

bridge THE GAP

Connect- Explore- Create

A series of highly participatory online events for professionals and individuals from within children's social care in England who are experts by experience to inform the independent review of children's social care.

EXPLORE - 16th September 2021

Collective Story Cafes for care experienced young people and adults.

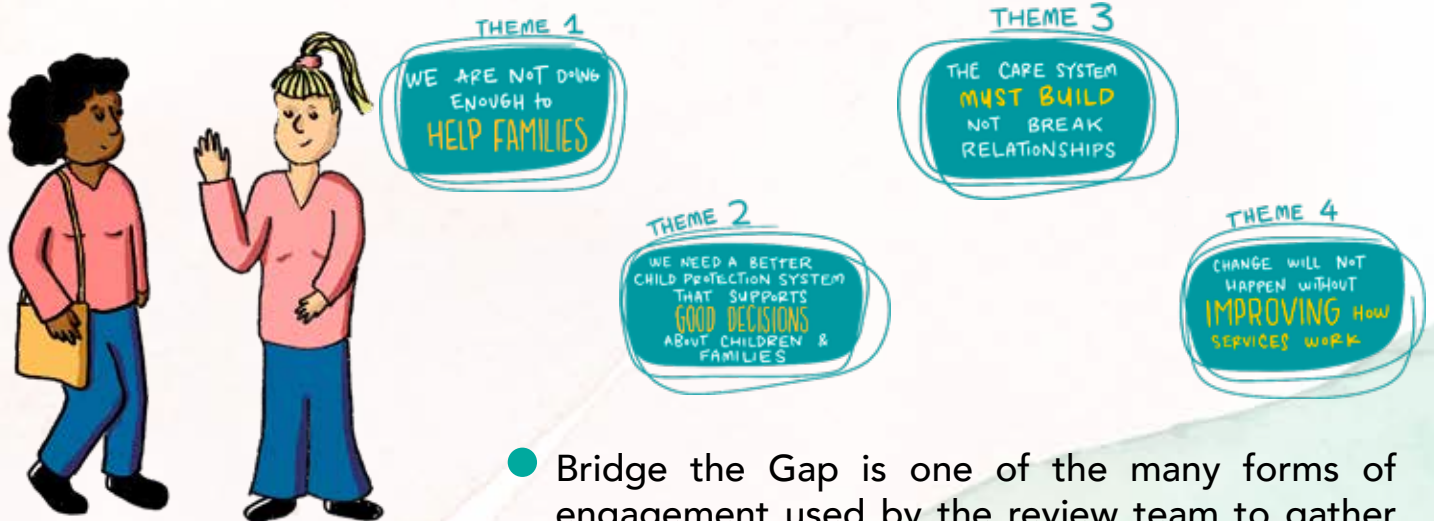
Executive Summary

1 The Context

- The government manifesto in 2019 committed to review the care system to ensure that children and young adults were provided with the support and care that they need. As a result, an independent review team was commissioned to research the existing challenges faced by the Children's Social Care system and make recommendations for improvement to the government.



- The review team conducted a preliminary analysis, defined the problem, and made the "Case for Change". The Case for Change sets out the review team's interpretation of the challenges within the system. It is a reflection of the engagement and research conducted in the early stages of the review. The overall purpose of the review itself has been captured in the big question: "How do we ensure children grow up in loving, stable and safe families; and where that is not possible, care provides the same foundations?"



- Bridge the Gap is one of the many forms of engagement used by the review team to gather views, stories and ideas from across the system to inform the review's recommendations and policy proposals.

2 Bridge the gap

- Bridge the Gap is a series of highly participatory online events for individuals from across children's social care who are experts by experience (i.e. kinship carers, foster carers, adoptive parents, birth parents and families, care experienced young people and adults, social workers and other professionals).

Bridge the Gap is a 3-step process with the purpose of engaging people from across the system to:

1 **Connect** with each other and the Case for Change, open up a dialogue around it, gather reactions, and identify gaps.

2 **Explore** stories of people's experience of being involved in children's social care, helping them to move from individual stories into a collective story that identifies key themes.

3 **Co-create** solutions for the whole system by co-creating with participants an agenda of conversations to further define the themes chosen by program participants as proposals for the review recommendations.



3 Explore

- In the explore step of the process, a series of events are held where individual stakeholder groups from across the children's social care system meet. One event was held with kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents, another with care experienced young people and adults, another with birth parents and family, and another with social workers and children's social care professionals.

- These events are intended to bring together each participating group to discuss their unique experience in the system in order to reflect on the individual and collective experience, identify key issues and explore possible solutions.
- The methodology is rooted in the Art of Hosting practices, where the current Case for Change and supporting data is presented focused on each group. This is followed by three rounds of collective story cafes, where from the individual stories of the participants, the collective stories of the group are collated, patterns, problems, strengths and possibilities are identified, and based on this, possible solutions are proposed to improve the system.

