

Learning Digest 5: Brent Care Journeys



BARNARD'S

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Changing lives.

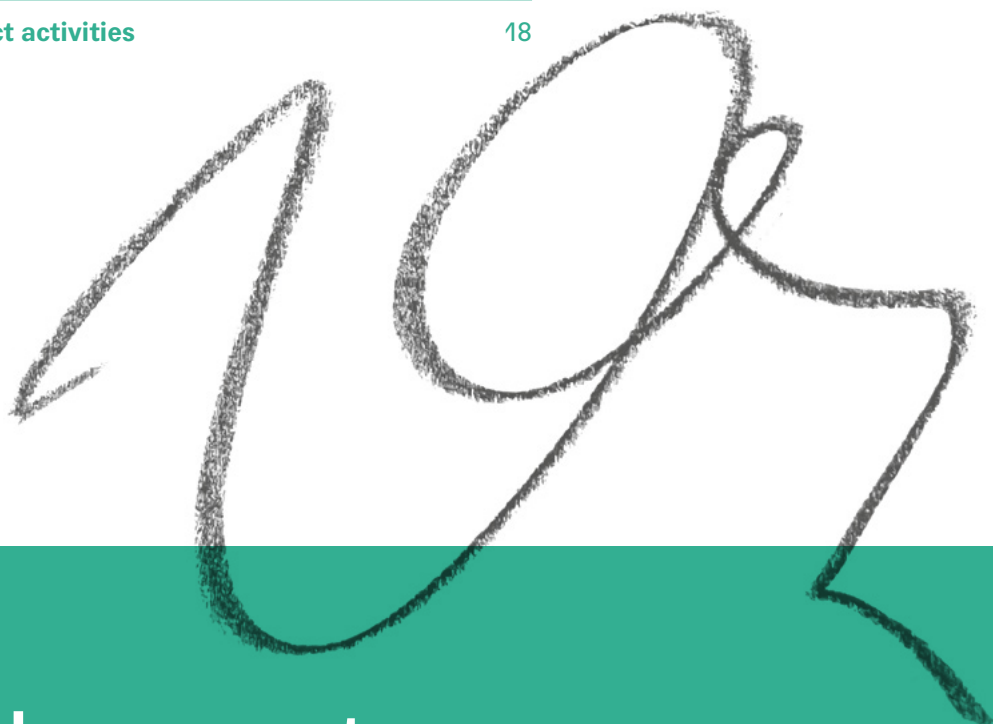
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Brought together by
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Introduction

Background and structure of the report

Scope of this digest

This is one of the three learning digests that together comprise the final phase of the independent evaluation of Barnardo's Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships (CJSPs or Care Journeys) in Brent and Plymouth. The evaluation was undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations between 2019 and 2024. This digest aims to reflect on the key learnings from Brent Care Journeys (BCJ). It showcases positive progress and improvements that have or could significantly enhance the experiences of young people entering, living in, and leaving care. It aims to share learning and recommendations from the experience of BCJ in collaborating with care-experienced young people and professionals to improve outcomes for young people and effect systems change in the children social care system.

This document can be read alongside the other two final learning digests produced, with one digest focusing on the Plymouth Care Journeys partnership (PCJ) and another explicitly focused on the young people outcomes achieved by the programme over the two sites. Previous evaluation reports produced as part of this programme can be found [here](#).

Digest Structure and Content

The digest begins by summarising activities undertaken since the Interim Evaluation Report 2 (published in July 2022), highlighting key learnings from previous reports up to that point. It then presents insights from BCJ with a focus on project aims related to collaboration with young people and professionals, partnership working, and systems change. The analysis includes:

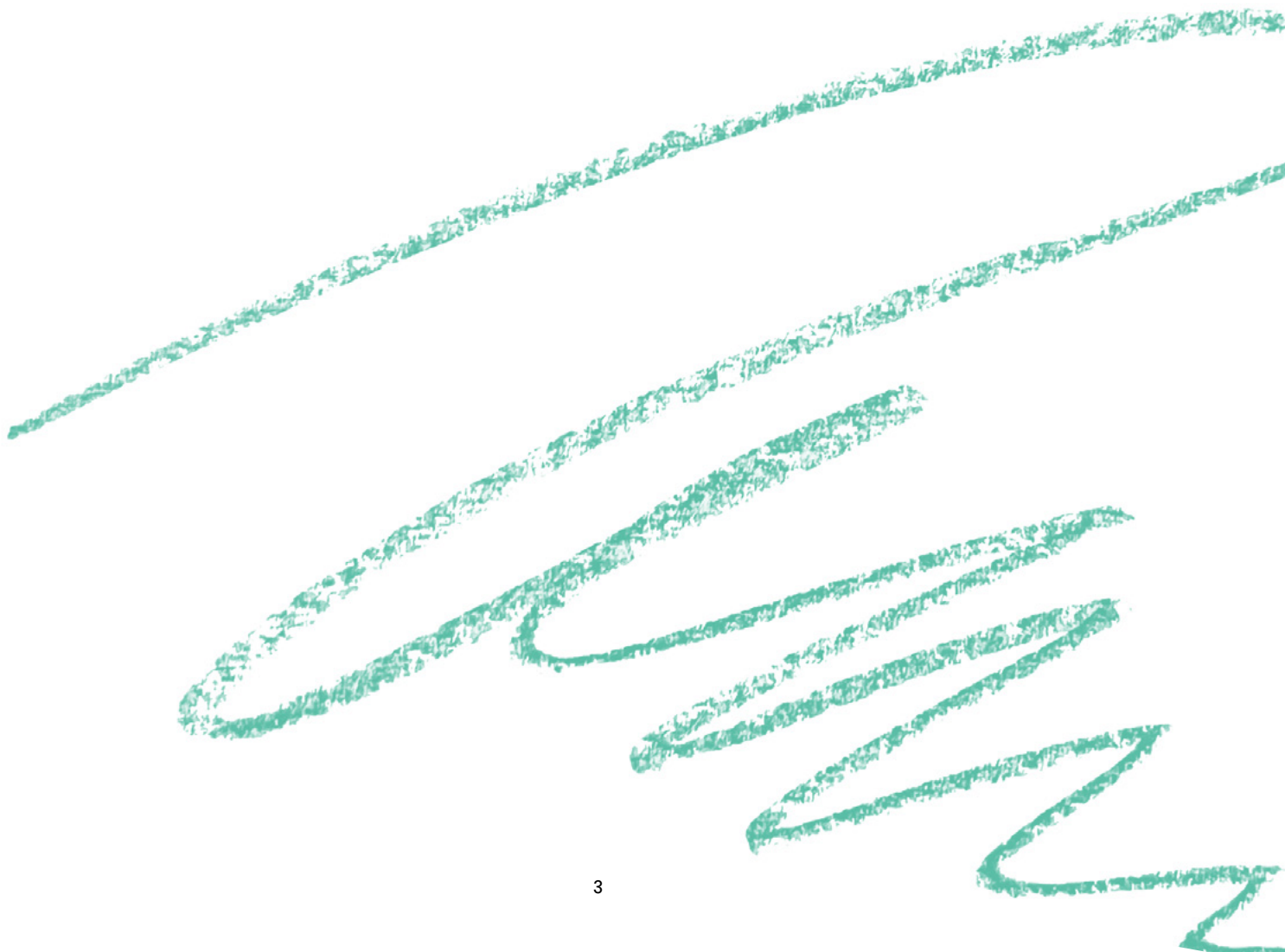
- interviews and focus groups with Barnardo's and Brent Council staff, and professionals from other partners.
- interviews with young people conducted between October 2022 and March 2024.
- further analysis of interviews and meetings since the project's inception.
- reviews of all reports produced by the evaluation team throughout the project's lifespan.
- additional data from documents produced by the partnership, such as meeting minutes, conference presentations, strategy documents, event write-ups, feedback, and evaluations of BCJ initiatives, a monthly newsletter, and material shared via the BCJ website.

The insights also draw on broader literature around innovation and collaboration, both within and outside the children's social care system. The report concludes with questions and points for consideration for statutory and non-statutory partners when setting up similar innovation programmes. Its aim is to provide opportunities for reflection and consideration, aiding partners, other local authorities, and voluntary and community sector organisations in designing, implementing, and delivering similar interventions in the future, as well as wider implications and learning for the sector.

Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships

Care Journeys was one of Barnardo's Core Priority Programmes as part of their 10-year strategy (2016-2025) focusing on outcomes for care-experienced young people. CJSPs were established in Brent and Plymouth, beginning in 2019 and ending in 2024. Plymouth and Brent CJSPs aimed to explore the major challenges in children's social care, in order to develop novel solutions, with the long-term goal of achieving transformational change within the system and supporting better outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Both Plymouth and Brent CJSPs used a service design approach to explore current issues for care-experienced young people and ways to develop solutions. This resulted in a range of pilot projects being implemented for different amounts of time. Plymouth and Brent CJSPs also ran activities aimed at addressing immediate challenges faced by young people. These activities were largely developed in collaboration with care-experienced young people and children's social care professionals.



Brent Care Journeys

Brent Care Journeys (BCJ) aimed to bring about transformational change in the children's social care system, leading to better outcomes for young people, and to provide learning for the wider social care system. The programme aimed to achieve these goals through collaboration with care-experienced young people and professionals based on a robust partnership with statutory authorities.

The project started in late 2019 with agreement between Barnardo's and Brent Council on a set of project goals, a timeline, and expectations around the roles and responsibilities and resources of each core partner. Barnardo's provided funding for a team (initially made up of two project workers, one children's service manager, with support from an area based Assistant Director) to be based on Brent Council premises where Brent would provide 'in-kind' resources such as rooms.

Early in the project, with the support of the Evaluation team, the partnership established more detailed project aims and outcomes and sought to develop indicators and metrics for each of these. The three key outcomes domains were:

Outcome 1: Strategic Partnership with Care-Experienced Young People

Outcome 2: Viable Partnership Working Towards Outcomes

Outcome 3: Improvements in Children's Social Care Systems

These capture the basis for the work as rooted in the partnership between Barnardo's and Brent and the partnership between professionals and care-experienced young people. They worked together towards the ultimate aim of improving the children's social care system so as to support young people to achieve 'positive destinations' (a broader conception of positive outcomes that went beyond the traditional focus on education, employment, training, to include the young person's goals and their assessment of the progress towards these).

From the start BCJ pursued each of these goals, establishing a robust and deepening partnership between the BCJ team and key partners in Brent children's social care, that helped build links at operational, manager, and strategic levels. Based on the core partnership, they then looked to draw in other partners from the wider system including private and third sector care providers, local arts organisations, commissioners, and policy makers.

At the same time, BCJ sought to build relationships with local care-experienced young people, undertaking a wide range of engagement and promotional activities to bring together a large group of young people. This group, in time, would become known as 'The Movement' or 'We Shine Bright' and represented a core group of care-experienced young people (albeit with shifting membership) with whom BCJ collaborated through the lifetime of the project. Other groups of care-experienced young people were then engaged/recruited for specific projects such as the codesign process (Alpha Labs) exploring the experience of late entrants to care.

Working with professionals and care-experienced young people as partners, BCJ has developed a wide variety of activities. These have ranged from more casual, one-off sessions, such as recreational events, meals, and workshops, to more substantial ongoing projects including codesign of products and processes. BCJ has supported substantial training and upskilling activities, enabling young people to take up project roles of responsibility. Examples include formal employment within the project team and support to develop and run groups themselves.

