



COMMUNITIES THAT CARE RENFREWSHIRE

STAKEHOLDER EVALUATION INTERVIEW & FOCUS GROUP REPORT

December 2020

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past 5 years, thanks to funding from the STV Children's Appeal, Who Cares? Scotland has been working across Renfrewshire to deliver local opportunities for Care Experienced people, and to deliver targeted community education to raise awareness and understanding of care experience. This work is known as the 'Communities That Care' project.

Approaching the end of year 5, the project has undertaken a series of both broad and in-depth research with key stakeholders to understand the impact of our work and future priorities. This report focuses on findings from a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups undertaken to ascertain views of key project stakeholders including Care Experienced people, project volunteers, carers, partner organisations, education professionals and local councillors. Interviews and focus groups gathered views on stakeholder interactions with the project; personal and professional learning; project impact on them/ their practice and the impact for Care Experienced people and communities.

In October and November 2020, the project team carried out 6 focus group sessions and 24 individual semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. A total of 40 stakeholders participated in either an interview or focus group session.

This report discusses key themes which emerged from these interviews and focus group sessions and the implications for the future of the Communities that Care project.

2. PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT WITH PROJECT

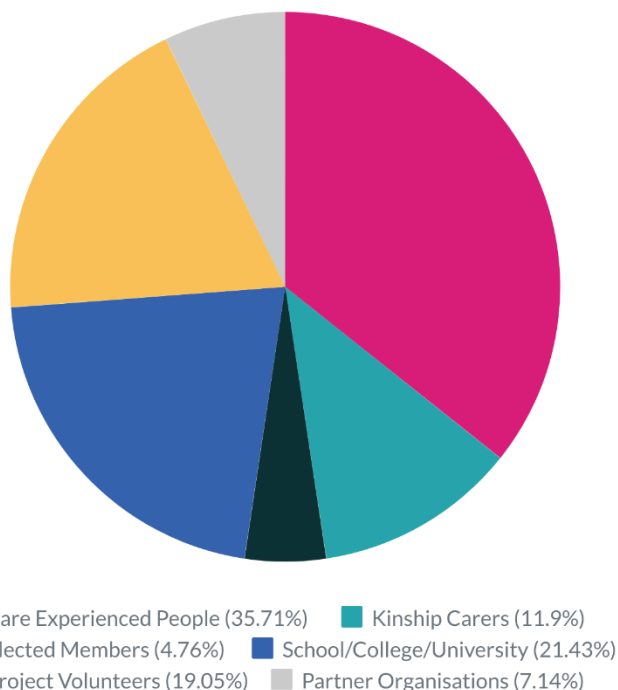


Figure 1: Stakeholder Involvement with Project

Interview and focus groups were carried out with a range of stakeholders, see Figure 1. It should be noted that some volunteers who participated in these sessions were also Care Experienced and therefore there will be a degree of overlap in the categories above.

The stakeholders who participated in these interviews and focus groups were those with whom the project team held the strongest relationships and who had had the most in-depth involvement with the project.

Care Experienced people made up the largest group of stakeholders. A total of 15 Care Experienced people aged between 8 and 43 (average age 20.4) participated in either an interview or focus group session.

3. PROJECT IMPACT – EDUCATION

Communities grow up being 'care aware'. They understand care experience and have positive attitudes towards Care Experienced people (starting with current school-age population in key education clusters and the communities in which they live)

Knowledge and Understanding of Care Experience

Many interview and focus group participants did not understand what was meant by the term “Care Experienced” before interacting with the Communities that Care project; the common misconception being that this term referred only to those who were currently living in residential or foster care. Through engagement with the project team, individuals learned that the term “Care Experienced” is much broader and can include those living with family. This led to a greater understanding of how many Care Experienced people are living within Renfrewshire communities:

“I had quite a narrow view of what a looked after child, or somebody that had care experience, was. As in my head it was ‘stayed in a children’s house’. So, I suppose the first thing I learned was there’s a lot more to it than that. There’s a lot more breadth in the definition, whether it’s kinship care, whether it’s foster care, adoptive. Even informal arrangements, staying with aunts, uncles. So I suppose I didn’t fully appreciate at first how many children the term ‘Care Experienced’ covered and then obviously discovering how many children in Renfrewshire could be classed as Care Experienced. Even some people who maybe themselves wouldn’t use that terminology to describe themselves.”

(Elected Member)

“I had heard the words being thrown around like ‘kinship’ and I would wonder, ‘what does that mean?’. I have now discovered a woman I know in Ferguslie Park is a kinship carer. I know her background, she has some kids from her sister, but I wouldn’t have known it if I didn’t work in this partnership.”

(Development Officer, Active Communities & Community Champion)

“So many staff wouldn’t have known what Care Experienced meant so as an organisation we have learned and grown. Those powerful messages in the project helped to make that difference.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

The project's work in local schools emerged as key to increasing knowledge and understanding of the term "Care Experienced" and the different types of care. Care Experienced people and kinship carers in particular felt that kinship care is not widely understood and that inputs in school play an important role in raising awareness of this:

"Being in the schools is a good thing, the kids know you. A lot of people don't know what kinship is and now you can tell them. It's important to learn this at school."

(Kinship Carer)

"See when we were talking in the class, we went through a presentation about kinship care and see when they asked what we were, and I said 'kinship care' none of them got what it meant but then see when you came in and you spoke about it and you told us about all the different types of care and told us about other people's stories I think it was good. I think they learned more about it."

(WC?S Member, age 12)

Interview and focus group participants indicated that because of their engagement with the Communities that Care project, they had a greater understanding of the various challenges that Care Experienced people can face. Involvement with the project has helped key individuals within the community understand what life can be like for the Care Experienced people within their community:

"I have a much more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Care Experienced people. I've learned a lot from the training you offered to UWS staff and students, and although I had a good understanding already, I feel that it has furthered my understanding. I feel that the very honest and personal experiences within the training were very useful."

(Named person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

"The bits that stuck with me were the kids, the siblings, getting split up and things like that, learning about their whole Care Experience was just something that I didn't really know about at all."

(Development Officer, Tannahill Centre)

This increased understanding of the lives of Care Experienced people has enabled organisations to put in place greater supports for the Care Experienced people who engage with their services:

“You got a much better understanding of what they [Care Experienced pupils] do go through and it’s helped us in supporting them as well, which we wouldn’t have had in the same level if wasn’t for Who Cares ? Scotland.

(Teacher, Primary School)

“The project has helped the college to learn about barriers but also how to help overcome these barriers for Care Experienced students and the difference this can make.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

Improved Attitudes Towards Care Experienced People

Lack of knowledge and understanding of care experience can lead to negative attitudes towards and perceptions of Care Experienced people. Interview and focus group participants highlighted that the presence of the Communities that Care project within local communities has enabled a shift in attitudes and perceptions of Care Experienced people. This shift has resulted in communities embracing Care Experience people and behaving in a more understanding and inclusive way:

“You guys have been along to community councils that I’ve been at and I have to say, they’re normally quite old fashioned and have a certain demographic of older folk, that’s just the nature of it and they’ve all certainly all had a fairly fixed view. Particularly maybe they’ve had children’s units within the community and have a very old-fashioned view of what it is. So, after those presentations it’s interesting to see a kind of generation, of them to be far more mindful. So, I’ve certainly seen a kind of change in attitude. Although Longcroft isn’t a children’s unit anymore, that always used to be the kind of ‘go to’ if there was trouble in the park. It was always coming from Longcroft. You seen a substantial shift in that when the likes of Who Cares? came to community councils and presented and I think people got a better idea of what was going on there.”