4 Emerging Themes & Key Ideas for Change from the Explore event with care experienced young people and adults

- a The excessive workload that professionals within the system operate under prevents them from providing an empathetic and adequate support.
- b High levels of staff turnover within the system hinder the formation and development of effective relationships with assigned social workers.
- c The professionals encountered in the system are not perceived to be adequately prepared for their role. In this respect, participants refer not to academic training but to their social workers' experience, empathy, and trauma management skills.
- d Participants state that there is a lack of transparency around the use of resources. This leaves them with the perception that the system is a business where children and young people are transactional assets.
- e Care experienced young people and adults do not feel that they can trust the system. They don't feel safe talking about their stories; they don't believe there is transparency with regard to their rights and options.

- f Care experienced young people and adults do not feel their voices are represented in the system. They attempt to raise issues but see that the same problems remain or even worsen over time. As a result, expectations for system change are low.
- g The system should be standardised at the national level, providing a consistent and equitable programme of support that begins with early intervention and continues to support young people once they have left care.
- g There should be permanent representation by participation of care experienced young people and adults at national and local board level. So that their input can be fed into complaints resolution, service design, planning and decision-making.
- h The system has a responsibility to reduce the social stigma and discrimination that care experienced people face.

5 Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank all the Care Experienced Young People and Adults who gave up their time to take part in this event. We are particularly grateful to all those organisations and networks who supported participants to take part, including Coram Voice, Young People's Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum, Leap Confronting Conflict, and the NSPCC.

About Community CoLab

The review team commissioned Community Colab to devise, manage, and facilitate Bridge the Gap.

Community CoLab is branch of CoLab International - a global collective of community organisers and facilitators, working with public, private, third sector organisations and international cooperation agencies from across the world to help them improve the quality of their conversations, meetings, events, and maximise the collective potential of their teams through participatory leadership.

CoLab brings together the expertise of their global extended network to support organizations to achieve their goals through dialogue and collaboration, designing and co-creating ad hoc solutions using innovative methodologies and technologies that harness wisdom, creativity, and imagination to tackle daily or strategic problems.

www.communitycolab.co.uk

About Event process

Bridge the gap

Bridge the Gap is a series of participatory online events for individuals from within different groups involved in the children's social care system. In addition to social workers and other professionals these groups include individuals who are Experts by Experience (e.g., kinship carers, foster carers, adoptive parents, birth parents and family, and care experienced young people and adults). This process aims to move people from discussing the challenges faced by the system into a position of identifying opportunities for change to transform and improve the system.

The aim of Bridge the Gap is to assist the review team in understanding more deeply the collective experience of individuals within the system in order then to think about potential solutions to the issues expressed in their collective experiences.

Bridge the Gap works across three moments: **Connect, Explore, Create**. This document's focus is to report on the process and results of the Explore event with the group of Birth Parents and Families.



Explore

"Explore", as its name implies, explores the stories of Experts by Experience, first individually and then collectively, to identify in those stories the aspects to improve and the strengths that should not only be maintained, but also promoted, so that, as far as possible, they are spread throughout the system.

From the exploration of stories, supported by the collective intelligence that arises from recognising a peer in the other, reducing the barriers of mistrust and perceiving the possibilities that this offers, a space for co-creation of ideas opens up to receive possible solutions to identified problems.

With that disposition towards the generation of ideas, the event closes by posing three final questions to the participants focused on finding ways to improve the system in a manner that enables all participants to contribute their points of view. These questions were drafted by the review team. They are based on previous stages of the review process and are tailored to be relevant to each stakeholder group. For the Care Experienced Young People and Adults Explore Event the questions were:

How can we better support young people who grow up in the system to build and maintain lifelong relationships?

How do we address the stigma that care experienced young people face?

What are the features of a 'good home'?

Methodology

This highly participatory three-hour event is rooted in The Art of Hosting and in particular a process known as Collective Story Harvest which CoLab has blended with another method known as World Café. Our methodology takes into account the purpose of the Explore event and its constraints. The whole process was delivered online using Zoom and Miro (online collaboration and engagement tools). The event was facilitated by CoLab's team with a member of the event team present in each of the Zoom break-out groups and virtual café tables. This support team comprised of CoLab staff, review team members and representatives from their extended network.



The Explore event began with a technical introduction to enable the widest participation of the attendees. Next, contextualisation was carried out through the presentation of the specific part of the Case for Change relating to Birth Parents and Families. Then three rounds of collective stories café were held, with the purpose of obtaining the key elements of the individual and collective stories and identifying possible solutions to the problems identified in the stories.

