

bridge THE GAP

Connect- Explore- Create

A series of highly participatory online events for professionals and people with lived experience of children's social care to inform the independent review of children's social care in England.

EXPLORE - 23rd September 2021

Collective Story Cafe for Birth Parents and Families.

Executive Summary

1 The Context

- In 2019, the government committed to review the care system to ensure that children and young adults were provided with the support and care that they need. As a result, an independent review team was commissioned to examine the existing challenges faced by the children's social care system and make recommendations for improvement to the government.



THE CASE FOR CHANGE

- The review team conducted a preliminary analysis, defined the problem, and published the "Case for Change". The Case for Change sets out the review team's interpretation of the challenges within the system. It is a reflection of the engagement and research conducted in the early stages of the review. The overall purpose of the review is to answer the following big question: "How do we ensure children grow up in loving, stable and safe families; and where that is not possible, care provides the same foundations?"



THEME 1
WE ARE NOT DOING
ENOUGH TO
HELP FAMILIES

THEME 2
WE NEED A BETTER
CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM
THAT SUPPORTS
GOOD DECISIONS
ABOUT CHILDREN &
FAMILIES

THEME 3
THE CARE SYSTEM
MUST BUILD
NOT BREAK
RELATIONSHIPS

THEME 4
CHANGE WILL NOT
HAPPEN WITHOUT
IMPROVING HOW
SERVICES WORK

- Bridge the Gap is one of the many forms of engagement used by the review team to gather views, experiences, and ideas from a range of diverse voices to inform the review's recommendations and policy proposals.



2 Bridge the gap

- Bridge the Gap is a series of highly participatory online events for individuals from across children's social care who are experts by experience (i.e. kinship carers, foster carers, adoptive parents, birth parents and families, care experienced young people and adults, social workers and other professionals).

Bridge the Gap is a 3-step process with the purpose of engaging people from across the system to:

1 **Connect** with each other and the Case for Change, open up a dialogue around it, gather reactions, and identify gaps.

2 **Explore** stories of people's experience of children's social care, helping them to move from individual stories into a collective story that identifies key themes.

3 **Create** solutions for the whole system by co-creating an agenda of conversations aimed at taking the key themes identified at the Explore event and developing them into solution-focused proposals and recommendations to be fed into the review.



3 Explore

- In the explore step of the process, a series of events are held where individual stakeholder groups from across the children's social care system meet. One event was held with kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents, another with care experienced young people and adults, another with birth parents and families, and another with social workers and children's social care professionals.

- These events are intended to bring together each participant group to discuss their unique experience of the system in order to reflect on the individual and collective experience, identify key issues and explore possible solutions.
- The methodology is rooted in the Art of Hosting practices, where the Case for Change and supporting data is presented to each group. This is followed by three rounds of collective story cafes, where from the individual stories of the participants, the collective stories of the group are collated; patterns, problems, strengths and possibilities are identified; and based on this, possible solutions are proposed to improve the system.

4 Key Themes & Emerging Ideas for Change from the Explore event with Birth Parents and Families.

- a Parents and families are fearful and distrustful of an opaque and prejudiced system that they see as engaged in an adversarial pursuit of removing children.
- b Participants feel powerless in front of a system that they perceive lacks accountability and oversight.
- c Birth parents and families lack the knowledge to navigate the system. They don't get the support and help they need to avoid their children being placed into care.
- d Enable birth parents and families to have better access to information that the system holds about them and provide mechanisms for them to submit information and evidence to the system.
- e Support should focus on early, preventative interventions aimed at avoiding the need for removal. Where this has not been possible, support should be focused on facilitating reunification of families. This type of support should include guidance to help birth parents and families navigate the system.



- f The organisations that provide oversight of children's social care services should improve their outreach with birth parents and families by directly involving them in inspections, reviews and other children's social care accountability processes.

5 Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank all the birth parents and families who gave up their time to take part in this event. We are particularly grateful to all those organisations and networks who supported participants to take part, including PAC-UK and the NSPCC.



About Community CoLab

The review team commissioned Community CoLab to devise, manage, and facilitate Bridge the Gap.

Community CoLab is a branch of CoLab International - a global collective of community organisers and facilitators, working with public, private, third sector organisations and international cooperation agencies from across the world to help them improve the quality of their conversations, meetings, events, and maximise the collective potential of their teams through participatory leadership.