(Elected Member)

“I think having the Wee Diamonds in Ferguslie has broke down the barriers in the community from people not understanding why young people were staying with their grans.... it’s made Ferguslie more open to that idea and wee bit more trauma informed. Even the Tanny [Tannahill Centre] and all their staff, I think you see a shift in their behaviour with how they respond to young people because now they understand that they’re not just doing that because they’re a bad child they’ve got a lot going on and that’s what’s driving their behaviour,

and they're not bad at all. It's broken down a lot of barriers of how people in the community speak to and respect the young people in the community, because they understand more."

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

The project's work in local schools was highlighted by many interview and focus group participants as being instrumental to changing attitudes and perceptions of pupils who are not Care Experienced. Teachers highlighted that before engaging with the project, many pupils would have been unaware of the challenges faced by their Care Experienced peers:

"I always do a wee follow up just the following week and I think it's amazing how the kids' attitudes change. For some people it's just something they haven't really thought about"

(Guidance Teacher, Secondary School)

"Kids at heart do want to look out for one another. I think that sometimes kids can go through life with tunnel vision if they have never experienced adversity or any upset within the family home, sometimes it can lead to a lack of empathy. I think that having the PSE [Personal and Social Education] classes, raising the profile has made them more empathetic and understanding."

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

Those with direct experience of care highlighted that there is a lack of understanding present within schools which can result in Care Experienced pupils being treated differently by their peers. Both kinship carers and Care Experienced people have experienced positive change in relation to this due to the Communities that Care project's work educating school pupils. Care Experienced people now feel more accepted and included within their schools due to improved attitudes of their non-Care Experienced peers:

"The project has helped being in the school, not everyone knows about what kids go through, it helps other kids to understand."

(Kinship Carer)

Interviewer: *"Do you feel more accepted at school?"*

Participant: *"Yeh. They [peers] used to always ask questions about like why I stayed with my Nana and they didn't get what it meant. I feel like, I think now they understand more and now they don't look at you as if you're weird. Because it [the project's input to the class] helped. I think it's really good for everybody to learn about Who Cares because it's a good thing. You do good."*

(WC?S Member, age 12)

In addition, teachers commented that the lunchtime drop-ins had provided an opportunity for those who weren't Care Experienced to learn more and to show support to their Care Experienced peers:

"I think that being in the school and doing the drop-ins has also been good, because it's kind of, for want of a better word, its normalised and I think children who even aren't Care Experienced have been keen just to drop in and say hello and support their friends maybe who have been."

(Guidance Teacher, Secondary School)

Interview and focus group participants highlighted that the project's presence in schools has had a positive impact on the entire school community. Creating a sense of empathy among those who are not Care Experienced has led to improved wellbeing of Care Experienced pupils:

"It's making a massive difference to the wellbeing of Care Experienced pupils and even the ones who aren't, having them understand that everybody's got a different life, everybody's got different families and always you have to be kind and understanding. I don't know if you do recognise the difference that you've made to a lot of young people to be honest"

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

Increased Knowledge of Who Cares? Scotland

A key theme emerging from the interviews and focus groups was that before the Communities that Care project was in Renfrewshire, there was very little knowledge of the work of Who Cares? Scotland and the various supports offered by the organisation. Through engagement with the project, individuals working with Care Experienced people now know more about Who Cares? Scotland and the opportunities for Care Experienced people to access independent advocacy and get involved in both local and national participation activities to develop a sense of belonging and influence change:

"The key thing that I had learned through the project is the work that Who Cares? Scotland do and what support they offer and how extensive it is."

(Named person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

"I knew that there is a huge initiative and drive from Who Cares? but I wasn't really aware how that benefits our local community. Before we started engaging with yourselves, there was nothing really there for the young people that had experienced care at some point in their life."

Through working with yourselves I feel like as a pastoral support teacher I have more places I can refer young people; I've got greater expertise identifying possible support networks and a better understanding what your organisation does and how you can support us and also the work that you do with the young people."

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

"Yes we have worked with children with care experience over a number of years, but what I didn't realise was the extent of support that would be out there for those who were Care Experienced and that's had a huge impact in some of our children and families."

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

This increased knowledge of Who Cares? Scotland has enhanced how these key professionals are able to fulfil their roles and the support they are able to give to the Care Experienced people they work with. The project has created more avenues for those working with Care Experienced people to ensure that Care Experienced people are aware of Who Cares? Scotland and are able to become involved with the organisation.

Communities that Care Education Model

A theme which emerged from interviews and focus groups with educational professionals was general praise for the Communities that Care education model. Feedback from these professionals has suggested that the model itself has been a key factor in the positive impact of this work in relation to increasing knowledge and understanding of care experience and changing attitudes and perceptions of Care Experienced people.

Education professionals highlighted that the interactive nature of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) lessons and the incorporation of lived experience were key factors. In addition, teachers also pointed to the regular presence of the project team within the schools through monthly lunchtime drop-in sessions as being instrumental in raising awareness of Who Cares? Scotland within the schools:

"I liked the way that you were so pro-active and enthusiastic in getting that message across and I think the way you actually involved the young people, you didn't come in and just lecture or put up graphs and say 'right this is what being in care means', you asked them 'what does care mean to you' and it was really interesting to get their perspective, the young people who had never been Care Experienced, and I think it was a really good exercise for them to be involved in in that way the way it was done."

(Guidance Teacher, Secondary School)

“It was a good mix of a good, organised PowerPoint presentation, group work, active learning and everybody getting their chance and the role models, as I say, it’s always good having role models and success stories there and telling their story.”

(Guidance Teacher, Secondary School)

“With your drop-in service as well, the kids having that visual person, someone they can speak to. It’s not a leaflet, it’s not on a board. I think that was so important and one of the factors that really did allow for your profile to grow within the school because of your presence there.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

It was highlighted that the holistic nature of the model enabled a “whole school approach” to raising awareness of care experience within the school, which had an overall positive impact within the school community:

“The whole programme with regards to coming to staff first making sure staff are aware, not just teaching staff but support staff, staff across the establishment, to make them have an understanding that benefits the children and the parents I think that has been vital within the St Fergus’ community.”

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

In summary, having a presence throughout local communities has enabled the Communities that Care project to increase knowledge and understanding of care experience among key individuals within communities. This understanding has resulted in a shift in attitudes towards Care Experienced people, meaning that Care Experienced people and kinship carers feel more accepted and included within their communities.

4. PROJECT IMPACT – BELONGING

Care Experienced young people have opportunities to come together with peers with similar experiences. They are proud of their identity and feel they belong in their community.

Care Identity

A central theme that emerged during discussions about belonging was that of care identity and that many Care Experienced people in Renfrewshire did not know that they were Care Experienced before engaging with the project. This has been particularly true for those who have experience of kinship care or being looked after at home. Through engaging with the project, Care Experienced people have had the opportunity to learn more about and embrace their care identity:

“Without the project I don’t think I would know I am Care Experienced.”

(WC?S Member, age 16)

The project’s presence in local schools emerged as providing key opportunities for those who may not realise they are Care Experienced to learn about this part of their identity, and to connect with others who are Care Experienced:

“Young people didn’t even realise that they were Care Experienced and that there were other people that had similar experiences.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

“I think the work in schools is good because you talk to younger people and some of them might not know that are Care Experienced and you can talk to them and help them understand and get them to the groups.”