At the end of the event, a space is opened for the participants to individually contribute their point of view to the three questions posed to the group.

Event Information

A total of 54 participants including the support team attended this event for Care Experienced Young People (16+) and Adults.

In the first round of the collective story cafe, the attendees were divided into small groups of four. Each small group was assigned to a Zoom breakout room and allocated a virtual table on the Miro board to record their discussions. Each group was facilitated by a member of the event team. The groups were tasked with sharing their personal stories by responding to the prompt "What has helped or hindered your experience of children's social care?"

In this round of conversation, the main problems that were identified can be grouped into three broad areas: Institutional, process, and social.

I Institutional

An excess of bureaucracy and a "dehumanised" system are the two most common problems identified by young people and adults who have experience of care.

Inefficiencies and lack of transparency around the use of resources, lack of coordination, and inconsistencies in the system at the national level are frequently identified as issues hindering timely access to services.

The participants believe that high caseloads, with excessive focus on procedures and lack of adequate technologies, result in professionals who should be caring for children, young people and families being unable carry out their work with efficiency and empathy. This generates a perception that the system is a business where children and young people are transactional assets, where poverty becomes a vicious circle, and where few leave the system with real opportunities to progress in society.

Typical comments related to institutional issues included:

"Seems like trying to fit children to the existing system (e.g. for statistics, etc) rather than putting children's needs first - not listened to as real people."

"TOKENISTIC"

"Overuse statistics, not focused on individual."

"Money - lack of funding is the issue. Pushed on to YP because they suffer the consequences. How can people pay council tax and not know why they are not asking where it's going to? Why is there no public dialogue about it? Where are the social workers protesting? Where is the Chief Exec saying that they're failing kids because there is not enough money?"

"Being treated like a thing!"

"Need to tackle poverty."

"System sets to fail / system overload, social workers cannot manage."

"System not actually listening /taking care of real needs of young people / seems to be just "ticking boxes."

"People do it for the money as opposed to actually caring."

"It takes time and has to go through lots of board (bureaucracy)."

"Too many referrals, not enough intervention."

Participants also expressed that they do not feel their voices are represented by the professionals who provide support and know their stories. As a result, expectations for change are low. There is a perception

that the system is too large and lacks adequate mechanisms to promote change. Many of those who have been through the system have not seen positive changes over the years. They state that the same problems remain or even worsen over time.

Typical comments expressing this view included:

"System is so big and complicated and so many people benefit / access the system it's too big to change."

"Need a system that is evolving to be modernised. It is a process but something needs to be done. Not progressive enough. Not led by people who are care experienced."

"When I said things should change, I got blacklisted."

"Repeat story & nothing changes."

"You have to be your own support system - no help - no point talking if nothing is actioned."

"Complaints system - too long and not independent"

"Shouldn't have to get to the point of suing for negligence or making complaints to be heard and acted on."

"No-one cares until the very bad things happen. No one takes action until someone dies."

"Don't know what the complaints procedure is."

"Down to LA discretion what support you're entitled to."

"Sharing experiences and struggles has not led anywhere until now - have been participating in these types of meetings for 5 years but nothing changes!"

2 Process

With regard to the process, participants identified that cared experienced young people and adults felt they are adversely affected by two main issues:

The professionals who provide support are overloaded with work and have insufficient time available to provide an adequate level of service and support.

The system operates with high aversion to risk. There is a blame culture that results in professionals making decisions with the primary aim of protecting themselves from blame.

This high workload and blame culture lead to high staff turnover. The consequent lack of continuity of social worker is seen as a major problem. Points of contact constantly changing makes it difficult to form relationships with social workers. This problem is exacerbated when information is not recorded efficiently, and every change in social worker, implies a new beginning.

Professionals are not perceived to be adequately prepared for their role. In expressing this view, participants made it clear that they are not referring social workers' academic training but to their experience, empathy, and trauma management skills. They point out that it is difficult to establish emotional and human relationships with them, and communication is not easy. Fear of attachment reduces the possibility of providing true emotional support to children and young people who are going through difficult situations.

Typical comments related to the process of care included:

"Trauma is increased by care system. The trauma gets worse."

"Lack of emotional support- impacts on us as adults."

"Focus on attachment as negative (social workers told not to get attached) - but people who are more attached/engaged are the ones making the most positive impact to young people."

"Communication with the social worker is poor."

"Social worker training to help young people to build trust and make relationships."

"Hard to get in touch with your social workers."

"Relationships not as important as it should be for social workers."

"Don't see PA/social workers much. Makes you feel alone. Caseloads too high mean they don't have time for you. Some missing meetings because of time off and meeting clashes."

"Not receiving quality support and time from supporting social worker."

