A creative exploration of Children in Care Councils during the 2020-2021 Covid-19 pandemic

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THE COMPASS PROJECT

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Introduction

The last two decades have seen an increasing acknowledgement of the rights of children and young people to participate meaningfully in decision making. The introduction of Children in Care Councils (CiCC) under the 'care matters' reforms in England provided a challenge to Local Authorities to try to find meaningful ways and processes which would give young people in care the opportunity to contribute their views to the planning and provision of services (*Thomas and Percy Smith 2012*). The purpose of CiCCs is 'to ensure that every child has the opportunity to air their views' and so that children and young people 'should be able to put their experiences of the care system directly to those responsible for corporate parenting' (*Department of Education and Skills 2007, p.21*).

The global Covid-19 pandemic, with its lockdowns and social distancing, has led to many Local Authorities adapting their methods of working with children in care. Some Local Authorities have worked hard to provide children in care with an opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision making at a strategic and individual level. Throughout the pandemic, and particularly during its early months, CiCC meetings have predominantly taken place online instead of in person, challenging traditional assumptions around how participation and decision-making at the individual and collective level works.

Prior to the pandemic, research into CiCCs was fairly limited. Relatively little was known in terms of how they work, what they do, how they shape policy and practice, and how children and young people feel about participating in them. This is surprising given their statutory and pivotal role in shaping how corporate parenting should be done. By exploring and foregrounding the views of CiCC members, The Compass Project seeks to rectify this gap in the research and policy literature.

Methods

The research was managed by Blue Cabin and undertaken by a team of independent associate artists, facilitators and academic researchers working to explore CiCCs during the Covid-19 pandemic using participatory and creative methods. The Compass Project took a social pedagogical and qualitative mixed-methods approach. Three Local Authority CiCCs took part in focused conversations and artist-facilitated creative sessions and five participation professionals were interviewed . Additionally, eight Local Authorties from across the North East of England responded to a survey to explore experiences during Covid-19. The in-depth research focused on Local Authorities that could share good practice, because findings from the survey demonstrated a great deal of inconsistency, with some CICCs discontinuing and others rarely meeting at all during the first lock down.

Findings

1. **The pandemic has significantly shifted how CiCCs meet and this affects membership:** CiCC meetings moved online and this made it difficult to recruit new members. Overall, young people were negative about moving CiCC meetings online. Most young people who took part in this study stated they suffered or experienced Zoom fatigue and they much preferred to meet in person. They missed meeting fellow care experienced young people face-to-face and also missed doing interesting activities and important work as part of their roles for CiCC.

2. **The pandemic has affected how CiCCs work with Corporate Parenting Panels:** Corporate Parenting Panels (CPPs) were one of the main channels through which CiCCs could influence policy before the pandemic and this has

been affected in different ways across the Local Authorities. However, in most Local Authorities that took part in this study links between the CiCC and CPPs seemed to be reduced since the onset of the first lock down in March 2020 and this is a concerning finding, particularly as a key purpose of a CiCC is to have an impact on decision making at a strategic level.

3. **Covid-19 has had a negative impact on care experienced young people's mental health:** Many of the care experienced young people who took part in this study stated that the pandemic and lockdown had a negative impact on their mental health. This has been highlighted in other studies (*Roberts et al 2020, Roberts 2021 see background to research section*).

4. **CiCCs had a role in supporting mental health and emotional wellbeing during Covid:** Some of the young people reported that attending the meetings and taking part in activities for CiCC really helped with their mental well-being, even when it was mainly online. The routine of meetings, having a platform to share their voice and having regular contact with other care experienced young people also helped with staving off boredom and improving confidence.

5. **The social element and friendship of CiCCs is important to young people:** This was the most important factor for the young people, especially being able to interact with other care experienced people, giving rise to empathy, mutual recognition and a desire to help others in similar circumstances. Young people were not motivated solely by self-interest; they wanted to support each other. Positive friendships with staff were also mentioned.

6. **The young people still felt heard during the pandemic:** Most of the young people who took part in this study felt 'heard' through their work with CiCCs.

7. **CiCC activities are having an impact at an operational level:** Much of the excellent work carried out by CiCCs prior to the pandemic is having an impact on the Local Authority at an operational level, such as the campaigns around language and improvement of review meetings. This work and impact has continued throughout the pandemic.

8. **Direct contact with senior managers is important:** Knowing who the key people are and having regular informal contact with them had a positive impact on the young people. The young people felt valued and felt as their voices were heard.

9. **There is a lack of consistency in how Local Authorities are supporting CiCCs during the pandemic:** Some CiCCs stopped running in March 2020 for a lengthy period. In other examples of excellent practice, CiCCs in one Local Authority met face-to-face in line with National Youth Agency guidance and still ensured that members had an impact on decision making. After the end of the first lock down, the meetings for this particular CiCC were moved to a larger building which allowed for social distancing.

10. **CiCCs work well when they use structures that are attuned to young people's needs and perspectives:** CiCCs work particularly well when they listen to and take into account the children's needs and views of how they want the Council to run.

11. **Some CiCCs in North East England are making a real difference, through training and campaigns and this has continued during the pandemic:** The training that some CiCCs had carried out for police and social workers had clearly worked well and seemingly had an impact on practice by professionals. This demonstrates the important work that CiCCs are doing at an *operational* level.

Recommendations from the young people:

1. Be creative with meetings, make them hybrid (for example allow for members to attend in an assortment of ways, such as in person or online), have more equipment and resources, such as a big screen so those who cannot be there in person can still attend meetings.

2. Make a 'survival pack' for future pandemics.

3. Invite the PM, Boris Johnson, along to the CiCC meetings.

4. Include mental health 'check-ins' as part of the CiCC remit.

5. Facilitate more interviews and direct work with senior managers, and more diverse opportunities in general.

Recommendations for Local Authorities:

1. Rethink what CiCCs can realistically do. Acknowledge the positive but unintended outcomes of the CiCC activities, such as the emotional and peer support they provide to each other and other young people in care. CiCCs could be structured around 'ground level' practical changes and more complex 'campaigns'.

2. Place the CiCCs in close physical proximity to managers and decision makers. Make it easy to 'drop in'.

3. Find creative ways to involve children in care who are not part of CiCC in operational roles and strategic decision making. Have a particular focus on including children in care who are placed out of county or who are in residential or youth justice settings.

Recommendations for DfE:

1. Update CiCC guidelines, including making the role of CiCCs more transparent and consistent.

2. Widen the remit of decision making that CiCCs should be involved in at the strategic and operational level and make it so that the inspectorate can review and comment on how well Local Authorities are doing in supporting children in care to participate meaningfully in strategic decision making.

3. Provide clearer guidance as to how Corporate Parenting Panels and CiCCs work together, by investigating how CiCCs impact decision making of CPPs. This needs to be monitored and commented on by the inspectorate.

4. Animals were considered as a source of wellbeing, connection and a good way that relationship based practice can be realised. This should be taken into account and considered by the DfE at a national level.

5. Create a countrywide network where examples of good practice, such as campaigns that have an impact on the culture of the Local Authority can be shared and replicated across other Local Authorities.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Section One: Introduction

The role of Local Authorities in looking after children in care, and care leavers, is critical to those young people's wellbeing. As the 'corporate parent' of children and young people in care, the major question Local Authorities must ask themselves is: 'would this be good enough for my child?' (*DfE 2018*).

The last two decades have seen an increasing acknowledgement of the rights of children and young people to participate meaningfully in decision-making about their care. The introduction of Children in Care Councils (CiCCs), under the 'care matters' reforms in England, challenged Local Authorities to find meaningful ways and processes that would give young people in care the opportunity to contribute their views to the planning and provision of services (*Thomas and Percy-Smith 2012*). The UK Government's white paper, *'Care Matters: Time for Change'* (*Department of Education and Skills 2007*), proposed that every Local Authority in England should establish a CiCC 'to ensure that every child has the opportunity to air their views' and so that children and young people 'should be able to put their experiences of the care system directly to those responsible for corporate parenting' (p.21). CiCCs aim to formalise previous efforts to 'give a voice' to children and young people in care.

Lockdowns and social distancing, designed to mitigate the spread of Covid-19, have caused many Local Authorities to rapidly adapt their participation methods, to ensure that services continue to be guided by children's voices. Throughout the pandemic, and particularly during its early months, CiCC meetings have taken place online instead of in person, challenging traditional assumptions around how participation and decision-making at the individual and collective level can work.

Prior to the pandemic, research into CiCCs was limited. Relatively little was known in terms of how they work, what they do, how they shape policy and practice, and how children and young people feel about participating in them. This is surprising given their statutory role in shaping how corporate parenting should be done. By exploring and foregrounding the views of CiCC members, the Compass Project seeks to rectify this gap in the research and policy literature.

The Compass Project

Specifically, the project aimed to explore CiCCs during the Covid-19 pandemic using participatory and creative methods. Compass developed as a partnership between one of Northeast England's Local Authorities (participating in the Department for Education's 'Partners in Practice' programme) and Blue Cabin, a Charity that specialises in using the arts to nurture meaningful relationships between care experienced children and young people, and the adults and organisations in their lives. The research was managed by Blue Cabin and undertaken by a team of independent associate artists, facilitators and researchers, who worked together to co-produce this report. Five Local Authorities ('LAs') from the North East of England participated in this research, with three taking part in the more in-depth exploration of CiCCs. They are referred to as LA1, LA2 and LA3.

Within participatory work in the arts and academic research, questions tend to be determined organically and collaboratively with participants. The questions within the Compass Project therefore evolved and became clearer as the study progressed:

1. What has been the impact for Children in Care Councils of the move to online or socially distanced meetings? What have been the impacts *for the*

young people who are members of CiCCs?

2. Do CiCCs have a voice in Local Authorities' strategic decision-making regarding children in care? Has this changed since COVID?

3. What has been the impact of Covid-19 and the lockdown on the mental health of children in care? Have the CiCCs helped with young people's mental health?

Question 3 came from members of CiCC, who felt it was important that we explored the impacts of the pandemic on mental health.

Background to the research

Prior to commencing research with the young people and CiCC leads, we conducted a literature review (*Diaz et al 2021*) – a critical appraisal and summary of existing research, which aims to find out what is known, or not, about a particular topic, what broader knowledge is needed, and thereby where future research should focus. This confirmed the scarcity of literature on CiCCs in the UK. However, there has been some research into children's participation in decision-making forums within social work practice and the impact Covid has had on children in care (*Diaz et al 2019, Pert et al 2017, Roberts et al 2020*).

What is participation?

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduces the seven corporate parenting principles that Local Authorities must align with in relation to their work with children in care and care leavers (*DfE 2018*). These are articulated as follows:

• To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people

• to encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings

• **to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people**

• to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the Local Authority and its relevant partners

• to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people

• for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and

• to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

(*DfE 2018 p.8*)

The third principle implies that participation is necessary for views to be heard and taken into account. Participation is an important and complex concept, with different meanings in different sectors. Trying to agree on a definition of participation is difficult (*Stabler 2020*). The word 'participation' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'consultation', 'partnership' or 'involvement' (*Roberts 2002, Stabler 2020*). Similarly, the language of participation can be vague and contradictory; it can mean taking part in an activity but is more often used in relation to involvement in decision-making (*Thomas 2007, Brady et al. 2019*). Kennan et al. (2016) define participation within two different categories: individual participation and collective participation. In terms of individual decision making and the extent to which children and young people are involved in this process within statutory children's services, recent research

indicates major obstacles exist which make it difficult for children in care to play a meaningful role in decision making about their lives (*Diaz et al. 2019, Diaz, 2020, Pert et al. 2017*).

Participation in service development and improvement includes 'the involvement of young people individually or collectively as consumers of services' (*McNeish 1999, p.194*). However, the notion of 'consumer choice' is clearly problematic within the child welfare system, as services are often provided against the will of individuals and families (*Stabler 2020*).

We therefore acknowledge that it is not feasible to agree a 'catch all' definition of participation (*Stabler 2020*). In social services, participation is often called 'service user involvement'. Smith et al. (2011) describe how service user involvement has played a role in strengthening communities, promoting social inclusion and trying to ensure that services better meet the needs of those who use them. However, it is important to note the term 'service user' is problematic, especially when used to refer to the care of children and young people and is one that needs to be contested (*McLaughlin 2009*).

Like much of the vocabulary used within children's services, the term 'participation' is complicated and needs challenging. It seems clear that there are two key components to understanding participation:

- It is a process and not a one-off event (*Larkens et al. 2014, Fylkesnes et al. 2018*)

- It enables the person or people to have an influence over decision-making (*Kennan et al. 2016*).

Why is participation important?

Stabler (2020, p.17) argues that for 'citizens in modern democracies, the concept of participation is central to that of the democratic system and is

necessary for the political and social structures that exist. But participation is not uncontroversial… critiques have emerged … that it can be expensive and time consuming to do well, and even then may not have the transformative power that was hoped'. In relation to children's services, Dickens et al. (2015) highlighted different perspectives that consider the importance of children's meaningful participation in decision making:

1. The purpose of participation is to promote development and self-confidence. This is particularly important for children in care who may have experienced abuse and neglect from their families prior to coming into care. If, when they come into care, children are not listened to and their views are not taken seriously, this is likely to have a very negative impact on their wellbeing and confidence (*Diaz 2020*).

2. To improve the decisions being made and the practice of the agency. If Local Authorities and other key agencies do not take on board the opinions and perspectives – both at an individual and at a strategic level – of the young people they serve, they are unlikely to be able to offer them an effective service.

3. It is important to consider children as active social beings who should be able to take part in decision-making particularly as it relates to their lives and impacts on them much more than anyone else.

4. Understanding that involvement is key to children's rights and in line with key social work values.

Participation as a right

Theories drawn from a 'rights' basis refer more broadly to the participation of children within society. A child's rights approach to participation re-characterises care and protection from harm as entitlements, rather than

acts of adult benevolence (*Bessell and Gal 2009*). This has consequences for the nature of participation, depicting children as 'citizens' irrespective of age and capacity, with rights, as members of society. This approach lends itself to viewing children as 'experts' on childhood (*Hale 2006*). However, a 'rights-based' rhetoric can lead to the view that those who require protection and social provision are dependents who lack competency (*Minow 1990*). This highlights the tension between legislation and theory in the context of child protection social work (*Lansdown 2010*). Children must be heard (legally and in guidance) but must also be protected from adult issues - raising questions around the possibility of 'partnership' and what level of participation can be realistically aimed for in the child protection context. This issue of finding 'effective ways by which children in care could contribute their views to the planning and provision of services' (*Thomas and Percy, 2012 p.2*) has been approached by facilitating collective participation through the introduction of CiCCs.

Children in Care Councils: A statutory obligation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child commits the UK to upholding children's rights to express their views freely: 'in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (*UNCRC Article 12, 1989*). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (2009) stipulates that Article 12 applies 'not only to the child as an individual, but to groups of children and children in general', and particularly mentions children in alternative care. 'Mechanisms must be introduced to ensure that [such children] are able to express their views and that those views must be given due weight' in matters concerning them. Such mechanisms may include 'for example, a representative council of the children... with the mandate to participate in the development and implementation of the policy and any rules of the institution' (2009, p.22). This means a commitment to wider involvement of children in the policies and procedures of agencies providing care, including LAs. These initiatives form

part of a wider movement to develop children and young people's voices and participation in public life (*Thomas and Percy-Smith 2012*). The UK Government appears committed to consulting with young people on matters of public service and public policy (*Kirby et al. 2003*); an example of this is school councils, which are now widespread in England (*Whitty and Wisby 2007*). It is however important to recognise that consultation is not the same as meaningful participation and some of this work has been criticised as being tokenistic or oppressive (*Cooke and Kothari 2001, Badham 2004*). Sinclair (2004, pp.110-1) highlights that in practice, participation can be used to mean 'being listened to' or consulted, in contrast with meaningful participation, where children 'have reason to believe that their involvement will make a difference'.

The UK Government's white paper '*Care Matters: Time for Change*' (*Department of Education and Skills 2007, p.21*) proposed that every LA in England should establish a CiCC 'to ensure that every child has the opportunity to air their views' and so that children and young people 'should be able to put their experiences of the care system directly to those responsible for corporate parenting'. The purpose of CiCCs is to formalise previous efforts to 'give a voice' to children and young people in care. A key aim of Care Matters was to provide young people in care with an opportunity to 'shape and influence the parenting they receive at every level – from expressing their wishes and feelings about the individual care they receive in their placements, through to helping shape the overall strategy for children in their area through a Children in Care Council' (*Department of Education and Skills 2007, p.20*).