After the first round of co-design with late entrants to care concluded, the second round aimed to collaborate with professionals within the children's social care sector. Like the first round, this led to the development of a range of projects, products, and processes to be trialled and implemented.

As the project developed it increasingly sought to bring care-experienced young people and professionals together in collaborative activities that challenge the traditional working relationships of these groups. It also sought to influence the wider system through holding events and showcases in collaboration with young people and professionals, attending and contributing to high-profile events in central government and elsewhere, and seeking to influence key decision makers.

Below we set out insights from the previous evaluation report in relation to each main outcome domain and updating on how the project progressed.

Outcome 1: Strategic Partnership with care-experienced young people

Previous reports identified how BCJ was increasingly involving care-experienced young people through activities, training, and paid roles. Care-experienced young people were seen as equal partners, influencing the programme's shape and direction through co-designing and leading activities. Evaluation insights included that BCJ had positive outcomes for young people directly involved in project activities, including better understanding of the care system, improved relationships, and increased confidence and maturity.

Update since Interim Report 2

The collaborative work with young people continued to grow, including through involvement in the second round of the co-design process which brought professionals and young people together in groups to develop and test novel ideas together. Additional avenues of collaborative work with young people included:

- continuation of care-experienced young people-led 'Power groups'.
- employment of care-experienced young people by the BCJ team in various project worker roles.
- design and delivery of training (placement inspections) and consultations in the development of placement regulation (with Ofsted including the production of a joint podcast).
- The development and running of listening and live design events involving young people and professionals (e.g., listen-up legacy event and the Fun Affair) designed to both generate and share learning from the project.
- An extensive schedule of learning, leisure, and social activities.

A full list of activities undertaken with care-experienced young people since April 2022 is included in the Appendix.

Young people involved in the project continued to give highly positive feedback on their experiences of collaborating with the project. Those interviewed described feeling listened to and supported to contribute and take on ownership of shared projects. For example:

“We always are listened to [...] They always went around in a circle, and they always made sure that each young person is given a chance to speak. [...] They have definitely shown that we can work together towards a common goal, so it was a very positive experience for me.”

(Young person)

The nature and quality of the collaborative work with young people is explored in greater depth below in the discussion section.

Outcomes for care-experienced young people (update)¹

As described in the previous evaluation reports, the project continued to produce positive outcomes at each of the levels it worked. Young people involved continued reporting positive outcomes, ranging from enjoying and benefiting from leisure and social opportunities, building skills and confidence, to for some, transformative opportunities in terms of education and professional progression – with several movement members going on to study courses at university and/or gain meaningful employment.

“Care leavers have gained confidence and a sense of community through Barnardo’s activities [...] Several young people have found employment and improved their mental health due to consistent support.”

(Brent Staff Member)

Outcome 2: Viable Partnership Working Towards Outcomes

The interim evaluation reports noted that the partnership between Brent Council and Barnardo’s was growing, with stronger trust and transparency. Communication had improved both formally (meetings, newsletters) and informally (due to Barnardo’s co-locating on Brent premises), and governance processes were clearer, with regular partnership and board meetings. It also noted that BCJ had broadened its reach beyond the local authority to other local and regional organisations.

Update since Interim report 2

The final round of data collection and analysis continued to show that the core partnership between Barnardo’s and Brent had operated well, with continued regular and open channels of communication, high levels of trust between partners, and relationships maintained at each tier of the partnership. Reflecting on the experience of the partnership, a senior Brent partner described the benefit of working in this way:

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of the outcomes achieved by the CJSPs for care-experienced young people, please consult the [young person’s outcomes digest](#)

“I would hope that it’s allowed my staff to create, given them more of a skill in working with partners. We’ve had to achieve things by negotiation. Operational staff, middle and senior leaders have worked on the negotiated approach, that has been a benefit [...] Not a contract management approach. It forces us into a different conversation; less transactional.” (Brent Staff Member)

Increasingly BCJ has looked to form connections and relationships with a broader set of partners, both from within the council, and with local/ national organisations working in this field. This has been achieved through engaging partners in further rounds of co-design as well as building connections through professional networks and word of mouth. One collaborator described how they came to be involved and the benefit of the work:

“Someone mentioned they had done some good work. We visited them in Brent, to see their young people’s group. It was a really interesting day. What was interesting about that meeting was that they [the young people] had control over it. [...] They planned it and presented to us – that made a huge difference to how it operated – they set the agenda. It was extremely powerful. Since then, we’ve continued the relationships. BCJ have come to other meetings we’ve had.” (National strategic partner)

Equally, the evaluation continued to identify challenges and obstacles to partnership working. These include ongoing difficulty for partners in having the space to participate, in a system with scarce resources and high demands. There were also some challenges for the partnership in relation to ending the project, with concerns emerging about how to retain and sustain its benefits after the funding period ended. This has raised wider questions about how to maintain a legacy when working in relational and collaborative ways. These questions will be picked up below in the discussion section.

Outcome 3: Improvements in Children’s Social Care Systems

Interim evaluation reports identified early signs of system and culture change within areas where BCJ was active. For instance, codesign with professionals introduced new ways of thinking and working. Practical changes and the creation of new products included the introduction of welcome packs for young people entering semi-independent accommodation, and BCJ seeking to employ care-experienced young people and adjust employment procedures, potentially leading to structural changes both at the council and at Barnardo’s.

The evaluation highlighted several enablers and barriers to the success of BCJ in achieving its outcomes. Key enablers included the vital role of experts by experience; BCJ’s flexible and entrepreneurial working style; ongoing communication; consistent staff teams within both core partners ensuring continuity; a shared sense of commitment; tangible outputs, and BCJ’s function as a bridge between young people and Brent Council. Additionally supporting care-experienced young people’s ideas with original research and working through existing networks, were significant contributors. The main barriers to progress were related to capacity and resources of the council and other partners to participate in the partnership.