"Professionals working to timescales and it is barrier to care."

"Social workers having too many cases to look after at one time."

"Changes in social workers - new SW every couple of months, sometimes with no notice. Having to re-explain story."

"Social workers kept on leaving every two months so difficult to build relationships and hard to thrive whilst in care."

"Social workers are terrified of losing their job."

"A lot of professionals in and out of your life. Very difficult when you are younger, especially when you are too young to understand what is happening e.g. different meetings."

"Complete lack of training from every professional in our lives, on trauma, love and care."

"A degree is not enough for SWs to deal with young people."

Due to the issues raised above, children and young people in the system do not feel that they can trust it. They don't feel safe talking about their stories, they don't believe there is transparency with regard to their rights and options.

Comments related to trust and transparency included:

"Basic information isn't right in notes."

"Don't involve you in report writing about you and decisions about your life."

"Aren't told your rights and entitlements."

"Need for social services to be more clear about what and why they are doing something."

"Don't believe a person when they tell them something."

"Young people are not believed. How can we change that?"

"Social workers not hearing/listening to young people/lack of belief of young people."

"Shocking personal revelations of views and values on public social media pages. Some gatekeepers with influence in role should not be in post. Disgusting lack of privacy - professionals who Tweet about their 'successes' without expressed permission and informed consent."

"Social workers should not be able to sugar coat."

Those who have lived in the system also report there are issues with the allocation of safe and secure temporary homes and families, with traumatic changes in locations, with the emotional difficulties that arise when they enter the system and are prevented from seeing siblings and relatives, and with the negative effect that results from suspending support when as young adults they leave the system.

Comments related to these issues of living in care or leaving care included:

"Lack of safety in area."

"Out of area placement."

"Housing needs to be safe."

"Young people leave hostels or other inappropriate accommodation and end up on the street."

"Why should there be an age on the system - 20-year old young people needing support left without anyone to help."

"No safe spaces for children to share what they're going through (e.g. social workers asking about abuse in same house of abusers)."

"Transition can impact safeguarding. Can come into contact with abuser/perpetrator and have no support."

"Foster carers treated care experienced children different to birth children."

"Foster carers with their own family: foster carers have unconditional love for their child but there's a dissociation to their foster child."

"In foster care abuse - frightened to say anything and then got moved on when did speak up."

"Social workers don't recognise signs of abuse within foster placements."

"Abusive foster parents."

"Emotional impact of being moved on from, coming home from school and belongings in black bin bags."

"Vulnerable to being groomed."

"Contact with family - siblings separated. Limited contact sometimes."

"Lack of connection with old foster family."

"Support to live at home with birth parents."

"Terrible - lack of support with important family relationships once you enter care."

"Maintaining relationships with sibling and family."

"Trauma, adulthood and no support as an adult. You can't thrive without counselling after care."

"Transition age is the time support drops but this is when additional support needed - setting you up to fail."

"Starting adulthood with no contact with anyone is really scary and lonely and alone."

3 Social

Participants reported that that stigma and discrimination are part of the daily life of those who live in the system. Participants stated that this stigma is present both within the system and in society in general.

Discrimination is identified inside and outside of the system and manifests itself in racism and inequality experienced by minority groups.

Typical comments reflecting this issue included:

"Dumb you down in school."

"Stigma (esp when CEA have children)."

"Low expectations of care leavers - expected to fail. Carers expect you to do bad in school."

"Celebrate care leavers going against stereo type e.g. going to uni but we need to break the stereo type."

"Care leaver identity does not allow you to feel pride."

"Lack of awareness and understanding of care - assume the worst Purposeful stereotypes by the media about young people - out of sight and out of mind. Unless you're involved in the system then you don't know."

"Lack of support for young parents/not enough early intervention/stigmatised as a care leaver."

"Stigma around Care Leaver status."

"Children of different ethnic backgrounds and how we sometimes forget the minority groups."

"No consideration of racism in area when placed in areas - areas that are safe for YP."

At the end of this first round of collective story cafes, groups from the different virtual tables were invited to share their findings with the other participants in a plenary. While a spokesperson from each group shared their ideas, audience reactions, comments, and questions were welcomed in the Zoom chat.

