Building our world

How to use mentoring to create community-based support for care-experienced young people

fractals co-op

care journeys

Believe in children
Barnardo's

Contents

Executive summary

The life experiences of care-experienced young people are significantly worse than their counterparts who are not care-experienced. As noted by The Independent Review of Children's Social Care for England, care-experienced young people are badly served by current social care systems and there needs to be change. Transition points within the care system are a key moment where vital support disappears - particularly when care-experienced young people leave care and begin living independently. Without loving and trusting relationships, this can be a lonely and isolating time.

This report was commissioned by Barnardo's Care Journeys Core Priority Programme to develop an understanding of how community-based support (such as mentoring) can support care-experienced young people through life transitions and help them to develop positive relationships. Research was carried out between March and June 2022 by fractals co-operative, a research and design agency based in the north of the United Kingdom, using the Manchester Care Experience Service (MCES) as a case study. fractals co-op carried out individual interviews and a workshop with staff, mentors and mentees in order to understand the suitability of community-based support as a practical response to this aspect of the Care Review.

The report finds that community-based support has numerous benefits to mentors and mentees alike. Mentees benefit from an increased sense of confidence and belonging through the support of mentors who cheer them on, listen actively, and guide, and who act in a flexible, authentic and non-judgmental way. Mentors also benefit, fulfilling a desire to 'give back', learning a great deal from their mentees and confronting their preconceptions and expectations about care-experienced people. We find that community-based support in the form of mentoring is a valuable way of supporting care-experienced young people as they navigate the transition to adulthood.

Three key recommendations emerge:

1. There should be a large-scale adoption of community-based support across the country. An extension or adaptation to the Independent Visitor scheme up to at least the age of 25 would enable vital relationships to continue as young people begin to navigate the challenges of adulthood. The important local connections that a young person can build through mentoring or 'befriending' services can help them to navigate early adulthood in a much more grounded and confident way, being able to utilise local services and have a trusted person to turn to for help.

2. There should be an establishment of best practices and standards for community-based support for care-experienced young people. As there is no precedent for large-scale community-based support for care-experienced young people past the age of 18, it is essential that such a scheme is co-designed with care-experienced young people who have left care and works to their needs specifically.

3. Further research and development of practice is needed to support the needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children with community-based support. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are massively underserved by current support systems, community-based support represents a significant innovation in the landscape of support they can access, helping them to learn about their local area, build their skills in spoken and written English, culturally acclimatise and also find existing communities in their local area that may speak their language or be familiar with their culture.

To assist with the establishment of more community-based support schemes, an appendix is attached featuring a service blueprint based upon MCES.

“It’s a social support network... some people would be completely isolated without this”

Introduction

As noted in *The Case for Change* published by The Independent Review of Children's Social Care for England, the life experiences of care-experienced young people are significantly worse than their counterparts who are not care-experienced. Around a quarter of people who have experienced homelessness are thought ot be care-experienced, and care-experienced young people between the ages of 19 and 21 are three times more likely to not be in employment, education or training as compared to the general population. The Case for Change and the full review itself (*The Independent Review of Children's Social Care for England*) both paint a picture of a group of people who are badly served by current social care systems.

Transition points within the care system are frequently identified as a key moment that support disappears, right when it is needed most. The process of 'leaving care' can be exceptionally difficult. Without a significant trusted adult in their life to turn to, this can be an exceptionally lonely and isolating time. Addressing this, *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care for England* proposed five 'missions' for care-experienced young people, which the government and wider society should work together to achieve for this group over the next five years. Importantly, this includes the mission that no young person leaves care without at least two loving relationships.

This has brought a renewed focus to the possibilities of stronger, more powerful communities in playing a role in supporting care-experienced young people. These have been core themes to the work of Barnardo's Care Journeys Core Priority Programme since it began in 2017, and have been of particular interest since the creation of their 2020 *Love, fight and learning* theory of change. This theory of change in particular acknowledged the role of community-based support and loving relationships as being instrumental in moving care-experienced young people towards positive destinations.

The majority of adults in a care-experienced young person's life may be professionals. These people may care deeply for the young person, but are bound by the responsibilities and boundaries of their profession, and so may not be there for a young person when they need it due to professional boundaries. Community-based support, on the other hand, focuses on the ways that strengthening a care-experienced young person's relationship with their community might help them in those moments when professionals cannot be there, reducing the potential need for professional intervention.

There has long been a recognition of the role that these types of services can play in supporting young people when they are in the care system. The 1989 Children's Act, for example, established a system of 'independent visitors', who befriend and support a child in care throughout their care journey, doing activities together based on shared interests. There has yet to be a significant focus on the role that this kind of support can play for care-experienced young people older than 18, and there is no equivalent statutory service offered.

As the government prepares its implementation plan for the recommendations of the Care Review, we sought to explore how community-based support could be used to support care-experienced young people after they have left care, and help to achieve the Care Review's mission for every care-experienced young person to have two loving relationships. The Manchester Care Experienced Service (MCES) is a mentoring project run between Barnardo's and the Greater Manchester Youth Network which has developed community-based mentoring services aimed at supporting this group.