CoLab brings together the expertise of their global extended network to support organizations to achieve their goals through dialogue and collaboration, designing and co-creating ad hoc solutions using innovative methodologies and technologies that harness wisdom, creativity, and imagination to tackle daily or strategic problems.



About Event process

Bridge the gap

Bridge the Gap is a series of participatory online events for individuals from within different groups involved in the children's social care system. In addition to social workers and other professionals these groups include individuals who are Experts by Experience (e.g., kinship carers, foster carers, adoptive parents, birth parents and family, and care experienced young people and adults). This process aims to move people from discussing the challenges faced by the system into a position of identifying opportunities.

The aim of Bridge the Gap is to assist the review team in understanding more deeply the collective experience of those individuals within the system to empower them to explore potential solutions.

Bridge the Gap works across three moments: **Connect, Explore, Create**. This document's focus is to report on the process and results of the Explore event with the group of birth parents and families.





Explore

"Explore", as its name implies, explores the stories of Experts by Experience, first individually and then collectively, to identify in those stories the aspects to improve and the strengths that should not only be maintained, but also promoted, so that, as far as possible, they are spread throughout the system.

From the exploration of stories, supported by the collective intelligence that arises from recognising a peer in the other, reducing the barriers of mistrust and perceiving the possibilities that this offers, a space for co-creation of ideas opens up to receive possible solutions to identified problems.

With that disposition towards the generation of ideas, the event closes by posing three final questions to the participants focused on finding ways to improve the system in a manner that enables all participants to contribute their points of view. These questions were drafted by the review team. They are based on previous stages of the review and are tailored to be relevant to each participant group. For the Birth Parents and Families Explore event the questions were:

What do we want family help to look and feel like?

How can we have a system that balances making sure children are safe, whilst working in genuine partnership with families?

What support should be provided to parents and families in the situation of a court removing a child?

Methodology

This highly participatory three-hour event is rooted in The Art of Hosting and in particular a process known as Collective Story Harvest which CoLab has blended with another method known as World Café. Our methodology takes into account the purpose of the Explore event and its constraints. The whole process was delivered online using Zoom and Miro (online collaboration and engagement tools). The event was facilitated by CoLab's team with a member of the event team present in each of the Zoom break-out groups and virtual café tables. This support team comprised of CoLab staff, review team members and representatives from their extended network.



The Explore event began with a technical introduction to enable the widest participation of the attendees. Next, contextualisation was carried out through the presentation of the specific part of the Case for Change relating to Birth Parents and Families. Then three rounds of collective stories café were held, with the purpose of obtaining the key elements of the individual and collective stories and identifying possible solutions to the problems identified in the stories.

At the end of the event, a space is opened for the participants to individually contribute their point of view to the three questions posed to the group.



Event Information

A total of 31 participants including the support team attended this event for Birth Parents and Families.

In the first round of the collective story cafe, the attendees were divided into small groups of four. Each small group was assigned to a Zoom breakout room and allocated a virtual table on the Miro board to record their discussions. Facilitated by a member of the event team, the groups were tasked with sharing their personal stories by responding to the prompt "What has helped or hindered your experience of children's social care?"

Birth parents and families report that the problems they experience with the system begin with their first attempts to engage with it and right throughout the process.

For many participants, requesting help from the system is a challenge because there is fear of the consequences that this request may produce

"Parents not confident about raising domestic violence, due to fear that it will lead to child being removed."

"Not being heard, asking for help is a weakness – villified."

Participants perceive that once social workers raise concerns about a child there is no support to help parents and family avoid having the child taken into care.

"Parents are asked to jump through hoops, but the professionals have already made their mind up about removal."

"Huge rush to remove the child - only reaction the state has. No consideration that removing a child is the most traumatic thing you can do to both children and parents."

"Focus is on removing children."

"It's an investigative role rather than supportive role."



The idea that social workers and other professionals in the system take a distrustful and adversarial position with the children's families is common. Although the intention of wanting to protect children is understood, the system is perceived to be dehumanised and unsympathetic when support is needed with the difficult situations that families may be going through.

"We are not the enemy to our children in circumstances where it is not our fault."

