bridge THE gap

Connect- Explore- Create

A series of highly participatory online events for professionals and people with lived experience of children's social care to inform the independent review of children's social care in England.

EXPLORE – 9th September 2021

Collective Story Cafes for Foster Carers, Kinship Carers and Adoptive Parents.

Executive Summary

1 The Context

- In 2019, the government 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 examine the existing challenges faced by the children's social care system and make recommendations for improvement to the government.

THE CASE for CHANGE

- The review team conducted a preliminary analysis, defined the problem, and published 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 is to answer the following 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?".

THEME 1
WE ARE NOT DOING ENOUGH to HELP FAMILIES

THEME 3
THE CARE SYSTEM MUST BUILD NOT BREAK RELATIONSHIPS

THEME 2
WE NEED A BETTER CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM THAT SUPPORTS GOOD DECISIONS ABOUT CHILDREN & FAMILIES

THEME 4
CHANGE WILL NOT HAPPEN WITHOUT IMPROVING HOW SERVICES WORK

- Bridge the Gap is one of the many forms of engagement used by the review team to gather views, experiences, and ideas from a range of diverse voices to inform the review´s recommendations and policy proposals.

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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 children's social care, helping them to move from individual stories into a collective story that identifies key themes.

3 **Create** solutions for the whole system by co-creating an agenda of conversations aimed at taking the key themes identified at the Explore event and developing them into solution-focused proposals and recommendations to be fed into the review.

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 families, and another with social workers and children's social care professionals.

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● These events are intended to bring together each participant group to discuss their unique experience of 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 Case for Change and supporting data is presented to 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 Key Themes & Emerging Ideas for Change from the Explore event with Foster Carers, Kinship Carers and Adoptive Parents.

a Information and processes across the system must be consistent at the local and national level.

b The support provided to children, young people and families must be extended so that it begins with earlier interventions, continues after permanent adoption and beyond into the life of the care experienced young adult.

c The stigma surrounding social care, foster care, and adoption needs to be tackled. Work must be done to educate the public about the benefits that the system provides to society.

d Carers and parents have knowledge and experience, which can be used to form support networks, to educate new carers and parents, to humanise and improve the system.

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5 Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank all the Kinship Carers, Foster Carers and Adoptive Parents 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 Adoption UK, TACT Fostering, Family Rights Group, Fostering Network, Kinship, 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.

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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 those individuals within the system to empower them to explore potential solutions.

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 Foster Carers, Kinship Carers and Adoptive Parents.

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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 and are tailored to be relevant to each participant group. For the Foster Carers, Kinship Carers and Adoptive Parents explore event the questions were:

- How can we support more children and young people to live in kinship care?

- How can the system provide better post-adoption support?

- How can we support more people to become and remain foster parents?

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 to foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents. 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 59 participants including the support team attended this event for kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents.

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. 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 first round of conversation, the main problems that were identified were:

- Problems with the information handled by the system; it is not accurate so the decisions made by the local authorities are not consistent with reality and therefore do not help care for children and young people.

- The support provided does not always take into account the characteristics of the family and the child's history.

- There are differences in the system throughout the country that make it difficult to access support at the local level.

- The information in the system presents many inconsistencies that make it difficult for the type and amount of support provided to be adequate.

- The system focuses on its own rigid rules and processes, and not on the individual needs of families, children and young people.

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- Many support workers lack resources and depth of knowledge to support children and families. There is no easy access to specialists, they do not have networks in which to support each other to offer a good service, and they are overloaded with cases, with a high demand in bureaucratic work which is inefficient.

- The knowledge and experience of kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents is rarely used to make improvements to the system.

- Scarce resources, funds are not used appropriately

Some comments made by attendees are highlighted.