Using this service as a case study, this research aims to better understand the possibilities of community-based support through key questions:

- What changes has the MCES made in the lives of the mentors and mentees?

- What elements of the service have been integral to its success?
- What does MCES tell us about the role community-based support can play for care-experienced young people?

The report finds that community-based support (in the form of mentoring) supports care-experienced young people to find an increased sense of confidence and belonging, by receiving support from mentors who 'cheerlead' and actively listen to them, and who are flexible, authentic and non-judgmental. Mentors also benefit, fulfilling a desire to 'give back', learning more about the life experiences of care-experienced people, and confronting their own preconceptions and expectations.

As such, we find that community-based support is an excellent and cost-effective way to ensure that care-experienced young people are well-supported in their communities and have meaningful relationships with people they might not otherwise have met. To facilitate a smooth roll-out of further community-based support services, a service blueprint of a mentoring service based upon MCES is included in the appendix.

Context and methods

The MCES describes itself as a "social action, life skills development and mentoring programme". It has been operating since December 2019 as a collaborative project between Barnardo's and the Greater Manchester Youth Network (GMYN), and will run for three years. The project team consists of two project officers from GMYN: one mentoring coordinator from Barnardo's and an intermittent volunteer. Over the past two years MCES has supported care-experienced young people in Manchester through weekly one-to-one mentoring support sessions and group activities. The social action and life skills development side of the project was run by GMYN and had reached 225 care-experienced young people by the conclusion of their second year. The mentoring side of the programme was primarily run by Barnardo's and reached 24 mentors and 21 young people.

The research for this report was conducted primarily between March and June 2022 and was approved by Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee. We worked with the MCES to recruit research participants from across the programme. Four staff members, one volunteer, five mentors and five mentees were recruited. Three mentors also participated in a workshop designed to better understand the qualities required for a successful mentoring relationship to take place, and to understand their experiences of being mentors through this service specifically.

Research was conducted in the form of interviews, either in-person at the (MCES) offices or online, over Google Meet. In the interviews, we asked a number of questions to better understand what participants' experience of the scheme had been, how mentoring had benefited them, and what they would change about any future mentor scheme.

There were two researchers present in every session: one to ask questions and lead the interview, and one to take notes and record observations. We made participants aware that they could view the notes at the end of the session if they wanted to, and remove anything they felt did not reflect their intended meaning or anything they did not want on record. Most participants selected their own pseudonyms, and those who did not were assigned one. Throughout the report, they are referred to by these pseudonyms.

To organise and analyse our notes, we transferred the handwritten codes to the digital whiteboard software Miro. During the research process, we constantly filtered and changed our questions as we became aware of gaps in our understanding, and avoided repeating questions where we felt any new data collected didn't change our understanding. We compared pieces of data with each other to establish differences and similarities, and created themes to describe the connections between these. Finally, we developed memos describing our themes and subthemes, and sorted these into a logical order.

Findings

The experiences of mentors and mentees within the project cannot be easily separated, due to the relational nature of mentoring. For ease of reading, though, we have separated mentees and mentors' experiences here. The experiences of mentees centre on how mentoring has impacted them, what good mentors do to create those impacts, and the qualities of good mentors. The experiences of mentors centre on why people become mentors, the reciprocality of mentoring, and the need to become comfortable with uncertainty as a mentor.

Mentees' experiences

The impacts of mentoring: connecting to community, preventing isolation, building confidence

The most essential aspects of mentoring spoken about by mentees centred on the idea of a mentor being someone who helps to "build their world". As part of the mentoring relationships, many mentors helped the young people they mentored to have new experiences - often supporting their mentees to do things that they would never otherwise do. These new experiences might take the form of cultural experiences, such as when Joseph's mentor took him to visit some art galleries and to visit Media City to walk around the various media organisations based there. Joseph spoke really positively about these trips, explaining that he wouldn't normally see art, and that his favourite moment of having a mentor was this trip. Brownie, a mentee, also felt that their mentor showed them new things about the world, and gave them opportunities to have new experiences. When their mentor began working at a community kitchen, she took the opportunity to show Brownie around and introduce them to the project. Brownie told us that they really valued going to new spaces and places, because it likely wouldn't have been something they would have done otherwise.

It is important for all people to be able to have a vibrant and thriving experience of the world, but this can be particularly important for care-experienced young people as they may be less likely to have someone supporting them to "build their world" as mentors have in this programme. These new experiences seem to be useful as they create a sense of possibility and potential, but they can also help to create a feeling of familiarity. Care-experienced young people that have recently left care are often living on their own with considerably less support than they may have had at any other point in their lives. This might involve understanding how to do "adult" things, like pay bills, apply for jobs, or deal with issues around the house - roles that parents might play for people who still have relationships with them. For many mentees, this has taken the form of their mentor helping them get to know their new local area. Yafet, for example, had just moved from North Manchester down to Levenshulme, and his mentor showed him around, helping him get to know the area, showing him important places, nice spots to get a coffee, and generally helping him to find out what the area was like and some of its history.