(WC?S Member, age 16)

Care Experienced people highlighted the wider impact within their lives of learning about being Care Experienced and embracing this part of their identity. In particular, embracing a care identity has helped Care Experienced people to accept their life experiences and release mis-placed guilt for these. It has also helped young people to make more choices that are more positive for them:

“It made me integrate parts of myself that I didn’t even know were separated. It gave me courage to accept that part of my own story and shed guilt over things in my past that I felt were my fault, that were actually a result of the system and circumstances.”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 33)

“I have learned that I am Care Experienced, and I learned how to have fun without going about the streets, that was really good.”

(WC?S Member, age 16)

The importance of having the opportunity to learn about care identity was further highlighted by Care Experienced adults, reflecting on the negative impact that not having this opportunity sooner had had on their lives and their ability to access supports:

Interviewer: *“Do you think it’s important for us to talk about Care Experience in school?”*

Participant *“I wish it was more focused on because then I wouldn’t have always grown up feeling lost, I would know where my identity was, and I would have been able to know that I was Care Experienced and to access supports and to come to groups. But because I didn’t know I feel like it limited me, to then be older and find out I was like ‘aw I could have had access to all this support like in uni and stuff like that’”.*

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

“We hadn’t heard about care experience until we were older, and it is a vital part of who we are so I wanted to change that so it wasn’t the same for others. We missed out on so much support we should have had but because we didn’t know about care experience, we didn’t get what we needed”.

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 35)

Care Experienced people commented that they now feel more confident and less ashamed of their care identity due to the work of the Communities that Care project talking about care experience and educating others within the community:

“Before you said anything about it you’d get slagged for it. I got called ‘buy one get one free’ when I lived with my brother. But after you started talking about it, that didn’t bother me so much because I realised that it wasn’t true. I learned that it wasn’t our faults and that we shouldn’t be ashamed because of something that the adults couldn’t do, and if we hadn’t been in care we could have been in a worse situation.”

(WC?S Member, age 19)

“See if I never met you I wouldn’t have felt confident about it. I’m happy staying with my Nana, I do like it, she’s funny but I don’t think anybody else would have got it if it wasn’t for WC?S coming into my school and explaining it to people.”

(WC?S Member, age 12)

Care Experienced people commented that the project’s work raising awareness of care experience has enabled them to be more themselves, to be proud of their care experience and to worry less about trying to live up to the expectation of others. The project’s work educating communities has resulted in Care Experienced people feeling safe enough to be honest about their care experience instead of feeling like they need to hide this part of themselves:

“I learned to be more of myself. I used to just be what everybody else was like but now I don’t care what other people think. Do your own thing, it’s up to you”

(WC?S Member, age 12)

“It’s just normalising instead of everyone thinking that we’re different.... I like that it’s now becoming a lot more normal and young people are now fine talking about it and saying “I live with my Gran” or “I live in a unit” instead of them lying about it or avoiding the discussion and getting upset. Now they’re proud to say “I live with my gran” because they understand it and they know their peers do too so they’re not going to get a negative response back.”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

“Normally you’d keep it to yourself, but now someone will just turn round and be like ‘I was in care’ and someone else will say ‘so I was I’ but I don’t think that would have happened if Who Cares? hadn’t made it normal and acceptable to be in care.”

(WC?S Member, age 19)

Bringing Care Experienced People Together

The main focus of the project’s work with regards to belonging has been creating opportunities for Care Experienced people to connect with each other. These opportunities have led to Care Experienced people feeling more confident in being themselves and accepting their pasts without feelings of guilt and shame:

Interviewer: *“Is that important to spend time with people who understand what it’s like to live with your Nana?”*

Participant: "Yep"

Interviewer: "Why?"

Participant: "Before this club was even here, I was like 'oh my gosh... I'm the only one that lives with my Nana. Oh my gosh, what am I going to do? Everybody's gonna hate me!'"

Interviewer: "Do you feel different now that you come to this club?"

Participant: "Yeh, I feel a bit better showing the way I am to people."

(WC?S Member, age 8)

"It wasn't like that you were the only person that's been through the care system, it was everybody and you didn't need to feel ashamed of what you've been through because you knew all them, they might not have went through the exact same stuff as you but they would have went through similar kind of stuff in a different way it just makes you more confident in being you instead of acting like someone else."

(WC?S Member, age 19)

Care Experienced people expressed that having this opportunity to connect with other Care Experienced people also deepened their understanding of their care identity and how this fits with their wider identity:

"If I'm honest, I didn't really feel like I belonged anywhere before I came to Who Cares?. I didn't really have an identity; I was a wee bit lost and then I suddenly found a group of people who were exactly like me and who had a similar background and I was like 'oh my god where have these people been all my life?!' and I suddenly had an identity and a purpose."

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

Interview and focus group participants highlighted that it was the shared experiences of Care Experienced people that led to a shared sense of identity and a confidence in interacting with each other that they may not have with people who are not Care Experienced. The project has also enabled Care Experienced people to connect with other Care Experienced people within their schools and communities that they perhaps would not have even known were Care Experienced without the project's presence in the community:

"To really meet and communicate with other young people within the school who have had similar experiences across year groups that they never maybe would have. It was important for them to know that there's other young people that have maybe experienced similar things."

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

“At school kids talk about mums and dads, but the kids talk about their grandparents and that other kids can't go to ‘their group’. They are all in the same boat and this has helped them build confidence, talk to each other and interact.”

(Kinship Carer)

“I know it's not just me that's went through everything, someone else has went through it aswell so they know how you feel about it.”

(WC?S Member, age12)

Connecting with the “Communities that Care” project in Renfrewshire has enabled Care Experienced people to join the Who Cares? Scotland membership as a “family member” and to become involved in national participation activities. These experiences have enabled Care Experienced people to widen their social circles and to build reciprocal supportive relationships with other Care Experienced people. This has led to Care Experienced people feeling a deeper connection with the organisation and lessened feelings of being alone:

“My favourite memory is just coming to all the different events, meeting new people and having time to spend time with other people I have never met before and just being involved in Who Cares?. It's really enjoyable and loads of people are nice to you.”

(IWC?S Member, age 16)

“Belonging has been about bringing me into the Care Experienced family and understanding. I never knew about Who Cares before, it was finding out that I wasn't alone. There was a whole organisation out there fighting for my rights. It was about getting in there and helping. Connecting with the kids and letting them know I care.... to support young people coming up through the care system.”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 43)

“I have learned a lot by going to all the events. The kids have done new things with Who Cares? like the Love Rally and Carelidh, things they have never done before. They have made new friends and people out of their own area.”

(Kinship Carer)

Communities that Care Belonging Activities

The main way that the Communities that Care project enabled Care Experienced people to connect with each other was the delivery of regular participation groups to promote belonging. These groups have provided a

unique 'safe space' for Care Experienced people, where they feel comfortable talking about what is going in their lives:

"They [grandkids] feel safe at this group, they know they can ask staff or volunteers anything, they can talk about things going on at school, if they are struggling they will spend time with them and help. They make them happy"

(Kinship Carer)

"The kids enjoyed the visits they had like from the ambulance. My granddaughter felt comfortable to talk about her dad [who had recently died]"

(Kinship Carer)

Kinship carers and Care Experienced people drew comparison between how they feel attending the groups facilitated by the Communities that Care project and how they feel attending other clubs and at school. The groups facilitated by the project have provided safe spaces for those with direct experience of care to feel welcomed and safe from judgement and bullying:

"All the kids are the same, they are all treated the same, they feel safe at the 'Wee Diamonds' club. My two tell everyone they stay with their Nana, but some kids can be cruel. I don't feel judged here, but at other clubs it feels different, but at this group we felt welcomed."