Update since Interim Report 2

As the project became more established and well known within the council and the local system, and the fruits of successive co-design processes had time to embed in routine practices, there was increasing visibility of changes to the culture within the system. Tangible outputs of these processes included partners changing the way they recognise and reimburse care-experienced young people for their participation in and contribution to collaborative work. This involved a move away from providing vouchers, towards paid employment on either a contract basis or using “as and when” payments. Not only was this of direct benefit to the young people but also was felt to better recognise the skill and expertise that young people bring to such work.

Some of the products developed and tested as part of the two rounds of co-design have continued to be used, shaping the local offer for care-leavers. The welcome packs, developed in collaboration with care-experienced young people have been taken up across SIAs in Brent and included in the placement inspection criteria. A project created through the second round of co-design (with professionals) has seen small budgets made available to Personal Advisors (PAs) to participate in leisure activities with the care leavers they work with. This was intended to help build positive relationships between a professional and young person, through supporting time and space together that was not focused on fulfilling statutory processes. The trial was popular with both young people and staff and Brent has agreed to continue funding it. Also, in the second round of co-design, a toolkit was developed to support professionals working with expectant parents which has been taken up by staff in several relevant teams. The final two years of the project also saw the establishment of regular panels for care-experienced young people to voice concerns within the local authority. This has been described as pivotal in driving systemic change and promoting more relational and collaborative approaches within the organisation.

“The panel has been a significant success, giving young people a platform to voice their concerns.” (Brent Staff member)

On top of the more tangible changes instituted by BCJ, the evaluation has picked up on a more subtle form of influence that the project has had on partners it had contact with. This has come through the project demonstrating a different way of working to professionals, for example, through contributing to consultation and events and working with professional bodies to improve their processes. Along with the welcome pack for people entering SIAs, BCJ has worked closely with the commissioning team at Brent to improve SIA inspections, drawing on young people’s experience of being in SIAs to inform how they are inspected. This in turn has led to building a relationship with Ofsted who have been designing a national regulatory framework for SIAs as part of a wider plan to regulate the sector. In relation to collaborative practices with young people, one partner said the following:

“They have definitely had an impact in terms of how we operate. That’s helped us to think about how we approach collaborative work, it’s a good model for us. We’ve done other work where we tried to follow their ethos and approach.” (National strategic partner)

“BCJ’s approach has inspired us to be more relational and collaborative in our practices.” (Brent Staff member)

Discussion

This digest now goes on to discuss two areas of learning in greater depth. Firstly, the factors that seemed to contribute to BCJ's success in authentically, and radically, collaborating with experts-by-experience. The second is the challenge of legacy and continuity with long-term relational work in time-limited initiatives.

What factors led to BCJs radical approach to collaboration?

Across its five years of operation, BCJ has undertaken a multitude of different activities, as previously described. It has used a wide range of different methods and mediums, working with a large and diverse population of care-experienced young people and many professionals representing different organisations and roles, undertaking work focused on ostensibly different aims. When describing the project, it has been a challenge for the evaluation to capture and reflect the diversity and depth of activities. Indeed, as with much work that is primarily relational and experiential, attempts to encapsulate in writing can often fall short in adequately expressing what actually took place and the value of this for all involved. Despite these challenges, underpinning this array of activities there seems to have been a unifying set of principles, values, and ways of working. These processes have consistently been described in evaluation reports as 'collaborative working'. However, even this perhaps does not capture the depth and consistency with which these principles have been applied.

Feedback from young people, council staff, and wider partners has consistently focused on the exceptional quality of the collaborative work that BCJ has achieved, both with young people and, as the project has developed, with professionals as well.

Many professionals interviewed for the evaluation have noted that some form of participation or co-production with experts by experience/ people with lived experience is a common feature within children's social care and beyond. Brent Children's Services for example have standing participation groups for both children in care and care leavers². The [learning digest on collaborative work](#) noted that the overall growth in participative practices has been accompanied by a growing body of research literature and policy frameworks. However, repeatedly the evaluation team have consistently heard BCJ being compared favourably to many other similar initiatives. For example, one partner described the first session where they worked with BCJ in the following way:

"We were impressed by the way [the session] was managed and supported and how BCJ worked with us. When you invest time to do it well, you give young people the confidence to lead and contribute. The [BCJ staff members] - you'd almost not know they were there. [...] They had obviously done so much work with the young people so they could sit back. It was very respectful of the young people – [the BCJ staff] never fell back on the 'we'll just answer for them', they all took responsibility. This is built up over time; real collaboration with young people, rather than just a tick box". (National strategic lead)

² <https://www.brent.gov.uk/children-young-people-and-families/children-in-care#careinaction>

The question therefore we are reflecting on is what has been different in BCJ to many similar initiatives? Where often projects are guilty of being transactional, or even tokenistic in collaboration, struggling to engage those with lived experience in truly collaborative work, **what factors and practices have allowed this project to do so?**

As part of its ongoing process of development, the partnership continued trying to make sense of, and articulate, what it was learning about collaborative work in this arena. This, together with insights from previous evaluation reports and learning digests, offer some possible answers to these questions.

During earlier phases of the BCJ evaluation and supported by the broader literature on the topic, some key principles for collaborating with care-experienced young people were identified, including:

- sharing power.
- enabling reciprocity.
- valuing lived expertise.
- investing time and resources in trusting relationships.
- supporting young people's agency and demonstrating the impact of their involvement.
- setting realistic goals and sharing the outcomes of the work.
- maintaining consistency, commitment, and transparency.