> "When I came here, I was proper lost... [my mentor] helped show me what Manchester was like, he explained the place to me"

Connecting people to their communities creates support structures outside of the formal mentoring itself. A person that is a meaningful part of their community has a stake in its wellbeing - and they have a stake in the person's wellbeing, too. Two other factors played a significant role here - the pandemic and the prevalence of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (now young people) using the MCES. Because the service received a large number of referrals of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, the benefits of building

someone's world also had the side-effect of helping them become acclimated to British culture and in many cases, more comfortable in using the English language. Yafet explained that when he first got to the UK, he was "proper lost", but his mentor helped him to feel more settled and like he knew what he was doing. He had someone to guide him through interactions and experiences that would have been a lot harder without a mentor.

As explained earlier in this report, the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health measures taken to stop the spread of the virus was an important context to the relationships occurring between mentors and mentees. Yafet also explained that arriving in the UK and then the pandemic beginning shortly after was a difficult experience for him. Early in the pandemic, he spent most of his time sat at home and felt isolated. When he started to work with GMYN and MCES, though, he became excited about having a mentor, and about the opportunities to do things in a group once some lockdown restrictions had eased. In addition to the general benefits of mentors building people's world up, then, the specific context of the pandemic and the high number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People using the MCES service meant that this acted as an even greater support.

"Building people's world" is in essence, a response to the loneliness and social isolation that many care-experienced young people often feel. A member of the project team explained that "some people would be completely isolated" without their mentor and the GMYN activities underpinning this. They explained that the mentoring scheme helped provide a social support network for people that might not necessarily have one or have a strong one. One mentee, Lisa, felt that it wasn't necessarily about reducing social isolation, but instead about building people's sense of confidence and self-esteem. She was clear to us that it was more about actively repairing the system so people don't experience social isolation in the first place, rather than merely dealing with the symptoms of social isolation.

This renewed sense of confidence and belonging was significant for many mentees. Regularly getting out and about with someone who was there just for them had a positive effect on their mental health, and many mentees saw benefits outside of the mentoring scheme. Due to the support of their mentor (and their own personal journey of self-discovery), Brownie found the confidence to come out as non-binary at an event held by GMYN. They explained that "just having one person who believed in [them]" helped to improve their confidence on the whole. Similarly, Lisa went through a personal transformation, with her mentor noting that it was a big thing for her to pick up the phone and ask for help. She explained that "she's become more forgiving of herself" through the time she's known her, and that Lisa is starting to find the room to forgive herself, and realise that "she doesn't have to have it all together". Mentors build people's worlds up and help them to feel this increased sense of belonging, reduced feeling of social isolation, and increased confidence and self-acceptance.

Cheerleading, active listening, and guiding: what good mentors do

Mentees told us a mentor is someone who is supportive and understanding - someone who can "cheerlead" for them. This sometimes involves practical support like getting help applying for a job or getting help to buy furniture, but it also requires a mentor to know when not to rush in to fix everything. Having a mentor sit with them as they experience something, being given space to talk, having access to personal advice from someone with greater life experience, and having someone actively listen are things we heard are important mentor traits. Giving praise, recognising achievements, saying encouraging words were all cited as actions and the type of support that was really valued.

> "I'll just be in the background saying, 'You're amazing!'"

Most mentees have a roster of adults in their lives, a lot of them are

professionals linked to services that are overstretched, or people who are associated with traumatic or unhealthy relationships. A volunteer mentor balances out mentees' other adult relationships because of the intrinsic motivation of the mentor, and the ability of mentors to protect space and time to really focus on their mentee. Mentees value having someone to talk to, especially someone outside of their other circles, who is open, receptive, and non-judgmental.

> "My mentee has become more forgiving of herself... a big thing for her was just picking up the phone to ask for help"

Both mentors and mentees felt that active listening was a crucial characteristic for mentors to have. Active listening allows mentors to read between the lines, empathise, offer specific guidance, and respond to mentees in ways that meet their specific interests. For example, Samantha's mentee talked a lot about food so they incorporated meals into their time together. Joseph's mentor picked up on his interest in creative things so they took part in arts and cultural activities together. Brownie's mentor set challenges for them to reduce smoking and gave them tips on how to cut down.

Just as important as active listening is being perceptive, or as one mentor told us, "It's about listening to what's not being said". Knowing when and when not to step in is also important. Mentees used words like 'guidance', 'enabling', and 'not directing' to describe things that were important to them in their mentor relationship.

A sense of authenticity: the importance of non-professional relationships

Good mentors are patient, flexible, and non-judgmental. Mentees expressed that time and space shared with the mentors must be free of judgement. This was a mutual sentiment with mentors sharing that they aren't there to add to any negative feelings already felt by the young people, and that they want the mentees to know that they won't be scared by anything shared with them. Carol, a mentor, shared that it was important to be non-judgemental as each young person will be different, with varying likes and dislikes.