The Children in Care Council Mapping Project 2010-2011 was a study carried out by A National Voice alongside the DfE and aimed to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of CiCCs across the country. The research gained responses from 150 of the 152 Local Authorities in England. 147 of those that responded had a functioning CiCC. In terms of their impact on policy and practice, 76% of CiCCs reported to senior managers in the form of the Corporate Parenting Panel; less than 8% reported regularly to elected

members; and 35% stated that they had real difficulty getting lead members or Directors of Children's Services to attend their meetings regularly. The more established and developed CiCCs seemed to have more influence over operational practice and policy including their own budget control, leaving care grants and recruitment of key staff including social workers. Most councils had meetings every two to four weeks, generally in sync with the Corporate Parenting Panel, which was seen as an example of good joined-up thinking. Most CiCCs were chaired by a young person, who was either elected or a rota system was used. The study found that CiCCs had a greater influence over the Corporate Parenting Panel when they also had support and involvement from senior managers, in particular the Director of Children's Services.

There is a tendency for children's participation structures to be based upon or similar to adult arrangements; examples include youth parliaments, councils and forums (*Thomas 2007*). Percy-Smith (2009) found that these types of arrangements rarely had much influence over decision making at a strategic level. Thomas and Percy-Smith (2012) carried out research into how CiCCs can provide children with an opportunity to exercise their rights and how young people play an active and positive role in shared decision-making. Research among 22 Local Authorities in London found that CiCCs' most common activities fell into four themes:

1. Direct involvement in Local Authority services including staff recruitment, induction and training;

2. Consultation activities including taking part in national consultations;

3. Publicity, promotion, information and campaigning, which included writing the local pledge and producing information about how young people can participate including newsletters, videos websites etc.;

4. Developing personal skills, which included opportunities for young people in care to gain work experience and qualifications, and do social activities.

The study concluded that most LAs in London had 'embraced the importance of CiCCs... and made arrangements for the participation of children in care' (p.17). However, it also found that the positive changes were driven largely by participation workers, instead of cultural change taking place across the LA led by senior managers. There are also some important limitations, such as the fact that although the children and young people leading CiCCs really benefit from the experience, this only applies to a relatively small number of young people (*Thomas and Percy-Smith 2012*). Young people in custody or living outside London play only a limited role in the work of CICCs and there remain major challenges relating to embedding meaningful participation so that children in care have a real impact on strategic and major decisions taken by councils.

It is essential that children and young people in care have an opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision-making, not only about their own lives but also in strategic decision-making and policy implementation by LAs. Despite increased recognition of the importance of this, research suggests that young people rarely have this opportunity, both at an individual and at a strategic level (*Diaz et al. 2019, Stabler et al. 2019*).

Covid-19 and the impact on children's services: Staying connected while socially distancing

Several qualitative studies have been carried out to assess the effect of the lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions on care experienced people, those who care for or support them, and the services they provide. The changes and new ways of working brought about because of the pandemic, particularly the need to keep socially distanced has meant that social workers and the children and young people they support need to stay connected differently. For social workers, being close to and immersing themselves in the lives of children and

families is crucial to ensuring children are protected from harm. However, when being close became risky, social services departments needed to adapt their practice almost immediately and 'virtual home visits' using WhatsApp and Zoom for example (*Cook & Zschomler, 2020*) were adopted by child protection social workers in England during the first few months of the pandemic (*Ferguson et al. 2021, p.2*).

In their research exploring the challenges of social distancing in child protection social work, Ferguson et al. (2020) found that Local Authorities with good provision of suitable IT equipment, such as good quality smartphones, were better able to reduce the number of home visits conducted, thereby reducing the risk to families and social care staff. However, in the four Local Authorities in which the research was conducted, when children were on child protection plans or had very complex needs, it was felt that they should be visited in person. This required practitioners to remain outside, such as on doorsteps or in gardens and to interact with children and families while maintaining the two-metre social distancing guidance. This raised ethical concerns around confidentiality, which may make both practitioners and children and their families uncomfortable. When the risks were assessed as high, social workers continued to conduct visits in the home. Social workers highlight that when children are too young to understand the need for social distancing, they continue to pursue tactile contact and physical reassurance from their social worker such as sitting on the social worker's knee, hugging their social worker or holding their hand. Families often live in small or cramped conditions, which presents a further challenge to social distancing. Social workers also reported that it is impossible in their role to avoid touching surfaces when examining home conditions and when the level of food available to children must be measured (*Ferguson et al. 2020*).

Further challenges for social workers, many of whom are working from home, are that they will be expected by Local Authorities to set boundaries with their family members to avoid the risk of children, partners or flatmates being able to hear or see confidential information relating to children at risk of significant harm (*Diaz 2020*). Some social workers may have rooms that can be set aside for such purposes but this is obviously more difficult for social workers living in smaller accommodation.

Ferguson et al. (2020) concluded that Local Authorities that had an organisational culture based on meeting performance targets and potential inspection visits led to increased stress for social workers. Often, strict timescales had to be adhered to, increasing pressure and negatively impacting on social workers' feelings of competence. The requirement for social workers to continue to meet their statutory duties to children without physical proximity has seen access to technology shift from a social worker 'want' to a social worker 'need' (*Evans 2020*).

Impact on children and young people's mental health

The disruption caused by Covid-19 and the lockdown has had a profound impact on the mental health of many people across the United Kingdom (*The Children's Society 2020*). Covid-19 brought uncertain times and a loss of control to children and their families as society needed to significantly adapt almost overnight. With the onset of the national lockdown on March 23rd 2020, most children could not attend school, resulting in them no longer seeing friends, teachers and other important figures of consistency in their lives. School closures have resulted in children losing their routines, losing social contact and not being able to access things that are important to their wellbeing (*Barnardo's 2020*). For some children living in unsafe family homes, not attending school means losing their 'safe space' (*Barnardo's 2020*). The Covid-19 lockdown and its disruption on society is likely to increase the number of children and young people that are exposed to poverty (*Lancker and Parolin 2020*), and some children will be exposed to domestic abuse, parental conflict or abuse for the first time (*Barnardo's 2020*).

To better understand the experiences of children in care and care leavers during lockdown, the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) designed a survey

to explore children's experiences of loneliness and anxiousness, the availability of technology to maintain contact with their friends and families, and the frequency of contact with social workers or personal advisors (*NYAS 2020*). In May 2020, 230 children in care and care leavers, aged six to 26, responded to the survey from 55 Local Authorities. Of care leavers, 86% reported feeling lonely and anxious more often during lockdown than prior to Covid-19. 50% of children in care reported feeling lonely more often during lockdown and 45% reported feeling anxious more often during lockdown. However, children living with a relative or with foster carers were less likely to have experienced loneliness or anxiety more often compared to children living in supported accommodation or residential homes. The reasons provided by young people for their increased experiences of anxiety included: reduced access to services, not having access to suitable technology to talk to family and friends, and not being able to socialise with people or leave their house as often as they wanted. 93% of children in care and 82% of care-leavers felt they had adequate access to technology so that they could maintain contact with friends and family. 13% of children in care reported they had no contact with their social worker during lockdown and 9% of care leavers had not had any contact with their social worker or PA since lockdown. However, as the survey was circulated online, it is only representative of the views of children who have internet access.

In April 2020, Barnardo's Cymru and Action for Children Cymru surveyed nearly 1,000 Barnardo's practitioners on the impact of Covid-19 (*Barnardo's 2020*). Findings highlighted that 92% of respondents were supporting someone with their mental health, 75% of whom were supporting children. 81% of respondents reported that they were supporting someone who was experiencing an increase in mental health issues as a result of Covid-19. Practitioners shared concerns for the most vulnerable children who were confined to challenging home environments, and for children who may be experiencing bereavement. Professionals also shared concerns related to poverty, with a greater number of children experiencing food poverty as a result of not having access to free school meals, of increased financial pressures

on families, and a lack of access to technology, which is key to continued education and maintaining contact with family, friends and services.

While the majority of care experienced children and young people have been negatively affected by the significant disruption to their lives because of Covid-19, some have thrived due to these changes (*Mautner 2020*). Lockdown has offered children increased proximity to their foster carer or caregiver, which may be particularly important for children who have experienced early trauma and loss. For some, this period has offered a break from more structured education; school can be a highly stressful place, with a great deal of social pressure, challenging learning environments and the presence of issues such as bullying (*Children's Society 2020*). Additionally, for some children, moving to virtual contact with their family may be more comfortable for them (*Neil et al 2020, Baginsky and Manthorpe 2020a and 2020b*).

Conclusion

The amount of research on the quality of social work practice conducted with social distancing measures in place remains limited (with the exception of Roberts et al. (2020) and Baginsky et al. (2020) who considered the impact on child protection conferences). In the available research, there are examples of the level and quality of support being offered to young people in care being negatively affected. The use of technology for enabling services will likely continue, so it is essential that the impact of this on children' wellbeing is considered to improve the quality of services offered. It is imperative that further research is carried out on this subject to identify areas of good practice, so that lockdown does not lead to families and children in care experiencing a poorer service than they received prior to the pandemic.

This brief literature review has shown that our understanding of CiCCs and their position in Local Authorities is limited. Two key areas for research are needed. First, participation collectively by young people is less advanced

than the commitment held by LAs to involve individual young people in their own care planning and review processes (*Thomas and Percy-Smith 2012*). This may not be surprising given that the latest government guidance on CiCCs is from 2007, and unfortunately the development of CiCCs does not seem to have been a priority for the UK Government. Consequently, more research is needed to gain a better understanding of how meaningful collective participation can be integrated effectively into Local Authorities' systems at a strategic and operational level. Second, it is important to explore how Covid-19 restrictions have impacted on CICC's ability to play a meaningful role in strategic decision making by Local Authorities and what this means in terms of children's voices being heard and their views taken into account.

SECTION 2:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND PROCESS

Section Two: Research methodology, methods, and process

The philosophical and theoretical basis of Compass

Social pedagogy

Blue Cabin operates from a contemporary social pedagogy model of learning from children and young people. Social pedagogy describes a holistic and relationship-centred way of working in care and educational settings with people across the course of their lives. This formed the basis for how the Compass Project artist delivered their creative sessions with young people.

Contemporary models of social pedagogy, as espoused by Blue Cabin, have been heavily influenced by liberal emancipatory concepts of education (*Freire 1968*) and the arts (*Boal 1993*) as vehicles for challenging social inequalities and democratising the voices of children and young people. Blue Cabin artists use the principles of social pedagogy to prioritise reflexively establishing and developing relationships with the children and young people with whom they work. The creative activity facilitates the social learning between them, encouraging the development of new skills and new insights (*ThemPra 2019*).

Mixed-methods qualitative research

Qualitative research can take many forms and use many methods, such as interviews, focus groups, ethnographic participant observation and various forms of creative enquiry. Different methods are better suited to different participants and researchers, and research that seeks to engage a range of participants often uses more than one approach. The Compass Project took a qualitative mixed-methods stance (*Greene 2007*) because it wanted to understand what was happening with CiCCs from multiple first-person perspectives, and sought to explore how young people and participation workers each responded to and felt about these changes.

The Compass Project used arts-based approaches with young people to harness the unique expertise of Blue Cabin's associate artists and because it is known that marginalised people tend to express themselves most eloquently through creativity (*Douglas and Carless 2018*). The Compass Project used focussed conversations and creative projects with young people, interview methods with participation workers, and a survey with wider LA staff.

Focussed Conversation

The 'Focussed Conversation' method, developed by the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs, uses a facilitation framework to help participants reflect on a topic (*Stanfield n.d*). Stanfield describes it as 'a relatively simple process that enables a conversation to flow from surface to depth'. A facilitator leads the conversation through a series of questions at four levels using the ORID (Objective Reflective Interpretative and Decisional) method of questioning:

Facilitators use ORID to structure the types of questions they ask, starting with Objective type questions and moving through to Decisional. In all four stages, the questions asked depend on the conversation, but the phrasing of the questions and statements by the facilitator are critical to the maintenance of focused discussion.

Type of Question	Purpose	Example
Objective	Begin with data, facts, external reality	"What did you actually see, hear or read?"
Reflective	Evoke immediate personal reactions, internal responses, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images and associations with the facts	"What was your gut level reaction?"
Interpretive	Draw out meaning, values, significance, implications	"What new insight did you get from this?"
Decisional	Bring the conversation to a close, eliciting resolution and enabling the group to make a decision about the future	"What do you think we should do?"

Table 1: ORID from Stanfield (n.d)

The Compass process diagram

Ethics	Social pedagogy	Philosophical and theoretical underpinnings	

Facilitation ORID — **Qualitative research**

Timeline	
January 2021	Literature review
February 2021	Survey
March 2021	Focussed Conversations with CiCCs
April 2021	The navigation group
May 2021	Creative workshops with young people in their CiCCs
June 2021	Interviews with participation workers
July 2021	Collaborative dissemination

Research process

Exploring findings

Grounded Theory Analysis of emerging themes

An overview of the Compass process
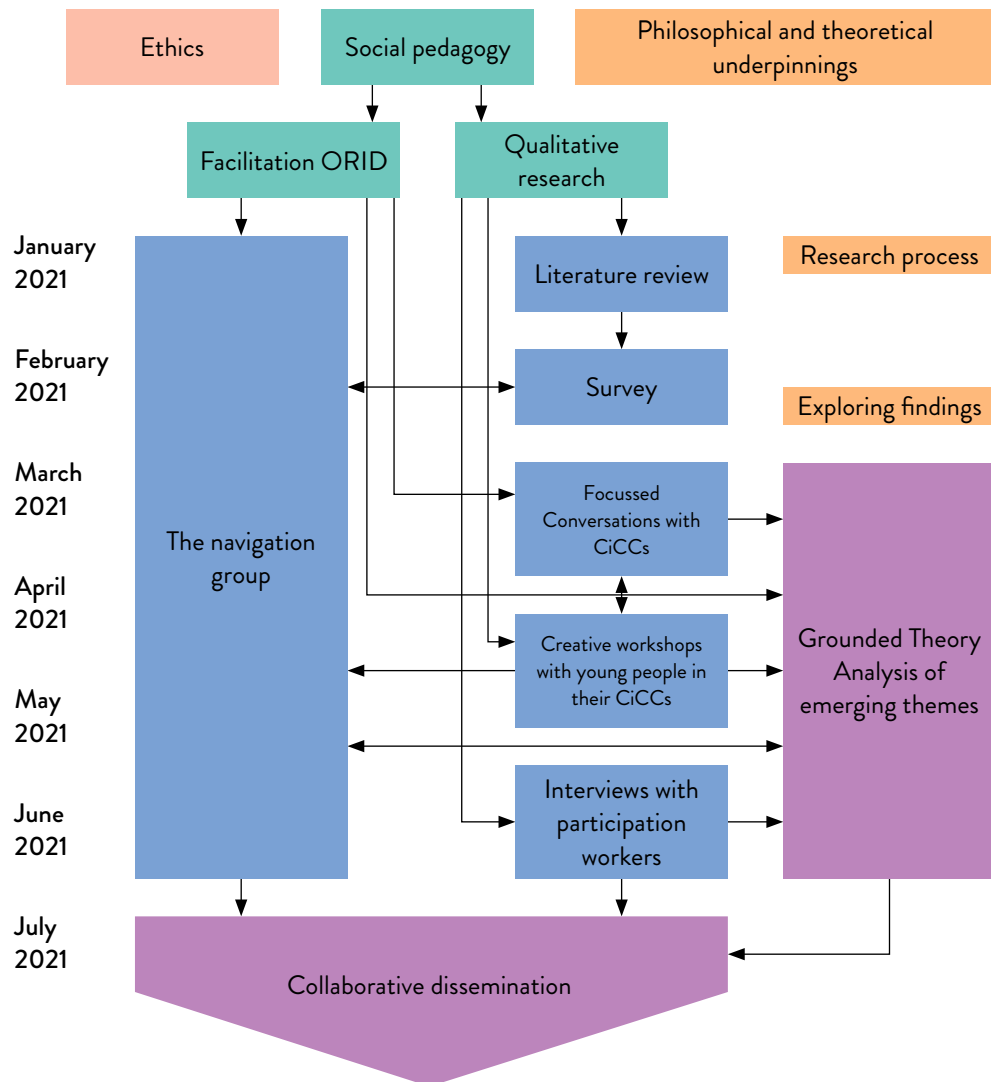
The navigation group

The Compass steering group, known within the project as "the navigation group", was formed through collaboration between the Participation Lead from the commissioning LA1 and their contacts and counterparts in LA4 and LA5. The navigation group met on three occasions during the study, and had a two-fold role within the research. First, the group advised on key safeguarding issues, methods and processes, offering valuable insights and challenges to researchers and artists alike. Second, they acted as a focus group, to discuss the systems and processes that have been in place to help support CiCC members to participate during the lockdown, and to compare experiences of their management role during the Covid-19 pandemic. Navigation meetings were captured through written notes and Google's Jamboard, which is a digital white board where participants can collaborate and write on Post-It notes that is shared virtually with the group.

