

What support do care-leavers need?

Relationships, Creativity and Genuine Co-production are Key for Care Leavers

Submission to the UN Committee's Day of Discussion – July 2021

Staf (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum) is Scotland's national membership organisation for all of those involved in the lives of young people leaving care and has over 30 years' experience working with care leavers and the workforce who support them. Our vision is that the wellbeing and success of young people leaving care across Scotland is indistinguishable from that of their peers in the general population. A consistent strand throughout all our many years' work and research has been the importance of relationships. A simple but hugely important concept. In addition to this creativity and co-production have proved enormously effective at building and sustaining relationships.

The outcomes of many care leavers in Scotland, are not equal to their non-care experienced peers. They are more likely to experience unemployment, poor educational attainment, homelessness, mental health issues, have experience with the justice system, suffer from isolation and loneliness, have experienced trauma and be living in poverty (Scottish Government, 2018).

In response to the inequalities faced by care leavers we have curated projects which allow young people with care experience and the workforce to come together, create new opportunities, learn from each other and most importantly develop strong and lasting relationships. By highlighting the work of our current project strands we will demonstrate that relationships are the golden thread running through them all.

Youth Justice Voices.

Youth Justice Voices was created as a joint collaboration between Staf and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ). It was established to amplify the voices of young people aged 16-25 with experience of the care and justice systems.

Led by the steering group Youth Just Us, the group uses creative ways to be heard in the care and justice system, and share their experiences with policymakers, managers, corporate parents and the Scottish Government.

Building relationships is at the heart of any youth work and it should also be part of any participatory experience. That connection needs to be developed both individually and collectively. Chekoway (2010) describes youth participation as respecting and enhancing the expertise, rights, and personal development of young people and measures the quality of participation on the effect that it has on outcomes, decisions or processes.

When facilitating early introductory activities young people told us that that they wanted participation projects to be proactive, they wanted to feel that the project would make a difference to their current circumstances.

“It feels like you say the same things over and over again, nothing changes, don't want to just talk [we] want to see action” (Youth Justice Voices Member).

Young people also stressed the importance of trust, respect, empathy and kindness. They spoke about the importance of honesty and the need for transparency and clarity about what was achievable in the short and long term and for facilitators not to “be scared to hear the truth” in the process.

If we want to create meaningful change and expect young people to engage in the process, then we need to go beyond simply listening to what they say. We need to harness and value the wealth of knowledge, skills and lived experiences that they already have.

Throughout the lifetime of the project we have used creativity as a means of staying connected and ensuring relationships thrive. From graffiti to tie dye, these sessions have led to the young people being able to discuss key issues such as their experiences with the justice system and mental health. They have also created regular newsletters and blogs which has had a huge impact on their self esteem

‘I love writing and to see my blogs shared on twitter and Staf website, word for word what I had written made me feel proud and empowered. I feel as if I have a good relationship with people in the group and even though I've never met them face to face I feel as if I know them well!’ (Youth Justice Voices member)

If we expect young people to engage in participation activities then we need to develop them together. The process not only needs to be fun and engaging but also worth their time. The voluntary nature of youth work requires us to invest quality time in relationships. It requires us to listen and act on what young people say. Youth work and meaningful participation can change lives.

The Real Toolkit

The Real Toolkit is a leaving care resource for young people and the workforce. Its creation is based on two decades of dialogue, work and influencing. Listening to lived experience it was clear that relationships are the key for good outcomes for young people and that relational practice empowers the workforce to do best.

Since 2020 the project has been steered by The Real Advisory Group, made up of young people with care experience and workers with professional experience in the sector. In 2021 we launched the first version of a living resource: [The Real Toolkit](#) – for young people and the workforce. This project is a genuine co-production, meaning that both young people and the workforce are equal partners and stakeholders in this work. There are voices of residential care, secure care, foster care, college students and apprentices as well as a range of professional experience, including throughcare and aftercare.

‘I believe relationships are the key to everything. I really enjoy the co-production aspect of the work we are carrying out, as I feel it empowers young people and gives them ownership to make a positive change into services which they use.’ (Advisory Group member)

It is important that relationships are at the centre of support when young people transition out of care. It is through relationships that young people develop confidence and emotional intelligence and can overcome trauma. This is the foundation for happy and fulfilled lives, where young people feel supported and know there are people they can count on.