Mentoring is an undirected activity, with no singular objective to the relationship. This contributes towards a sense of authenticity in the relationships that other services and programmes may not have. Mentors aren't professionals and are there when support might disappear from other services, e.g. at transition points in their care journey. This was significant for many mentees, as they felt that their mentors were able to be there in a way that a professional might not, such as being available at the weekends.

Because mentors aren't paid professionals, there is a flexibility to the relationship that might not be present in other relationships. A member of the project team shared that it was common for the mentees to remark on mentors being unpaid, helping the mentees to feel like they're worthy of their support, as the mentors are giving up free time for them. Many hadn't had a significant adult who isn't a professional in their lives, which left them feeling like they are unworthy of that level of care. Mentees explained that they really valued that their mentor only knew what they told them about themselves, rather than knowing their entire history with the social care system.

Mentees explained that they appreciated their mentors' patience and consistency with them. Although one mentor had to rearrange their first meeting with their mentee four times, their willingness to keep trying helped to build trust in the relationship. Many mentees have been

> "It's good to have someone who isn't a professional... when you meet them, you're a blank canvas to them"

let down by support services previously, but the persistence of a good mentor helps to rewrite these experiences. Moreover, the flexibility and non-professional status of mentoring relationships means they can last as long as they need. This might mean that a mentoring relationship far outlasts a regular professional relationship and continues even after the project ends. With no clear cut definition, the mentor-mentee relationship is subjective, evolving to be whatever is needed over time.

> “Whatever you tell me won’t scare me”

Mentors and mentees alike told us that they wouldn’t necessarily have encountered each other if it hadn’t been for the scheme. These relationships are structured and artificially created, yet retain authenticity and flexibility. There is a perceived authenticity to these kinds of relationships as mentors don’t have to be there and are not paid. It’s important that the young person feels “it’s not just another person to tell me what to do”. Mentees value having someone to talk to, especially someone outside of their other circles, who is open, receptive, and non-judgmental.

Mentors’ experiences

Giving back: why people become mentors

Although there are a multitude of reasons that mentors decide to become mentors, common to almost every mentor was a want to ‘give back’. This tended to be either a recognition of something specific they felt they could help someone with, or a want to help someone avoid a bad experience. One mentor who had worked with care-experienced young people throughout their professional life decided to become a mentor in order to “give something back following retirement”. They felt that they wanted to keep working with young people who needed them, but in a less formal way than they did in their professional life. For another mentor (who was also care-experienced), mentoring was important because she didn’t “want someone to go through what [she] did”.

In addition to ‘giving back’, some mentors wanted an opportunity to do something different. One mentor wanted some experience working with young people as she was in the process of changing careers. Another mentor wanted to know what it’d be like to mentor a young person, having previously worked at a nursery. This was complemented by mentor motivations around empowering and encouraging young people or “living [their] values”. The mentors are altruistically motivated people who recognise their own experiences, want to share them with a young person, and learn more about themselves along the way.

Mentoring as a learning experience: why mentoring is reciprocal

The mentors we interviewed were clear that their experiences were not merely one-way. They felt the relationship was reciprocal and that they learned a lot from working with a mentee. One mentor felt that her mentoring relationship helped her to learn a lot about the experiences of young asylum seekers, which she felt she previously did not know much about, and the culture that her mentee had come from. She also spoke about how this filled her with an activist fire, telling us that it “made [her] more aware of the difficulties faced by young people and committed to improving that”. Mentoring can clearly be a de-stigmatising and enlightening activity, bringing people closer to the experiences of some people that they might not otherwise know. As one mentor explained, “I learn from her every time we speak… I take it as a learning experience. I learn to be non-judgmental, unconditional, and supportive”. Mentoring can therefore be seen as reciprocal - amongst other things, a mentee teaches a mentor how to be a good mentor by the situations that arise out of their relationship.

“Taking your ego out of it”: confronting their preconceptions and expectations

The mentors explained that by far the most

important thing about being a mentor is to be prepared to work with anyone. Some mentors were aware of others that came in with this "burning need to help", with "preconceived ideas" about the needs of the mentee. Yet approaching the relationship with these ideas might lead to a mentor trying to offer their mentee something that they really don't need.

One mentor in particular, was adamant about the need to "surrender" to the mentoring relationship. She explained that because mentoring isn't goal-driven, it's important to just surrender to the relationship that is actually there, rather than some imagined idea of who your mentee might be. She explained that she felt that a good mentor needs to ask "what does this person want or need from me?". This is particularly relevant as we heard from the project team that many people had an idea of who they wanted to mentor. Most mentors wanted to support a 13/14 year-old girl, and in reality the majority of mentees were Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking boys, aged 17+, new to the area.

In many ways this is the key benefit of mentoring to mentors: an education in how to become comfortable with unexpected circumstances. To be a good mentor requires you to be truly present in the mentoring relationship, to cheerlead, actively listen and guide and to be authentic, flexible and non-judgmental. You cannot be an effective mentor if you approach the relationship with a clear idea of what you're going to do for your mentee, because their needs may be different to what you imagine.

