

Evaluation Report

Report on a study of the Top 10 Messages from attendees at the Care Experienced Conference.

Background

In 2019 a national conference for care experienced people and care leavers of all ages ‘The Care Experienced Conference: Past, Present and Future – Our Care, Our Say’ was organised by care experienced people to share their experiences and views on how things can improve for those who are currently or who have recently been in care. One of the outcomes of the conference was a pledge setting out the top 10 messages from the day.

These were:

1. We need more love in the care system, including displays of positive physical affection.
2. We want to be seen as individuals worthy of respect much more than we are.
3. Relationships are critically important to us.
4. Instability and loss of continuity in our lives is made worse through no fault of ours by pressure in the care system.
5. Mental health and wellbeing are our biggest worries and the most important and urgent things that have to improve.
6. The impacts of the care experience do not end at 18, or 21, or even 25.
7. Our sense of who we are is important. Our family, heritage and history are uniquely ours and must be protected.
8. Having our say is essential.
9. We have legal rights and entitlements, and we are not always being told what they are.
10. Nobody knows more about what it means to be in care than we do.

In 2021 a follow-up online knowledge exchange event took place with the people who had participated in the conference. This reflected how the messages had in some local authority areas informed local policy, practice and culture. They described how ‘bringing the child into the room’, or ‘placing the child at the centre of thinking’, changed ways of working, including a change in the use of language and the dialogue between young people and the professionals working with them.

As young people were being consulted on other matters as part of an evaluation of the impact of training, it was decided to use the opportunity to explore the extent to which the Top 10 messages from the conference have relevance for them and where applicable are demonstrated within the current practices of Restorative Social Care Services.

During November/December 2021, 6 young people living in RSCS (ages ranging from 10 to 17 years) took part in an informal study to seek their views on the 10 key messages / statements. It is recognised this is a small-scale study and may not be representative of the views of all the young people in RSCS.

Methodology

Each young person was presented with the original key message, or a statement simpler in structure, which focused on the main issue. They were asked to weight their answer in terms of importance of the matter to themselves and to explain their response. Supplementary questions were asked in some cases which invited the young people to explain how the issue is demonstrated in RSCS.

Where given, all scores and comments were captured although it was evident to the interviewer that one young person in particular lost interest in the study part way through and therefore those responses may be tokenistic. In addition, the ways in which the young people interpreted the question and scored how 'important' or not the issue is to them, varied.

Findings

Table 1 – number of respondents scoring each statement on a scale of 0 to 10 (Not important to Very Important).

		< Not important			Fairly important				Very important >			
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Statement	1									2		3
	2						1				1	4
	3								1		1	4
	4			1 >			1		1			2
	5					1						3
	6						1					2
	7	1										4
	8						1				1	4
	9									1		3
	10		1								1	3

1. We need more love in the care system, including displays of positive physical affection.

Of the 5 young people who responded to this statement, 3 said this was very important to them. One person said '.... you want a substitute parent figure'. All respondents described ways in which 'love' and 'physical affection' is demonstrated in RSCS including 'They help me out', through food, being given 'hugs' and being listened to.

2. We want to be seen as individuals worthy of respect much more than we are.

2 of the young people said this is very important to them. One explained, 'respect is give and take. Staff listen to me and vice versa. We're treated as individuals [in Restorative] – we have different problems, so staff support us to deal with them'; the other said, 'I think we're seen as a number when in the care system – people on the outside show no respect. Staff who like me interact and show interest in my interests.' Examples to illustrate how young people are shown respect in RSCS included, having 'own stuff', different types of food, different bedtimes. The person who scored this 5 recognised that young people 'might feel angry' if they are not shown respect.

3. Relationships are critically important to us.

The majority (4) said this was very important. One person summarised how they view relationships in RSCS as '... see workers as a different family. If you have a good relationship, have a better experience.' In a similar way, another young person suggested, a good relationship, 'makes life a lot easier'. Ways in which 'good relationships' are demonstrated in RSCS were described as 'someone who talks to you, eats with you, makes your favourite food', 'being kind', 'listened to', 'being nice to each other'. Good relationships mean 'can speak to staff and they try to help.....can have a laugh, have fun and you get to enjoy things'.

4. Instability and loss of continuity in our lives is made worse through no fault of ours by pressure in the care system.

The person who scored this low at 2½ commented on previous personal experiences, 'I feel the system is not trustworthy. Several moves make mental health issues worse have to get used to different places and wondering if you'll get moved again. Don't feel safe in the system feel safe here.' This was followed by 'Depends what people say – not open or honest don't tell you what's happening keep some things back. I want people to be down to earth'. One young person who said this issue is very important to themselves noted having the same staff caring for you is critical for continuity and routine, whilst another who scored this 5, said, moves are important '....so you get the right place'.

5. Mental health and wellbeing are our biggest worries and the most important and urgent things that have to improve.

Of the 4 that responded, 3 young people expressed concern about this issue noting, 'contact issues worry me' and another, '...I know young people who have taken their own life so worried it can be the same for me'. Examples were provided which demonstrated how attention is given to mental health in RSCS, including, 'Think it's right here. If I have a problem, [they] try to find a solution', 'Being asked if I'm OK', being given extra help. However, one person suggested it would help if more attention was paid to matching young people when arranging placements in RSCS and of the importance of consistent approaches by staff.