The survey

The Compass survey was sent via SurveyMonkey to participation professionals involved in working with and supporting CiCCs in all 12 Local Authorities across the North East of England. The survey questions can be found in Appendix A. Ten professionals participated in the survey. Of these, two surveys were missing the answers to the substantial questions, so were excluded from the project. Analysis of the eight fully-completed surveys produced data that was used to inform the questions asked during creative sessions and interviews, and to identify the four LAs that were invited to participate in the more exploratory and in-depth qualitative research. Due to circumstances brought on by the pandemic, one LA who was invited to participate had to disband its CiCC, so was unable to contribute to the qualitative research. The three participating LAs are referred to in this report as LA1, LA2 and LA3. Each identified that

they had experienced and had examples of 'good practice'. Therefore, this report is set in the context of identifying and sharing good practice.

Focussed Conversations with CiCC representatives

Three focussed conversations with the three participating CiCCs in LA1, LA2 and LA3 took place online using Zoom. In March 2020, several members from each CiCC attended a single session together to discuss and develop the research agenda. The Islands exercise, designed by Blue Cabin's facilitator Mary Robson, was used as a way for the group to reflect together on The Compass Project. This is a graphic representation of a project, using the visual metaphor of an island, which enables the group to map the project, tell their story, identify challenges and successes, make connections, and begin to interpret information together. Questions are subsequently improvised, depending on the conversation. The rational aim for the first session was for the young people to co-produce the research questions, while the experiential aim was for the young people to enjoy the island exercise in a safe environment and feel comfortable to contribute. Firstly, the group was led by Blue Cabin's creative facilitators, Dawn and Mary, to make a map of their 'Covid CiCC' experiences. They were led through a focussed conversation about it, following the ORID line of questioning, to draw out their opinions of the experience and to develop questions they would like the research project to answer. The group was asked to think about their experiences of meeting as a CiCC before and during the pandemic. Because the conversation took place on Zoom, Mary created the outline of an island on a large piece of paper and took on the role of cartographer. Dawn asked the questions and Mary added the features described by the CiCC members.

At the end of the project, one focussed conversation took place with members of LA1 and LA2 joining together and a further session took place with only LA3 present (as they were unable to make the session with the other LAs). These conversations focussed on two things: first, exploring the young people's

experience of participating in CiCCs, rather than of their personal experiences of the pandemic, and second, verifying that the initial findings and themes were illustrative of what they had shared within the research.
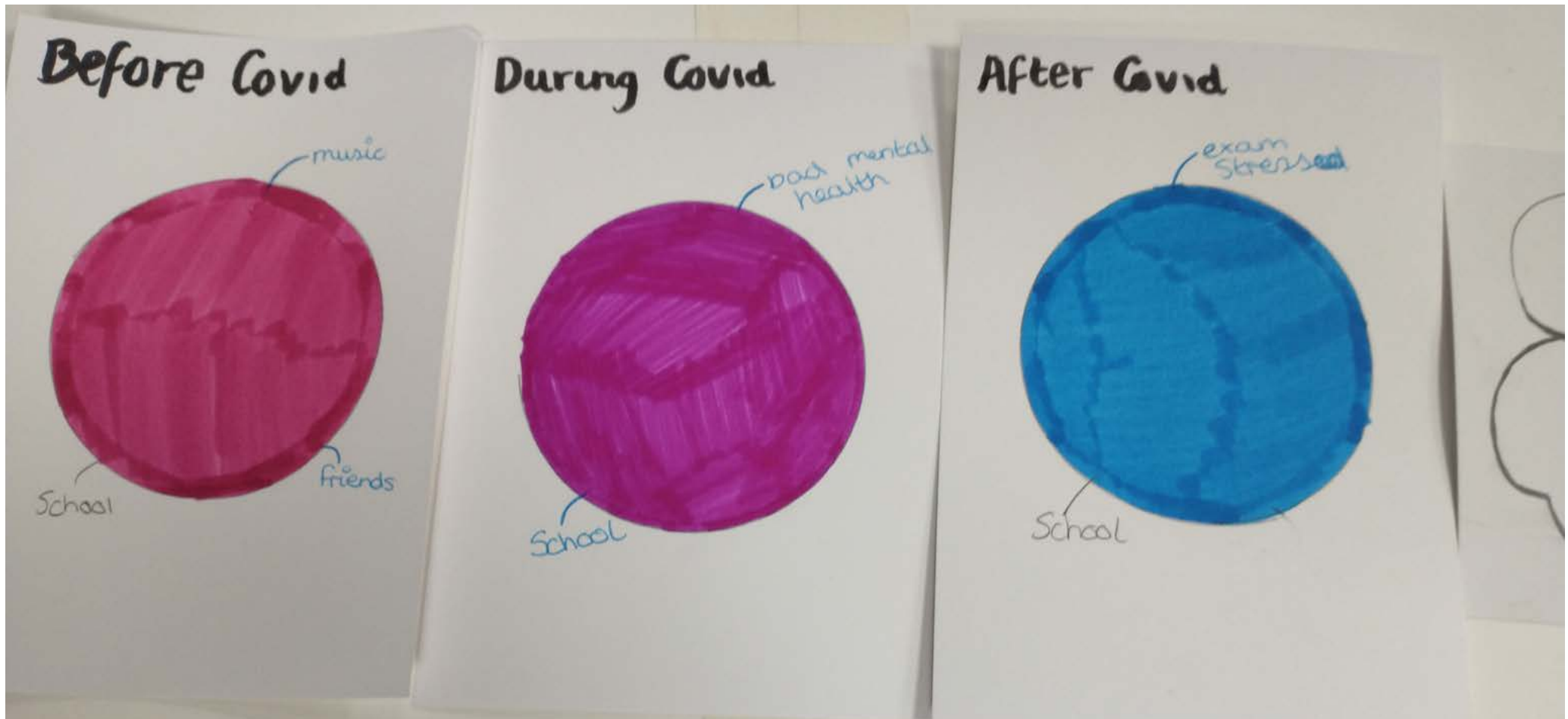
Creative projects with CiCCs

Blue Cabin's Associate Artist Hannah Campion facilitated online creative sessions with each CiCC, supported by their participation worker. These were informed by their personal artistic practice and by Blue Cabin's model of social pedagogy. The artist used their own creative methods to engage the children and young people in the activity and to produce artistic creations that expressed their lived experiences of being in care during the Covid-19 pandemic. The young people (supported by the support worker with technical support from Blue Cabin producers) were encouraged to create their own visual language, through 'mark making' and self-expression with their use of colour, in which the marks made represented the emotional ups and downs – like a rollercoaster – of the pandemic. As the creative activity progressed, the artist invited the group to talk about their experiences before, during and

after the pandemic. The creative sessions were recorded through notes and photographs and some of the conversation was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the artist subsequently wrote a reflective account.

Interviews with participation workers

The participation worker from each LA was interviewed online, using a minimally structured and directive interview that looked at exploring questions around:

- How CiCCs had an impact on strategic decision making

- Immediate and medium-term challenges in responding to Covid-19

- Events/approaches that have been effective in keeping CiCCs engaged

- Barriers and challenges

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

All interview transcripts and documents were analysed thematically using NVivo 12 (qualitative data analysis software). We used a modified grounded theory approach in that, outside of our broad questions around wellbeing during lockdown and young people's voices, themes were allowed to emerge naturally. In grounded theory, the researcher identifies emergent themes and develops initial hypotheses to account for those themes. They then "return to the field to gather further data and to refine the emerging theoretical framework" (*Charmaz, 2006, p. 23*). Data was collected from March 2020 to June 2020 and emerging themes were discussed with CiCC representatives towards the end of this period, ensuring that the researchers had correctly understood

the main issues that were important to the young people. Although we took an organic and more conversational approach with the participants, the core research questions formed the basis for the research themes in this section.

While the analysis focussed on comments relating to the research questions, other themes also emerged, such as the role of peer support, having direct contact with managers, and other oblique benefits yielded by young people's involvement in their CiCC. There were also minor themes only tangentially related to the questions but important to the young people's wellbeing (and mentioned on several occasions by various participants), such as contact with animals and pets. These do not necessarily relate to 'having a voice within the service' but led to some low-level policy change and also enabled some insight into the mindset of those young people who become involved in Children in Care Councils.

Ethics

The research design was informed by the navigation group, who guided us through key safeguarding issues to ensure that the needs of participating young people were consistently met throughout the project. Ethical approval was granted by the Liverpool Hope University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

All participants were given details of the research, and informed that their participation was voluntary and that collected data would be protected and anonymised (unless stated otherwise). With regards to consent, the children and young people were provided with options for participation that allowed them to opt in or out of different parts of the research. It was difficult obtaining written consent because of Covid restrictions and the use on online platforms, so verbal consent was sought at the start of each focussed conversation, creative session and interview.

The Navigation Group helped us to decide to compensate the young people for their time. It was advised that for each time they participated in a session they would receive a £10 voucher of their choice (Amazon or Love to Shop). Rather than pay an overall sum at the outset, the vouchers were paid after each session to ensure that the young people knew that there was no obligation to participate in all parts of the research, and that they had the option of withdrawing whenever they wanted.

Strengths and limitations of the research

Time restrictions limited the capacity of the study. In order to complete the research in a timely manner as the pandemic unfolded, the participants were recruited by the Local Authority in which they are in care. As this was a small-scale study exploring the views of CiCCs, it does not claim nor was it intended to be representative of the experiences of the wider membership of CiCCs across the UK. Since the report focuses on good practice, it is important to note that the in depth research we carried out was focused on those LA who continued to run CICC meetings throughout the pandemic.

Furthermore, the research commenced towards the easing of the third national lockdown. It is therefore possible that this timing may have influenced the stories collected. For example, at the design stage, it was not expected that we would be in another lockdown during the data collection stage. We assumed that the research would be a retrospective account. Instead, the research took place at a time when many were still experiencing restrictions and had been doing so for many months, so this may have had an impact on perspectives. Additionally, in terms of methods, we also accept that interviews and focussed conversations conducted online have more limited opportunities for building rapport for both researchers and participants. The creative workshops conducted via Zoom also posed problems, with the artist in one space and the young people in their own individual spaces - known as a hybrid delivery - where participants are in one space and the artist / facilitator is on the screen.

One session involved the group together in a space. Nevertheless, the use of creative and visual methods offered alternative forms of communication, which allowed young people to engage in meaningful and appropriate ways of sharing their experiences from their unique perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the types and range of participation – from young people and professionals from across the North East – is a strength of this research. The findings presented in this report offer an insight into how the pandemic has affected care experienced children and young people, professionals and their participation in CiCCs.

SECTION THREE: FINDINGS

Section Three: Findings

These findings have been drawn from a range of data, primarily from transcripts of creative workshops with young people talking about their artwork, and from focussed conversations and navigation sessions with CiCC members and from one-to-one interviews with CiCC Leads from three Local Authorities. Other data informing these findings includes feedback from training events, leaflets and flyers generated by CiCCs, blog posts by adults and young people, and other related documents.

Findings from the professional survey

As previously stated in the research overview, eight professionals responded to the survey from the twelve local authorities across the North East of England. The following sections illustrate the themes that emerged from key survey questions around participation before and during Covid.

Variation in how CiCCs are assembled

The table in Appendix B shows the configuration of each LA CiCC. This shows that there is no standardised structure to how CiCCs are assembled or governed across the local authorities. Instead, there appears to be diversity in:

- the ratio of number of children being looked after to CiCC membership numbers

- the number of CiCCs facilitated per local authority (ranging from four groups - one group)

- the participation of care leavers. Three local authorities have a specific council for Care Leavers.

One of the most striking findings was that there is a wide disparity of groupings in terms of age ranges. The two local authorities with one group have participants aged 11-21 and 12-20 years. Those with more than one group consisted of a senior, junior and for some a care leaver group. Although the standard age range for participating in a senior or junior group is six years, this range varies across local authorities. For example, a 15-year-old can be a member of a junior CiCC in one local authority and a senior group in another. What this range in age means for participation is something that would need consideration in further research.

CiCCs meeting before the pandemic: frequency and venue

Younger groups tended to meet less frequently: monthly, fortnightly and only in school holidays. Older groups for all local authorities meet weekly. One local authority identified additional sub groups that would meet throughout the month.

Group 1 [14+ age group]- meets once a month, with variety of sub groups meeting throughout the month, which includes facilitating training and development for foster carers, social workers and other key staff.

Later in the survey they added more detail to the types of participation their CiCC would engage in:

Group 1 met on several occasions, which included social work awareness development sessions across three universities social work programs, Durham, Sunderland and Northumberland, including New College Durham. They also led on a key fund bid securing 1000 [pounds] to develop a winter wonderland experience with [name] County Council, 185 attended. Presentations have taken

place across the council on variety of topics, including language and regular updates CPP and [...] they helped organise celebration event for care day 2020 and 85 people off all ages attended, including members of the group applying for funds from Time to Change - mental health fund to bring a care experienced rap to the north east to support the event - developing a co-produced song together on care experience and mental health.

All meetings take place for all participating local authorities in a face-to-face setting, with three stating that these meetings are held in a local authority building and five noting that meetings take place at another venue.

CiCCs during the first lockdown during March 2020 onwards

When it came to facilitating CiCC meetings, there were differences in how each local authority responded during the first lockdown:

- three local authorities reported completely stopping their sessions during this time

- two local authorities met 'less frequently'

- two continued to 'meet as normal'

- one met 'more frequently'

One local authority noted age as an issue with continuation:

Unfortunately our younger group has not really run during Covid as we struggled to keep young people virtually.

Those who continued to facilitate CiCC meetings did so virtually during this time, using platforms such as MS Teams, Zoom and Google virtual meets

(with one noting the restrictions of using certain platforms). After the first lockdown, all five of these participants identified the continued use of these methods of facilitating their CiCCs during this time. Furthermore, the three local authorities whose sessions had stopped took up using the virtual platforms mentioned above. One professional stated that they attempted '*to continue sessions via digital platforms but not as regular as once a week*' and another shared that numbers of participants '*built up gradually*' when taken online.

Additionally, four of the professionals surveyed gave examples of adapted additional forms of communicating that they were providing to their CiCCs during the lockdown period: phone, email, IQPost me, Whatsapp (with one noting this was only possible with those over a certain age), Facebook and creating a newsletter. One professional stated that forms of communication such as email '*were not as needed previously when we were seeing children every week at a regular time/venue*'.

Good practice in enabling children and young people's meaningful participation

One local authority stated that better outcomes in recent weeks was due to carrying out face-to-face sessions, admitting that there was a '*poor response over a virtual meeting*'.

For other local authorities, a range of innovative and positive activities were highlighted as examples of good practice that enabled the continued meaningful participation of children and young people. These have been grouped as:

- The young people create and send out wellbeing packs for young people, based on shared experiences of isolation during this time;

- More frequent forms of communication and check ins with CiCC members;

- Newsletter containing stories written by CiCC members and sent out;

- Inclusion of more children who live out of the area where CiCCs are usually held;

- Involvement in external projects;

- Creativity in virtual sessions that continued to allow members to engage in key activities, such as recruitment panels, feedback and training sessions.

Challenges faced by professionals

All eight of the professionals identified challenges they faced during the lockdown and in the subsequent months that followed, where they tried to get the CiCCs back to meeting. These included:

- The difficulty of facilitating meetings in a virtual space. This included young people being unable to adapt to such spaces and to fully engage, which was a difficulty shared across all eight local authorities, as well as one of the professionals identifying their own technical skillset and being unable to provide appropriate activities for an online meeting. They expressed that this made it difficult to capture the views of children and young people. Another professional identified the lack of support from Foster Carers and their inability to help facilitate children and young people's participation.

- The changing nature or purposes of the meeting. Online meetings became more of an informal catch-up rather than productive meetings where discussions, debates and decisions about important matters take place.

- Trying to recruit new members.

- Reduced staff numbers and increased workload.

- Organising dates and times when all children and young people could participate.

- Not being able to take issues forward.