"Adopted children should not be "labelled" as care leavers." **(Adoptive parent)**

"Adopters need a responsible adult from LA to help when issues arise e.g. 15 year old starts taking ketamine, social worker starts a 12 week assessment! Not helpful. When help is sought assessment happens rather than help." **(Adoptive parent)**

"Six year old wanted to meet birth mum. 12 week assessment process starts and social worker decides if the child can see birth mum. It's the adoptive parent's decision that they want support with – not for the social worker to take charge." **(Adoptive parent)**

"Adoptive parents need same support and financial help as foster carers." **(Adoptive parent)**

"I believe that Special Guardianship Orders undermine the human rights of a Special Guardian, leaving us vulnerable to legal and financial abuse by birth parents who often have complex criminal histories/associations, complex mental health problems and substance misuse issues as well as a history of violence. We need to be protected from this not exposed to it by inadequate legislation." **(Kinship carer)**

"*Special Guardianship Order granted, LA goes away, and when approached for support afterwards, it was through the front door to frontline child protection social worker 4 year into placement, who had no knowledge about special guardianships, checked foodcupboards, children's bedroom, social worker assumed from a child protection view that any difficulties were because there was a problem with parenting or home life, not that my nephew had experienced significant early life trauma before placement.*" **(Kinship carer)**

"*There is no transparency on what is available for financial or other support.*" **(Kinship carer)**

"*I think consistency of social workers is an issue, a continuous social worker who knows your family and history would be massively beneficial.*" **(Kinship carer)**

"*Also personalised support based on your family, not just a one size fits all approach.*" **(Kinship carer)**

"*Get the concept that you have to take pearls of wisdom from everyone, this is a start to wider understanding if left to continue.*"**(Kinship carer)**

"*I was actually told that I was just a foster carer and my home was just a foster home some years ago plus a racial slur about my mixed European background nothing was done by social services.*" **(Foster Carer)**

"*My other concern is the poor level of referrals and how LA are not giving FC the true picture of a child´s needs - the end result is needless placement breakdowns.*" **(Foster Carer)**

"*I feel very sad that we experience different responses depending on where we live.*" **(Foster Carer)**

In the second round of the collect 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 their stories.

The strengths and possibilities found were:

- Carers and parents and families are the great strength of the system, they have extensive knowledge due to the experience they have, they are resilient and the empathy that arises when connecting with others in similar circumstances is key, besides, it is important to them that they want to contribute their knowledge and help the system.

- Third sector organisations offer many possibilities of help and support to families that must be strengthened and expanded by local authorities.

- Social workers have valuable experience and knowledge of the history of children and young people. With good conditions to do your job, that experience and knowledge can be put to better use.

- Some local programmes provide valuable inputs to the system that can be replicated at the national level.

Some comments made by attendees are highlighted.

"We are hearing that peer support and community is massively important." *(Kinship carer)*

"*More knowledge about sgo throughout the system (education, healthcare).*" **(Kinship carer)**

"I'm a kinship carer and have always said that there needs to be groups for the children, or the opportunity to get together with other kinship carers. " **(Kinship carer)**

"A positive - one of our social workers had a completely different way of working with us. He knew we had been treated very badly by the system so he came to our house after 5 pm for a cup of tea for meetings, he shared personal information with us, he worked collaboratively with us and it worked so well for us and our daughter. All social workers need regular training on building relationships - it is crucial for our children." **(Adoptive parent)**

"Once YP leave care support to maintain tenancies is very poor. Housing can't wait to issue acceptable behavior contracts which gives the LA the right to evict without further notices. Housing does not work as part of the team around YP. They need to become more supportive." **(Foster Carer)**

"Vision to collate & understand that the local council system is failing under Ofsted. The majority of cared for children are isolated along with their carers. We cannot access services & resources for children. It makes children doubly vulnerable as has often been proven in the media in the past via sensational headlines." **(Kinship carer)**

"Support should not be withdrawn from children just because they have "achieved permanence". Their need for support doesn't just disappear because you have changed their care plan." **(Foster Carer)**

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 inclosing plenary.

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

- Adjust the process so that it is transparent, easy to access and consistent at the national level.