Relevant comments from this section of the chat are presented below:

Institutional issues:

"Frontline is shockingly bad, but can't convince the chair can we?" (CEYP)

"The police need mandatory training too!" (CEA)

"We seem to repeat ourselves and not much changes." (CEA)

Process issues:

"S47 visits focus is just to get the children to disclose!!!!!" (CEA)

"The police in our area on S47 visits say to the children once disclosed, ok so what do you want to do about that, do you want your Daddy to go to court etc? How unempathetic is that and how much pressure is that on a child?" (CEA)

"I was made to explain my story of abuse about 6/7 times and then was told that I was lying because I didn't tell it exactly the same each time and that was by a frontline social worker when I was 15!!" (CEA)

"When I spoke out about it, they closed it 3 times, it's ridiculous! They need to start believing you, they always assume, I feel like they don't do enough on mental health as well." (CEA)

"I've seen a manager comment once " I can't help but think the child is to blame for her parents' hostile behaviour towards her, as she isolates herself in her room and her personal hygiene isn't the best so must make the parents really uncomfortable" - how un-child-friendly is that? - this child was 8." (CEA)

"It should be the same offer of a support package plus a continuing key worker when you leave care whatever your post code." (CEA)

"SW's need clinical supervision." (CEA)

"It's so important that more support is in place, particularly as case loads rise!" (CEA)

"Social workers & PA'S need to have trauma informed training !!!!!" (CEA)

"I spent 8 years in care but don't get much support due to revoking my care order." (CEYP)

"There needs to be a national standard that every care leaver gets so it doesn't matter where you grew up in care." (CEYP)

"I think even now the support is dropping within food vouchers etc." (CEYP)

Social issues:

"Especially as black person, a lot of behaviour was chalked to my race. Social workers who made disgusting racist remarks in regards to my troubles." (CEYP)

"We are referred to as "Former relevant" so totally agree we are no longer relevant. They state it!" (CEA)

"There's an assumption that parents who have been in care/abused will go on to abuse their own children which is wrong, also parents asking for help who have been in care are made to jump through hoops to access it e.g. being sent on multiple parenting courses - many of which are not really relevant to the actual needs of their children who may have disabilities/special educational needs etc." (CEA)

In the second round of the collective story café, a facilitator at each table highlights the relevant aspects identified by the group in the previous round, and those who have come from other tables bring in and comment on key aspects identified in their groups during round one. This nurtures the collective history and expands the scenarios in order to clearly define problems, strengths, and possibilities within the stories.

In this round of discussions, it was clear that the participants felt that the biggest strengths and possibilities reside in the children, young people and adults that are experiencing or have experienced care themselves.

As a group Care Experienced Children and Young Adults have a deep interest in:

- Creating community

- Supporting those who are currently in care
- Transforming and strengthening the system so that it provides an adequate service.
- Ensuring that care experienced young people and adults are involved in decision making at all levels.

"Meeting with other care experienced people, knowing you are not alone and can relate and empathise."

"Having a community. Really important to be feeding into the system. We are expert in our own story but not the system in general."

"CO-Production."

"Being able to have direct contact to directors through LA Children in care council."

"Be your own support system, speak up for yourself."

"Young people themselves!"

"Care experienced young person going on to work in care themselves to improve the system and have a voice."

"My LA involve care leavers in interview panel."

Other strengths and possibilities in the system were also identified. These focused on specific individuals within the system who care experienced young people and adults come into contact with. These individuals may have formal positions such as social workers or foster carers, or may be members of the families cared for individuals are looked after by. Practical support, such as bursaries, were also recognised as being beneficial.

"Compassion can be given at any time."

"Some fantastic PAs, there for you through difficult times and go above and beyond."

"Individual people who go above and beyond their role and they make a difference."

"PA's who listen to young people."

"Regular updates and encouraging emails from PA's."

"Certain social workers help to make a difference, by guiding you and putting time and effort into helping and getting to know the people they are working with."

"Access to an FNP due to being a care leaver."

"Having access to a wide range of services that other children may not have access to."

"Allowances that we got (clothing, leaving care, Christmas)."

"Certain care leaver offers."

"A lot of financial help e.g. bursaries. Leaving care grant. Benefits to being in care."

"Residential care - met so many different people with varied experience - learned a lot - built up confidence, coping mechanism. Like a big family."

"Residential care can provide more stability compared to multiple foster carers."

"If you are placed in the right family or placement, it can be beneficial."

"My LA involve care leavers in interview panel."

Comments and reactions captured in the chat during the plenary stage of this second round included:

"Was told at 15 by my foster mum and SW I'd drop off the radar. I wonder if they know I'm 24 with a first-class honours, about to go work with my local MP and doing a masters next year." (CAYP)

"It's so nice to hear how successful some of you are. it gives me hope I can be too." (CAYP)

"You already are successful. You're present, your here, and as <someone> said, you're the solution." (CEA)

"The system should be built around and by care experienced like us all." (CEA)

"I think our stories of how we overcame adversity to achieve studies/have families, be the amazing strong people we are is so powerful - thank you to others for sharing makes me feel sad how much extra harder we have to prove ourselves/do things for ourselves and without any help - it needs to change." CEA

"We have strengths, they need us in the system!" CEA

In the final round of the collective story café, participants were asked to consider the strengths, possibilities and ideas that they had previously discussed. With the help of their facilitator each group was tasked with deciding which solutions or suggestions could have the biggest impact on the system. Each group was asked to select up to three high priority solutions to be shared in a closing plenary.