(Kinship Carer)

"Everybody's kind and caring, whereas in class sometimes people get bullied. Whereas in there [pointing to the group] noone gets bullied."

(WC?S Member, age 8)

This safe, non-judgemental atmosphere created at groups has been particularly impactful for certain individual young people. One kinship carer highlighted that her nephew has autism which can cause him to find it difficult to socialise with other young people in certain settings. The participation activities offered by the project are the only social activities that her nephew participates in because he feels comfortable and at ease in these settings:

"He doesn't do shops or kids play areas, but he does this group, and he looks forward to it and it's amazing. He is himself at the group, he talks, he interacts with other children which is something he doesn't do in school so it's amazing."

(Kinship Carer)

The example above emphasises the important role that the project's participation activities have played in providing social experiences to Care Experienced young people who would otherwise experience social exclusion. The project has also enabled families living in poverty to have opportunities to connect with each other, create memories and have experiences that they otherwise would not have been able to access for a variety of reasons:

"We've went canoeing, team building, lots of crafts, days out, doing things like a family would do which we can't do as a family all the time but with our Who Cares? family we can and it's great. When you haven't got a lot of money and these things are being given to you for nothing, it's great."

(Kinship Carer)

"Going to Millport was like a holiday to us, he [nephew] had never played on the beach before. We also now communicate and look out for some of the kids from the older group."

(Kinship Carer)

These examples illustrate the profound impact that the groups and trips facilitated by the project have had for families with experience of care. These activities while primarily being about fun and connection, have served a much deeper purpose to those who have participated in them. This is further reinforced by the examples below which highlight the impact that participating in project activities has had on the lives of Care Experienced people in general:

"Coming to the groups has helped me with my behaviour, it would be bad for young people if they didn't have the group. Growing up in a community it's not that good but going to different of events and clubs you get to meet people and do things you wouldn't normally get to do."

(WC?S Member, age 16)

"It gave young people a sense of belonging and leadership, I could see them thriving working with yourselves"

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

The project has also provided opportunities for Care Experienced people to stay connected and socialise during the Covid 19 pandemic through a variety of virtual participation offers. For some Care Experienced people these virtual connection offers were their only opportunities to connect with others during this stressful and isolating time:

“Especially with this Covid it’s helped me because I know a lot of groups haven’t been on due to the pandemic but just having that Zoom call, once a week sometimes two/three times a week at the start, doing quizzes or just a general chat with a cup of tea. I know it’s not the best, but it’s still seeing that person on camera, still feels kind of real. Just company really.”

(WC?S Member, age 21)

Relationships

A key contributing factor in enabling individuals to develop a sense of belonging was the formation of positive relationships with Who Cares? Scotland staff and volunteers. Various aspects of Who Cares? Scotland as an organisation were highlighted as contributing to the formation of these positive relationships, particularly the organisation’s independence from other services and the staff and volunteers always being there for people:

“I didn’t trust outside agencies because of my past experiences with social services and I first thought you were spies for social services and then I came to realise that you were there for us, you’re not there to judge if we need help or need to ask you a question, you are always there.”

(Kinship Carer)

Interviewer: *“What’s been your fondest memory of being involved with Communities that Care?”*

Participant: *“I think it was meeting you because you were the first person to actually stay in my life and you tell me all the time how much I’ve come from when you first met me in the school and that.”*

(WC?S Member, age 19)

“I’ve been respected and understood at points where I feel like I’m nothing. But with that help I’ve felt like I belong somewhere and in some people’s hearts which is really nice. The relationships are a big thing to me, I’ve never had a relationship that’s actually stuck around for so, so long.”

(WC?S Member & Previous Staff Member, age 23)

Those with direct experience of care likened the relationships held with Who Cares? Scotland to family relationships and drew comparisons between the relationships they hold with Who Cares? Scotland and others within their lives. These examples further reinforce the important role that the project has played in the lives of those involved, and they evidence a necessity for these relationships to continue:

“The kids communicate more now and get close to the staff. This is our extended family.”

(Kinship Carer)

“It is family. Who Cares? is family. Like a long-term family, forever. No matter how old you are they’re still going to be there whereas our own families come and go whenever they want.”

(WC?S Member, age 21)

Participant: *“You do treat us like your own children. It’s never this social work barrier.”*

Interviewer: *“What’s different about us?”*

Participant: *“You don’t act like your normal professional, there’s not like a power dynamic. We’re all the same.”*

(WC?S Member, age 21)

An emerging theme was that Who Cares? Scotland’s staff and volunteers had a different approach to supporting people than other organisations delivering participation within the community. This approach was viewed as being more supportive by kinship carers and made them and the young people they look after more likely to want to engage:

“I would rather be with you than in the community. You have more time for the kids than other clubs.”

(Kinship Carer)

“He [grandson] will be more likely to go to an event if he knew it was with Who Cares? Scotland and wouldn’t go if it was with other organisations.”

(Kinship Carer)

Care Experienced people also reflected that their involvement with the project had had a positive impact on their family relationships. The groups and trips facilitated by the project enabled families to spend more quality time together, particularly for brothers and sisters who may only have the chance to spend time with each other at Who Cares? Scotland groups and events. Care Experienced people also reflected that being a part of the project had enabled them to understand the feelings of others more, which was having a positive impact on their family relationships:

“All the trips, and your parents can come so that’s more involvement with them. You get to know each other more when you’re doing things like that and you’re closer.”

(WC?S Member, age 12)

“I think I’ve learned a lot about caring about more people now, like the people round about you. I’ve learned more about what other people feel. You would never get what other people feel, but now I think I get it more and to always look after your family and that.”

(WC?S Member, age 12)

Interviewer: *“What was your favourite thing about that day [trip to safari park]?”*

Participant: *“That I got to see my sister, and animals. Like, I never see her.”*

(WCS? Member, age 8)

Increased Access to Support

Interview and focus group participants highlighted that the Communities that Care project has made it easier for Care Experienced people to access support and opportunities. The presence of the project within Renfrewshire, has enabled Care Experienced students to gain networking and employability skills and to access essential support from Who Cares? Scotland. Without the project, these students may not have had these opportunities:

“I personally know of students who have volunteered or worked with you and received advocacy and support, and found that support to be of significant value. Students have definitely benefitted enormously from the project.”

(Named Person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

“It is invaluable for students to have volunteering opportunities through partnership working for their own experiences and connections.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

By increasing awareness of care experience and ensuring that Care Experienced people (and those around them) understand the different types of care, the project has enabled those working with Care Experienced people to support them to access the supports available to them. Having the opportunity to access these supports from Who Cares? Scotland and other organisations has impacted positively the overall wellbeing of Care Experienced people:

“One of the children in primary 7 didn’t identify herself as Care Experienced because she was always in the care of her maternal grandmother.... but simple things like financial support or clubs that she wouldn’t have normally been able to get to you know we were then able to use.”

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

“Since starting a new job as a teacher, I have a couple of kids in kinship care, and you see them when others talk about their families and you see them shy away and close up. But then when you see other kids who are accessing services such as Who Cares? you see the difference in those children and how much better they feel and the difference it makes to their confidence.”