- The care system must focus on early intervention. The aim should be the prevention of child removal and court proceedings. Where this has not been possible, the support should be focused on maintaining long-term wellbeing.

- The support provided to children, young people and families must be extended so that it continues after permanent adoption and beyond into the early adult life of the care experienced young people.

- Kinship carers and adoptive parents requested that this extension of post-care support also be made available them. They explain that this is needed because they are often affected by accompanying cared for children and young people as they live through traumatic events and experiences.

- The system must be human and must rely on the ties that are generated through it e.g. community or peer support networks for families, workers, organisations.
  "It takes a village to raise a child, we need to act like that"

- The stigma surrounding social care, foster care, and adoption needs to be tackled. Work must be done to educate the public about the benefits that the system provides to society. This can be achieved through various means including: education and

outreach work in schools and other settings; commissioning arts projects to produce works with positive portrayals of children´s social care; and with better PR i.e. by combating sensationalist media headlines with regular, proactive, and positive narratives.

"Agencies to work more closely together - education/social care/ health - children not passed from one to the other." **(Adoptive parent)**

"The package of support should be with the child and move with the child. It should be updated regularly." **(Foster Carer)**

"Social workers changing need to be reviewed when there are sometimes 3 or 4 in 18mths. Should be flagged as a risk and appoint an experienced SW to avoid another change and ensure accuracy." **(Foster and Kinship Carer)**

"To support more children and YP to live in kinship care the support that is offered needs to be transformed." **(Kinship carer)**

"Kinship Carers UK run peer groups. Details are available here: https://www.kinshipcarersuk.com/." **(Kinship carer)**

Key Findings and ideas for change:

At the end of the third round of conversations there was a plenary where a spokesperson from each of the groups shared their ideas for high impact solutions. Whilst this was happening audience reactions, comments, and questions were welcomed in the Zoom chat.

Thus, in relation to the question "Looking at the strengths and the possibilities, which solutions do you see that could have the biggest impact", the Explore event for kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents, produced the following key findings and ideas for change:

- The community of carers has knowledge and experience, which can be used to form support networks, to educate social workers, carers

and parents, to provide solutions and improvements to the system:

> *"Carers aren't superheros, we have our own families to support and our own needs to be met, but regardless of whether we are KC, SGO, FC, AD we want to care, we want to make a difference, but we need support to do it."*

> *"Buddying up system."*

> *"Work with us - let us help you help others."*

> *"Solution is all of the 'carers/parents' working together -should be being treated the same. Sharing and learning from each other as experts."*

> *"Make it compulsory for carers to be part of committees and decision making rather than decisions being made and all carers just having to fit in with the system. They are the real experts who know what works best for them and their families."*

- The system requires continuity over time, consistency at the national level in the processes and information, specialisation to be able to work with the particular difficulties of the cases, deep training of the workers and support networks between the different professionals and institutions, but above everything, the system needs to be humanised.

> *"Empower social workers to make the right decisions - either pair them with a mentor or team so decisions are taken together and less risk averse. Mandate a ceiling for SW caseloads. Mandate that supervision happens."*

> *"Remove bureaucracy that is draining social worker resource for this to be channeled to direct work. Give managers cases so that they continue in direct work."*

> *"Greater ambition and vision for children across the board (health, education, jobs, life quality and chances etc.)"*

"Treat every child as an individual - listen to the people closest to them and make support bespoke."

"Better training for social workers (including admitting that they are not the only experts)."

"Support needs to be transparent and available for all the family, including carers from the outset of the process. Support should be offered and well known. It should be seen as a positive to access - e.g. proactively getting support for a traumatised child."

"National guidelines and consistent pre and post adoption support across the UK."

- Transparent and efficient administration of resources, efficiency in processes, reduction of bureaucracy, accountability.

"Differentiated resources for special groups (grandparents, etc)."

"Should Ofsted's inspection framework dig much deeper into LA's? How could this happen? (survey all carers from all areas?)."