Challenges faced by children and young people

Some professionals identified more general challenges such as young people experiencing loneliness during this time, lack of routine and financial worries. Others identified challenges more specific to participating in CiCC activities:

- One participant identified lack of internet access;

- Finding use of the virtual platforms challenging (for example not wanting to be on camera and lack of confidence in technology skills);

- Lack of support to engage from foster carers;

- Online fatigue.

Sometimes challenges (personal and participatory) appear to overlap, for example one respondent identified that isolation has been the cause for young people not wanting to engage with the CiCC.

Positive lessons carried forward: a 'toolkit of participation'

Given that the survey was sent to participants during another national lockdown in January 2021, a final question was asked about whether any of the practices learnt and used during the first lockdown were being implemented during the current lockdown. All respondents identified that continued communication with CiCC members (via telephone, email, WhatsApp and home visits) was a practice that has been useful to carry forward. All suggested

that maintaining an online presence (the use of Zoom meetings for example) alongside face-to-face sessions has been positive. One respondent identified 'developing a toolkit of participation' that includes continued use of Zoom to hold events, as well as other creative methods such as the use of film and staff filming themselves doing craft demonstrations (particularly for virtual events with younger CiCC group).

Finally, we wanted to ask what positive lessons could be learned from this period that could be used in the future in similar situations. Respondents suggested that facilitating a mixture of online and face-to-face has been a valuable lesson. Online is good for some types of work or activities, but face-to-face is necessary for other types of work. This seems to suggest that methods of communication depend on different types and level of participation needed from the children and young people.

Other positive lessons included:

- Learning to adapt to meet the needs of the young people, including new ways of doing things, such as learning new skills that can help run more creative meetings that enable meaningful participation.

- Having time for reflection; for one respondent this has meant that they have been able to see how important the CiCC is a 'social group' and how important they are in terms of decision making within the local authority.

These findings illustrate that positive lessons include a mixture of practical lessons, such as finding ways and learning new skills to improve online sessions to support meaningful participation. But some lessons are more focused on how to 'do' or support a CiCC and their members more generally. For example, one lesson shared was:

To be more understanding, no one expected the year we have experienced and in difficult times priorities change and sometimes we have to accept this. We need never give up but maybe go back to the drawing board and think about what we can do differently. [...] We plan to go back to basics, develop and change our group in a way that meets our young people's needs.

Qualitative research findings

Changes within the CiCC since the onset of Covid-19 lockdowns

Work prior to the pandemic

Prior to the lockdowns which began in March 2020, CiCCs met in person and engaged in a range of activities. The frequency of these meetings varied between Local Authorities, although most were fortnightly or weekly – sometimes more often, if a large project was being carried out. One young person said that the CiCC groups in their Local Authority were broken down into an older group (14-20) and a younger group (8-13), who met (prior to Covid) on alternate weeks. Within this, subgroups were organised around individual projects. The common factor was that all CiCCs are explicitly led by the young people:

We're basically in charge of the meetings, basically. I mean, [the CiCC Lead] is there, 'cos she's got to be for legal reasons. But yeah, we can chair the meetings; we can bring up whatever we want, really.

Young person, creative workshop

The meetings were not always about policy; they also involved day trips etc., with a focus on enjoyment and building relationships between their members:

Basically, we went like on trips and stuff; we used to go to [outdoor education centre]; we used to erm go Laser Quest and stuff like that.

Young person, creative workshop

In one Local Authority, the CiCC meetings had returned to being held in person in the summer of 2020 and remained in person during the second and third lockdowns in England in late 2020 and early 2021, but this had necessitated moving to a different building with larger rooms to allow for social distancing. Pre-Covid, the group met in what they called a "chill out room", which they preferred:

We had Wi-Fi and a games console, an Xbox… when we were in the other building, it's got a TV for Xbox and this building just doesn't have anything.

Young person, creative workshop

The move online

Perceptions of moving the CiCC meetings online were mixed. It was acknowledged that this solved a lot of problems during lockdown and saved time in terms of travel, reflecting findings by Roberts (2020), but the general feeling was that online meetings were more stilted, and 'Zoom fatigue' was an issue.

I've got really bad mental health right. Let's just say I don't like doing it online at all, it's just boring, I'm not going to lie, because you cannot do activities like in person… Like literally, I just fall asleep looking at the screen… so like for me, when I was doing virtual for college all day, I would fall asleep during some of the lessons… It can be bad for you, because you can get addicted to it as well.

Young person, creative workshop

In line with previous studies (Roberts et al. 2021) technical issues were a factor for some young people, as well as the need to get outside, even if only between school/college and CiCC.

It's really bad for you to stay indoors all the time and finishing college earlier on a Zoom call, I mean I did sometimes, because my internet was going off and that, on and off.

Young person, creative workshop

If you think about it, it's really lazy if you know what I mean like, you cannot just sit in the house and do online courses all day, you know? It's too lazy, and you can put a bit of weight on if you sit down all day as well at the same time, which is not good for your health.

Young person, creative workshop

The consensus among CiCC leads was that, in the context of the pandemic, the only real advantage of moving online was being able to continue the meetings.

We tried virtual… But they just didn't want to do it. Erm, we got a couple in, but compared to how many we normally have attending, they just didn't like doing [it]… And I think a lot of it was down to them having to do Teams, or Zoom or whatever for college and school and stuff like that, so having to come back on it is a lot.

CiCC Lead, LA2

That particular Local Authority was able to find a suitable venue and the meetings were moved back in person in September 2020, after the first lockdown but before the second lockdown.

We got a venue. One of our buildings has got enough space… It's an old gym, so it was a really large space for them to be able to come in and meet face to face

again socially distanced following guidance, which again, is difficult but they did so they could meet... We ran face-to-face all the way through [the second and third lockdown in line with guidance].

CiCC Lead, LA2

Unfortunately, not all Local Authorities had these types of facilities, so these remained online throughout the pandemic. The numbers of young people attending the online CiCC meetings declined across all Local Authorities, especially the younger CiCC members, as noted in LA3.

P: The numbers have dropped connecting with CiCC virtually. That's the challenge. And then when we come out of this... We've just started the younger group face-to-face... We're on our third meeting.

I: Right. Yeah. And is the older group going to meet face-to-face as well?

P: We're still debating it, 'cos it's easier to connect online.

I: Yeah. Oh right, okay. So the older young people are quite happy meeting online still?

P: They are but there's a lot of young people won't...

CiCC Lead, LA3

For LA1, the CiCCs moved from weekly to fortnightly meetings after going online.

I think, because of the nature of the sessions, they were different; they felt a bit more intense, erm, we spent a bit of time as staff, really, trying to work out how we manage those situations and the fact that only one person can speak, erm, how you engage people, erm, as faces on a screen, as our young people, was completely different, as you can imagine, to being in the room. And the

whole kind of physicality of that interaction and engagement and how you grab people's attention and how you look at different topics... So I think for us as a staff team, it was a big big learning curve and I remember the early weeks of switching to Zoom, we would meet after the sessions and talk about how exhausted we were from doing a 45 minute session; it was ridiculous. But it was almost like... Well, this is what live TV must feel like, because we were doing stuff on the hoof and reacting and of course, very mindful of all of those faces on the screen and how do we make sure everyone's okay? That they're interested? That they're involved, that they feel listened to? That they feel seen? And also, how do we adapt our activities and our engagement to maintain those groups?

CiCC Lead, LA1

However, they have recently resumed face-to-face meetings, which have been more popular.

I think when our young people talk about not having to travel, or whatever, I think, absolutely. They could just sit down and log on, but its noticeable that since we've come back to face-to-face – and I don't know about you, but it's been tipping down here over the last couple of weeks – everybody's still been pitching up on the door and we've got one young person who's out of borough. And the next borough, who again, has been here for the last three weeks. So I think... I think my observation of the groups is that they do much prefer being in each other's company and being here face to face.

CiCC Lead, LA1

Acknowledging the risks associated with social contact, the CiCC lead for LA1 organised in-person activities between lockdowns for the young people.

[There was] a high level of anxiety around the pandemic and the safety of our children and young people. Between the lockdowns, so July last year, we did get both groups together down to our water centre in the harbour and we went kayaking. We knew that we would be a kayak oars' distance apart, so we could

guarantee the social distancing.

CiCC Lead, LA1

Given that CiCCs represent only a small proportion of all the young people in care, recruiting new members is important. One significant drawback of meeting online was bringing new members into the CiCC, as meeting virtually was considered more anxiety-inducing than in person. Problems with recruiting to CiCCs further compounded the issue highlighted by Atkinson et al (2015), that many children, especially those in out-of-county placements or in the youth justice system, still do not have a voice within Children's Services.

When we bring new people into the group, we'll do a home visit and then we'll bring them along and I think we'd struggled with the idea of bringing people into a virtual space where they don't know anybody and they may have only met myself or one of my team once and we just thought that wasn't... It didn't feel safe and it didn't feel comfortable.

CiCC Lead, LA1

The same types of difficulty also created problems when introducing senior managers to the group, as it was felt that online communication was less naturalistic.

So introducing the person, what their role is, what they can do for them... What do you want to know? What can we ask? What activities should we do with them while they're here, so you can get to know them? And doing all of that on the much more limited... On Zoom.

CiCC Lead, LA1

The benefit of not needing to travel to meetings is predictable (although the effect of 'Zoom fatigue' might not have been predicted so easily). This increased convenience for the CiCC members as well as for the senior

managers who could also attend.

I think with Covid and stuff, it's made me involved a lot more with CiCC because I don't have to be in [LA3] all the time. I think it's allowed us all to meet up with like, higher-end people, 'cos they can't back out and be like: "oh, I can't get to [LA3]" and stuff like that. 'Cos it's like virtual; they can just hop on a computer. So we've had the CEO of [LA3] Council and talked about budgeting and stuff like that.

Young person, creative workshop

So like, the [LA2] Council, which I think if Covid wasn't a thing and we didn't have to do it virtually, I don't know if like... Not that many people would have attended, because obviously, [LA2] is a bit of a trek to get to [LA3] and we have our meetings quite late... I think it allows a lot more people to get involved. Like, it's just an email and then you just hop on a call. It's not like loads of time of your day, I think.

Young person, creative workshop

Corporate Parenting Panels

Corporate Parenting Panels (CPPs) are made up of local counsellors and senior managers, who make strategic decision about children in care. They are a key part of the Children's Services infrastructure, which the CiCCs engage with. In LA4, the CPP meets quarterly and CiCC members are able to attend should they wish to do so. However, the CPP meetings are quite formal, so instead, the young people tend to review the meeting documents in advance and can comment on any issues. This raises issues about accessibility:

If the authors [of the meeting documents] just explain in a more 'young person friendly' way, like, "this is what the report is about; this is why we've done it; do you have any questions? Because ultimately these impact on you", and then they would always have a space on the board for them to present maybe any

questions they had for the councillors...

CiCC Lead, LA4

In LA4, the CPP meetings have continued but since the pandemic, CiCC members have not been invited. It is not exactly clear why this is the case or if the young people can contact the CPP panel members, but it seems this avenue for informing strategic policy decisions is now unavailable.

Pre-Covid, we ran regular corporate parenting meetings, where our young people, our Children in Care Councils had a regular slot; they had good relationships with them. But that all stopped during Covid; they didn't even go online, so obviously the impact on them key strategic decisions was probably nil.

CiCC Lead, LA4

LA3 was able to adapt CPP / CiCC meetings online, and the CiCC lead felt that the young people's critiquing process had improved since this.

I: So thinking back to your overview of the main things, which is influencing, critiquing services they have, how do you think that changed as a result of Covid and moving online? Do you think they had more or less opportunities to have an influence?

P: I thought they had more... We sharply moved to an engagement process; what I would call mini Corporate Parenting Panel meetings, made up of senior managers and the CPP chair and vice chair, which provided a platform for young people to engage in, share ideas and opinions of senior management and then that could be filtered back down, which resulted in quite a lot, actually. Quite a lot of change during Covid.

CiCC Lead, LA3

Because of the disruption caused by the pandemic and moving online, the relationship between CiCC members and Corporate Parenting Panels varied between Local Authorities. This is important, as the connections between CiCCs and the wider Children's Services network are critical. One CiCC lead described that when they started their post (pre-Covid), it was a single-person role, but he has brought in more staff, fractionally, from different areas, to make the CiCC more cohesive with the wider organisation.

One young person recalled a 'speed networking event', done in person with senior managers prior to the pandemic. While such events can be conducted online using breakout rooms, this has not been attempted during the pandemic. Nevertheless, managers have asked the CiCC lead if they can do a similar event again, due to staff turnover etc. One CiCC lead noted that many of the activities they did pre-Covid, such as having regular Q and A sessions with the Head of Children's Services, had fallen by the wayside due to personnel change.

We had a Q and A with the Director and the Head of Children's Service every six months and we also had the Chief Exec would come once a year on a general meeting but they would also come along and do like, Christmas Card judging, which again, it was... yeah, it was judging the Christmas cards but it was just a vehicle for involvement.

CiCC Lead, LA1

Work during the pandemic

During lockdown, most CiCC meetings continued with a similar frequency and sometimes more often depending on the activity or campaign undertaken. Some young people were paid to attend meetings or to be involved with specific projects or campaigns.

P1: And there was like a period... I don't know if it was just at the end of the first lockdown or something, where we were having like, two meetings a week. Maybe three sometimes.

P2: Yeah, there was like one every day at one point.

P4: And I know it's not about the money. But like, during the first lockdown, I'm pretty sure I got about £200 off [LA3] for all the different meetings I was doing, in my bank.

Young people, focussed conversation

It is unclear if these payments happened only after the lockdown. Many of the activities that CiCC were involved in are clearly work and as such should members be paid for their time undertaking them, such as running training sessions. Being paid to attend meetings might have played a role in reducing attrition, although the lower attendances precluded some discussion type activities.

Even though [Council name] [were running], they didn't get like, everyone attending. Sometimes I was the only one who was there... So it was just really hard and stuff.

Young person, creative workshop

...loads of people don't like using cameras and stuff, so that's why lots of our members didn't come tonight, 'cos they don't like using Zoom and all that... But once the restrictions eased, we were allowed to meet face to face and have like, more numbers and lots of people joined and we all went into a big room.

Young person, creative workshop

Getting new members to join the CiCCs was more difficult during the pandemic, so recruitment was frozen across most Local Authorities.

Because we weren't recruiting; nobody wanted to seem... Well, they seemed to not want to join, so we decided that we would kind of put a freeze on, you know, recruiting, just because it was difficult carrying out the virtual meetings.

CiCC Lead, LA5

The young people agreed that things are better now the restrictions are easing, although not the same as before.

Obviously now we're out of lockdown, it was still odd, 'cos we all had to like, social distance; we were only allowed a certain amount of people in and then we've come to different board rooms and stuff, so it's just been odd.

Young person, creative workshop

I would say when we started actually coming in, it was really useful, 'cos it was like actually seeing people. 'Cos like before that, there was like, no one, basically. It was like... It was nice to actually see people for a change.

Young person, creative workshop

Virtual meetings are now commonplace, so the range of options around how to meet has increased. Despite experiencing 'Zoom fatigue' and other disadvantages with online meetings, the young people recognised the potential advantages of running hybrid-type meetings.

I know a lot of people enjoy it face to face, but like, travel as well. People might find it more convenient to do it online because of how far away... Like, we could try and implement, like, both. So have like, them on the big board or something like that.

Young person, focussed conversation

But now that, like, everything's going back to normal, like kind of... Like, virtual meetings will still be a thing, but like, it's definitely helped me because I could

actually communicate while I was in lockdown.

Young person, creative workshop

Much of the CiCC work during lockdown centred on helping others, such as key workers and other care experienced young people who might be struggling. Such activities are laudable and 'vehicles for engagement'. While this might indicate 'drift', away from the more policy-focussed work, it is important to have a range of different activities to ensure a wide range of impact at different levels and it also helps maintain morale amongst children who attend CiCCs. The young people generally saw the value in such activities.

We've helped make thank-you cards for the key workers and stuff and we made, like Care Experience packages, so like food for people who were living independently in homes and flats and all that... And then recently, we've just managed to get loads of money for foster care fortnight, so we made care packages for the foster carers.

Young person, creative workshop

Altruistic activities also had a wellbeing element. Numerous small comments illustrated a strong sense of empathy among the young people, who clearly valued supporting other care experienced people who weren't necessarily in the CiCC. This type of outreach work is important given that the large majority of young people in care are not in CiCCs.