The groups' priority solutions reflected the key issues raised in previous rounds with potentially high impact solutions related to the following themes proposed:

At the institutional level, the proposed solutions focused on:

- Standardization of the system at the national level, so that support and assistance is equitable, adequate, free of discrimination, with a continuous and consistent programmes - even for care leavers.
- Permanent representation by participation of Care Experienced individuals (including children and young people) at national and local board level. So that their input can be fed into complaints, service design, planning and decision-making.

"Better support package for care leavers and activities after 18 to socialise with other CEP including mentors. Same support for everyone - a minimum standard for support."

"A more standardised local offer for care leavers."

"Consistent national statutory support offer for all qualifying young people regardless of where they live, which is not age-bound or limited, allowing young people to access support when they are ready to access it."

"National Standard for Care Leavers - equal opportunities, equal funding, making sure that nobody is left behind - regardless of status/background/location etc."

"Social care should be nationalised."

"Care needs to continue - no age limits (but doesn't mean having a social worker forever!)."

"Lifetime counselling offer."

"Get protected status for care leavers (opt-in or out)."

"Entitlements for care leavers."

"Proper complaints procedure - make it independent."

"Young People and Care Experienced board / trustees to test policy changes (particularly in housing) and to feed into service design, to hold councils to account."

"Joint decision-making and planning with young person, housing depts and social services."

"Better accountability and consistency between Local authorities."

"Have young people represented in reviews, trainings, etc."

"Have independent advocates in the system to support young people throughout and make sure young people are being listened to."

"Reviewing whilst providing evidence."

"Inviting decision-makers into meetings like today to listen to the actual needs in person!"

At the process level, suggestions and proposals focused on:

- Defining an adequate service provision as: consistent and coherent with national standards but delivered to the individual in a bespoke manner that prioritises mental and emotional health.
- Including within the system's services preparation of young people for adult life.
- The promotion of activities that construct community networks of care experienced individuals of all ages. This will enable and empower them to have emotional and social support in their development and in their future lives beyond care.
- Strengthen the care and protection of minors with efficient preventive actions. These actions should be aimed at keeping families together and allow for appropriate levels of monitoring without overwhelming the

families that host cared for individuals.

- When they must leave their homes of birth, help cared for individuals to move through the system easily, lovingly, humanely, while building and maintaining very important ties with their families.
- Train the professionals in the system (and those in the institutions that interact with the system) beyond academic qualifications. Skills training in the areas of trauma management, communication, dignified and humane treatment children and young people are currently missing from the system.

"Choose a package of care and support as a care leaver that is bespoke. e.g. keeping in touch with a key worker, job, independent living, financial entitlements, mental health support, in the package would also be automatic feedback about the care experienced."

"Financial support to allow CEP and children in care to access proper support."

"Mental health needs to be a priority - early access support, prevention (rather than cure) for young people, care leavers, social workers, families, foster carers, professionals."

"Investing in mental health services for CEPs."

"Activities and programmes in place to help YP with self-esteem and learning basics before 18 e.g., learning to drive and helping to plan for the future."

"Better screening for foster carers and mandatory surprise visits and consequences for complaints, consequences decided by independent body."

"Agencies being trauma informed from early age."

"Do more in local authorities to connect kids in care, with other kids in care. Opportunity to speak with each other, then we know we are not the only kid in care, and that's not the case. Give us a voice to vocalise what's going on whilst you are in the system. Creating space to exist together, adds more to it. Having care experienced friends really helps in understanding how awful social workers and review meetings can be. The connection helps in later life. Should be given spaces to create spaces together - kind of grass roots community."

"Don't assume that care experienced parents harm their children, support, don't assess."

"Early intervention- notice signs for when young people might be being involved in gang, professionals knowing/understanding/being trained in these issues and noticing the signs."

"Language used with children should be reviewed so there is less jargon and things are explained in layman's terms."

"Positive use of language for young parents, not focusing on the past, stigma of a care experienced YP, but supporting the parent to maintain having their children at home and believing they parent positively, rather than automatically seeing the negative."

"More support to maintain pre-existing relationships ."

"Communicate with us, and with compassion i.e. not cutting families off through closed adoptions - transparency & access to info only through files."

"Training for those supporting YP (social workers and PAs) in relationships and telling YP their rights and entitlements."

"Mandatory training for social workers, police and others."

"This requires TRAINING in every aspect (trauma training, not writing disgusting things in files, being better humans who can talk to children and young people), and professionals willing to look at themselves and consider own practices."