"No signposting for parents for support."

"Parents are not told what they need to do to get things right, only what is wrong."

"Social workers concentrate on what THEY think is best for the child which isn't necessarily what's best for them."

"Lack of understanding where parents have mental health issues themselves."

"90% of time force mental issues on parents through bullying, intimidation, force you into a situation where you're stuck."

"Social workers try to blame parents for a child's diagnosis."

The manner in which cases are dealt with is questioned. Participants do not experience support that helps them overcome their difficulties, but mistrust, abuse, lack of transparency, and as a consequence, they perceive greater harm being done to children who are "in the middle of a struggle that doesn't feel fair."

"Bullying and intimidation."

"At times feels abusive experience, aggressive tone from social workers towards parents."

"Social workers type up your story with no transparency and they are insensitive."

"Social workers manipulate information - no accountability for what they're recording or how they are - lack of validity of information recorded."

"What we are told isn't consistent with what is written about us - we are told we are doing well but they write something different."

"Lack of accountability and transparency for how decisions are made."

"Children seen as "bad kids" or not "fitting into a box" + parents made to feel they're not good enough."

"Harms the children involved."

"Amount of harm caused within the system."

"The biggest perpetrator of the abuse against children is the services themselves."

"LAs can't help families find solutions."

"Parents don't understand the language."

"Difficult to challenge the system."

"Challenging the system can make you appear / be labelled violent and aggressive."

When families attempt to engage with the system, they encounter great difficulty in accessing the support that might allow them to resolve the situation.

"Parents have to undertake a subject access request to get reports."

"You learn what's going on as you're living through it."

"Lack of support and advice available - felt like a rabbit in headlights in the courtroom just after I had been in hospital for a month."

Participants feel that they are not heard or considered in decisions regarding children. They feel there is no mechanism for them to counter accusations because they are not given adequate access to information.

"Parents voice is not heard by courts - more focus on professionals."

"Lack of communication with parents (e.g. information and procedures not explained to parents thoroughly, difficult to understand) - lots of meetings but not practical nor helpful - information not passed on to foster carers / parents not listened to."

"Court hearing - have to answer the questions asked, which does not always give you the opportunity to say what you want."

"No evidence required to support accusation."

"No policy which indicates how you validate the information social workers report."

In addition to feeling that they do not have equitable access to information within the system nor an ability to provide information to the system, participants perceive that their social workers use their privileged position to advocate for an agenda that is focused on child removal. This imbalance in access to information processes, coupled with a lack of knowledge of how the system works, leaves participants feeling powerless. They state they are unable to self-advocate or argue for their position that the children need not be taken into care.

"Parents discounted from being parents in their own right."

"Advocate to help families navigate the system."

"Where is the focus and priority - is it where it needs to be?"

"What evidence can support future risk?"

"No duty of care towards parents so they think better to be safe than sorry with children."

"Social workers are a law unto themselves - stick together."

"Didn't even speak to the child - child not taken into consideration."

"Families forced to prove themselves with evidence against opinion of services - imbalance of expectation."

"Don't want to know about any good you do."

"Reluctance to change mind once set on a path."

This feeling of power imbalance exacerbates their perceptions of high levels of prejudice, and therefore feel that they are left alone, without support from the system or the wider community.

"Horrendous levels of prejudice, truth doesn't seem to matter."

"Lack of family and friends' network can mean they are left on their own."

"Lonely and isolating process."

"High energy, high stress" on family, extended family / parents traumatised by the process (e.g. doesn't want to attend meetings anymore)."

When decisions have been made about children, many participants perceive that the process ends without them being given the opportunity to attempt to reunite their family. Participants that are given this opportunity state that it takes a too long and in the meantime they do not feel that their children are being well cared for and that there is no opportunity develop close and constructive relationships with them in the interim.

"When court cases are finished, they are left to their own devices."

"Parents pushed to the side when children are removed - no option for reunification."

"Supervised contact only focusses on the negatives."

"Safeguarding concerns at placements - child got paracetamol and blades while with carers."

"Poor quality placements which are not suitable for own children e.g. mould."

"Secure is often overlooked even though it could work for some children who need safeguarding."

"Multidisciplinary team but parents not given advice, so don't know which way to turn (e.g. child missed 5yrs education as a result.)"