While these principles can be useful, they do not in themselves account for the response to BCJ from young people and professionals. The key factors that they identified included aspects of the makeup of the team and of the partnership, the ethos, and values with which they worked, and contextual factors that both supported and hindered their progress.

In the growing body of literature and evaluation on co-production, co-design, and collaboration, sharing of power is often referred to as a key component. However, the practical realities of what this entails, within a hierarchical and target driven system, unfamiliar with working in this way, means often projects fall short of this goal. In this sense BCJ is a rare project that, to a great extent, has been able to create the conditions for sharing power, working with a high degree of equality between different partners. Through a combination of skills, commitment, and supporting structures, it has been able to implement a radical collaborative approach to working in the children's social care system.

An ethos that cuts across traditional roles/ boundaries

One feature of the way BCJ worked that sets it apart from similar initiatives is the consistency with which the team worked with partners, regardless of whether they were working with care-leavers or children's social care staff. Increasingly as the project progressed, they developed a commitment to seeing everyone as 'partners'/ 'collaborators' with expertise.

This suggests that if you 'really' want to work in an equal way and share power, it requires a conceptual shift away from seeing people in the binary categories of 'service provider' and 'service user' or 'grown-up' and 'young person'. These categories themselves are seen as containing and recreating some of the power-imbalances found in the wider system. So, the simple radical act of viewing people in both these groups as alike, for the purposes of their participation in the project, embodies the value of shared power and makes it more possible. The decision, for example, to work primarily with professionals in the second round of service design rather than to conduct a further round with care-experienced young people exemplifies this stance.

Leading by example and offering experiential learning

In keeping with the above shift in power-relationships, in some ways BCJ represents a practical experiment and demonstration of what sharing power looks like. Each aspect of the project appears to have operated on two levels, both the expressed purpose of the activities (for example, training, leisure, or developing a new product or process) *and* as an example of its ethos, values, and ways of working. So, whenever people engaged with an aspect of the project, they also had a live experience of this way of working, a demonstration that it *could work*, and in fact could deliver high quality results and even be fulfilling and satisfying to participate in. In this sense BCJ appears to have operated with an element of **‘The medium is the message’**. Both staff and young people interviews reflected that for many within the social care system there was some cynicism about the claims of new initiatives being delivered, with both groups expressing a sense of having ‘seen it all before’. Those encountering the project often noted that it “really felt different” – “they’re really doing it”. Comments such as these express how BCJ was authentically enacting its philosophy and values in a way that many projects struggle to do, and which may have acted as an antidote to cynicism.

Again, the decision to work with professionals from across the children’s social care system in the second round of service design process demonstrates how this worked. Not only did the participants learn about technical and theoretical aspects of service design, but they also had an experience of undertaking it, where they were encouraged themselves to work collaboratively with care-experienced young people. As one BCJ staff member observed,

“The system, as it is, offers no opportunity for collaboration between young people and staff, only intervention. [...] there are no structural enablers for professionals to work alongside children and families.”
(BCJ staff member)

Therefore, BCJ set out to create this opportunity. First by bringing care-experienced young people into the co-design sessions and second by encouraging staff participants as part of their own co-design projects to seek collaboration with young people within their services. While initially this was found to be challenging for some professionals, it was ultimately a very positive experience for all:

“Bringing everybody into the same space, so kind of finding that space of commonality with people who receive the service. The relationship or the contact with young people in that setting as opposed to in other professional settings was very positive. I enjoyed it and we really have found the co-design approach works really well for everybody, the staff as well as the young people.” (Brent staff member)

A limitation of this effect, however, is that it must be experienced to be truly understood and ‘learnt’. This means that only the people who encounter the approach directly get this insight. This fact was increasingly recognised by the project as the end of the funding period neared, where there was concern that the project had influenced those who had engaged, in the parts of the system where it had been active, but not the wider system. As one senior partner explained:

“A new way of thinking about how we work with young people, and we can see that benefit which has increased the desire for the work to continue. Hearts and minds: shifting the way of thinking has been helpful and we want to embed it. It’s just a really hard boat to turn.”

(senior Brent staff member)

This formed part of the rationale for the ‘Dear Social Services’ Live exhibition at Kiln Theatre, the ‘Listen Up’ legacy event at Bridge Park Leisure Centre ‘and the ‘Fun Affair’ , each of which aimed to attract large numbers of professionals and young people to showcase the approach, giving a live experience of the BCJ atmosphere and ways of working.

Skills, capacity, and structure

Key strengths demonstrated by BCJ were the skills and commitment of core staff team members at each level. For instance, project workers held excellent youth work skills, knowledge and understanding of the young people they were working with, and enthusiasm and commitment to the work. They were supported by a deep theoretical and practical understanding of the process of collaborating with young people and professionals at more senior levels, as well as the ability to draw on staff with specialist skills in service co-design. The work of the core team has then been held by a partnership structure, with stable, continuous support and oversight from senior colleagues.

Through this combination of skills and structures, the project was able to build trusting relationships with care-experienced young people on the understanding that the needs of young people came before the needs of the project. This, as a result, helped enable the skills, knowledge, and commitment of care-experienced young people to be more fully embraced.

Central to BCJ’s own account of their work was the importance they placed on **values-based working: Commitment, enthusiasm, passion, and love**. This involved placing an emphasis on diversity, equality, inclusion, and a democratic spirit. They spoke of bringing an ethos of ‘love’ into the work. What this way of working requires of professionals is to go beyond traditional professional roles, while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Seeing staff ‘go above and beyond’ is part of the reason care-experienced young people were initially willing to get involved. This is perhaps especially important in a setting where many young people have had variable experiences of professionals. As one staff member put it:

“I just think those little elements to BCJ have really helped nurture that family feel and make young people want to be a part of something, where they’re not just thinking, oh, I’m just attending a group. They feel like they’re a part of it, and they own it with us. [...] I think that is a main ingredient and its love. It’s love. I think that’s what they feel. It is like, genuine love.” (BCJ staff member)

The BCJ team also identified a range of staff qualities that they felt supported the success of the project. These include:

- resilience, the ability to retain focus on the goals, but also commitment to the ethos and values of the project.
- ability to manage change and negotiate with competing demands.
- confidence to shift power dynamics.
- emotional intelligence and creativity.
- acknowledging their limitations and being prepared to ask for help.