Recommendations

This research clearly showed the value of community-based support for care-experienced young people in the form of mentoring relationships. Community-based support has the power to positively impact care-experienced young people's sense of confidence and identity, making them feel like a meaningful part of their community and local area. Having a relationship with a mentor who is flexible, authentic and non-judgmental has the potential to alter a person's sense of self-worth; in our research, multiple care-experienced young people explained that their mentor helped them to feel less anxious and more grounded. Finally, having someone in their lives who is able to both provide practical support and advice (for example, helping them apply to a job) and also cheerlead them through difficult situations (for example, preparing for and attending an interview) suggests that large-scale community-based support could have a huge impact on the life experiences of care-experienced young people in all of the major areas of life mentioned earlier.

There may also be a positive feedback loop to these benefits, as through the mentoring process, mentors confront their own preconceptions and expectations about care-experienced people. As many care-experienced people experience prejudice and discrimination throughout their lives due to the stigma attached to care-experience, actively bringing the community into the care of a young person has the potential to remove a major barrier from the lives of care-experienced people.

On the basis of the positive impacts described in this report, we strongly recommend community-based support as an approach to support care-experienced people throughout their lives. This could take the form of mentoring, as it has in the case of the Manchester Care Experienced Service, or could look more like the Independent Visitor service that is provided for care-experienced young people up until the age of 18. Whichever form community-based support takes, it is clear that it has the power to address issues of loneliness and social isolation, and to create relationships that continue throughout a care-experienced young person's life - particularly through difficult transition points.

As the government turns towards its plan for implementing the recommendations of the English Care Review, we make three key recommendations concerning loving relationships and community-based support:

1: There should be a large-scale adoption of community-based support across the country.

As the government and wider society has already recognised the value of community-based support for children in care through the Independent Visitor scheme, it may be appropriate to consider an extension or adaptation to this scheme for care-experienced young people up to at least the age of 25. The important local connections that a young person can build through mentoring or 'befriending' services can help them to navigate early adulthood in a much more grounded and confident way, being able to utilise local services and have a trusted person to turn to for help. The needs of care-experienced young people who have left care are very different from children in care, though, and it is important that such a scheme does not treat them as such.

2: There should be an establishment of best practices and standards for community-based support for care-experienced young people.

As there is no precedent for large-scale community-based support for care-experienced young people past the age of 18, it is essential that government and wider society looks towards the experts in this field - projects such as the Manchester Care Experienced Service - to distil best practice and establish standards for community-based support. To aid this, we have collected our observations and understandings of how MCES has operated into a service blueprint that can be used for a starting point for this work, or for any service intending to start offering community-based support. This can be found in our appendix, Blueprints for Community-Based Support. Alongside this, there should be further research into the best ways to prepare and support mentors. It is clear that early in the relationship, mentors and mentees benefit from a good level of contact with a service to help them establish the relationship, build trust and suggest activities that they might do together. As the relationship progresses and becomes more defined, though, mentors in particular may require different support. This can only be understood by further research into more developed mentoring relationships (that have lasted 5+ years, for example).

3: Ensure that there is further research and development of practice to support the needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children using community-based support.