> *During Covid for me, my [Council name] helped me keep my focus by [offering] a care package or the care experienced young people who were in their own flat and that and who were struggling with Covid to help them out.*

> Young person, creative workshop

During the early stages of lockdown, most leads maintained contact with CiCC members in various ways, including via text and telephone, and going for walks (with dogs). However, this was not consistent for all the young people.

P3: Yeah, we had the occasional cards and things to do but I think it would have been nice if we had something every other week. We did have a few things but not a lot and it would be nice if we had things that... Doesn't even have to do with the [Council name] really. I don't know, an activity pack. Like an activity pack every couple of weeks or something.
P1: We got activity packs... Or did you not get one? Where it had like the colourings in and the word searches and the hot chocolate and some marshmallows.'

Young people, focussed conversation

Moving to an online format allowed one CiCC lead to reorganise some of the previous CiCC activities, dividing an overarching project into smaller activities that could be run more concurrently but which were still linked.

> *...it gave us a real overarching project that we could involve our [different age groups] because they all had some kind of, erm, level of ownership of that review stuff and some kind of interest... It had to be done in a different way, so it's accessible to the young people. Erm, and there was a range of other things, like the [pre-teens] picked up the 'know your IROs', the [early teens] did 'what is a social worker' and 'what is a review' leaflets, with erm, the rights and responsibilities attached to that... And what we were able to do is spread the projects out across the groups but do it in such a way that they were all contributing to one big project and the care leavers would act as a kind of sense check to all of that.*

> CiCC Lead, LA1

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Of the young people who attended focus groups or artist-led sessions, most reported that their mental health and emotional wellbeing had been negatively affected during the pandemic. Some of these responses provide the context for more specific comments relating to CiCCs. Recurring concepts included 'living in the unknown', a 'roller-coaster' of emotions and the idea of a 'return to normal'.

I've put 'living in the unknown' and then like, normal-ish and like, family, friends, relieved, scared, all of that… Mixed emotions.

Young person, creative workshop

For mine, I've chosen family, anxiety.

Young person, creative workshop

Covid for me has been a rollercoaster of emotions. Some of it's been bad at the beginning, then the middle and then good or just been bad altogether, if that makes sense.

Young person, creative workshop

There were some specific examples of resilience in the face of challenges:

Seeing how strong you actually are, 'cos if someone had told me I'm going to be in a global pandemic for a year, I wouldn't have thought I was fine; I would have thought I'd have been going mad. But we've all survived. We all made it through.

Young person, creative workshop

Erm, basically, wanting to drop out of college because I was feeling isolated and like, lonely because I didn't know anyone and as a result of that, I had like, panic attacks and my anxiety became like too much, but I didn't, like… Out of all the
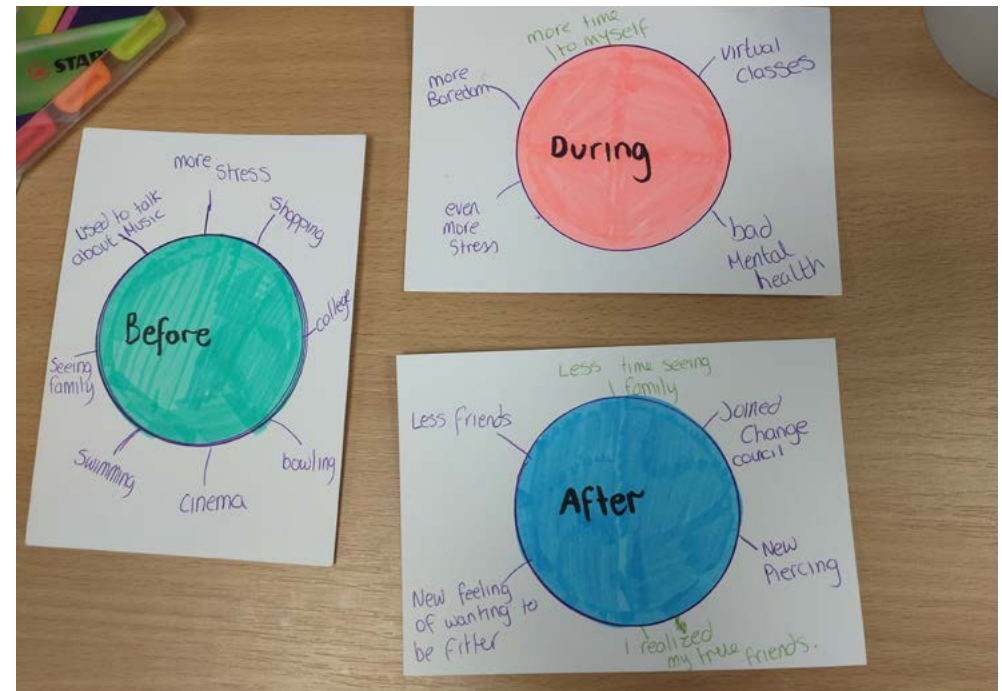
support around us, I didn't drop out and I stuck in and now I've became like an A star student and I'm progressing onto my next year of college to go to university next term.

Young person, creative workshop

Resilience also manifested in a certain amount of positivity and reflection. One young person focussed on things beginning to improve; another recognised that their time during lockdown had allowed them to reflect on their life and their goals.

Breathe. I chose the word breathe. Because now we're actually starting to get out of lockdown, we can breathe a bit better now.

Young person, creative workshop

Realisation is probably the main one for me, because it's like... I've sort of realised a lot of things. Including like, who my friends are, like what I actually want to do in life. Like, it might sound weird but who I actually am. What my purpose...

[That's incredible. Is that because of the pandemic?]

Yeah, because I've sort of had like, time to think about... So I've sort of realised what my purpose is. Like, why I am who I am.

Young person, creative workshop

Being part of a CiCC had positive emotional impacts. Aside from the support they provided, the routine of having regular CiCC meetings helped mitigate some of these issues for the young people.
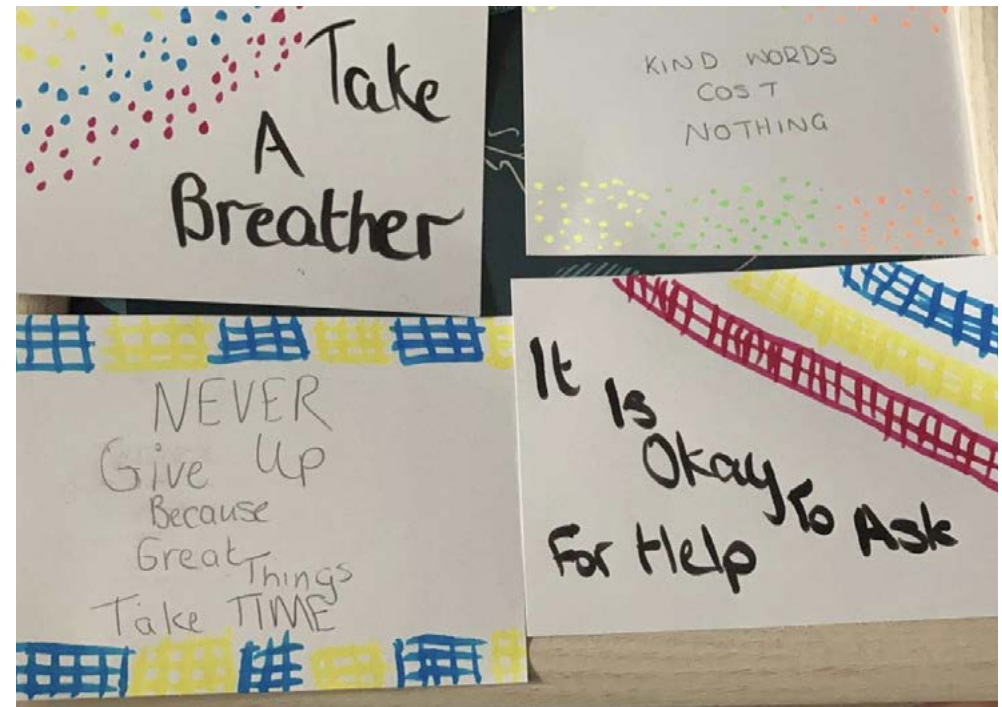
[Council name] was the only thing that was normal and getting the extra things to do, like making the cards for the key workers that were going in and doing the drawings on the front of the cards and stuff... I think doing all that was just normal. Something normal to keep us all going.

Young person, creative workshop

The role of animals

Several young people mentioned animals, which clearly play a key role in wellbeing. This is well-known in terms of the benefits to both physical and mental health (Morris 2018 and Carr and Rockett 2017). Dog walking was mentioned specifically, as well as the easing of anxiety. Given that many people spent more time outside during the pandemic, this prompted opportunities for some young people to spend time with other people's dogs – a great example of relationship-based practice (Morris 2018 and Carr and Rockett 2017).

I just mainly spend time in [name]'s room and going on dog walks, 'cos I got to meet her two dogs as well, like my social worker's two dogs. As well as my six dogs... They helped us with my anxiety and they helped us when I lost my dad,

'cos they were just there and like, they were comforting.

Young person, creative workshop

I was thinking about my dog and, you know, thinking about how things have progressed since I've got my dog to when I sat and saw my dog and how things got worse and better.

Young person, creative workshop

The importance of animals in young people's lives was a topic of interest across CiCCs. This had led to at least one CiCC campaigning to change residential and foster home rules about allowing animals and keeping pets, constituting policy change at a local level.

The campaign about the importance of animals in young people's lives and they felt more could be done in line with the importance of animals in children and young people's lives in care. Not all, but a high proportion of young people seem to have really positive relationships with animals… The result of that, the young people's homes in [LA3] developed a strategy and a process to allow more animals to come into the house. That included bringing in their dogs for the day, or they might be able to come in for an overnighter. They also changed – and I don't like using this word – we campaigned to call them 'safety plans' rather than risk assessments, and that's young people doing this – they even would have risk assessments in regards for an animal what might be at a foster carer's house.

CiCC Lead, LA3

Briheim-Crookall (2016, n.p.) notes the significance of pets, particularly dogs, for looked-after children. She notes, "pets cheered children up and were always happy to see them. They provided children with opportunities to learn how to be caring and there is some evidence that animals can help children manage trauma. Social workers can encourage carers, including residential settings, to keep pets."

Stigma

Stigma is a recurrent problem for children in care (*Rogers, 2017*). LA3 launched 'Positive Matters', a campaign to challenge stigma, in early 2021. Young people's experiences of stigma had affected their wellbeing but had also led to CiCC activities around training police officers and around the language used in Children's Services. While this study does not examine the nature of stigma per se, it does recognise tackling the stigma children in care face as a driver underpinning many of the CiCC activities.

I think, like, when you're in foster care, it's a knee-jerk, just 'you're different to me' just because of the things we get and the things we're known by and stuff like that.

Young person, creative workshop

Let's say I was playing football; we would break a window, it was clearly one of my friends or someone else we were playing with. All the parents would come to this house and say it was me, 'cos I was in foster care, 'cos they just immediately think that people in foster care have to be naughty; that's why they're in care… And everyone believes it.

Young person, creative workshop

This was a source of vexation for several young people, although not in relation to the pandemic. One of the CiCC participants had created a podcast in which the social stigma of being in care and its effects were discussed. As an activity organised through their CiCC, this was an excellent and creative opportunity for that young person to get their voice heard.

More generally, in relation to stigma and being made to feel different, the young people all demonstrated an acute awareness of mental health.

And they don't take into consideration that there is outside factors other than our behaviours and some of us may very well get angry at the fact we're in care, 'cos we feel like it's a punishment and it affects our mental health; we're on waiting lists for ages.

Young person, creative workshop

They recognised the issue of mental health being a wider societal concern, heightened during the pandemic, which needs to be addressed and normalised as part of an educational curriculum.

I: What would you ask Boris to do?

P2: More mental health support. Not just for care kids but for everyone. There's so many people that I know of and like, myself and like, other people have just been struggling so much with not having people around them and not being able to leave the house… There needs to be more knowledge about mental health because I feel like you don't know about it until secondary school, if that, and I feel like they should do like, mental health wellbeing classes for like, people in primary school. Because, like, me and [name] are part of a mental health groups, which are trying to promote changes and everyone says that they only really intervene when people are in crisis and when people are really struggling. Whereas they should be like, helping people beforehand… It should be the curriculum because if all of us talked about anxiety and about ways to support yourself and ways to help yourself, then not as many people would be in crisis or would be struggling so much now.

I: Whose responsibility do you think that is?

P2: Everyone's. Like safeguarding's everyone's responsibility. What's the difference with mental health? Mental health is just as severe as anything else that's going on with people.

Young person, creative workshop

We have data about how the young people were feeling during lockdown, as well as what they perceived to be the major factors affecting wellbeing for all children in care. This did not always relate to the work of CiCCs, but has potential to inform some of the activities, projects and campaigns done by those groups. Nationally, the loss of social contact due to school closures, as well as increased risks of domestic abuse and loss of a 'safe space', have contributed to a decline in mental wellbeing generally (*Barnardo's, 2020*). Feelings of loneliness and anxiety were increased during lockdown for children in care, especially care leavers (*NYAS, 2020*). In Wales, the biggest impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on children's wellbeing were social: not being able to spend time with friends, not being able to visit family members and school or college closing (*Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020*).

The role of CiCCs in mental health and emotional wellbeing

The question of how CiCCs supported the young people's mental health tended to hinge around social interaction, although some CiCC meetings were seen as an opportunity for some informal counselling, if needed:

[The care counsellor] gave us time out of her busy schedule to talk about how we were feeling and that, when we were on the Zoom calls and that.

Young person, creative workshop

For some, CiCC was the only routine they had in their lives and helped stave off boredom.

[Council name] was the only thing that was normal that was going on in my life. I wasn't allowed to attend school; it was all remote. They weren't asking for any work to be sent to them so I literally had nothing to do.

Young person, creative workshop

Having a voice within the Local Authority was not only important for influencing policy but had also been helpful in terms of personal development:

> [The CiCC Lead]'s helped me get involved with [an agency within Children's Services] a lot more and it's helped with my like, confidence and anxiety.
>
> Young person, creative workshop

One young person, who had been involved with the CiCC and was now involved with a theatre group, had been producing shows with the aim of highlighting stigma associated with being a care experienced young person but also highlighting the lack of mental health support. However, this study did not explore other mental health services available to this group of people.

The social element

It was initially assumed that having a 'voice', a sense of agency, would be most important, given the stated remit of the CiCCs – but the data suggest that the young people were more invested in the social rather than the agentic benefits of the group. This suggests that either (a) the groups' activities incorporated a strong social element, even if the primary aim was focussed on influencing policy; or (b) that opportunities to socialise in groups outside of the CiCC were lacking. If (a), this can be seen as an oblique benefit of the group, as long as it does not indicate 'mission creep'. Socialisation and 'having a voice' are not mutually exclusive, although this places some pressure on CiCCs to fulfil multiple needs.

While the CiCC leads were focussed on supporting the young people to have their 'voice' heard, they recognised that mental wellbeing and the social element could at times be more important, not least during a pandemic. When the meetings went online, one lead commented:

> They weren't together as a group and I think that's one of our biggest things during Covid, for that social interaction to support young people who are isolated. Erm… So it was massive for them and to be fair, the feedback that I got from the young people all the time was like: when can we meet back up? […] I think that was probably the biggest thing for the young people during this time… but that was the feedback that I got, which is why we worked so hard to bring them back face to face in a social distanced way.
>
> CiCC Lead, LA2

> They have come together really well as a group, so they are friends, do you know what I mean? So it's that sort of social interaction and for some young people, that is more than just making the change, you know? Like, having somewhere where they feel safe and where they can talk to other people and build the social interaction; I think that's really important.
>
> CiCC Lead, LA2

The CiCC leads took the attitude that the group needed to serve the young people as best as possible even if this meant the activity did not always focus on influencing policy making. In that respect, the groups were tailored to the young people's needs in any given moment. During the pandemic, the need for social interaction may well have outweighed the need to communicate with and inform Children's Services senior managers.

> When you talk about what's the purpose of the Children in Care Council and stuff, we have those clear aims in mind and we have projects in mind that we work with our children to identify. But it can be a bit random as well, that if something comes up that's been an issue for a child or young person, it can send us off in a different direction, so we need to be quite responsive to that as well.
>
> CiCC Lead, LA1

Our online stuff was kind of tilted a little bit more towards being sociable and having a bit of fun and staying in touch.