6. The impacts of the care experience do not end at 18, or 21, or even 25.

The older respondents had clear views on this issue, that is, 'I want to finish with the care system at 18 but think it should be 21 with ongoing support', and '.... need to be told what will happen at 16 should take experiences of being in care into account for life e.g. may have less money or not be so good with talking etc.....' explaining this could be as a result of lack of skills and opportunities whilst in care and people (outside of care) do not know what it is really like. Other, younger, respondents thought it less important as 'people tease'.

7. Our sense of who we are is important. Our family, heritage and history are uniquely ours and must be protected.

Only one young person said this was not important at all to themselves explaining they 'don't need to know' about their past. All others (4) suggested knowledge of their background and family is very important and commented, 'Want to be able to remember my past', 'My past has made me the person I've become', '....the more you know, the more you [professionals] can help'. One person suggested a photo book would be useful to capture the young person's history and heritage. Through discussion, young people suggested that RSCS uphold this statement.

8. Having our say is essential.

4 of the 6 young people said this is very important (scored 10) and one scored 9/10. The young people said being able to have their say is demonstrated in RSCS by 'not being made to do things I don't want', 'expressing myself through music', making decisions about life, 'talking to people', having meetings, 'when Ofsted come'.

9. We have legal rights and entitlements, and we are not always being told what they are.

Three young people scored this as very important commenting that they are easily able to access information in RSCS and from their social worker. One person suggested that it is the responsibility of staff to ask the young person if support is needed.

10. Nobody knows more about what it means to be in care than we do.

The person who scored this low did not make any comment. All others suggested young people in care have first-hand experience themselves and 'can advise on things about being in care', 'I'm the only one who has experienced my life'. One person commented that they should be given more credit for understanding the risks that may affect them or that staff need to present a 'more convincing argument for why something isn't safe'.

Analysis

In general, the comments provide a clearer insight into the views of the individuals on different issues rather than the scores. In some cases the label 'Important'/'Not important' was not helpful as the comments did not reflect the score given. For example, the person who scored question 2 as 5 was describing how important this issue is to them but was also able to recognise that other young people 'might feel angry' if they are not shown respect. The low score for statement 4 suggests in this case the young person was reflecting their view and experience of the care system rather than focusing on responsibility for the instability in the system.

Analysis of the responses to each statement, suggests that:

- RSCS staff demonstrate that they care and show affection in different ways (practical, emotional and physical) and young people identify with those aspects that are most important and acceptable to them.
- Individuality is recognised and addressed in the care and attention given to children and young people's individual needs and interests. The young people feel respect should be mutual and they described being 'listened to' - a theme that was reflected in several of the responses throughout the study.
- Relationships are clearly important to the young people and different examples were given to illustrate the positive relationships between RSCS staff and young people.
- Young people recognise the importance of stability in their lives whilst acknowledging that some disruption in the care system is inevitable. They used personal experiences to suggest ways to manage this more effectively and sensitively.
- The importance of consistency and a proactive, supportive, approach by staff was highlighted when exploring different issues and in particular to promoting good mental health.
- A number of the respondents effectively articulated their views and provided examples from their own personal experiences which suggests they have a valuable role to play in improving other people's understanding of the impact of care and 'what works'. All the young people noted the importance of having opportunities to express their views and described different ways this takes place in RSCS.

Conclusion

Although there were a few differences of opinion and low scores for some statements, most respondents in this study reflected the importance of the key messages of the conference prepared by other care experienced people. Furthermore, when highlighting the matters that are of most importance to them, the young people in this study were able to provide examples of how they are met in RSCS.

By exploring the key messages from the conference, this study has confirmed the good practice adopted in RSCS whilst raising other issues which may indicate the need for change. It is suggested that learning from this study and the views of young people should be taken into account when considering how to improve practice and support in RSCS.

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When making changes, it may be useful to refer to the following -

Pledge drafted from the 2019 conference for Care Experienced People setting out the things which are most important to improve the experience of children in care and care experience to people.

In delivering the pledge, it is important to:

- support the principles which underpin the Top Ten Messages and apply these to the way services are planned and delivered in future;
- use the Top Ten Messages to drive improvement; and
- invite care experienced people to feedback the extent to which the pledge is upheld

When planning and delivering services in the future we will:

1. promote more love in the care system including displays of positive physical affection;
2. ensure young people in our care are regarded and treated as individuals worthy of respect and to promote that respect wherever we can;
3. ensure that relationships are seen as central to all our policies and procedures to support children in care and care experienced people;
4. take clear steps to improve stability and continuity in the lived experiences of people in care;
5. work with our partners and young people to raise awareness of need and improve support for the mental health and well-being of children in care and care experienced people;
6. recognise in our daily work that the impact of care experience does not end at 18 or 21 or even 25, and review our practice to remove age restrictions on support wherever we can;
7. protect, promote and where necessary rebuild family and community connections and help those young people for whom we are responsible to understand their personal history;
8. make sure that young people in our care are routinely engaged, consulted and have a real have a say in their own lives
9. ensure that young people in our care are properly and fully informed of their rights and offer advocacy to ensure they receive them; and
10. listen to the voice of children in care and care experience people of all ages and always consult them about changes to services and support.