"No individual therapy with the girl."

Regarding the system in general, they perceive a lack of resources for the care of children and young people. They perceive that social workers are overloaded with work and as a result are unable to provide children and young people with the level of attention they require. There seems to be little availability of specialists, considerable bureaucracy and cumbersome processes that cause resources to be wasted. They do not know who is accountable for these deficiencies and wasted resources.

"Lack of specialist knowledge."

"Lack of time of social workers - no time to prioritise case (social workers are not thorough enough; support takes too long to be given)."

"Little support provided but if no progress detected, that support is withdrawn, so parents left on their own."

"Resources/funds misused (e.g. in courts, but could be better spent in supporting families)."

"At the centre is a lack of funding from government and way it's targeted."

"No one took responsibility no collaborative working."

"No accountability."

"No repercussions for social services for getting things wrong."

"Massive protection for social care by the judicial services - review of law of how judicial service deals with LA."

They observe that many those who work for the system are more attentive to processes and documents than to families.

"More focus on protecting agency, individual and not the child."

At the end of this first round of collective story cafes, groups from the different virtual tables were invited to share their findings with the other participants in a plenary. While a spokesperson from each group shared their ideas, audience reactions, comments, and questions were welcomed in the Zoom chat.

Relevant comments from this section of the chat are presented below:

"Social Work should be a vocation like doctors and nurses, it is not a 9 to 5 job. They are dealing with people's lives and should be empathic towards the family they are dealing with. Like clinicians, can they not have certain specialities so they are trained properly in the field in which they work." (BF)

"Child in Care meetings are unnecessary; they are not recognised by solicitors or the court." (BF)

"I feel that there is a huge lack of understanding for families that have a background of domestic abuse and/or mental health and physical disabilities." (BP)

"LA's are refusing support for kids, but punishing parents for difficulties." (BP)

"Our group agreed that mums should be supported rather than social workers rushing to remove children. The removal itself does massive massive harm yet this is not considered." (BP)

"I think social care has a massive issue with this / a lot of 'bycatch' in this area. It really needs to be looked at."

"Lack of accuracy / investigation and 'witch hunt' social work REALLY needs to be on the government's radar." (BP)

"Social care needs to concentrate on supporting the primary carer in order to support the child. Social workers under pressure do not prioritise the amount of time cases may take. Is there an assumption that parents are uncooperative?" (BP)

"There is nothing whatsoever to ensure social workers are honest and accurate in their reports. The LGSCO does not even investigate cases that have gone to court so there is complete impunity for untruths used to remove children." (BP)

"Criminals are innocent until proven guilty, parents are guilty until proven innocent." (BP)

"Social Workers should be more transparent and open about their reports and should be able to share with parents, etc. to be able to challenge what is written. (BF)

"Lack of training." (BP)

"Future risks more focussed on rather than current." (BP)

"Reports formed without validation of facts." (BP)

"Conflict of interest." (BP)

"The process adds emotional abuse to children." (BP)

"Social work evidence is considered to be true as soon as a social worker writes it. This is too much unchecked power. Power corrupts." (BP)

"Victim blaming." (BP)

"Children being harmed by blame culture." (BP)

"Solution is about ensuring that local authorities adhere to the statutory regime that it is subject to, and if they are not then they should be challenged by children and parents." (BP)

"Parents discredited as professionals." (BP)

In the second round of collective story café, a facilitator at each table highlights the relevant aspects identified by the group in the previous round, and those who have come from other tables bring in and comment on key aspects identified in their groups during round one. This nurtures the collective history and expands the scenarios in order to clearly define problems, strengths, and possibilities within the stories.

In this second round of discussions, participants identified some positive aspects of the system suggesting that the system has potential to improve its way of working with birth parents and families such as multidisciplinary working and the help that was offered to some participants.

"Different professionals working together."

"Group therapy."

"Volunteer at garden."

"Assessment centre quite good."

"Services really helped when I asked."

In terms of people strengths, there are "some professionals whose vocation allows parents and family members to feel guided and accompanied during the processes". However, there was a consensus that such individuals stand out as exceptional.

"Social workers who take time to listen are the exception."

Participants also highlighted as positive the spaces where they can participate in the decisions about their children and young people.