CiCC Lead, LA1

The dual impact of fun and agency was a potent mix; a dual objective of having influence but also meeting as a group of young people in care and creating some memories and enjoyment. This particular lead felt that the social interaction element came a close second to 'being heard'. They also noted that warm and positve relationships were not limited to being solely between children in care but could also exist between young people and staff. and staff. One young person even noted that they felt that they had "made friends with the staff" (YP in Focused Conversation). This is important in linking social interaction and influence.

Primarily, it's around voice and influence; that we want to learn from the experience of children and young people, and give them a voice and the ability to be able to change things and to shape the service from their expertise and the experiences they've had. Erm, a lot of it is about relationships and having a... Whether that's with their peers or with my team as staff; having those regular consistent positive reliable relationships. And it's also about fun.

CiCC Lead, LA1

One young person specifically noted that while they had re-evaluated their friendships during the lockdown, their (2-3 month) involvement in the [Council name] had been helpful, since they were among other care experienced young people.

Because no one that I know, like, my age, are in care. And then when I came here [to the Council], I met quite a few other people who had gone through the same stuff as me, so I can sort of relate to them. And it's actually really nice.

Young person, creative workshop

Another said:

The people here understand what we've been through but our friends outside of this don't know what it's like 'cos they haven't experienced it.

Young person, creative workshop

There are other groups for young people, although this study did not explore these in detail. The Youth Council in LA3 (which aims to give all young people a voice, not just those in care) has a focus on mental health, which piqued one young person's interest.

I've got application forms to join the Youth Council as well, so I'm going to... Like, 'cos I was talking to the Youth Councillor a couple of months back and they were just saying how they work and what different subjects they do in there and like, what they do to help the environment and like, mental health.

Young person, creative workshop

Aside from the campaigns and activities, training sessions, informal interviews of social workers and CV enhancement workshops, the CiCCs enabled other opportunities. For example, one social worker had interviewed a young person for her blog, giving them a voice at a national level.

She's basically said that all the young people she's worked with have made the team complete and I got interviewed about it and I got to speak about how like, the Children in Care Council has changed my life and has given us amazing opportunities, 'cos I would like to become a social worker, so... Yeah. And it's just gone live this afternoon.

Young person, creative workshop

Friendship

Related to the social aspect, several young people mentioned friendship specifically. When asked what they enjoyed the most about the CiCCs, one young person said:

> Just like, you know, seeing friends.

Young person, creative workshop

'Influencing policy' and 'seeing friends' are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible that the social skills and confidence that can be developed through friendships and social interaction will have some effect on young people's co-influencing skills.

Since lockdown, and the difficulties that entailed in relation to socialising, one young person had to re-evaluate who their 'real' friends were. This was not examined in detail but they described feeling a closer connection to the other young people in [Council name].

> For the whole Covid thing, I've sort of realised who my actual friends are. Because like, I did have quite a lot of fake friends, so because of the whole Covid and lockdown and that, I've sort of realised that in reality, they're not really my friends.

Young person, creative workshop

Others commented:

> I've sort of realised a lot of things. Including like, who my friends are. Like, friends and family. You find out who's actually there for you. The people here understand what we've been through but our friends outside of this don't know what it's like 'cos they haven't experienced it.

Young people, creative workshop

Significant aspects of friendship include trust, solidarity and recognition (*Honneth, 1996*).

> What we like about [Council name] is like, it's a safe place. What you talk about in [Council name] usually stays in [Council name] unless it's a safeguarding issue. But like, you can trust each other and you can just talk and you can be honest and stuff and you can, like, what's also nice about [Council name] is that everyone's different.

Young person, focussed conversation

The role and importance of friends in the young people's lives had been previously overlooked by some practitioners and only emerged when they co-produced reports with CiCC members.

> Friendship was massive in the early stages of lockdown. The young people presented a report called 'Circle of Trust'... In their circle of trust was friends. Right in the middle. And that wasn't on the circle of trust by the practitioners. So they campaigned for that to be talked about more in reviews. Talk to our social workers about your friends. Do you see them? How often do you see them? Does your [foster carer] support that and promote that? You know, so that was a big massive thing. The concept of how important that was to care experienced young people.

CiCC Lead LA3

Having a 'voice' within Children's Services

The CiCC activities give a voice to young people in several ways: through involvement with other Children's Services groups; creative activities that feedback on particular aspects of the service; enabling direct contact with senior managers; co-creation of informational or training documents, or campaigns around, for example, language or training.

"Shy bairns get nowt"

Mainly, the young people in this study were not afraid to voice their opinions. Those that had joined the CiCCs had the confidence and self-assurance to not be fobbed off.

Erm, if they're not taken seriously, they're pretty vocal, so... Yeah, they don't get much option to sort of not listen to them... And if they don't feel listened to, they'll tell us.

CiCC Lead LA2

We talk all the time. We always have a voice. We talk too much, really. Some people might not want our opinions and we just give them. Like, erm, if we are unhappy with something, they're going to know about it... at the end of the day, it's making a difference for us; we need our voices to be heard and we're not scared of getting our voices heard...

Young person, focussed conversation

For me, freedom is like being able to do what you want. Like, being able to express yourself as well.

Young person, creative workshop

We have to fight for everything we get. They think we all just get whatever we want and we don't.

Young person, creative workshop

While the young people recognised the importance of having a say in strategic policy relating to their service, they also acknowledged the diversity of each other's needs and the necessity of ensuring others' voices are heard. There was a general recognition – connected to the empathy mentioned previously – that the CiCCs should not be the only place for care experienced young people to be able to voice their opinions.

It's actually really good that the baton is kind of getting passed to other people because as much as I love doing foster care training and I love getting my points across, other people have different ideas and sometimes it's really nice just being able to hear them.

Young person, creative workshop

Some young people don't even want to associate with being looked after. However, they've still got some very good things to say that could, you know, shape the service. So the more one to one work, rather than just thinking I had to get them all in one room, has been, you know, has been [important] for the last year and I think we'll try and continue that.

CiCC Lead, LA5

Importantly, the young people felt 'heard'.

The best thing is, it all gets left down to us as well, so like, [names] and everyone else who works with [LA3], they're like in the background, if that makes sense, and they have little or no involvement, 'cos they say like, it's our training and [LA3] is about us having our own voices.

Young person, creative workshop

The CiCC leads also recognised other pathways for young people to get their voices heard.

The biggest thing is just them having somewhere to go where they feel comfortable voicing their opinions. Obviously they'll always have that option of speaking to social workers and IROs... But, 'cos I'm not a social worker, it's more of an independent voice. For them to come and kind of speak to us. Erm, and for us to support them.

CiCC Lead LA2

One CiCC lead acknowledged the importance of information flowing both ways; that the strategic managers could use the CiCCs to seek feedback on things as well – making the CiCC both a source of ideas and also an evaluation resource.

It has to be about influencing and critiquing the services they have. But... I personally think we should take direction from children and young people... With a bit of flexibility to align it to what practitioners and people within the service want feedback from children and young people on.

CiCC Lead LA3

Direct contact with senior managers

Most commented on the sense of importance they felt in being able to communicate directly with senior managers and they did not feel intimidated by this. The move online was seen as an opportunity to reach more people.

We've definitely been heard more, by like, a lot more people... I think if Covid wasn't a thing and we didn't have to do it virtually, I don't know if like... It might have still happened but it mightn't have like... Not that many people would have attended, because obviously [LA2] is a bit of a trek to get to [LA3] and we have our meetings quite late.

Young person, creative session

Other times, CiCC meetings were held in the same buildings, and managers would drop in ad hoc.

Children's social care are all based in this building, so... Our Director of Children's Social Care comes to pretty much every meeting. Even if he can't stay, he'll always pop in to like, talk to the young people, just see how they're doing and then go off. They all know him. Erm... Yeah. And other managers... And the building that we're in, obviously having directors and managers and things, things get actioned a lot quicker. Because they're there and they can hear it. Do you know what I mean? So they hear it first hand from young people.

CiCC Lead LA2

One young person noted that holding meetings online meant that senior managers were less able to pull out at the last minute, since they were conducting all their meetings from home.

I think it's allowed us all to meet up with like, higher-end people, 'cos they can't back out and be like: "oh, I can't get to [LA3]" and stuff like that. 'Cos it's like virtual; they can just hop on a computer.

Young person, creative session

Meeting managers online or in person broke down barriers for some young people, especially where trust was an issue.

It means getting our voice heard and actually making a difference, so making a positive impact. And like... I like that we can trust all the staff members and things, and we get to know all the staff members and different social workers and what their job is... We can tell them, basically, how they can do their job better. In a nice way, of course... Before, like, you would think if you were seeing the head of one department, you'd be a bit scared to meet them or something, but no, they're just like ordinary people. They're just down to earth and it's nice to like, just have a conversation and have a laugh with them and stuff. Because

at the end of the day, they're just doing their job and they do want to care. And they want our feedback and to know what they can do to help us.

Young person, focussed conversation

This worked both ways; staff felt they could approach young people on the CiCCs to get feedback on ideas or information about specific initiatives or issues. There was a sense that the two-way engagement was sometimes more important that the one-way idea of children influencing strategic decisions. This type of shared decision-making is indicative of CiCCs occupying the higher rungs on *Hart's Ladder of Participation* (1992), as described in the literature review.

We also get to know all the staff, so whenever they've got a question or like, they want our feedback and stuff, we talk to them and they really value our opinions and feedback and everything, which is really nice. And like, even staff outside of [the organisation that runs the CiCC on behalf of LA2], they do come to us and ask things.

Young person, focussed conversation

Opportunities to speak with staff within Children's Services and across other services were framed by CiCC leads as 'networking', which the young people broadly agreed was a good thing. For some, this was considered helpful for their future careers.

P2: It's good as well because like, me and P4 are going into social work and it's nice to like… 'Cos obviously we want to be social workers, so we're going to be working with these people and it's nice to have like, an adult point of view of it and see how it affects the young people around you because like, you're learning from both sides, if that makes sense. 'Cos then we meet with Ofsted and the head of Education and…

P4: I actually interviewed the new Head of Education for [LA3]. I interviewed

him… It felt weird because it was like a normal interview but then afterwards, I was just kind of like: well that's actual… The person that's sitting on the top of our council. But I got that through like, being part of the Children in Care Council.

Young people, focussed conversation

For others, it gave them an insight into the structure of the service and consequently better knowledge of how to have impact using the right pathways.

I think networking's got a lot better for me. Like I've met a lot more people, like, that I didn't know existed in the care system and stuff and I think that'll help if I want to push going further into like, the [LA3] or something, or like, work further into it. And it was just good during Covid… to meet new people online… I've met the… I don't know his official role; [the CiCC lead] just said the CE of [LA3] and he does like, the funding.

Young person, focussed conversation

Much of the contact is fairly informal:

We've got a director, a service manager, team managers, who are more than happy to pitch up to stuff.

CiCC Lead, LA1

However, introducing managers online is less easy than the informal relationships that can be built by sharing the same building – to borrow from organisational language, the 'water cooler moments'.

We've had personnel changes, so our CSU manager's left in that time and when we started the review project, the children knew who she was and would mention her by name, but of course, she's moved and introducing a new person in that

role is easier to do in person when you can do it... As we do with everything in [LA1], it's about the relationships and... Maybe we should have attempted that online, but it's just not as comfortable for young people.

CiCC Lead, LA1

Specific examples of young people's voices being heard

The more creative activities in the CiCCs were an important way for young people to have their voices heard by frontline staff and senior managers. For example, one group decided that instead of presenting to a CPP or challenging senior managers, their opinions would be better expressed through a short film, which they produced. The film was circulated to the relevant staff via online meetings and consequently reached a wider audience.

There was a consensus around the way that they could feed into the reviews and how that could be much better... Erm, so that kicked off with doing a short film with one of the groups... because they didn't want to present in corporate parenting or speak to staff; they said 'let's just capture it... You know, let's get the ideas out and capture how we feel'... One of our young people talked about being really anxious and worried and stressed because they were quite a difficult environment to go into and others talked about not being sure that they had any influence about where they were and we looked at all of that kind of stuff.

CiCC Lead LA1

Some small actions led to major changes in the culture and tone of Children's Services.

One young woman came on a call in June, July last year, and she came on for literally seconds and just said "look, I've been in care a long time and I don't hear enough said positively about young people with care experience" and that's massive. As a result of that, senior management who go to corporate parenting panel now have to come with positive stories... That was because of that young

woman and the members really benefit from that.

CiCC lead, LA3

Young people's critique and engagement has influenced practice:

It's changed the way that the IROs work, that the children had asked for their own version of the plan after the review. So the back part of the consultation document now contains a section where IROs will write down what's happened and what's been decided but my expectation is that they write it in a style and in such a way that it reflects the relationship that they have with that child. So that's really positive and really personal...

CiCC Lead, LA1

One of the main activities, done across the CiCCs, is producing or co-producing literature and information for other care experienced young people. This not only linked into the language campaign but also set the tone in terms of making materials more accessible and less alienating.

You know the booklets that a looked after child gets when it's the next looked after review? It's very old and outdated and they don't really put any colour on it and it's horrendous and some of the letters that they put, some of the words that they put in there are horrendous... "Any breach of this confidentiality may result in prosecution" – in a child's letter... That's aimed at all the way from like, young children to like, 18, 19 year olds and I don't really think, like seven, eight year olds should be... Because they'll be going off, saying "what's prosecution?" and like, they don't want to be hearing that they're going to be locked up... We got the chance to improve it. So we all got the letter and the booklet to take home and we all decided that we were going to make our own letter and then take it in next time we see each other and then put it all together.

Young person, focussed conversation

Me and [another participant], I think it was a couple of months ago... Like, we got given tips on what you need to know about being a looked after child and we got given that to annotate and like, improve.

Young person, creative workshop

Numerous studies over many years have highlighted the negative views children in care have of consultation forms that they fill out prior to review meetings and it is hoped that more creative methods could be considered to fulfil this purpose (*Thomas 2002, Pert et al. 2014, Diaz et al. 2019, Diaz 2020*).

CiCC involvement with the Corporate Parenting Panels are perhaps the most likely avenue for influencing strategic policy.

We're looking at ways to reimagine the corporate parent panel and like, we're coming up with a PowerPoint with a few of the young people to present and make positive changes...

Young person, focussed conversation

We're meeting with the Chief Exec and all of our directors across the board, in the council, to say: look, they've come up with their own presentation; this is what a corporate parent should be; this is how we are. You know, this is what we want... Erm, so to actually say, you know, you're our corporate parent...

CiCC Lead, LA4

Although the majority of the evidence indicated more targeted, practical and immediate changes, for example with housing for young people who are going to live independently:

Say for example, someone from our group wasn't really pleased with the semi-independent flats and stuff, so we got [the housing association] in and talked to them and they're making a difference for them young people and stuff.

Young person, focussed conversation

Or those living in residential homes:

The care homes or children's homes didn't have very good Wi-Fi, so we were able to get it so they've got brand new Wi-Fi that works a lot faster and we did that through getting it brought up through the Children in Care Council. Some of us took it to the Corporate Parent Panel and then they actually did something.

Young person, focussed conversation

Or schools:

Children in Care Councils, they're doing a major project around education and improving outcomes for other children in care based on the attainment gap in GCSEs, and they'd done a huge project and we actually did get some major decisions changed within school. Erm, they put together their recommendations and they were all implemented... We felt that did have some major strategic stuff.

CiCC lead, LA4

In order to, to help combat possible isolation one LA is:

We are currently looking at a mentoring service, so our care experienced young people can be matched with a mentor... Property mentors.

CiCC Lead, LA2

A property mentor would be that person a young person could call during the weekend, as noted as being important by their young people. CiCC Lead, LA2 adds:

'Cos obviously they've got the social worker or the PA but like, for on a weekend and things like that, you've got your out of hours duty and things like that, but it's not about that, so what they were raising is like: just someone to go for a cuppa with, or... I don't know, if the boiler doesn't work on the weekend, like what do they do? Like, you would just ring your mam or dad; they don't have that.

In one LA, following an issue raised by young people moving into independent living, different options about how to improve this transition were explored and meetings are now held with the leaving care service and a local housing provider:

They had to prioritise what they were going to buy for the house, 'cos they're obviously kitting out a full house, do you know what I mean? So when they're moving... So that was discussed, erm, and from having that conversation, obviously our Director of Children's Social Care was here, he talked to the CEO of the housing provider and got him in, so he came along to a meeting pretty quick, erm, to have the conversation with young people, sort of, around different options.
CiCC Lead, LA2

All these examples are positive but are slightly removed from the strategic policy influence the CiCCs were set up to achieve. This is not necessarily the fault or problem of CiCCs. Strategic policy is often ingrained in wider structures and can be somewhat intractable, especially from the bottom up. The CiCC members did not always have the relevant higher-level information, experience or regular joint working with senior managers or broader perspective they needed to properly inform strategic policy. However, the changes they did achieve had more immediate impacts that directly affect young people.