"Social work training should be at least 4 years, with ongoing trauma informed training as part of CPD. Staying updated with what's going on in the world. Needs to be better training and forever, to assist with their caseloads. Training helps remain current."

"We need more people with life experience of care rather than more textbook social workers."

"More social workers that aren't agency staff."

At the social level, the proposed solutions and suggestions included:

- Educate society to eradicate stigmatisation so that the system is recognised as making a valuable contribution to the community
- Ensuring that the system is inclusive and without barriers to access of any kind.

"Support for ethnic minorities in the care system - better representation and eradication of racism, discrimination. More black social workers/people in positions of authority. First, we need to raise awareness of the problem, and then work on solutions to address it."

"Public need to be educated more. More positive role models and positive stories."

"Misinformation of the public - educating the public."

Further Ideas for change

During the prioritising task, and indeed throughout the event, a great many ideas for change were suggested. Participants expressed difficulty in narrowing down which of these ideas should be selected as priorities. They asked that these, perhaps equally valuable, suggestions not be lost from the review process. This section, therefore, presents these ideas alongside the audience reactions, comments, and questions recorded in the Zoom chat during the plenary presentation of the prioritised solutions proposed by the groups.

Although the authors of this report understand the volume of quotes is somewhat difficult to assimilate, it is included here in recognition of the level of engagement with the review process that the participants demonstrated.

"Better data collected on care leavers - to inform meaningful analysis."

"Should have a process of feedback during care. Maybe using technology."

"Connection between LAs and charities or other partners offering positive opportunities."

"Create safe spaces for people of colour."

"Boost public awareness of those in care and promote positive narrative e.g. positive media and success stories."

"Need to invest in the community - encourage volunteering in the social care sector (not a swap for Gov support - in addition) Skills for independence booklet."

"Don't move 16+ ppl under benefits, keep under social care for true reflection of cost."

"Help with learning how to build relationships with extended family as you age out of care."

"Group councillor sessions with siblings and family: there should be building techniques to build up healthy relationships and how to maintain them"

"Activities after 16 to socialise with others. Should be opportunities to limit isolation and being alone."

"Policy outcomes based on emerging adulthood transition, not instant transition."

"Age of going to university. YP in care are not going through the education system. Going to FE and HE later in life. Should be supported to go to 6th Form or Uni at a time that is right for them."

"Standard higher uni offer e.g. waver of fees, bursaries
Young people to know higher education is an option and be encouraged to do this."

"If you go to Uni - basic income on top of loans so can survive."

"More support package for care leavers esp. safeguarding and changing accommodation."

"When YP are in semi-independent, have dedicated care experienced accommodation. Not pool with other people (homeless, those leaving jail)."

"Safe housing for YP leaving care."

"Have high expectations for young people."

"Basic income for care leavers - safety net."

"Needs to be another support system as you leave the system - to deal with earlier trauma's as well as the support experienced through being in the system itself."

"To as much as possible to keep siblings together."

"If we can't be together - facilitate us to see each other at least once a week. Disparity between biological, step/half and foster siblings."

"Reconsider the places where you do meet up - boring community halls, not very nice places. Contact centres without of date toys, full of other groups of siblings in other rooms."

"Facilitate real relationships - don't leave it to us to find each other through social media."

"More natural relationships with professionals."

"Training on making relationships with YP, listening to them and trusting them."

"Always keep the door open for people to come back for support."

"Address the lack of lovingness within the system."

"Social workers to have an empathy test."

"More child-friendly practices."

"Confusion between section 17 and section 47 and when CE parents ask for help, they are assessed under safeguarding. just needed help with disability."

"More support and understanding for children with disabilities."

"There should be LAC CAMHS as well as LAC Nurse." (CEA)

"I feel like social workers should be trained the same as therapists and counsellors." (CEA)

"There was a review over 10 years ago but nothing has changed." (CEYP)

"APPG seats for Care LEavers!" (CEA)

"Will the review be able to help guide us? they said there would be something at the end to help us do that? If josh is talking directly to the cabinet cant we help? (CEA)

"We could create an action group." (CEA)

"Then work together to set the agenda and action change collaboratively." (CEA)

The event closed with an invitation for all participants to reflect on their collective exploration throughout the event. Based on this reflection they were invited to propose concrete responses to the three key questions posed by the review team to this particular group. To facilitate this, three dedicated areas of the Miro were provided to capture individual written responses to the review team's key questions. By this stage of the event many of this group of highly engaged participants, having recounted traumatic events and shared emotional stories, were exhausted. Therefore, in order to enable these participants to contribute to this final activity, the Miro board remained live for a further twenty-four hours after the event.

How can we better support young people who grow up in the system to build and maintain lifelong relationships?