"Accurate report taking - notes should be signed/dated and countersigned by the person they are about, or anyone who has contributed to them. They should be evidence tested and analysed to prevent untrue information being shared."

"Funding and support for peer support for SGO/KC/Ads."

"Money redistributed so that it's not tilted to spending on reactive services only. Have more prevention."

> *"Invest in support services for KCs/FCs/Aps."*

> *"Differentiated resources and consistency across localities."*

> *"Remove bureaucracy that is draining social worker resource for this to be channelled to direct work. Give managers cases so that they continue in direct work."*

- Social stigma disappears if society is educated.

> *"Educate society similar to autism / suicide awareness scheme about trauma and care experience."*

> *"Increase/promote the profile of carers and these children (being proud of these children and YP, reduce stigma, remove labels)."*

> *"National acknowledgement as doing an important, essential role."*

How can we support more children and young people to live in kinship care?

When CoLab asked participants "How can we support more children and young people to live in kinship care?", the emergent themes and ideas were:

- Financial support for kinship families

> *"The kinship charities, Family Rights Group and kinship have been very helpful for us as a family: giving us advice and support that is outside the social care department. Supporting them supports us."*

> *"The adoption support fund should be open to all children removed from their birth parents regardless of the court order."*

"Offer non-means tested financial support."

"Standardise financial support across the country. There should not be a postcode lottery."

"Free school meals for children in kinship care."

"Access to educational support, e.g. tutors, extra curricula activities, to try to increase attainment."

"Support with school uniform costs for kinship carers."

"Access to funding to enable kinship children to access social groups, e.g. sport activities etc that help them to develop as children and young people."

- Kinship assessment and decision making

"Continue with support for child if moves to SGO i.e., school, and through care emotional wellbeing."

"The support and resources in place for a child in fostering should follow the child through to SGO and adoption."

"Better and easier to access mental and emotional health support for children, young people and carers."

"Better support both financial and practical with recognition of how demanding this role is and how it wasn't likely part of their plan! Also, confirmation that that support will be permanent to offer reassurance and allow work plans to change."

"Make kinship carers part of the decision process."

"Connected Hubs within each LA where KC can go for support rather than going through the "front door" and being assessed by child protection social workers."

"We need more research on kinship care: local authorities don't even seem to know how many kinship families live in their area, and we know very little about what makes a successful kinship family, or what interventions are best. Along with this, the DfE should fund an Innovation Fund for properly evaluated innovative services /interventions/ approaches."

"There needs to be systemic change in the approach from CSC to how they treat kinship carers / SGO's and other carers. We are people which they seem to forgot."

"Don't lie to prospective kinship carers: we were promised a lot when we were approached to be kinship carer, but as soon as the court order was granted the LA disappeared."

"Once in care revisit at every review."

- Legal Advice

"Legal aid available to kinship carers, no matter the order or means."

"Legal support: make local authorities increase the amount they offer for legal support to prospective SGs. We were, begrudgingly, offered £60 but it cost us several thousands."

"Protection from legal action from birth parents."

"Change the legislation to protect carers (SGO's) so that they are not put into such a vulnerable situation and can focus on caring for a child / children."

"Make it mandatory to include young people raised in kinship care in policy making at local and national levels."

- About birth families

  "Provide birth parents with support to accept the situation and their child's parent so that they can understand what has happened."

  "Training for CSC on managing birth parents with complex mental health issues."

  "Love Matters, It Is A Human Right."

  "Don't say "love is all they need" cos it ain't true."

  "Remember our children deserve as much of a positive outcome as others."

  "Should we be trying to put more children in kinship care? Surely, we should do more to support birth families."

  "More support for birth parents after removal (from professionals, not from the kinship carer)."

  "Access to training and information for all kinship carers about their roles, orders and support rights."

- Emotional / psychological support

  "Support which is consistent and ongoing rather than only available in crisis."