(WC?S Volunteer)

Belonging in the community

As a result of engaging with the project, kinship carers have been able to develop a deeper sense of belonging in their community through making friends with others in similar situations to them. These friendships have become an important source of support for carers who, despite living in the same community, may not have connected with each other without the Communities that Care project’s groups:

“I have made three new friends and we all live close together and without this group I would just have walked past them but now we go to other things at the Tannahill together, when the children are at school. So, it gave me freedom; I didn’t know anyone and now I have a close-knit group of friends from this group. They are there when I need them and for the children.”

(Kinship Carer)

“When I took my grandkids, I didn’t know anything about kinship and social work didn’t help. I didn’t know any of the other grans at the group, I dropped kids off at groups but now I get to listen to their stories and I don’t feel alone, they are in the same boat as me. Now I talk to everyone, I made friends. When I am feeling down, I can phone and talk and I would rather do that than phone social work.”

(Kinship Carer)

Through participating in activities delivered by the project within the local community and having the opportunity to become project volunteers, those with direct experience of care have become more connected within their local communities. This has led to them participating in other community events and feeling a deeper sense of belonging. Many Care Experienced people had never experienced this sense of belonging or feeling connected to the community before engaging with the project:

“The group has connected me more to the Tannahill Centre and I know more about what’s going on in the community.”

(Kinship Carer)

“Now I have more belonging in my community and I've never really had that before. I never even had that in my family. I've never had that community before, and now it's normal that you've got neighbours that you talk to, and it's weird because I feel like I belong and I've never felt like that before.”

(WC?S member & volunteer, 24)

“Belonging to the project has been a massive impact personally for myself. Especially in an area where I'm not well connected, it made me feel I belonged to the local area. I never felt so connected to an area until I became part of this project. It gave me courage to accept that part of my own story.”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, 35)

Through engaging with the project, key community organisations have become aware of the barriers to Care Experienced people feeling connected within their communities. There are examples of organisations committing to reduce these barriers and to do what they can to promote belonging:

“For me it's about breaking down if there are barriers. Because people have talked about that and because we have had these conversations, we have started to create a situation where someone will feel more confident saying, ‘Oh I would like to know more about the museum and would like to get in touch with someone.’ Just having those connections and having more representations of Care Experienced young people's voices in the museums and learning more about how we responded as a museum and how we can break barriers down.”

(Co-Production Officer, Paisley Museum Re-Imagined)

Changing lives

Throughout the interview and focus group sessions, there were examples of the many ways that the Communities that Care project has changed the lives of those with direct experience of care. As a result of the project, Care Experienced people have been able to change the path that they were on and to make choices that were more aligned to their aspirations. The connections and support networks established as a result of engaging with the project were instrumental in this change:

“It brought me closer to being who I actually wanted to be, instead of just turning into a daft and turning into the person I didn't want to be if I kept doing what I was doing”

(WC?S Member, age 19)

“I don't know where I'd be without Who Cares?. I'd probably still be on the path of self-destruction. Now I've got a purpose, I've got a family and I've got a community.”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

The connections and relationships that Care Experienced people have formed with the project team have had life-changing impact on individuals' educational achievements, employability skills and career choices. The supported offered by the project team and the opportunities provided by the project has enabled Care Experienced people to feel more confident in their abilities and to pursue and succeed in their dreams:

Interviewer: *"What do you think would have been different if this project hadn't been here?"*

Participant *"A lot of people wouldn't have ended up being where they are. I wouldn't have ended up being a support worker if you weren't there making it seem like I could actually believe in myself and do something that I've always wanted to do. When I used to tell you that I wasn't good enough, you always said that I was and you were always there to phone if I felt bad and that, and you're still there now."*

(WC?S Member, age 19)

Interviewer: *"What would have been different if the Communities that Care project hadn't been here?"*

Participant: *"I don't think I ever would have passed uni, I think I would have dropped out. And I don't think I'd have had the confidence to do a job like the one I'm doing now if I wasn't going to different influencing meetings and being in the Rights Group and having people behind me that cared about me pushing me."*

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

These examples reiterate the profound impact that the project has had for individuals; suggesting that without the project many Care Experienced people would not have received the support they needed to realise their potential. The example below highlights the impact that regularly attending a participation group in the community had on the overall happiness and quality of life of one very young Care Experienced person, further reinforcing the life-changing impact of the project:

"It makes people happy; you make people's life better. You made my life better when I got to come here [to the group]. You made it really happy. So thank you for everything you've done. All of you have made my life the best it has ever been."

(WC?S Member, age 9)

The project has created opportunities for Care Experienced people and their families to come together, to learn about and embrace their care identity and develop a sense of belonging. Relationships were identified as being key to the development of this sense of belonging; enabling Care Experienced people to access supports from Who Cares? Scotland and other organisations and in ultimately changing the lives of those with direct experience of care for the better.

5. PROJECT IMPACT – INFLUENCING

Who Cares? Scotland continues to challenge oppressive structures and influence budget & policy decisions which have a negative impact on the lives of Care Experienced people now and in the future.

Influencing practice

It emerged from interviews and focus groups that the Communities that Care project has influenced professional practice and enabled key individuals within communities to provide more effective support to Care Experienced people.

As a result of engaging with the project, community youth work organisations reflected on their approach to responding to Care Experienced young people and have now instead implemented a more relationship-based approach which has been much more effective:

“I think it just reinforced views that what you do works, it works much better than the disciplinary you know what I mean, it just works. How can I put it, just always supporting the young person no matter what they do you’ve got to keep supporting them....They’ve [young people] come back and they’ve totally changed their outlook which is a great thing to hear. And then when the guys [staff] tell me that I say ‘told you! all they need is a bit of love and a bit of attention’”

(Development Officer, Tannahill Centre)

The project has enabled staff within schools to be more aware of which pupils within the school are Care Experienced and to be more alert to recognising when these pupils may need support and understanding. There was a common theme in interview and focus groups that engaging with the project had empowered schools to be more supportive of their Care Experienced pupils:

“It’s important that staff are able to know who Care Experienced young people are so they can pick up on any difficulties and offer empathy and support and be more understanding. Without you and that education of the staff and the pupils then that wouldn’t happen and they wouldn’t be as well supported as what they have been.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

“Had we not had your involvement; things would have been really quite different. We probably would have just been struggling along and maybe not been as effective as what we can be now with regards to supporting these children.”

(Depute Head Teacher, Primary School)

In addition, through the training and support delivered by the project, school staff now have a deeper understanding of what Care Experienced pupils could be communicating with their behaviour and how to respond to this communication empathically. This empathy and understanding among education staff are essential to ensuring that barriers to Care Experienced pupils achieving their academic potential are removed wherever possible and to improving overall school experiences:

“Teaching staff were going about their daily job and young people were getting into trouble for things that was outwith their control and there wasn’t any understanding of adversity or that young person’s journey. So working with yourselves, and us under our Head Teacher’s direction, really looking the whole holistic view of the young people and taking into consideration their life and what’s maybe happened with them has equipped our teachers to be more understanding of that.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

“It really reiterated what children who’re Care Experienced go through and to be a bit more mindful of what is going on in their lives at home and it gives a wee bit of insight into why they are acting in certain ways and helps us to be a bit more understanding.... I think makes you realise how important your support is to them.”