"Being a part of the decision making on your child."

"Being protective of your children."

"Fighting for what's best for your kids."

Child protection regulations were highlighted as positive. For example, The Children Act was acknowledged as being protective of children.

"Children Act is a good law and clear and specific about what LAs and social workers should be doing."

At the end of this second round of collective story cafes, groups from the different virtual tables were invited to share their findings with the other participants in a plenary. While a spokesperson from each group shared their ideas, audience reactions, comments, and questions were welcomed in the Zoom chat.

Relevant comments from this section of the chat are captured below:

"Even the term "investigate" is hugely loaded and counterproductive to partnership with parents." (BP)

"Giving false information about what they are doing has left me feeling unable to trust the people looking after my children." (BP)

"Witch hunt social work is a perfect term to describe the selective reporting and fabrications in sw reports."

"What kind of people write falsehoods in order to remove children from the families who they love and who love them. Could the review please consider the enormous power given to individuals who are free to misuse their power without accountability."

"Professionals can be wrong / biased / undertrained in an area - there is such absolute trust in 'professionals' vs. the parent as the suspected 'perpetrator' that potential mistakes and misdiagnoses aren't explored."

"Independent review of parents is not independent as the case is discussed with the social worker first thereby influencing the decision of the independent reviewer." (BP)

"There is no ability to go into reverse and decriminalise parents if they do realise that they made a mistake."

"More transparency from social care. Trained staff for neuro-diverse children." (BP)

"There needs to be some specialisations / ability to buy in specialism." (BP)

"Social Care need to understand that parents and families are not perfect, and may feel annoyed at certain situations. This is normal and should not be treated as "not working with professionals"." (BF)

In the final round of the collective story café, participants were asked to consider the strengths, possibilities, and ideas that they had previously discussed. With the help of their facilitator each group was tasked with deciding which solutions or suggestions could have the biggest impact on the system. Each group was asked to select up to three high priority solutions to be shared in a closing plenary.

The suggestions and solutions were focused on making changes to two areas: issues related to participant perceptions of the system and issues related to the nature of support that birth parents and families receive from the system

In response to the collective perception that existing mechanisms and processes within the system are not clear, easy to manage, nor equitable, they propose there be:

"More transparency in the decision-making process and in reports which are written by professionals as evidence."

"Services that are evidence based in their decisions and be transparent about this or include parents in the decisions."

"Accurate reports and transparency with families."

"Recorded interviews with parents and families accused (like police processes) to hold social workers to account."

"Accountability through regulatory body - something like an ombudsman/watchdog with increased/appropriate powers (to include when families have been through courts)."

"Families involved in the Ofsted process as service users."

Participants also suggest that it is necessary to improve parents and families' access to information and provide more support with understanding their options.

"LA work in partnership with families, and not just investigate. This should also mean using appropriate language, and ensuring parents have advocates."

"Have timelines explained."

"Give clear explanations of what the procedures are."

With regards to issues relating to the support that they receive from the system, birth parents and families propose that support be refocused on maintaining the family unit through early, preventative work. They propose that this focus should extend to support that is provided once a child has been removed i.e. reunification should be the aim of in care support.

"Bring the threshold for support lower than the threshold to start care proceedings."

"Need to move away from a blame culture which affects children."

"Social workers need to listen to parents and respect them and their voice."

"Support for parents and children before, during and after the process."

"Social workers to be specifically trained and perhaps specialise so they can help families effectively."

"Specialist training for social workers (domestic abuse particularly important)."

"Specialised training for social workers - building trust with families and children."

"Consider removing a child as the last resort due to traumatic effect on the child."

"Funding focus should be on not taking children into care."

"Social services to come as support and not persecution. A crisis is not a crime."

At the end of this round a plenary where a spokesperson from each of the groups shared their ideas for high impact solutions. Whilst this was happening audience reactions, comments, and questions were welcomed in the Zoom chat. Participants were highly engaged during this plenary and produced a considerable volume of responses echoing either each presenter's ideas or reiterating relevant points made during early stages of the event.

The event closed with an invitation for all participants to reflect on their collective exploration throughout the event. Based on this reflection they were invited to propose concrete individual responses to the three key questions set by the review team. These responses were either posted on the Miro board or in the Zoom chat, and for those participants who were unable to attend whole event an opportunity for them to answer these three questions was included in the post-event evaluation questionnaire.