Because of this, we believe the stated intention of the CiCCs could be better aligned with their actual achievements. While aspiring to influence high-level strategic policies and decision-making is laudable, this is difficult and somewhat detracts from the real and direct changes being made at operational levels. One of our recommendations therefore is to recognise both types of influence as important CiCC aims.

Key campaigns

Training of professionals

The **police training session** in LA3 generated a great deal of positive feedback from the officers involved. However, the language used in the feedback document implies that many of the officers who attended were unaware of their impact on young people, especially those in care.

I feel less than everyone else already. Don't make it worse.
Young person, police training

The young people went 'I think we should develop training to our police in [LA3]'. Last Thursday, they facilitated a pilot session with 12 senior police officers, linked to the safeguarding team aligned to some practitioners on the beat. And that was extremely powerful and that was led by young people aged between 10 and 20. [That was on] Relationships. Safety. Communication... I mean, it was quite diverse. You had like, a 12 year old talking about the... the connection he'd had with police because of his family. Let's say that. As a result of that, on and off, they'd been to his house, been in, been out, you know...? He's aligned that to trauma. And then we had a 20 year old who has a lot of knowledge around CSE.
CiCC lead, LA3

There is some overlap with the language campaign:

We're talking about how the police like, approach like, looked after children and changing their language that they use when they speak to us.

Young person, creative workshop

One young person had further suggestions to improve the police training programme:

I spoke to [name] at the end of the interview with the police commissioners about my idea of getting a few other young people in to do something similar to what we did on Thursday... Like the young people who have had traumatic experiences with the police before and trying to build bonds with the police back again to see them for themselves, instead of the uniform.

Young person, creative workshop

The **Social Worker training sessions** were also led by the young people:

So that training is amazing and that's all ran by young people. So we took that virtually. We weren't sure how that would work... The young people embraced it and were really good. The feedback was really powerful... And the young people developed that and have tweaked the training session a couple of times during lockdown. I think, if I've got my numbers right, during that lockdown period, I think they supported 28 future foster carers with that training and that seems to be the most [popular?] training led by the young people because the evaluations suggest that.

CiCC lead, LA3

It's also to helped to see if these practitioners or these social workers are going to be good at the job. So in the past, if we haven't liked someone that we're interviewing, we've said it to like, the other professionals and the ones that are running it and they've not got the job or they've been given feedback on how they can improve.

Young person, creative workshop

Involving young people in social work professionals' interviews has become policy in some Local Authorities which is a very positive development. It is not clear if the idea originated with the CiCCs – but CiCC members are involved with this.

Yeah, now every social worker that goes for an interview or, I think it's every professional that works with children and young people have to have a young person's interview.

Young person, creative workshop

Not only did the young people enjoy interviewing and training police officers and social workers, and knew the value of it, they also indicated that this might not have happened without Covid:

P3: I would like to interview more high up people; I would like to help improve the police and social workers and independent reviewing officers...

P1: Yeah, I enjoyed the training. And speaking with like, potential foster carers and social workers, that was like the first time I've done that, like Covid was the first time I've had the chance to do that and that was fun.

Young people, focussed conversation

Future training is also planned for corporate parent panel members.

So our young people are going to deliver some training to the corporate parents around what corporate parenting should be like and what they sort of want from our corporate parents but that's another thing that we're just working on at the moment.

CiCC Lead, LA2

Language campaign

The young people recognised and immediately understood the impact of language. Compared with high-level policies, the language used in relation to young people has arguably broader effects on power dynamics, culture and the ethos of Children's Services. The campaign emerged from conversations around stigma, and from the back of a national campaign, 'Language that Cares' led by The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT).

Sometimes people… They say "slipped through the net" and that's a nice way of saying they just forgot about us or the they didn't give us the right help when we needed it. But they label us problem children and try to leave [us] behind.

Young person, creative workshop

Like, we've done a change the language campaign and we've chose things that are making a massive difference. Like we really hated the words 'contact' or like, 'challenging behaviour' or things like that, and it's like our own personal experience, so making it better and like, stuff like that…

Young person, focussed conversation

Yeah, like we've changed 'contact' to 'family time' and that, so now all the social workers in [LA3] use the language that we've came up with, so like, 'family time' and like, placements are called 'homes', 'cos it's our home, not a placement.

Young person, focussed conversation

It's come from changes that [the young people have] decided… Obviously we use 'family time' instead of 'contact'… Erm, that's already changed. Erm, we don't use 'LAC' or 'Looked After Children' any more, or we shouldn't be, so it's 'cared for'. And 'Care Leavers' we don't use anymore; it's 'Care Experienced'… And 'Placements'. We shouldn't be using 'Placements', it's 'house' or 'home'. Erm, so yeah. That's just a few of the changes that they've started to make… I'll tell

you what they've centred on recently, the word 'vulnerable'. We've done a lot of work with language and a couple of young people spoke to me about "we're not vulnerable"… So now they're looking at getting rid of that word in the council.

CiCC lead, LA3

The campaign emerged naturally and independently in different CiCCs from conversations between the young people and managers. This more organic change – and the large-scale initiative it has given rise to – is likely to have a greater impact on multiple levels than tweaking individual policies within limited parameters. These types of change more directly impact young people's wellbeing and are expected to be more far-reaching.

I think it's just conversations that have been had with sort of, erm, senior managers and directors and things like that with our young people and sort of… It's sort of naturally evolved. So conversations they've sort of had around language and then, how young people are saying "well, I hate it when they say this, or that, and…"

CiCC Lead, LA2

Magic wand

We asked participants: if they had a 'magic wand', what would they change about the CiCCs? Many were happy with the way these were run already, although some answers related to timings – especially of last-minute sessions. Most answers related to the current Covid restrictions:

I just hate doing it online.

Young person, creative workshop

Probably being able to attend regional meetings in person. 'Cos I'd rather do that than go virtual. It would be much better if we could attend it in person, where we

have all the professionals there and everything.

[The regional ones?]

Yeah, where all the CiCCs are there. Like [Local Authority names]... Where they all are there, with all the professionals and we like, deliver workshops. That would be what I would like in the future, for the regional meetings to go in person.

Young person, focussed conversation

Equipment and resources, or items related to stress relief, engagement or alleviating boredom:

For children in care, I'd probably say something like, I don't know, like having a laptop for schoolwork and having like books and everything... Books to like write in and everything, so we've got like something that they can jot their things in.

Young person, creative workshop

I've put down like fidget toys, like something to keep the children like calm and like less stressed... It helps relieve stress and stuff, yeah. Brilliant.

Young person, creative workshop

We could have done [Council name] challenges to try and get everyone in. So, for example, if there was a prize, even just a little pack of sweets or something, maybe that would have encouraged people to come onto the Zoom.

Young person, focussed conversation

One young person suggested a 'survival pack' in case of future lockdowns:

Well if we were in lockdown again, I would say we had to have a survival pack ready. Like a plan of action; what is going to happen, like... Things to send out that are already prepared...

[Tell me a bit more about what would be in that survival pack].

Food... [laughs]. Cheddar cheese. Things like that... Maybe like, little... You know flip calendars? You can get ones like that but with positive quotes. Maybe instead of doing positive quotes, where you could have that one as well, you could write a little challenge a day, saying like, 'try and get this many steps today', 'try and maybe socially distanced visit a friend...' Something like that, where you've got something new each day to do, so it's not the same all boring stuff, really... Like a note to like, the younger generation or to yourself, saying what you've found helpful during lockdown because no one had been in lockdown before. Like, I had no one to ask advice.
[What would be your piece of best advice to give to a young person?]

Don't listen to Boris...

Keep yourself busy. It would take your mind off what's going on around you. Keep yourself busy. That's what I did.

Young people, focussed conversation

More specifically in relation to the Prime Minister, a different young person explicitly requested that he should join their CiCC meetings:

I think what we should do next time, is that you should arrange a meeting with Boris and he should be on the meeting with us, so he could...

[He wouldn't get a word in edge ways].

Well if he wants this information, why doesn't he come and ask us himself? –

Young people, focussed conversation

Mental health 'check-ins' would be welcomed as part of the CiCC offer.

It would probably be better if they sent out little things once in a while, like during lockdown, even if it was not off the groups, saying things like 'how are you feeling?' 'Make sure you're doing this, this and this' to make sure that you're not just going down the wrong way… So more sort of check-ins, maybe?

Young person, focussed conversation

One participant was particularly keen to interview more senior managers and people in adjacent professions, such as police and social workers. Their views were echoed by a CiCC lead who also wanted to increase engagement between CiCCs and other services.

I would like to interview more high up people; I would like to help improve the police and social workers and independent reviewing officers…

Young person, focussed conversation

I suppose, for me… More opportunities for young people, to connect with [LA3] CiCC. You know? That would be the big one.

CiCC Lead, LA3

This comment was connected with a general sentiment that holding sessions online actually enabled such meetings by making them more accessible to different participants. Contrasted with the negative comments about moving online, there seems to be a mix of pros and cons. One participant suggested adopting a hybrid approach to meetings post-Covid:

I've spoken with [the CiCC lead] before and I think he's mentioned it's a good idea… Like, the room that we normally do all our big meetings in and stuff, there's like a big board and we could have like… I know a lot of people enjoy it face to face, but like, travel as well. People might find it more convenient to do it online because of how far away… Like, they want to get involved but they live in like, [LA2] or they live quite far away, so we could have like… we could try and implement, like, both. So have like, them on the big board or something like that.

Young person, focussed conversation

The consideration of both practical (travel) and wellbeing (social contact) issues corresponds with our previous research (*Diaz 2021*) when we noted that "The use of technology for enabling services will likely advance, so it is essential the impact on the wellbeing of service users is considered to maintain quality".

SECTION FOUR: SUMMARY

Section Four: Summary

Impact of Covid-19 on care experienced young people's mental health

Many of the care experienced young people who took part in this study stated that the pandemic and lockdown had a negative impact on their mental health. This was partly due to seeing much less of their friends and families and partly due to disrupted routines, which meant they were less able to do activities that helped improve their mental wellbeing.

Need for more consistency in how Local Authorities support CiCCs

We found a wide variation in the extent to which Local Authorities supported children in care councils during this time. In some Local Authorities, staff were moved from these roles to work in other jobs, or when people left their CiCC roles they were not replaced. This meant that in some LAs, the CiCC effectively stopped functioning in March 2020 for a lengthy period, and have had limited meetings since and very little impact on decision-making. In other more positive examples, CiCCs in some LAs met face to face despite the restrictions and still ensured that members had an impact on decision making. There was also wide variation in terms of how much contact CiCCs had with senior managers and local politicians during this time. Urgent work needs to be undertaken by the Department of Education (DfE), senior leaders and local politicians to ensure there is more consistency across different LAs in this regard.

Work prior to the pandemic

Meetings were led by young people and included fun activities and day trips alongside work with Corporate Parenting Panels and specific campaigns. Since the pandemic has had such an impact on people's lives and has gone on for so long, it is difficult for us to be certain of the impact of CiCCs in the Local Authorities prior to Covid-19, so we cannot comment in depth on this point.

The move online

Overall, young people were negative about moving CiCC meetings online. The younger children were less keen on meeting online and most, if not all, experienced 'Zoom fatigue', since much of their school/college work was also online. One CiCC (LA2) was able to move into a larger building and meet in person from summer 2020 onwards. If there is another pandemic in the coming years, all Local Authorities should consider doing this if possible. However, some advantages were noted about the move to online meetings, e.g. being able to meet a wider range of stakeholders and not needing to travel.

Corporate Parenting Panels

Corporate Parenting Panels (CPPs) were one of the main channels through which CiCCs could influence policy. Worryingly, one CiCC had ceased involvement with the CPP. Another adapted these meetings to an online format. The relationship with CPPs is under review in another Local Authority. Work during the pandemic

Much of the good work carried out prior to the pandemic by the CiCCs seemed to continue, which is very positive. There did seem in some LAs more

of a focus on social interaction and fun, to help with mental wellbeing, which of course was a positive amendment to the CiCC. It was noted that both prior to and during the pandemic, CiCCs are open to only a relatively small number of children in care. More activities geared towards helping other care experienced young people who are not in CiCCs need to be considered.

The role of animals

This came up on numerous occasions and had resulted in a small amount of local policy change among residential homes.

Stigma

This was a cause of anxiety and poor mental health for some young people. Stigma was a key driver underpinning the language campaign, which in turn seemed to have a major impact on the culture in that LA. This sort of campaign was a very clear example of good practice, which could be replicated across different LAs.

The role of CiCCs in mental health and emotional wellbeing

Some CiCCs had provided emotional support where needed. The routine of meetings and having a voice had also helped with boosting confidence and also staving off boredom. The positive impact that CiCCs can have for children in care, both in terms of purpose and enjoyment, needs to be considered more by researchers and policymakers, in terms of how this can be further strengthened.

The social element / friendship

This was the most important factor for the young people, especially being able to interact with other care experienced children, giving rise to empathy, mutual recognition and a desire to help others in similar circumstances. Young people were not motivated solely by self-interest; they wanted to support each other. Positive friendships with staff were also mentioned

Having a 'voice' within Children's Services

Very importantly, most of the young people who took part in this study felt 'heard' through their work with CiCCs. However, we note that those who became CiCC members might be quite confident anyway.

Direct contact with senior managers

This was very important, especially face-to-face and ad hoc meetings that happened as a result of sharing a building. Knowing who the key people are and having regular informal contact with them had a positive impact.

Specific examples of young people's voices being heard

Most of our examples of young people's voices being heard centred on more practical and immediate issues, like getting better Wi-Fi in residential homes. It was also evident that the Leads and young people were good at finding creative ways to make their voice heard.

Training of professionals: The training that some CiCCs had carried out of police and social workers had clearly worked well and seemingly had an impact on practice by professionals. This work needs to be carried out more consistently across the country.

Language campaign: This piece of work seemed to be very powerful in terms of impact. Combined with the training, it is important to note that these things that make a real difference.

Magic wand

We received many small-scale suggestions: meet in person; hybrid meetings; more equipment and resources; make a 'survival pack' for future pandemics. Also: get Boris Johnson along to the CiCC meetings; and **include mental health 'check-ins' as part of the CiCC remit**, which is an excellent idea particularly in the current climate. The participants also suggested more interviews and direct work with senior managers, and more diverse opportunities in general. As the recent care review report highlights, Local Authorities need to become more 'pushy parents' for children in care, and CiCCs are one avenue in which it can do this work (*The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2021*).

General conclusions

There are many **positive but unintended outcomes** of the CiCC activities, including emotional and peer support during the pandemic. These should be acknowledged for the impact they have, some of which might be more important to the young people than, for example, budgeting.

High-level policy is difficult to change, especially when it is embedded in political and economic factors. Related to this: **much information flows *out of* the CiCCs about young people's needs but perhaps not enough flows *inwards*, to give young people the full picture, to inform 'overall strategy' and impact practice 'on the ground'**.

Differences between Local Authorities often seemed in part due to chance e.g. having the building available to meet in person. Policymakers and senior managers need to consider how more transparency, consistency and impact of CICC can take place across England. There needs to be revised guidance from the DfE relating to CiCC as the last guidance is from 2007 and the inspectorate needs to monitor and comment on how CiCC are functioning and the extent to which they are impacting on strategic decision making by Local Authorities children's services.

The CiCC remit is broad: It is important to note that the current government guidance relating to CiCCs is very broad and quite subjective in terms of measuring/considering impact; for example, 'expressing their wishes and feelings [...] to helping shape the overall strategy'. However, the CiCCs examined here do what is possible rather than aim to have impact at every level. They also seem to use structures that are more attuned to children's needs/ perspectives, although we have no data on how the young people are recruited (other than new members are introduced gently and in person).

Some of the CiCCs in North East England are doing some very good work and should continue to focus on and develop what works. They shape overall strategy in limited and practical ways, but in terms of their remit, we should be realistic about what can be done and how. This report is therefore fairly positive and we hope provides some extra nuance that will help shape CiCC activity for even more positive outcomes as we emerge from the pandemic.

SECTION FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Section Five: Recommendations

The Compass Project has shown that CiCCs are important and essential for the young people who are members. In order to ensure that any future Covid-19 related or other pandemic lockdowns do not lead again to the cancellation of CiCC meetings, it is important that LAs learn from what took place during Covid-19. The recommendations of this research are intended to put relationships at the heart of social work practice, to recognise and promote good practice, and inform responses to any future lockdown disruptions.