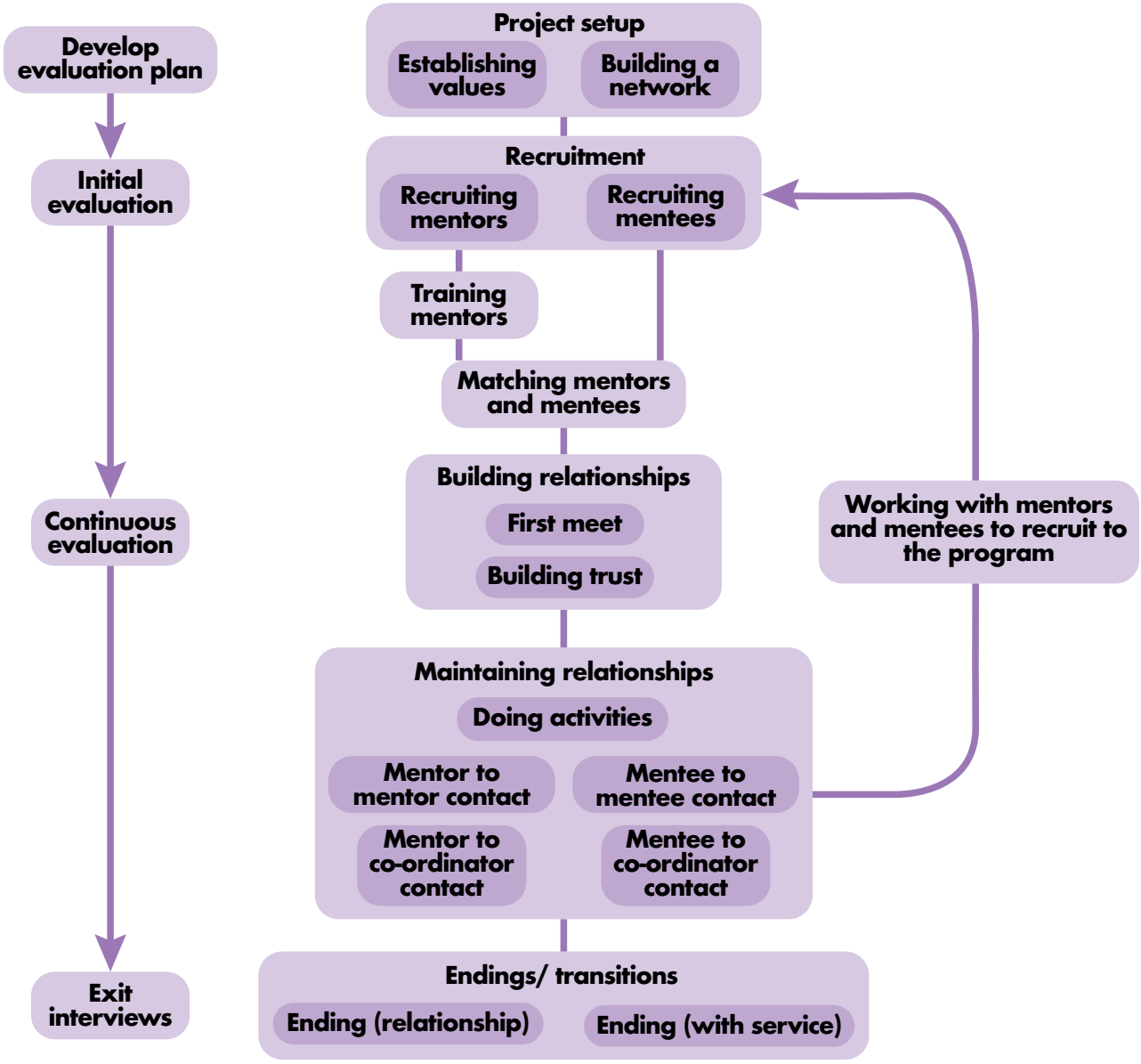
The mentors and mentees we interviewed were unequivocal that community-based support is of special importance to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. Community-based support can help Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children to learn about their local area, build their skills in spoken and written English, culturally acclimatise and also find existing communities in their local area that may speak their language or be familiar with their culture. Because Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are massively underserved by current support systems, community-based support represents a significant innovation in the landscape of support they can access. There should be further specialist development of community-based support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, and research in parallel to understand their needs and wishes for community-based support specifically.

“My mentor... he’s a good man. He knows a lot about things and he listens.”

Appendix: Blueprints for Community-Based Support

Throughout our research with the Manchester Care Experienced Service we were able to get a clear insight into how the service has operated, what worked well, and what could do with some changes. In this section, we provide a service blueprint and description for community-based support based upon this research. This should not be treated as a pure reflection of how MCES has operated, as this also incorporates the wishes of mentors and mentees for changes to the project. A service or local authority wanting to start offering community-based support could use this as an outline, but we would strongly suggest ensuring this is adapted to your local context and the constraints of whatever service is being offered to ensure the service has appropriate capacity and support provision.

Service composition



Project setup

Working on your own? Spend time building relationships with other organisations and ensuring appropriate capacity is in place.

A community-based support service can be run either by a single organisation or in partnership across multiple organisations. There are benefits and drawbacks to both approaches. If the service is being run by a single organisation, that organisation will need to make considerable effort to build relationships and network early into the life of the service, to ensure that they are a trusted part of the systems they are operating in and to maximise the potential for referrals from other organisations. In addition to this, single organisation services may need to undertake a period of gathering resources, conducting research, or planning events, in order to ensure that their recruitment, training and matching processes draw upon appropriate material and not just that already available to the organisation.

Working with another organisation? Spend time establishing values and intentions, getting to know each other, and identifying shared policies and processes to use.

If the service is being run by multiple organisations, they will enjoy the benefit of collaborative working, but will need to make an effort early on to establish what that collaboration looks like, how roles and responsibilities can be shared, and how to best work together as a team. This might include an onboarding stage for the project team that focuses on learning about all of the organisations involved, some trust building activities, activities to establish the values and working patterns of each project, and work towards a clear shared vision. The organisations involved should note that each organisation will have different policies, processes, and technologies available to them, and should either:

- Approach issues of policy, process or technology with care, understanding that these may have different requirements, responsibilities, or timescales attached to them in each organisation, or
- Establish shared policies, processes, and technologies, operating differently from each of their host organisations with the understanding that multi-stakeholder working requires compromise in order to work well.

If the latter option is chosen, this should be designed to complement the organisations involved as much as possible, for example, designing a referral form that fulfils the referral criteria for both organisations, or using technologies that can export to all organisations' own technologies.

Interrogate what being "young person-led" will mean in this project.