Moreover, the evaluation has also noted that BCJ was particularly effective at recruiting care-experienced young people from traditionally underrepresented groups, particularly young Black people. Project monitoring data showed that throughout the life of the project around one third of all participants were Black British, African, Caribbean, or from other Black backgrounds (in keeping with the proportion of Black young people in the care leaving population in Brent). This was thought to owe much to the way the staff team reflected the identity of the young people they were seeking to engage. This included Black women in prominent staff roles from the start who in some cases were from Brent themselves, and in others had care experience. As the project progressed, the employing of former participants deepened this sense of representation. Having staff and young leaders from the communities the project sought to work with supported them to develop what one staff member described as a “youth-relevant” project identity and led onto undertaking projects as part of the Black Lives Matter movement and Black History Month. Data from the first evaluation report included comments, such as the following, from young people, that reflect this sense of representation and familiarity:

“[The project workers] are young people themselves, young adults, that was the eye-opening thing. Its women led, it’s usually men that dictate it. In a way it’s almost like a feminist movement if you want to put it like that, which is great.” (Young person)

Strategic support and resources

When trying to work in ways counter to the prevailing culture of an organisation or system, it is vital to have senior support and permission to do so. We found that both within Barnardo’s and within the council, key senior figures continued to advocate for the project, supporting it to:

- receive robust organisational support, which helped create a safer space and the freedom to fail and learn.
- have autonomy to explore, be creative, and make decisions.
- try novel approaches, being prepared to take risks.

Collaborative working was an explicit pillar of the model proposed in this project when it was first negotiated with the local authority. While this is not a sufficient condition, it is certainly a necessary starting point and signal to staff, partners, and young people.

Part of what appears to have gained and maintained this support at senior, strategic levels was the ability of the project to produce **high-quality outputs** such as primary research, film, podcasts, training, and events presentation.

BCJ also sought and drew on expert support to work with the project to produce high quality outputs, whether contracting with specialists or bringing in internal partner resources. This is crucial when seeking to influence, for example, policy makers. The use of research alongside testimonies from participating young people helped produce a compelling combination when seeking to influence decision making. As noted in interim evaluation reports, stakeholders respected the validity of arguments made:

“[BCJ staff member’s] work is a good starting point for us, they have the evidence base from the young people they have been working with. That is quite powerful in terms of what we want”. (Stakeholder)

This is in recognition that decision makers must base funding decisions on strong evidence and may sometimes be resistant to testimony from people with lived experience alone for fear of it not representing the wider experience of the population.

As this section has shown, BCJ used a sophisticated approach, with passion and commitment, to the complexities of collaboration. Its team understood how truly embodying the ethos, values and processes they were seeking to develop could lead to positive, long-lasting system changes, for the benefit of those currently involved and those yet to experience the system.

Challenges of legacy and continuity with long-term relational work in time-limited initiatives

While BCJ has achieved a great deal and been successful in many of its aims, and in some cases surpassed these, there have nevertheless been challenges. As previous evaluation reports set out, early stages of the project faced challenges from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the social care system and the young people they were seeking to work with. There were also continuous challenges in relation to the availability of resources for partners to participate in project activities. However, in this last phase, perhaps the greatest challenge facing BCJ has been around the legacy that it will leave in Brent and more broadly.

A focus on sustainability has been built into the project from the start. For example, the initial project rubric, developed in early 2020, outlined aims including the “sustainability of The Movement” and “developing a clear sustainability plan”. Discussions took place in partnership board meetings over the project’s last two years to try to manage this process and develop a plan to handover aspects of the project or try to ‘mainstream’ its approaches. Successes towards these goals included influencing the development of both Brent’s new participation strategy and Barnardo’s Voice and Influence strategy. Both of these draw substantially on the learning from BCJ about how to collaborate with partners in the children’s care system. In so doing, they hold the possibility for BCJ’s influence to outlast its funding by continuing to shape the way both organisations work with young people.

However, challenges also emerged around how to sustain the ways of working and the relationships that were formed through the partnership, once the funding ended. As has been noted throughout the evaluation, the tight restriction on council **resources**, and the statutory requirement to fulfil legal obligations, do not leave sufficient funds to continue working in the way that BCJ were able to, due to their independent source of funds.

As discussed in the previous section, a key insight from previous evaluation reports was the need to invest time and energy on building relationships, both with young people and between professionals. While aspects of this have been brought in, through the personal budgets pilot for PAs and care-experienced young people, this does not provide the level of resource or time that was available during the BCJ funding period. The ending of the project may influence both skills and relationships available to support care-experienced young people in Brent in the future:

Skills: BCJ was able to bring several highly skilled staff together in relation to this way of collaborative working.

Relationships: Given the length of the project, and the high degree of continuity within the core staff team, and in due course the employing of project members to paid roles, one thing that is hard to transfer in a meaningful way is the actual relationships that have been built, in some cases over years.

As one Council staff member explained:

“I have a concern that the skills will leave with [BCJ staff team]: the memory and practical experience of doing it may be lost [...] “We’re in a delicate spot. If Barnardo’s go, we don’t have the skills and we may let down young people as a result. We feel lot of pressure that this has been a huge investment and young people really value this way of working... How do you keep going without budgets from Barnardo’s?”