What do we want family help to look and feel like?

When CoLab asked "What do we want family help to look and feel like?",

participants shared the following ideas:

"Non-judgemental."

"Support before separation."

"Trust building."

"Truth based."

"Open-minded."

"Support, not persecution."

"A personal, caring and kind partnership empowering parents, shoulder to shoulder."

"Working effectively with education and health care."

"Fairer, more open, and honest."

"Child-focused."

How can we have a system that balances making sure children are safe, whilst working in genuine partnership with families?

When CoLab asked "How can we have a system that balances making sure children are safe, whilst working in genuine partnership with families?", participants shared the following ideas:

"More time, don't rush the process."

"Specialist knowledge of domestic abuse would be crucial given the number of children removed for this reason."

"Change complaints procedure to be simpler and to be conducted by an independent body."

"Acknowledging the harm currently created by and within the system."

"More support for everyone."

"Training for social workers - develop specialisms."

"Sensitive report writing."

"Flexibility with regard to solution finding."

"Accountability; standards and validation in report writing."

"Transparency in decision making."

"Unequal power dynamic to be recognised and parents' voices to be given more weight."

"Listen to the parents and listen to the children. Safeguard children within their communities and give the support parents and children ask for."

"Children may have to be removed if they are not safe, but with the emphasis on parents getting help while children are away."

"If parents are struggling sometimes, they need temporary respite. This should be discussed as an option instead of making parents feel bad for not coping at that moment in time."

What support should be provided to parents and families in the situation of a court removing a child?

When CoLab asked "What should be provided to parents and families in the situation of a court removing a child?" participants shared the following ideas:

"Counselling."

"Clear advice."

"Legal advice."

"Provide parents with a social worker to work through anything that needs to be done to facilitate the return of their children."

"Grief counselling would be helpful. We have lost our children, our role as a parent, our identity, our purpose, our confidence, place in society."

"The whole process should be explained to parents and families about the court proceedings and also what contact will be like."

Reflections on Process:

Event process

The process enabled participants to talk about their stories and share with other members of their community. It was evident that the process of sharing their stories was challenging and emotional draining experience for many participants. Nonetheless, participants stated that it was a good space to share their experiences, listen to those of others and that they welcome the opportunity to be included in attempting to change to system for the better.

"Hearing similar experiences from other birth parents made me realise that it was a systematic issue rather than individual circumstance. It did feel like a brave space to share."



Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the contributions from the participants of the Explore event for birth parents and families, this report finds:

- Parents and families state they are fearful and distrustful of a system that they perceive as not transparent, prejudiced, and engaged in an adversarial pursuit of removing children.
- Participants feel powerless in front of a system that they perceive lacks accountability and oversight. Birth parents and families lack the knowledge to navigate the system. They do not feel supported to advocate for care solutions that would avoid the need to place their children into care.

Consequently birth parents and families call for changes to be made to the following aspects of the system:

Enable birth parents and families to have better access to information that the system holds about them and provide mechanisms for them to submit information and evidence to the system.

Support should focus on early, preventative interventions aimed at avoiding the need for removal. Where this has not been possible, support should be focused on facilitating reunification of families. This type of support should include guidance to help birth parents and families navigate the procedures and processes of the system.

The perceptions that the system lacks accountability and oversight can be countered by the organisations that perform these roles (e.g., The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and Ofsted) providing more effective outreach. Many of the participants were unaware of the existence

of such bodies and those that were aware were dissatisfied with their effectiveness. Suggestions that birth parents and families be involved in Ofsted inspections and offers to be part of review panel were made during the course of this event. Ideas for inclusion such as these could be explored and, with the right support, birth parents and families could be more involved in the processes of accountability and oversight.

In addition to the contributions presented in this report, participants identified a considerable number of problems and shared a great many ideas for improvement. The highly specific nature and indeed considerable volume of these contributions has placed their inclusion beyond the scope of a report of this size. Nonetheless, it is the hope of the authors of this report that the contributions of this highly engaged group can be acknowledged and respected by revisiting them at some point in the future.

**Social services should support not
persecute; a crisis is not a crime
(Explore participant 23/9/2021)**