Regardless of whether the service is being run by one organisation or many, the project team should ask themselves at this stage what they consider "young person-led" work to actually mean, and what that might require of them. Community-based support services in many ways require greater internal transformation and surrender than other services, as there is a deliberate transfer of control away from the service towards the people actually in relationship with each other. As such, the project setup stage should involve hard conversations that interrogate what the boundaries of being young person-led means for this service. What will the service do, and what will it not do? What can it support and what can it not?

Resource the service appropriately, and set boundaries for what the service can offer for the amount of capacity available.

Understanding the boundaries of what can be offered by the service also includes ensuring that there is adequate capacity to support the service. From what we have seen in this case, we would recommend a minimum of three workers whose sole, full-time responsibility is the community-based support scheme. This should be scaled accordingly if any of the team have other responsibilities within their organisation, or are not working full-time. In addition to this, there should be an adequate budget to support all aspects of the service, including budget for training, events, activities, travel, food, and evaluation.

Think about evaluation early, and aim for slow, deep and continuous evaluation.

There is considerable complexity involved in evaluating relationships. We would encourage any community-based support team to think carefully and innovatively about evaluation. We strongly discourage using any clearly defined "hard" outcomes and expecting that this will lead to any meaningful information about the service at the end. Evaluation of relationships within community-based support services should focus on transferring as much agency as possible to the people in the relationship to talk about their experience of that relationship. As such, evaluation should focus on qualitatively exploring the journeys that involved people have had. Relational support such as this needs time to grow and mature, and many of the impacts of community-based support relationships will not be seen until many years after. As such, the evaluation should also be ongoing, focusing on checking in with people over time to see how their relationships have grown and changed, and how the service can be of best use at that time. There should be an effort to think about how to undertake slow, deep, and continuous evaluation, rather than relying on research undertaken only at the beginning and end of a service.

Peer mentoring may offer more opportunities, but you should draw upon existing research on how to do this.

Peer mentoring could be included within a community-based support service, and may have significant benefits in amplifying the support that many receive in more formal mentoring relationships, but as no peer mentoring took place in the MCES project we can give no concrete explorations of that here. Instead, we would recommend looking at the extensive published research on peer mentoring, or engaging with organisations that already undertake peer mentoring to better understand the best practice behind this
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Recruitment

Recruit mentors by appealing to their want to give back. Recruit mentees by clarifying why they might want a mentor.

Mentors very clearly are motivated by a desire to "give back", people who have benefited in some way from the way their life has gone and wanting to help someone else as a result. As such, recruitment of mentors should be based on this, appealing to the desire to give back, making clear that they will learn about a group of people they might know nothing about, feel "humbled" and "useful", or, if they are care-experienced themselves, they will be able to support someone who they may already understand and relate to a lot of the life experiences of.

For mentees, the central aspect of recruitment should focus on making exceptionally clear what a mentor is. As our analysis has shown, mentors are people who can cheer you on, actively listen to you, and provide guidance (but not fix something for you), and are flexible, authentic and non-judgmental. The benefits of mentoring are about "building up your world" and feeling more connected to your community - which can support mentees a great deal. The entire project team should be involved in all aspects of recruitment, so as to create a clearer understanding of the pool of both mentors and mentees for matching purposes. The increased clarity offered by this report on what mentors and mentees actually are should make recruitment much easier.

Ideally, everyone should have access to a mentor - but if that isn't possible, think about offering targeted support to groups experiencing multiple intersecting oppressions.

Regarding where mentees are recruited from, there are two possible approaches, which ideally should be undertaken simultaneously. If the pool of mentors and the team's capacity allowed, the best-case option would be for every care-experienced young person to be entitled to a mentor, and for statutory services to refer people who indicate that they would like one. Getting to this stage will take considerable work, but should be a focus as it is clear that community-based support such as mentoring is a tremendously beneficial intervention. Initially, engagement with colleagues in the statutory sector to show the benefits of mentoring will start to build momentum in this regard.

At the same time, targeted support has the potential to bring its own unique benefits. For example, in the case of MCES, significant engagement from an organisation that supports Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People meant that many Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People were able to access support that better integrated them into their communities, helped them with their English, and generally gave them a positive welcome to the UK. Often, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People (or any care-experienced young people that face multiple intersecting oppressions, such as race, disability, or being trans, non-binary or questioning of their gender) experience poor support from universal services. It would be extremely beneficial to these groups to maintain targeted support.

Training

Focus your training for mentors on boundaries, safeguarding, emotional literacy and care experience.

Training for mentors should primarily focus on boundaries and managing expectations, safeguarding, and emotional literacy. The exact content of the training can vary depending on the needs of the group or the intentions of the service, but these are the key areas that seem to allow mentors to become the most comfortable with their new roles. Mentors should be taught how to have conversations about boundaries, and these should not be imposed with the mentee as limits, but instead as a way to productively and lovingly have an ongoing and long-lasting relationship. This has the additional benefit of modelling what healthy relationships can look like to mentees, and normalising that communicating about the relationship that is healthy.