(Brent Staff member)

Independence and sustainability

As noted in previous evaluation reports, there were initial advantages to BCJ being able to distinguish and even contrast itself from statutory services, and in relation to Brent’s participation service especially. Put simply there were advantages to “**not being the council**”. Initiating a programme outside of the council’s statutory framework allowed for increased flexibility and innovation. Many care leavers have also had experiences in the care system, which have negatively influenced their perceptions of statutory services leading to mistrust. So, while being based on council premises, BCJ was set apart through name, branding, and in the way it worked. This clearly supported engagement with care-experienced young people and the possibility of building trust in the first place. However, this same dynamic presented challenges for the project as it worked towards its conclusion. In considering what aspects of the project can be sustained (either project activities or processes), this separation could complicate efforts.

Competition One notable feature of this challenge was the occasional sense of competition between BCJ and some council services. Since the establishment of BCJ some young people who had previously been part of the council participation service preferred to work with BCJ. One Brent staff member described this as like being the “less favoured parent”. While the risk of competition has been well managed for the most part through robust and transparent partnership agreements, and council staff sharing perceptions of the benefit BCJ has brought to young people. There has remained, however, perhaps on both sides of the partnership, a tension between togetherness, and a separateness, leading one stakeholder to say:

“BCJ still feels like an add-on after four years, not fully integrated across services. It’s a challenge aligning with the LA’s broader commitments.”

(Brent Staff member)

While this has been a productive tension during the life of the project, it may represent a risk or fault-line as the project comes to an end. It perhaps leaves the question remaining of: **How does this kind of work become more routine - or can it only ever operate as a contrast to the mainstream?**

Reflections, considerations, and recommendations for future programmes

This section concludes the digest with some final reflections on the achievements and challenges faced by Brent Care Journeys. It ends by offering some questions for consideration by those working in the children's social care systems as well as those evaluating and researching the role of partnerships in improving systems and outcomes for all.

What is sustainable and what is lost?

Where BCJ has excelled and perhaps gone beyond many similar projects is to recognise the difficulty of sustaining a “service” wholesale, without funding. Instead, it has focused on building capacity, with:

- care-experienced young people, through supporting the creation of networks and leadership.
- professionals, through the creation of products and processes that can be taken up by the system.
- modelling ways of working that may be able to sustain some of the benefits of the project.

Awareness of the risk around the legacy of time-limited pilots was the rationale for including explicitly the aim of system change within the original brief for the programme. This recognises the fact that you cannot expect the system to simply take on additional service delivery when project funding ends without either additional resources or changing how you do things and how those resources are used. This view could be described as **systems change as legacy** approach.

However, while there has been a focus on system change, BCJ has also undertaken a significant amount of what you might term direct delivery of services (see Appendix 1), through for example the provision and coordination of leisure, social and other activities, and the substantial ongoing provision of informal support to care-experienced young people. And here lies a tension. To some extent projects such as BCJ providing services directly to young people may be the **price of doing business** in this field – it is these aspects of the project that both engage and retain young people in the process. However, it is also these elements that are least likely to be sustained after funding ends. While the networks, skills and confidence built up for young people during the project may sustain, the direct support will not. From the outset of the project, BCJ adopted a strategy to manage this tension through placing emphasis on low-cost leisure activities and placing a strong emphasis on developing the capacity of young people to lead their own activities. This culminated in a series of ‘Power groups’ being developed and led by care-experienced young people. These groups themselves may continue to meet and those with the experience of running and participating in such activities may be better equipped to organise activities in the future.

As this and previous reports have explored, BCJ has demonstrated the difference that co-design and collaboration between statutory and third sector partners and young people can make to services and people's experiences of services. Perhaps an inherent challenge of working in an explicitly relational way with care-experienced young people however is what happens to those relationships when staff members change roles or the funding for the project ends? Especially as care-experienced

young people have often faced a lack of consistency in their lives and in their networks, there is a corresponding pressure on staff to compensate for this, and the impossibility that they, through any project can do so. Again, BCJ sought to manage this tension within the project through how they worked with the young people around endings. As part of the wider openness of the project staff, the boundaries (both time and others) of the work were communicated with young people on getting involved and re-iterated throughout the project. They then adopted a celebratory approach in relation to the ending themselves to mark young people's involvement and progress. These included graduation events for movement members and the compilation of photo books for those young people employed in the project team. These activities sought to demonstrate and reinforce the fact that endings can be healthy, positive and developmental.

Even with the emphasis on sustainability in the original programme aims and the steps taken throughout the project to lower the barriers to ongoing impact and manage the endings, is it realistic to think that within the life of a project, even one as comparatively long-lived as BCJ that when the funding comes to an end, highly skilled, relational work can continue at a similar level? Do stakeholders collude in a fantasy of sustainability at the beginning of projects in order to meet the required hurdles to secure funding to provide much needed services, when we know that the wider system lacks the resources to continue the work after the funding ends? Perhaps there is a more honest conversation within the sector about what sustainability and legacy mean in this context. And perhaps we should ask how these projects can be sustainable and what that would really take? *For example, does an express commitment of legacy funding arrangements need to be built into programme design and partnership agreements?*

What depth and scale of culture change is necessary within a local authority or in a wider system to become self-sustaining? Is this a matter of a tipping point that leads to wholesale change to the system? And how realistic is it for a project of the scale of BCJ to achieve that when pushing against a system of the size of children's social care, sat within a wider system of local government? What depth and breadth of influence must a project achieve in order to meet the requirements for sustained system change in such a system?