  "Invest in time to work with the carers and children from the start. Just because they're with family that doesn't make it plain sailing. It can make it even harder."

  "Being proactive rather than reactive in support."

"Early investment in support, time and finances can ensure that lots more money doesn't need to be spent when things go wrong. Also, it can cause irreparable damage."

"My local authority organises its social care teams so they include a psychologist. We have found this very beneficial as they support children as a team, and the psychologist is a specialist."

"Be aware that they may have emotional needs to be supported."

"Open up peer support to all kinship carers in every LA."

"Regular support need reviews rather than being reactive to crisis."

"Mental health support available when it is needed and by appropriately trained professionals (probably not CAMHS)."

"Kinship kids support groups/meets to allow them to meet other kinship children."

"Recognise that long-term support (psychological, educational etc) to deal with trauma & attachment is more likely to be the norm not the exception. So, professionals should not act surprised or dismissive, or blame it on the kinship carers. The state needs to recognize its long-term responsibilities toward these children."

"Access to wellbeing support that is not fed back to CSC."

"Ask young people in kinship care what support they want: my kinchildren each have very different needs."

"Automatic information provided about support available and where to go to get it - make it clear for all and accessible for all. No 'you can get this if x, y and z'."

"Provide potential carers, and carers, with advice and information on what it means for them."

"Empower kinship carers by putting them in charge, not leaving them at the mercy of birth parents who often have negative feelings towards them."

"Support services should be for life as often children won't engage in therapeutic help but are ready as adults. Adoptive parents should be able to refer themselves for therapeutic help for their children not have to through social services. Therapeutic help needs to happen within weeks not months as often too late and risk of breakdown."

"Help older kinship carers deal with aggression and violence from their kinship children when it occurs."

"Open the ASF to all children no matter their previous looked after status."

- Kinship status / treatment as experts

"Involve potential kinship carers from an early stage and treat them with respect, not a free resource."

"Support plans at the start of a formal kinship arrangement (SG or any other) should be (1) written as partnership between the LA and the kinship carers (2) be enforceable (3) include the voice of the child. The LA should have a *long term* commitment to the children, not try to evade their responsibilities."

"Buddy system from experienced local foster carers or kinship carers to support kinship carers and kids especially in the early days."

"*Approach carers as peers rather than acting on the reports of birth parents and advocating for them to the detriment of the carers and children that they are caring for.*"

"*Professionals (social workers, schools, health) to work with kinship carers and kinship kids to be ambitious for their outcomes, not just accept bare minimum scraping by.*"

"*Recognize kinship carers as experts, and respect their views and knowledge about a child and their family.*"

How can the system provide better post adoption support?

When CoLab asked "How can the system provide better post adoption support?" participants made the following suggestions:

"*Firstly, the system needs to provide post adoption support, at the moment there is none. From the beginning the system must recognise that when a Local Authority purposely places a traumatised child with an approved family, that family WILL need support. That child WILL have suffered and will have special needs of all sorts. Post adoption is a misnomer, it is "current" and we have children that would otherwise remain in the care system. Let us access help without being made to feel we have failed when we ask for help, get assessed and judged as failing.*"

"*No social worker would do better if they lived with the traumatised child, so believe us and help us. Let us not be assessed ever again. Let us get on and help our children, seeking expert input when we need it.*"

"*Ensure that the support given while the children are fostered continues once they are adopted. Whatever it takes!.*"

"*Unless not in the interest of the child, ensure contact of some sort continues with the previous foster carers. This is so important in the life story work of the child.*"

"As an adoptive parent(s) we are not the enemy - this is a BIG step so support is vital for our survival."

"Legal aid available."

"Consistency across localities - end post-code lottery."

"Trauma Informed approach."

"Same support as all in care."

"Differentiated resources."

"The support and resources in place for a child in fostering should follow the child through to SGO and adoption."

"Better and easier to access mental and emotional health support for children, young people and carers."