Recommendations from the young people:

1. **Be creative with meetings, make them hybrid (for example allow for members to attend in an assortment of ways, such as in person or online), have more equipment and resources, such as a big screen so those who cannot be there in person can still attend meetings.**

2. **Make a 'survival pack' for future pandemics.**

3. **Invite the PM, Boris Johnson, along to the CiCC meetings.**

4. **Include mental health 'check-ins' as part of the CiCC remit.**

5. **Facilitate more interviews and direct work with senior managers, and more diverse opportunities in general.**

Recommendations for Local Authorities:

1. **Rethink what CiCCs can realistically do and acknowledge the more operational work as the remit of CiCCs, as it is important and makes a difference.** CiCCs could be structured around 'ground level' practical changes and more complex 'campaigns', which could involve children of all ages and use numerous avenues. Perhaps this, alongside high-level policy change needs to be the focus of CICC work.

Senior managers and policy makers need to further emphasise creativity in how CiCCs function and have an impact both strategically and operationally.

2. **Acknowledge the positive but unintended outcomes of the CiCC activities.** The emotional and peer support they provide to each other and other children and young people in care has been a positive but unintended outcome. There is a need to place more emphasis on the value of peer support in CiCCs and helping those who cannot access CiCCs for whatever reason

3. **Place the CiCCs in close physical proximity to managers and decision makers. Make it easy to 'drop in'.** Where possible, CiCC meetings should be held in close physical proximity to senior managers and decision makers and make it easy to 'drop in' and improve relationships between CiCC and senior managers.

4. **Find creative ways to involve children in care who are not part of CiCC in operational roles and strategic decision making.** Have a particular focus on including children and young people in care who are placed out of county or who are in residential or youth justice settings and children and young people who are quiet or "shy". Local Authorities could also consider having larger CiCCs so that more young people have the opportunity to engage in them.

Recommendations for DfE:

1. Update CiCC guidelines, including making the role of CiCCs more transparent and consistent.

2. Widen the remit of decision making that CiCCs should be involved in at the strategic and operational level and make it so that the inspectorate can review and comment on how well Local Authorities are doing in supporting children in care to participate meaningfully in strategic decision making.

3. Provide clearer guidance as to how Corporate Parenting Panels and CiCCs work together, by investigating how CiCCs impact decision making of CPPs. This needs to be monitored and commented on by the inspectorate.

4. Animals were considered as a source of wellbeing, connection and a good way that relationship based practice can be realised. This should be taken into account and considered by the DfE at a national level.

5. Create a countrywide network where examples of good practice, such as campaigns that have impact at the cultural level, can be shared and replicated across other Local Authorities.

CONCLUSIONS
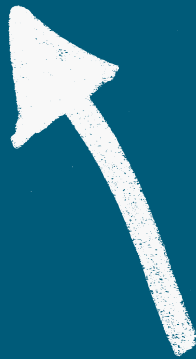
Conclusions

This study sought the views and perspectives of 'experts by experience' (*Preston-Shoot 2007*), young people in care. In addition, the study sought the views of participation leads who work alongside children in care who attend Children in Care Councils. The involvement of participation leads, who have corporate parenting responsibilities, was aimed at ensuring we understood the agency perspectives of how Covid-19 and the lockdown had impacted on CiCCs as well as opportunities to contrast and compare with accounts provided by care experienced young people.

The UK Government's white paper, '*Care Matters: Time for Change*' (*Department of Education and Skills 2007*) proposed that every Local Authority in England should establish a Children in Care Council (CiCC). The purpose of CiCCs is to formalise previous efforts to 'give a voice' to children and young people in care particularly in relation to strategic decision-making.

There were some major differences between the CiCCs in terms of how they changed following Covid-19 and the lockdown. For example, one Local Authority found a large enough building/room space to meet in person again, while most of the others met online. We also found that there was a great deal of variation in terms of the impact that Children in Care Councils had on strategic decision making. A key issue was access to senior managers and in some cases this has reduced during Covid-19. For example at the final navigator meeting the CiCC lead from LA 4 stated how the regular meeting between CiCC and the corporate parenting committee ceased during the lockdown:

> *Pre-Covid, we ran regular corporate parenting meetings, where our young people, our Children in Care Councils had a regular slot; they had good relationships with them. But that all stopped during Covid; they didn't even go online, so obviously the impact on them key strategic decisions was probably nil.*
>
> CiCC Lead, LA4

As stated above one Local Authority CiCC managed to meet face to face throughout the second and third lockdown but for most Local Authorities they have been meeting online instead throughout this period. Meeting online was generally unpopular for both young people and staff, mainly due to 'Zoom fatigue' (much of the young people's school/college work was also online) and some concerns about privacy. However, they all understood the reasons for moving online and identified advantages around reducing travel and accessing senior managers.

In relation to wellbeing, the lockdown experience was likened to a roller-coaster, with emotional ups and downs. Friendship and contact with animals were cited as being especially helpful. We found evidence of remarkable resilience from some of the children in care that took part in this study. A good example of this was a quote from a young person who attended one of the creative workshops:

> *Erm, basically, wanting to drop out of college because I was feeling isolated and like, lonely because I didn't know anyone and as a result of that, I had like, panic attacks and my anxiety became like too much, but I didn't, like…… Out of all the support around us, I didn't drop out and I stuck in and now I've became like an A star student and I'm progressing onto my next year of college to go to university next term . I think its fine to use decent sized and fairly long quotes and quite a few of them particularly when we are quoting young people'*
>
> Young person, creative workshop

CiCC meetings were an important opportunity for staying in touch with friends, especially other care experienced young people. CiCC leads recognised that wellbeing and mental health needs might be heightened during lockdown and steered group activities towards this. It was noted that while such 'fun'

activities were not the primary objective of CiCCs, they acted as 'vehicles for engagement'. The most prominent theme here was the social element of the CiCC. It was initially assumed that in line with national guidance and the stated remit of CiCCs having a 'voice' over strategic decision making, a sense of agency would have been the key factor – but our findings suggest that when the first lockdown started in March 2020 the young people were more invested in the social benefits than the agentic benefits of the group. This may in part have been because as a country we were in such unchartered territory that people started to prioritise their wellbeing over impact on strategic decision making.

This suggests that either (a) the groups' activities incorporated a strong social element, even if the primary aim was focussed on influencing policy; or (b) that opportunities to socialise in groups outside of the CiCC were lacking. If we assume (a), this can be seen as an oblique benefit of the group, as long as it does not indicate 'mission creep'. Socialisation and 'having a voice' are not mutually exclusive, although this places some pressure on CiCCs to fulfil multiple needs. It may be argued that unless the CiCCs support young people with their emotional health needs and provide a 'safe space', they will not be able to have a wider impact on strategic decision making. While the CiCC leads were focussed on giving the young people a 'voice', they recognised that the social and wellbeing element to the work could at times be more important.

Influence: In some Local Authorities meeting online reduced opportunities to have ad hoc meetings with senior managers. In one Local Authority, the CiCC's representation on Corporate Parenting Panel had stopped happening for now at least. Conversely, in some Local Authorities online meetings made it easier to reach a wider audience and have more regular contact with senior managers. The lack of consistency on multiple levels between how CiCC worked across this area of England was very noteworthy. This enabled, for example, training sessions and interviews with prospective social workers and other professionals as well as pre-organised discussions with senior managers from Children's Services and the Local Authority more widely.

The CiCCs with whom we worked more in depth, which were the ones identified in the survey as doing more interesting and better quality work (as we were keen to highlight and share good practice) enjoy good relationships with and access to senior managers, policymakers and other strategic decision makers. However, there were limited examples of high-level policy-change. This is probably because high-level policy can be somewhat intractable and also requires wider understandings of relevant politics and economics. Nevertheless, these findings indicate the door is open for such changes and that those running Children's Services are listening.

Critically, there were changes at implementation level. For example, young people are now involved in **training professionals**, including social workers and the police. This increases understanding of the needs of care experienced children but also directly affects the types of encounters they will have. The **language campaign** involved changing key terms used by professionals and in literature relating to care experienced children. These changes will be rolled out through training sessions and in all Children's Services documents. Language can perpetuate negative assumptions and stigma, so this campaign is expected to have a significant impact on the culture and ethos of the care environment and adjacent services.

Framing the CiCCs as being able to consistently achieve high-level strategic policy changes is perhaps unrealistic. However, they do have an impact at operational level, where changes have more immediate effects directly affecting the young people. Consequently, we recommend re-aligning the stated intentions of CiCCs to better reflect this type of outcome.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Final Thoughts

Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown has had a major impact across the world and has had a disproportionally negative impact on the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. Care experienced young people are often particularly vulnerable. They tend to have limited family support and are reliant on the state to support them to ensure a successful transition into adulthood. The International Care Leavers Conference (2020) highlighted the extra vulnerabilities of care experienced young people and the importance of giving them extra support across a range of areas including education and employment, and providing them the opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision making.

Despite some recent UK research into safeguarding vulnerable young people and supporting families during this time (*Ferguson 2020*), and into care experienced people's experiences of lockdown and Covid-19 (*Roberts et al. 2020*, *Roberts et al. 2021*), this is the first study that has gained in-depth views of care experienced young people about the impact of lockdown on CiCCs and their ability to have a voice during the COVID pandemic. It therefore provides important learning for policymakers, social workers, managers and other key professionals across the UK who work with care experienced and other vulnerable young people.

This study has provided a platform for the voices of care experienced young people, who have provided vivid and detailed accounts of their experiences of lockdown. Many of them found the experience very difficult but also showed remarkable resilience during this time. Ferguson et al. (2020), and Baginsky and Manthorpe (2020) have highlighted the difficult circumstances in which social workers are trying to support vulnerable children and families. However, it was noteworthy that participation leads (and their teams) at some of the Local Authorities we worked with had worked extremely hard to support children in care who attended the CiCCs and tried to provide creative means so that they would have a voice in decision making at a strategic level.

APPENDIX A:
COMPASS SURVEY QUESTIONS

Appendix A: Compass Survey Questions

1. Your Name

2. Which Local Authority do you work for?

a. Darlington LA [tick box]
b. Durham LA [tick box]
c. Gateshead LA [tick box]
d. Hartlepool LA [tick box]
e. Middlesbrough LA [tick box]
f. Newcastle upon Tyne LA [tick box]
g. Northumberland LA [tick box]
h. North Tyneside LA [tick box]
i. Redcar and Cleveland LA [tick box]
j. South Tyneside LA [tick box]
k. Stockton LA [tick box]
l. Sunderland LA [tick box]
m. Other (please specify) [free text]

3. What is your role?

4. How many children and young people are currently looked after by your Local Authority between the age of x and x ?

5. How many children and young people in care attend your Children in Care Councils?

6. How many Care Leavers attend your CiCC groups?

7. How many Children in Care Councils does your Local Authority facilitate?

1 (Group 1)
2 (Group 2)
3 (Group 3)
4 (Group 4)
5 (Group 5)
6 or more

If more than one, please provide further details of the age groups and/or other demographics of each group.

Sub question 1:
What are the ages of the participants in 'Group 1'?

Sub question 2:
How frequently does 'Group 1' usually meet?

Sub question 3:
How many times did 'Group 1' meet during September 2019 - 26th March 2020 (i.e. When Covid-19 was emerging globally)?

• They continued to meet as 'normal'
• They met more frequently
• They met less frequently
• Sessions stopped
• Other (please specify)

Sub question 4:
Where did these meetings take place?

• Virtually
• Face to face in a local authority building
• Face to face in another venue
• Other (please specify)

Sub question 5:
How many times did 'Group 1' meet during the first pandemic lockdown of April – June 2020?

• They continued to meet as 'normal'
• They met more frequently
• They met less frequently
• Sessions stopped
• Other (please specify)

Sub question 6:
Where did these meetings take place?

• Virtually
• Face to face in a local authority building
• Face to face in another venue
• Other (please specific below)

The above will need to be repeated for each group before moving onto question 8

8. During Covid 19, have any new communication methods or platforms been used with children and young people during this time?
(e.g. Zoom, WhatsApp, postal deliveries etc.)
Please provide as much information as possible.

9. Has your Local Authority identified additional provision for members of the Children in Care Council who are identified as particularly vulnerable?
Please provide as much information as possible.

10. What examples of good practice have developed?
(i.e., in enabling children and young people's meaningful participation. For example perhaps more inclusive or more frequent forms of communication have been established)? Please provide as much information as possible.

11. What challenges have children and young people faced?
Please provide as much information as possible.

12. What challenges have Local Authority staff faced?
(i.e., in terms of facilitating children and young people's meaningful involvement)? Please provide as much information as possible.

13. Have any of the practices which you implemented during the first lockdown been used during the subsequent lockdowns? (i.e., NE regional lockdown Sept-Oct 2020, circuit-breaker lockdown Nov-Dec 2020, full lockdown Jan 2021-date)?
Please provide as much information as possible.

14. What, if any, are the positive lessons that you are learning?
Please provide as much information as possible.

15. What, if anything, are you doing differently?
Please provide as much information as possible.

16. The aim of this project is to gain a deeper understanding of your experience of facilitating Children in Care Councils during a Pandemic, and we would really like the opportunity to speak to you further.
Your participation will help us to better understand your experiences and the experiences of children and young people taking part in CiCCs so that this learning can be shared with other local authorities.

A. Would you be willing to take part in an interview lasting 1 hour in (name month)?

i. Yes
ii. No
iii. Not sure

B. Would you be willing to take part in a focus group in (name month) with staff from other Local Authorities who facilitate CiCCs?

i. Yes
ii. No
iii. Not sure

C. Could we meet members of your CiCC in (name month) to ask them for their views?

i. Yes
ii. No
iii. Not sure

D. Would you be interested in working with our Associate Artists in (name month) to facilitate creative experiences / sessions for your CiCC so that we can find out more about their views?

i. Yes
ii. No
iii. Not sure

17. If you would like to continue to be involved in this project what is the best way for us to contact you?

APPENDIX B
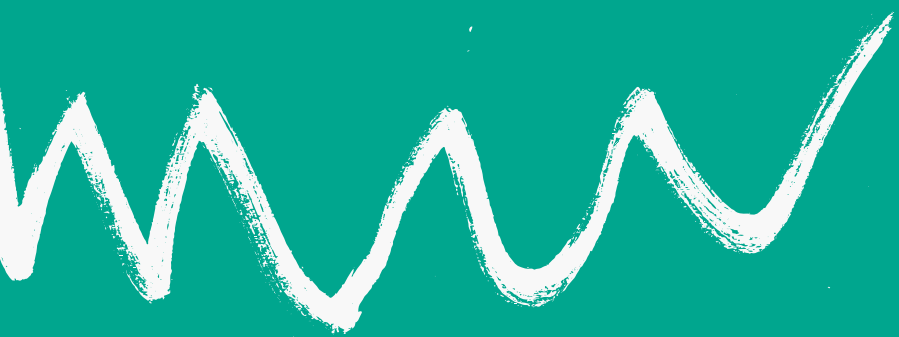
Appendix B

	How many children and young people are currently looked after by your local authority?	How many children and young people in care attend your Children in Care Councils?	How many Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) does your Local Authority facilitate?	How many Care Leavers attend your CiCC groups?	What are the age ranges of your CiCCs?
LA1	635	Unfortunately our younger group has not really ran during Covid as we struggled to keep young people virtually.	2	8	Group 1. 10-15 years Group 2. 16-25 years
LA2	955	63 - this does not include our CiCC facilitating a big event to promote Care Day 2020	2	8	Group 1. 8- 13 years Group 2. 14+
LA3	Approx. 300	12	2	5	Group 1. Junior CiCC 7-12 years Group 2. Senior CiCC 13-21 years
LA4	337	8	1	3	11-21 years

	How many children and young people are currently looked after by your local authority?	How many children and young people in care attend your Children in Care Councils?	How many Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) does your Local Authority facilitate?	How many Care Leavers attend your CiCC groups?	What are the age ranges of your CiCCs?
LA5	440	10	1	3	13-20 years
LA6	350	9	2	5	Group 1. 11-16 years Group 2. Care Leavers Group 3. 17-21 years
LA7	Approx. 300	Approx. 28	4	Approx. 7	Group 1. 7-11 years Group 2. 12-17 years Group 3. 12-17 years Group 4. Care Leavers Council 17-25 years
LA8	286	Up to 12 when not in lockdown	2	Normally 3	Group 1 not answered Group 2. Care Leavers Forum 16-25 years

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