(Teacher, Primary School)

The project’s work within local schools, in particular the training delivered to school staff, has been instrumental in prompting and enabling a shift towards restorative practice within schools:

“We spoke about the restorative practice that is fully embedded across our school now. You know, we’ve thought about that and that wouldn’t have been here if it wasn’t for the input that you gave....we had already started that but I think your project actually brought it right home to us more than anything, because you guys were all part of Renfrewshire”

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

The project has also influenced the practice of those supporting Care Experienced students in further and higher education. Through the partnership working encouraged by the project, colleges and universities have learned

more about the supports that Care Experienced students may need and how to ensure that they are able to receive these supports. Partnership working between organisations is essential to ensuring that Care Experienced people can realise their educational potential and the project has facilitated the formation and strengthening of these local partnerships:

“Learning about partnership working has been very useful, we have called on Who Cares? Scotland on how Care Experienced people can be supported or what other support there might be for them and referred a number of students onto Who Cares?. Working with the project but also volunteers who are also Care Experienced students gives a better picture of how everything links in.”

(Named Person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

“The college embraced working in the community and with the help of the project and their involvement they brought organisations and the local authority together in the community, to exchange info and network and get to know other organisations to then be able to work together to support Care Experienced students. This might have happened over time but not in the same way as it did with Who Cares? Scotland’s involvement.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

The project’s work in further and higher education institutions has resulted in an overall increase in the support available to Care Experienced students throughout their entire educational journey. This has been largely due to the project creating opportunities for Care Experienced students to influence policy and practice within their colleges and universities and change things for future Care Experienced students:

“We influenced policies, created an induction pack at university which will carry on for future students which is huge for making university more of a possibility and making the transition easier”

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 33)

“[Without the project] the set-up we have would not be what it is, we couldn’t wear the corporate parenting badge proudly.... Procedures have changed such as what kind of support will be place.... it is more personal now right from the start of applying and it may have still been quite mechanical. The student is welcomed and supported, and they know college staff are there if they need them. We have better understanding of reaching out to Care Experienced students that we are there for support, asking appropriate questions, picking up on things quickly when there looks like difficulties for a student. We might not have had that if it hadn’t been for the project..... no other groups of students have that level of support yet. Without the

project we would have had something but not what we have today, that it is on everybody's radar."

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

Employers are now more aware of the barriers that Care Experienced people may face relating to employability as a result of their involvement with the project. This has made organisations more empathic and understanding towards prospective and current Care Experienced employees:

"Certainly going to these events, it just makes you think about Care Experienced folk and it makes you more considerate, I know for a fact that we've got the Community Jobs Scotland young folk in our café and we had some Care Experienced people coming for interviews and it make you kind of understand and see what they've had to go through to get to stage even to get to the interview so it makes you a bit more supportive."

(Development Officer, Tannahill Centre)

Importance of Care Experienced Voice

Lived experience and the Care Experienced voice have been integral elements to the Communities that Care project's approach to influencing. Interview and focus group participants highlighted that having the opportunity to hear directly from Care Experienced people was the biggest contributing factor in changing policy and practice in a way that would ensure that Care Experienced people were supported:

"There is nothing more powerful than listening to lived experiences, that is essential to keep doing."

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

The screenings of the STV documentary 'Who Cares?' led by Care Experienced volunteers provide an example of both the power of the Care Experienced voice and the impact of volunteer-led influencing. These sessions have enabled college and university staff to hear directly from their own Care Experienced students, which was highlighted as being particularly powerful in influencing practice and encouraging these organisations to support the work of Who Cares? Scotland:

"Watching the documentary was significant and it really did emphasise the experiences that Care Experienced students would be bringing with them if they came to university, and demonstrated what I would need to do in my role to support them. The training sessions where

Care Experienced students came into give their account was both brave and profound as it allowed me to hear things first-hand. This is another example of how useful your training and support is.”

(Named Person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

“These sessions influenced our practice on working with and supporting Care Experienced students. It was really powerful that the volunteers were former students, seeing where they are now and hearing from them, staff spoke about the event for days and weeks afterwards. That had a huge impact on staff.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

“We felt passionate about the work at Who Cares? Scotland. Getting students involved in events, championing their rights, taking part in rallies and Kiltwalk. This was an organisation we as a college wanted to get behind. The STV documentary had a huge impact on staff wanting to take this further within the college.”

(Head of Student services, West College Scotland)

The lived experience elements of the project’s “Listen and Learn” training sessions, delivered to professionals and community members, have also been key to influencing attitudes and motivating people to want to take action:

“For me it’s that real experience, it’s the difference between talking to someone about something and talking to someone who has been through something and talking about their life and that’s what has struck me. Thinking back to the Listen and Learn and hearing that, it’s hard to walk away from that meeting and switch off and think, ‘I will just let someone else address that, that someone’s else job.’”

(Co-Production Officer, Paisley Museum Re-Imagined Project)

The lived experiences shared by Care Experienced people during teacher training have enabled school management to recognise the changes needed within schools to ensure that pupils and families with direct experience of care received the right support:

“Through speaking to you, through listening to the girls’ presentation I could see children I taught during my career but also I’m pinpointing things that are happening in my own school; and I wanted to make sure that if we even supported a child or family just a small amount then it’s going to make a huge difference and that is why I think it is a vital support for schools which

is why I championed you throughout the cluster and to make sure that it's not just us that benefit from the knowledge and the background that you have."

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

"I think I learned very much about the value of that key person for a Care Experienced child within the school, that really stood out to me from the presentation that the girls gave and how that person was what got them through what they were experiencing. So, it was a real learning curve there as to what we could put in place within the primary school."

(Depute Head Teacher, Primary School)

The lived experience elements of training inputs have also played an important part in the recruitment of volunteers. This has been particularly true for Care Experienced people who can connect to the experiences being shared on a personal level which leads to them wanting to do more and to become involved with the organisation:

"One day at college you came in and done a presentation, a young person did her story and it hit me right in the heart. I was like, 'can I volunteer with you?' I felt like grabbing onto you with both hands and not letting go. I was just learning that I was Care Experienced, it didn't have any meaning to it. It was that whole thing it hit me right in the heart. I think it was the connecting with her and her story, and I wanted to cuddle her. It was a more personal thing, connecting with her story. I started to realise what I'd actually come through in my life."

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 43)

Hearing lived experiences during training sessions has had a profound and long-lasting effect on professionals within the community, with shifts in practice observed long after the training sessions themselves:

"I done training for the police and I spoke about my story and to this day there's two police officers that will always take the time to come and speak to me and say hi to me. They always say that I'm one of the people that they remember because it was my experience. I've made an impact on their understanding of Care Experienced people just by telling them a bit about my story which is really powerful to be honest"

(WC?S Member & Previous Staff Member, age 23)

Amplifying Care Experienced Voice

The Communities that Care project has provided Care Experienced people the opportunity to find their voices and to have their voices amplified in a multitude of ways to influence change for themselves and other Care Experienced people:

“You've made a massive difference to many of them [Care Experienced pupils] within the school. Having opportunities to go to Love Rallies and really have a voice is so important. How can we make things right, how can we make things better for people who are Care Experienced if they don't have a voice? And now because of the work that you have been doing, they do and they have a means of communicating that”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

Care Experienced people commented that through being involved with the project, they had the opportunity and the support they needed to use their lived experience to try make change for other Care Experienced people on issues that matter to them:

“With the video that you use in training, and my experiences are used in trainings. It means that maybe what I went through, it might stop other people needing to go through the same. And that means a lot to me.”

(WC?S Member, age 19)

“I wouldn't have thought I wanted to be an MSYP.... But coming to Who Cares? made me realise I wanted to do that because I realised I could make a difference, through the care system. It was enjoyable, it was good because I got to hear different issues people were having and going to MSYP groups and listening to what people had to say.”