"Quick, instant, comprehensive support for all in the adoptive family from knowledgeable, approachable, nonjudgmental professionals and people who have lived it / are living it and are relatable and keeping links with carers where appropriate who can support the child and family through the transition and as they settle (post honeymoon). Key is preparation with realistic expectations and learning from those who have been through the process and are living as adopters. Honesty and openness in the information provided for potential matches is essential. Recognising how those involved in the adoptive family want the support to be, (face to face, virtual, what's app support groups) and how often, so as to respect that to keep the channels of communication open in a way that works for them and gives them some control at a time when they may feel like their world has been turned upside down."

"Having a variety of people to contact to support, specialists in different areas. Limiting those chances for feeling isolated or overwhelmed by the whole process or afterwards when living in an adoptive family by providing and building that support way before not when at crisis level."

"A package of bespoke & flexible support for individual children."

"Recognise that relationships made with FC can have an important emotional connection with child."

"Trauma informed approached are better for all children, care experienced or not."

"Be ambitious across all agencies involved in child support."

"Much greater use of clinical psychological support as it really makes a difference. Listen to experts."

"Be proactive not reactive. An IRO we were involved with said that he couldn't be proactive. He could only act after something had happened - which could have been something very serious. An incredible admission."

"Full time SW: very part time children's SW's some only work 3 days over two weeks and even then, it's by negotiation so children have no social worker most of the time and no one else takes over just told to wait till their SW is back."

"Radical overhaul of school system for our children. It doesn't work for children with trauma. Smaller, nurturing, less unstructured time, fewer changes of staff for the child, less emphasis on academic achievement and more on relationships."

"Respite for adopters if they want it. Don't wait until there is a crisis."

"Assume that adopted children will need that support without having to fight for it. Selwyn report stated that 2/3 of adoptions are very difficult and 1/3 are violent."

"Deal in facts, evidence not gut feelings and emotions. Action has to be based on what is going to work."

How can we support more people to become and remain foster parents?

When CoLab asked "How can we support more people to become and remain foster parents?"participants made the following suggestions:

"More recognition and better delegated authority."

"Paid breaks – structured short breaks when needed to support sustainability of the placement – retainer fees between placements – loyalty bonus paid annually."

"More value on foster parents of babies and new borns – financial appreciation, recognition of the hectic support network around a baby, recognition of the sleep deprivation, household running cost escalation."

"Trained and linked short break carers."

"Restorative practices – settled social worker to build relationships – better appreciation and understanding of our role 365/24/7 – maintained and supported networks to better support carers – better out of hours emergency support."

"Better and easier to access mental and emotional health support for children, young people and carers."

"Key support for foster carers when false accusations are made. I know of foster carers who were badly let down by the system."

"Create proper connections with schools as this is the biggest barrier to our children and them feeling supporting."

"Respect, loosing blame culture."

"Be a recognized important part of decisions around a child / young person."

"Educate social workers to understand the impact of trauma and abuse and this should be across FC, SGO's and adoption services."

"Invest in peer support not just rely on parents/carers to do it for free."

"Seeing the whole placement/ family."

"Foster carers are not aware of the degree of intrusion the assessments will have and often withdraw as they feel it is too intensive."

"Consistency is key."

"Protection- LADO procedures looked at moving forwards considering all parties."

"Support and possibly finance carers to embrace technology and how to use it - technology is the world of our children and we need to be confident with it to better protect and support our children funding, support."

"Include all information in a child's report - it is the parent and carers right."

"Retention of foster carers through respect and buddy systems/ mentors."

"Early Intervention services rather than crisis and no cure proactive and preventative rather than reactive."

"Pets - some have wanted to foster but told they can't due to having pets. Told to 'get rid of pet' then they can foster. There is a pet assessment but some especially with dogs find they are told to remove the pet as a 'risk'."

"Think of more imaginative ways to recruit foster carers."

"Develop carers support networks - invite carer representatives to be members of groups - corporate parent panel - virtual school governing body - QA assurance reviews - regular meetings/conferences with managers of teams around children - hears carers concerns / views / opinions / ideas encourage them to be a part of the network around the child."