The safeguarding aspect of the training should focus on understanding what it means to safeguard an adult, and how this differs from safeguarding children, as well as the conventional aspects of safeguarding training such as noticing concerning behaviours, when to tell someone else about something, and so on. The training around emotional literacy would act as a complement to the existing training on boundaries, and would support mentors to understand how to safely ask questions about emotions, what the constraints of their role is, and how to work with someone that's having a difficult emotional experience.

Ideally, the training should take place in person so mentors have an opportunity to meaningfully get to know each other. The training should also include more details about what care-experience actually is, so mentors can get a good idea of the possible experiences of someone they're about to work with, to reduce any preconceptions they may already have, and to address the significant lack of knowledge about the care system generally. Care Journeys' Care Experienced Awareness Training is an example of training that would support this.

Matching

Let the mentor and mentee decide for themselves if the match is appropriate.

The matching process is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of any community-based support service. The project team needs to accept that they may get it wrong, and they should give as much agency as possible to the mentor and mentee to decide for themselves whether the match is appropriate. In short, prospective mentors and mentees should fill out some information about themselves and their interests, and the project team should have a good understanding of both mentors and mentees. Then, the team should meet regularly to understand whether there may be any good matches. Optionally, the service may want to hold a rapid meeting event (similar to a 'speed date' format), where mentors and mentees get to meet each other and decide who they'd like to talk to further. It should be stressed here that there is no perfect mentor-mentee match: it is much more about getting two people into relationship and seeing what works and what doesn't and responding to that. There are benefits to mentors and mentees sharing interests, and there are benefits to them not sharing interests - no one approach is 'right'.

Relationship building

The first meet should involve an activity.

Building trust within the mentor-mentee relationship is one of the most critical stages, but is by no means simple. The first meet between the mentor and mentee should involve an activity, so that the sole focus isn't just on conversation between the two. Some members of the project team should be present in order to 'broker' the relationship, and to be on hand if either there are any issues or if the mentor and mentee need some help in getting to know each other. Ideally, the activity they do should be of interest to both of them, and should involve either some level of co-operation or of doing something in parallel, in order to help build a shared experience and create opportunities for bonding and building trust.

Have a list of ideas or opportunities available.

The relationship building stage overlaps with the relationship maintenance stage, and there is no discrete end to this stage. As such, elements of that stage apply here also. In particular, in the early days of the relationship mentors and mentees may benefit from having an activity or opportunity suggested to them, as they may not know what each other enjoys or what to suggest. The service should have a list of opportunities on hand that help the mentor and mentee to have fun and build trust together, and these opportunities should be in some way categorised, so that mentors and mentees can easily pick from them if they are stuck on what they might like to do next together.

Maintaining a relationship

There should be a budget to support whatever activities the mentor and mentee want to do.

The activities undertaken by any given mentor-mentee relationship will depend entirely on the interests and needs/wants of the pair. As far as possible, these should organically arise, but as mentioned in the previous section, there should be a bank of activities for those that are unsure what they might want to do next. There should be a budget underpinning these activities, ensuring that anyone can be a mentor and any mentee can benefit. Any activity that a mentor-mentee wants to do should be supported within reason and safety, as long as it supports the relationship. If needed, arbitrary constraints can be placed on this such as a certain budget per pair, but this should be able to be used flexibly - i.e. if a pair wants to go to something that requires an expensive train ride, they should be allowed under the condition that their next few activities must be free or low-cost.

Mentors and mentees should be supported and encouraged to meet other mentors and mentees.

There should be a good level of support for both mentors and mentees and this should be resourced appropriately. Mentors and mentees should have individual frequent conversations with the project team (perhaps fortnightly or monthly) where they can talk about anything about the mentoring relationship that they need to. For mentors, this might include talking about any safeguarding issues arising, and for mentees this might be an opportunity to talk about how their mentor could best support them. In addition to this, there should be opportunities for mentors to meet other mentors (to build a community of practice or peer support for mentors, to talk about how things are going, get ideas, or normalise experiences) and mentees should have an opportunity to meet other mentees for similar reasons. Finally, there should be occasional events that mentor-mentee pairs can attend together (perhaps 2-4 a year) which can act as celebrations, opportunities, or just a moment to meet more people experiencing the same service.

Ending/ transitioning the relationship

Every relationship will end (or not end) differently.

There should be support available for all of the different options regarding the continuation of

the mentoring relationship. Some relationships will drift over time, and this should be allowed to happen if both involved want this to, or supported to either be renewed or ended if needed. For mentees that feel they have got what they've needed from mentoring, or mentors who believe they no longer have the time to engage in mentoring, there should be support for ending the relationship in a managed way, including marking the end of the relationship in some way (with a reflection event, a final meeting, or something material). Finally, for relationships that can continue without the support of the service, there should be a clear transition process, where the relationship becomes entirely self-managed by the mentor and mentee. Even in this case, though, the service should provide the option for relationships to engage with the service again, or access occasional support such as on-call workers, infrequent supervision, or special events. Although the service has relinquished the relationship at that point, there is still some responsibility to it by virtue of being how the mentor and mentee were brought together.

“Just do it. Don’t have any reservations, just go in with an open mind.”

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