(WC?S Member, age 16)

“I am proud of all the stuff I have done in regard to brothers and sisters, that's been really important to me, the fact that I was able to use my experience and help other people going through it just now.”

(WC?S Member and Staff Member, 23)

“I shout about it to everybody, I don't take no for an answer, anyone who will listen to me. I wouldn't have been as brave to do that if I didn't have the support of the project in the first place.”

(WC?S Member and Volunteer, 35)

As well as facilitating the amplification of Care Experienced voices to influence change, the project has also enabled Care Experienced people to access advocacy support. Having access to advocacy has been essential to supporting Care Experienced people to have their voices heard on issues that matter to them within their own lives. The project's work in local schools emerged as being key to ensuring that Care Experienced people had access advocacy:

"If you weren't in my school, I wouldn't have known about Who Cares? Scotland and I wouldn't have got advocacy. When you're a wean you don't really want to say what you want in front of the three members of the panel, the writer, your school, your mum and dad, your social worker. I didn't want to say how I really felt because I didn't want to let anyone down. But having you there to say it for me, it didn't make it feel better, but it made it feel more relaxed."
(WC?S Member, age 19)

"It has made a difference, in just helping them, and feeling that they've got a voice and that somebody is listening and somebody actually is speaking up for them as well....knowing that they are not having to represent themselves"
(Guidance Teacher, Secondary School)

The examples above illustrate the ways in which the project has directly enabled Care Experienced people to have their voices amplified. In addition to this, the project has also had an indirect influence by empowering key individuals within communities to do what they can to amplify the voices of Care Experienced people:

"For me, given how minimised the voices of Care Experienced people have been over the years I've seen it as a great opportunity to amplify it in a way – whether that's a council motion or even just instructing officers to meet more regularly with yourselves [Who Cares? Scotland] or the young people."
(Elected Member)

Empowering individuals

The Communities that Care project has empowered Care Experienced people to understand their rights and to recognise when they or others were experiencing oppression. Through engaging with the project, Care Experienced people have had the opportunity and support to influence change and to ensure that their rights and the rights of others are upheld:

"The project gave me the opportunity and the bravery to go to the right kinds of people, in the uni where Care Experienced students aren't being supported.... Had the support been there it

wouldn't have been such a hard first year. They still need to go a long way but now they're trying, because I went to the right people.” (WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 35)

“When I was in the units, I used everything I learned [about rights] against them. I knew what I could say, that would make them stop.”

(WC?S Member, age 19)

“I feel more confident in myself, like speaking up more as well”

(WC?S member age 12)

As a result of being involved in the project, kinship carers have been more confident expressing their views in Children's Hearings. Having the opportunity to connect with other Kinship carers for emotional support has played an important part in this empowerment:

“I am more relaxed now when I go to a hearing, this [coming to the group] has brought me out myself to say what I want to say. I can talk to the grans about how I am feeling.”

(Kinship Carer)

The examples above illustrate the important role that the project has played in empowering those with direct experience of care to use their voices to influence change within their own life and the lives of others. Care Experienced people expressed that since being involved with the project their confidence has increased which has led to them to realise the power of their care experience and their voice.

WC?S Approach to Influencing

The Communities that Care team's unique approach to influencing and the experiences created during training inputs have had a huge impact on those who have attended sessions. In some cases, interview and focus group participants were able to isolate particular activities that had impacted them deeply within training sessions, whereas in other cases it was more the project team themselves who had made the impact:

“I feel that Who Cares? is an incredibly positive organisation; you are very driven and passionate about what you do, which I have found very inspiring. The knowledge that you provide in making others aware of the barriers that Care Experienced people face is

exceptionally useful and makes you a very approachable organisation. You are very clear in your own goals which makes it easier for people like me to understand how to apply your approach in my own work.”

(Named Person, Widening Access, University of the West of Scotland)

“As part of the presentation, you had to move around from seat to seat and be with different people and leave all your belongings behind. That was the most powerful thing for me because.... I know how I felt just moving to a different seat and sitting beside somebody I didn't know and leaving my pen and my phone or whatever sitting at the table. It was so uncomfortable and you didn't want to do it, you wanted to take everything with you, you didn't even want to be in a different place you were quite happy, quite comfortable where you were and for that, something as simple as that, to have an effect on how you were feeling, it just gave you the slightest idea of what these children are actually going through and yet you couldn't really imagine it. So, that was really impactful for me and made me want to really try and help in some way, of how I can make those feelings for a child that bit better.”

(Depute Head Teacher, Primary School)

Influencing Policy

Interview and focus group participants highlighted the many ways that the Communities that Care project has directly influenced budgets and policies within key organisations.

Local councillors reflected on the role that the project had in securing £100,000 in council funding to enable Care Experienced young people in Renfrewshire to have access to cultural, employability and leisure opportunities. This funding was secured through a motion which was raised after local councillors heard a Care Experienced person share their positive experience of having the opportunity to go on holiday while they were growing up during one of the project's 'Listen and Learn' training sessions:

“I can see first-hand how you have helped, and if it wasn't for that first 'Listen and Learn' that £100,000 fund wouldn't have been there for the young people”

(Elected Member)

Councillors also reflected on the impact that the Communities that Care project had on significant council motions and the council's approach to implementing the recommendations set out in the Independent Care Review report, 'The Promise':

Interviewer: *“What would be different if the project hadn't been here?”*

Participant: *"We wouldn't have moved the council motions that we have and The Promise - we would've just done the same as every other council and just said 'aye, we adopt The Promise' then moved on and stuck it in a drawer probably. But with the presence of your project, I suppose there's a lot more awareness that this isn't just a document to be sat on a shelf, it's got to be engrained into every aspect of the council.... The last thing we need to do, after such a long process of listening, is to all of a sudden stop listening and just go 'we'll implement The Promise now'. So, the motion that we approved at the last full council was, we welcomed The Promise and we're going to work with all the stakeholders. Who Cares? Scotland was specifically mentioned to understand what it would mean, what the expectations of The Promise is. Because it would be really, really poor after all the hard work and engaging, at the very end just to pull the shutters down and say 'that's us done'. Again, that's not something I think I would've done if I wasn't involved with the project."*

(Elected Member)

The examples above illustrate the significant influence that the Communities that Care project has had on council budgets and policy making with regards to Care Experienced people. Care Experienced people involved in the project have also had the opportunity to contribute their views on other local policy discussions on important issues:

"They [Barnardo's] wanted someone to speak about personal experience within the system and how they were able to change that in the future.... that was really good to get involved with that and actually see change actually happening now. Because now they're actually making a service and they're talking to young people and they're going to make that service. So from us talking about it, it's now going to be something."

(WC?S Member & Volunteer, age 24)

As well as empowering those with direct experience of care to influence local policy, the Communities that Care project also supported Care Experienced people and kinship carers to contribute their views to the Independent Care Review. Kinship carers shared their experiences of having the opportunity to shape this national policy and the points that they put forward:

"They asked about our experience being a kinship carer and we talked about the difficulties around this when parents don't show up and challenges with social work."

(Kinship Carer)

"We talked about financial challenges and not getting the right support."

(Kinship Carer)

“We talked about the challenges with the kids’ parents and how things should be different to help kinship carers more.”