When Colab asked participants "How can we better support young people who grow up in the system to build and maintain lifelong relationships?", the emergent themes and ideas were:

Don't judge - listen, empathise, act, support, signpost.

Career long training for all of those working in it.

Review social media presences for key role holders and gatekeepers.

Some sort of mandatory attachment or relationship building therapy for them.

To ensure that important relationships are maintained - such as with family, friends, location and important professionals (where possible.)
STOP using statistics in LA's charities, and in the media.

How can we address the stigma that care experienced young people face?

When CoLab asked participants "How can we address the stigma that care experienced young people face?" it was proposed that "care experienced" be given protected characteristic status.

What are the features of a good home?

When CoLab asked participants "What are the features of a good home?", the emergent themes and ideas were:

Compassion, Love, Kindness, Warmth, Humanity, Trust.

Protection from harm.

Somewhere you can be.

Friends and family.

Promoting emotional health.

A Nurturing environment where your identity is built.

Stable and consistent but with love.

A Nice place to meet siblings, family of origin.



"The word 'home' is not used by the care system. I don't need accommodation, I need a home."

Reflections on Process:

Event process

The participants were highly engaged through the event. They are determined to be part of the change they want to see in children's social care. They worked hard to not only identify problems within the system but also to suggest constructive solutions.

They found the experience a positive one and wish to be further involved in the review process. They wish to continue their conversations and have already begun self-organising to form independent care experienced persons groups.

"We could create an action group let me know if you would like me to create a WhatsApp group." (CEA)

"We should set up a discord so we can all discuss this." (CEA)

"How can we get everyone's details so we can invite them to the discord channel?" (CEA)

"There is also the care leavers rock Facebook page- great space to connect with each other." (CEYP)

"I'll set up a Discord group." (CEYP)

A number of participants expressed that they appreciated the space to speak and to join others in exploring the possibilities to bring about change.

"Thanks table 10 guys- super strong powerful voices." (CEA)

"I really hope there is a change. Let's do this, guys we can do it. Gone on too long without change." (CEA)

"I've very much enjoyed this meeting! feel like we're going to make change together!" (CEA)

"Feeling quite emotional and mentally tired but so happy to have had input - take care everyone you are all amazing xx." (CEA)

"Proud of us guys. Xx." (CEA)

"Amazing, loved to hear different stories and understanding people's difficulties and worked together for changing the system to become even better." (CEA)

"Let do this, guys we can change for the better." (CEA)

Some scepticism, perhaps borne of the experience of being involved in similar reviews, was also expressed:

"I'm hopeful that something gets done but I'm still unsure that something will actually happen from this." (CEYP)

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the contributions from the participants of the Explore Event for care experienced young people and adults, this report finds:

- The professionals in the system are perceived to be overloaded with work and consequently have insufficient time available to provide an adequate level of service and support. The participants believe that an excess of bureaucracy, an excessive focus on procedures, and an absence of adequate technologies, result in professionals who should be caring for children, young people and families being unable carry out their work with efficiency and empathy.
- The participants report being adversely affected by high levels of staff turnover within the system. The consequent lack of continuity of social worker is seen as a major problem. Points of contact constantly changing makes it difficult to form effective relationships with social workers.
- The professionals encountered in the system are not perceived to be adequately prepared for their role. In this respect, participants not referring social workers' academic training but their experience, empathy, and trauma management skills.
- Participants state that there is a lack of transparency around the use of resources. This leaves them with the perception that the system is a business where children and young people are transactional assets.
- Care experienced young people and adults do not feel that they can trust the system. They don't feel safe talking about their stories; they don't believe there is transparency with regard to their rights and options.

In support of these collective observations, participants provided specific instances and detailed individual accounts of how the system had failed them. As many of these accounts as possible have been presented in the body of this report.

This highly engaged and motivated group provided a multitude of suggestions to address the issues highlighted above. The participants worked hard to distill these suggestions into more general advice and guidance for the review team. Accordingly, they propose that:

- The system should be standardised at the national level, so that service provision is equitable, adequate, and free of discrimination, providing a consistent programme that begins with early intervention and continues to support young people once they have left care.
- The system should allow and enable the care experienced people community to take ownership of children's social. They have independently begun to form their own peer support groups and are keen to be involved in transforming and strengthening the system so that it provides an adequate service.
- There should be permanent representation by participation of care experienced individuals (including children and young people) at national and local board level. So that their input can be fed into complaints resolution, service design, planning and decision-making.

Finally, during the course of this event it became evident that care experienced young people and adults face constant discrimination. Their stigmatisation by wider society was described as "another source of trauma and pain every day". Participants want to work with children's social care to reduce this stigma. They want to show society that they are individuals with a valuable contribution to make.