In our workforce survey 99% of respondents stated relationships are important to their work and can heal trauma.

Relationships matter. Young people in care deserve and have the right to meaningful, positive and lasting relationships with friends, family, support workers and anyone else who matters to them.

Project Return

Created in 2018 Project Return has worked with care leavers to explore issues surrounding trauma and promoting trauma informed practice. Relationships, creativity and coproduction have been key to this group, especially during the pandemic with their fortnightly meetings moving online. Despite this, the steering group known as The Catalysts, have achieved an incredible amount. They have created Scotland's choir for the care community, utilising music and relationships as a supportive resource to overcome trauma by bringing together those with experience of the children's care and/or the justice system and their workers, giving them a voice and way of connecting through music.

Last year, following a discussion on pets, they developed a Pet Survey which highlighted the importance of pets in overcoming trauma. The survey was completed by young people with care experience and also Members of the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Councillors which demonstrated the stark difference in support for pet ownership between the two groups. The Catalysts now plan to work with national animal welfare organisations to help local authorities, residential services and care leavers work together to support pets for care experienced young people.

Working in partnership with the Scottish Forestry Commission the Catalysts also developed a Seeds for Change initiative which led to seed boxes being delivered across the country alongside a series of online forestry club sessions.

Their most recent project has been Togetheroo, a day when care experienced young people and those that support them came together to discuss Relationships, Well Being, Culture and Safe Place. The event was all about strengthening relationships between both groups and those participating were provided with resource packs which helped to facilitate the conversations and were designed by The Catalysts after a series of workshops using screen printing as a means of expressing their emotions.

'Togetheroo is about informing people about the care system and creating a better understanding of relationships. Not all relationships are the same and not all relationships work'. Project Return is not just a group, we're a family. We are trying to change the care system and work as a team with no wrong and right answers'
(Catalyst member)

Key Recommendations for Participative Practice and genuine co-production.

Relationships are key in every walk of life but for care leavers they are especially important. By working together in genuinely collaborative and creative ways, those relationships can be formed, strengthened and maintained and play a huge role in ensuring the outcomes of care leavers are equal to their peers.

Recruitment

- You need to “widen the net out” to approach and include people who haven’t been involved before so you’re not relying on the same faces all the time.
- A meet-up beforehand would be beneficial, allowing new participants to connect and get to know you prior to attending a session/carrying out any work in your organisation.

Facilitators

- People who are leading sessions should welcome challenge and a different lens from which they view the world.
- Facilitators should be kind and genuine - trust, respect and empathy should be core values.
- Building relationships is key and this should be at the heart of any participatory experience, strategy or project.

Meetings and experiences

- It is important to provide refreshments and food in face to face participation meet ups, whether it is an individual or group meet up - sharing a meal can be a bonding experience.
- Sessions should take place in safe and creative spaces where young people feel comfortable.
- Sessions should help participants gain skills, knowledge and confidence. This could include further training and employment opportunities for people with lived experience in different areas within or out with your organisation.
- Sessions should also have a flexible structure with the autonomy to make changes to fit the group’s needs. The facilitator and session plan should demonstrate compassion and empathy and have an understanding of the audience and different experiences - “don’t put pressure on us”.

- Sessions should be fun, engaging and non-judgemental. A level of emotional intelligence is required to understand and support your audience - "just be human".
- You should create a sense of freedom so young people can drop in and out.
- You need to create different opportunities to engage and communicate in different ways as an individual or a group e.g. phone calls, emails, texts etc.
- Balance structuring and not structuring sessions - "keep it informal, people are giving up their time so keep it friendly and happy".

Benefits

- Reimbursing people for their time should be key to your participation strategy - everyone's time is of value and that should be respected - "pay us or give us rewards when you can".
- There should be mutual benefits – e.g. skills and development opportunities.
- Applicants for jobs should be welcomed from those with lived experience.

Continuing projects during the pandemic

- Despite the challenges the pandemic has placed on face to face contact, it's important that we use technology to keep connected for as long as is necessary - "my opinion matters".
- Keep the same focus and activities but do it online.
- Ask us how we want to take part, what platforms we use and be flexible.
- Care packages, creative activities which can be used off line and data all help.

References

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