(Kinship Carer)

In summary, the Communities that Care project has enabled those with direct experience of care to communicate their voice to ensure their rights and the rights of others are upheld; to influence local and national policy affecting Care Experienced people and to influence professional practice. The project has had a unique approach to influencing which has had a profound and long-lasting effect on those who have participated in training sessions.

6. CHANGES & IMPROVEMENTS

All interview and focus group participants had the opportunity to share their opinions on what could have been better about the project. We anticipated that these responses would likely have been open to bias because the project team were conducting the interviews. To mitigate against this, follow up questions were asked rephrasing this question in different ways such as: *“if we were to start the project again, what could we do differently?”* and *“if you could think of the perfect way to educate people about care experience/ make sure Care Experienced people belong/ influence change for Care Experienced people, what would you do?”* Despite these attempts to reduce bias, the responses contained little critique of the project itself and more emphasised the need for continuation, extension and replication of the Communities that Care project.

Continuation

There was an overwhelming consensus among interview and focus group participants that the work of the project is not yet completed. Education professionals in particular commented on the positive impact of the project and that they would like this to continue:

“We hope that we can continue this partnership with yourself because of the positive impact that it’s having on our young people, and staff.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

“It is always useful to repeat it [training] as we get new staff, new students and things change with national policy so it would be good to get on an annual basis. Coming onto campus and being alongside our Care Experienced group, having a presence on campus would be useful and I would like to see that in the future. Offering more to Care Experienced students: more links to Who Cares?, virtual sessions with other local community organisations, working together to create informative sessions would be of value, combined community events so they are all aware of you. Not really improvements just continuation of the same.”

(Named Person, Widening Access, University of West of Scotland)

There was a view that although the project has made an impact, it has not been long enough for the whole community to have been educated on care experience. The consensus was that the project would need more time to fully achieve its aims. In addition, Care Experienced people reflected on the personal impact that the project had for them, but due to the short-term nature of the project there will be many Care Experienced people who we have been unable to reach:

“The project could have been longer, things have changed but they aren’t solved yet, not everyone knows what Care Experienced life is like. It needs to go on longer as it’s important. I am a different person to when I got involved in this project and there are more people out there in the position I was in and there are so many people out there needing saved.”

(WC?S Member and staff member, age 23)

Kinship carers reflected on how important the participation groups were for their nieces, nephews and grandchildren. They expressed fears of the negative consequences for Care Experienced people if the groups did not continue:

“The kids would fall apart; they would fall apart if the group wasn’t here”

(Kinship Carer)

Extension

Other suggested improvements related to extending the work already carried out by the project. It was suggested that extending the work of the project would allow for more individuals to receive training and more benefits for Care Experienced people, particularly in relation to education:

“Every member of staff would have benefited being part of the project and for new staff not knowing the work done before things might get lost or diluted. Online resources aren’t the same as the team coming into deliver sessions. The next step to look at curriculum CPD days for the team to offer delivery of sessions. Partnership working to improve best practice and look at what else staff should be doing to support Care Experienced students. Valuable to work with the project to have this resource to support staff and students for a better understanding and awareness and different ways students need support.”

(Head of Student Services, West College Scotland)

“You had done the parent council input and we also have the CPL input for the teachers who go along to the Career Long Professional Development group, but it would have been great to have had more training - if you could have got an in –service slot that wasn’t opt-in everyone was just there.”

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

A lot of comments which related to the theme of extending the project were centred around the project’s work in schools. Key reflections were that while the project’s in-class inputs were hugely impactful, these alone may

not be enough. Reflections from Care Experienced people and schools themselves were that there needs to be more than just one lesson, and perhaps a series of lessons throughout the school journey and that this needs to be incorporated across the local authority. It was highlighted that having Care Experience taught at every educational stage would benefit Care Experienced pupils in many ways both in terms of their peers being more understanding, and increasing their own understanding of Care Experience and the supports available from Who Cares? Scotland and other organisations:

“I think maybe rather than just the one workshop, maybe a series of workshops in the classrooms because again I think it’s good to build upon it even a shorter input over a number of weeks because then the children have got time to have a wee think about the impact. A series of lessons would be good because I think that would have a greater impact on the children.”

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

“I think it’s good for wee ones from P1 right the way up to S6 to get it [learning about care experience]. It’s better if you’re learning about it from a young age cos then you understand going through high school and going through primary more about it. I think it’s better if it’s every school in Renfrewshire, I think everybody should be learning about it and every school should know about it, especially for the other people who are going through it, so people understand more about how they feel and not to laugh about it. I think they should be learning about it, it’s a good thing to learn about because you never know when you could be going through it.”

(Who Cares? Scotland member, age 12)

Schools put forward various suggestions for extending the work in schools to include more support and opportunities for Care Experienced pupils to grow and develop important skills:

“I always worry about our children, especially our Care Experienced children, going from a small school going to a huge high school and then getting lost when they go up to high school because they don’t know them the way that we know them and I think there might be transition work could be done that would maybe help children at the end of their primary career into their secondary career I think that would be really good for them.”

(Head Teacher, Primary School)

“It may well be worthwhile having a wee leadership team in every school when we are coming up to deliver those lessons that they’re taking ownership of that as well... I’ve got a fantastic group of young carers and they want to go and speak to SLT they want to raise the profile.

They want to go to primary schools and educate primary schools too. It's different, but it's a similar thing we're trying to do."

(Pastoral Support Teacher, Secondary School)

Replication

A common theme in recommendations put forward by interview and focus group participants was for the Communities that Care project to be replicated in other local authority areas. There was a view that the learning of the project should be taken on board by other councils with the intention of replicating the positive impact that the project has had for Care Experienced people in other areas:

"I think it [Communities that Care] should be in every community. It should be in all local authorities, the word would spread and reach even more people. I think it would be really beneficial for other councils to tap into the Renfrewshire project and see what we've done in the past 5 years and see how much of a difference it's made to Care Experienced people"

(WC?S Member & previous staff member, 23)

7. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings presented in this report indicate that the Communities that Care project has increased knowledge and understanding of care experience and improved attitudes towards Care Experienced people within communities. The project has created opportunities for Care Experienced people come together, learn about and embrace their care identity and develop a sense of belonging. The project has also amplified the voice of Care Experienced people to create transformational change to professional practice and both local and national policy. Ultimately, the impact of the project has been life-changing for those involved especially for those with direct experience of care who now feel more accepted and included within their communities, as a result of the project.

It should be noted that the feedback gathered during the focus group and interview sessions was overwhelmingly positive and contained little critique of the project. We were aware that these responses were open to bias due to the fact that the project team were conducting the interviews and focus groups; and that the stakeholders who participated in these sessions had the most in-depth involvement and strongest relationships with the project. However, in parallel to these interviews and focus groups, an anonymous survey was distributed to other stakeholders who had varying degrees of involvement in the project. The responses to this survey and the recommendations given mirror those that were captured in interview and focus groups. This suggests that the Communities that Care project has genuinely had the positive impact which has been presented in this report.

As the project received only 5 years of funding, the project team were required to make a choice between depth and reach. The project team decided to prioritise in-depth connection, choosing to fully embed the project in a few Renfrewshire communities, mainly within the Paisley area, rather than roll out a diluted version of the project across the entire local authority. This report evidences the profound impact of the project being fully embedded within certain communities, however the negative side of this is that there were communities that were not reached within the 5 years of the project. A clear recommendation put forward by project stakeholders was that more people within Renfrewshire and beyond should have the opportunity to engage with the project. This can only happen if the project is able to continue, extend and replicate the work that has already begun.