To conclude, Brent Care Journeys in many ways has been an exceptional project: resourceful, innovative, compassionate, and committed. It was able to reach large numbers of young people that many other services struggle to and work with them in radical and collaborative ways. It exceeded many of its initial project aims, branching out to spread its influence beyond Brent into regional and national arenas. There is much to learn from this project within social care, young people's sectors and indeed in any setting where services can be improved. And yet still it has struggled to get broad purchase within the local authority where restriction on resources, statutory imperatives, and understandable institutional risk aversion limits its ability to engage and take up the learning. Through its success it begs wider questions of how to support partnerships in this system to build sustainable and meaningful change.

Appendix: Brent Care Journeys project activities

Below is a comprehensive list of BCJ activities undertaken since March 2022. It shows when activities took place, what they were, how many attended and which groups attended.

DATE	EVENT/ACTIVITY/WORKSHOP SESSIONS	ATTENDED	WHO ATTENDED
March 2022	Local Offer Re -Design	8	Movement members
	CJNE meeting - Online	7	Movement members
April 2022	Theatre Trip- Black Love	10	New and old members
	Ninja Warrior	14	New and old members
	Ice Skating	10	New and old members
	Care Journeys Networking event	8	New and old members
May 2022	Bowling – Kiln engagement	9	New and old members
	Eid Meal	13	New and old members
	CEO Visit – Putt golf & Meal	9	New and old members
	Kiln workshop 1 - Expressing through theatre	7	New and old members
	Kiln workshop 2- Calling to action	7	New and old members
June 2022	Kiln workshop 3 - Crafting and creating	5	New and old members
	Young Company Theatre Trip	8	New and old members
	Horse Riding	5	New and old members
	Kiln Taster 1	8	New and old members
	Westminster - Day of Action	7	Movement members
	Kiln taster 3	6	New and old members
	BCJ Meal - Global Buffet	13	Movement members
July 2022	BCJ & Deepr	4	New and old members
	BCJ Filming Promo	6	New and old members
	Movement link Up	7	New and old members
August 2022	BCJ Filming Promo	5	New and old members
	BCJ Filming Promo	8	New and old members
	PW2 Youth Panel	3	Movement members
	Dear Social Services – Next steps meeting	5	Online
	BCJ young company meet up	7	Movement members
	Prep Art session- Walk in My Shoes	4	Online
	BCJ young company meeting	7	Movement members
	Kiln BCJ young company	5	New and old members
	Community outreach engagement	2	Movement members
	BCJ Drop In	40	Professionals & YP's
September 2022	Kiln BCJ young company	6	Movement members
	Kiln BCJ young company - run through	8	Movement members
	Kiln BCJ young company – dress rehearsal	8	Movement members

DATE	EVENT/ACTIVITY/WORKSHOP SESSIONS	ATTENDED	WHO ATTENDED
September 2022	BCJ Show case - Dear Social Services	45	Professionals & YP's
	YP Gender reveal	6	Movement members
October 2022	Parent Power	3	Movement members
	Parent Power	2	Movement members
November 2022	Film Screening -Independence	5	New and old members
	Movement link up	10	New and old members
December 2022	Movement link Up - x-mas edition	15	New and old members
January 2023	Youth Panel	3	Movement members
	Therapart workshop	6	New and old members
	Eat Club- cookery session	7	New and old members
	Therapart workshop	6	New and old members
	Eat Club- cookery session	6	New and old members
	Ofsted prep Session - Locations and Place-ments	5	Online
	Thera part workshop	5	New and old members
February 2023	Ofsted Planning	5	Movement members
March 2023	Therapart workshop	5	Movement members
	Co design session	3	Movement members
	Podcast training	2	Movement members
	Therapart workshop	5	Movement members
	Therapart workshop	5	Movement members
April 2023	Locations & Placements planning session	3	Movement members
	Eid Celebration	18	New and old embers
	Trauma programme - BCJ & Loud Futures	9	New and old members
May 2023	Co design Training 4 Carers	4	Movement members
	Co design Training 4 Carers	4	Movement members
	Trauma programme - BCJ & Loud Futures	12	Movement members
	Brothers kick off - Testing	13	New and old members
	CYPS Training prep	4	Movement members
June 2023	Trauma programme - BCJ & Loud Futures	8	Movement members
	Care-experienced Training	3	Movement members
July 2023	Vibes in that Kitchen	8	Movement members
	Brothers Testing	17	New and old members
	Vibes in that Kitchen	11	Movement members
	Podcast	1	Movement members
	Locations and Training delivery	4	Movement members
August 2023	Brothers	3	New and old members
	Sports Day	8	New and old members
September 2023	Chelsea Physic Garden	4	Movement members
	Vibes in that Kitchen	10	Movement members
	P2C Co-design	3	Movement members
	Locations and Training Prep	4	Movement members
	Vibes Visit from chief exec	14	New and old members
	Vibes in the Kitchen	7	Movement members
	Vibes in the Kitchen	9	Movement members

DATE	EVENT/ACTIVITY/WORKSHOP SESSIONS	ATTENDED	WHO ATTENDED
October 2023	Brothers	3	Movement members
	Bowling	6	New members
	Brothers	2	New members
	Listen Up Event	35	New and old members
November 2023	Podcast recording	3	Movement members
	Semi Visit -New engagement	4	New members
	Bank of England	4	Movement members
	Brothers	2	New and old members
	Brothers	2	New and old members
	Vibes in the Kitchen	9	New and old members
	Brothers	4	New and old members
	Vibes in the Kitchen	12	New and old members
	Brothers	3	New and old members
December 2023	Parent Power - trip	8	Movement members
January 2024	Brothers	3	New and old members
	Brothers	2	New and old members
24th January 2024	MOJ prep and Meal	8	New and old members
29th January 2024	Ministry of Justice - Meeting Minister Freer	4	Movement members
12th February 2024	Brothers	2	Movement members
	BCJ Fun Affair	137	New YP and professionals