"Transparency and trust - relationship building across all partners involved."

"Third sector involvement - more of what works well."

"Create plans that give a lifelong route to support using some existing processes and review if to grow with the child."

"Clearer procedures and processes so that everyone is clear and singing from the same sheet."

"Give some control back to foster carers rather than taking it all away."

"Acknowledge, thank and show deepest appreciations ALL the way."

"Embed changes - government accountability for ensuring changes happen."

"Panel of carers for each authority which meet regularly to open up communication and make sure things move forward and continue to develop."

"Being able to be family rather than on edge about what we can and can't do. We want to invite children to be a part of the family not treat differently."

Reflections on Process:

Event process

The process allowed the many people to talk about their stories and share with other members of their community of carers and parents. Connections emerged that were ultimately reflected in the strengths identified.
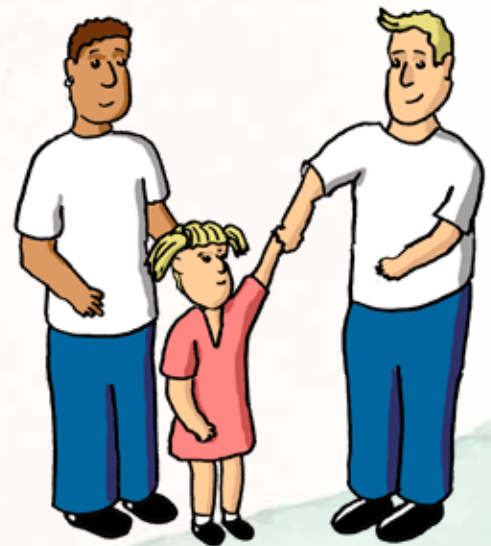
Whilst some participants expressed that they appreciated the space to speak, there were some comments from others about how their perception that the session was difficult because of the tech.

"Tech was a bit overwhelming and too many difficulties"

"It's very difficult for us all, various ages, not all tech savvy. And not all of us have up to date tech. But, appreciate without tech we couldn't have done a meeting like this, after all, we have people from all over. Thank you everyone who care so much to have given your time and energy."

"I think you should not assume that people have top-notch tech. Maybe we are not the kind of people you normally deal with?"

"Thank you for allowing me to join today to share kinship carers voices who couldn't attend. It's been amazing to hear so many skilled and knowledgeable people talk so passionately today. (project worker for Kinship Charity https://kinship.org.uk/)."

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the contributions from the participants of the Explore event for foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents, this report finds that the system requires change in five broad areas:

- Humanisation of the system and standardisation of provision across local authority areas.

- The knowledge and experience of the system that carers and parents as a community have built up over many years represents a great strength. This strength should be harnessed because when carers come together, they feel strengthened, empowered and supported by each other. They believe they have a lot to contribute to the system and they want to make that contribution.

- It is evident that the current stigma surrounding carers´ families is another source of trauma. Therefore, to improve their quality of life, it is essential that society´s perceptions of this group are changed.

- This particular group of Experts by Experience has a special vocation. They are people who have decided to devote themselves to the service of children and young people who require a home. An acknowledgement of the vocational nature of that decision must be embedded into the future design of the system if their contribution is to be fully realised.

Improvements in the above directions could be achieved by encouraging, nurturing and harnessing this vocational contribution to the system. The idea that this could be achieved through the formation of local peer groups of foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents coming together to share their knowledge, experience and expertise with the system was explicitly suggested by a number of participants. More so, the

benefit of such peers coming together was implicitly demonstrated in the participation, engagement and reflections of all those involved in this Explore event. Peer groups such as these already exist in some but not all areas. To address this, the formation and development of local peer group organisations could be part of the standardisation of local authority provision that many participants expressed a need for during the event.

Work with us – let us help you help others
(Explore participant 9/9/2021)