

# Connected Communities

## Communities in care:

**A scoping review to establish the relationship of community to the lives of looked after children and young people**

Leslie Hicks, Diane Simpson, Ian Mathews, Karin Crawford, Harriet Koorts with Kevin Cooper



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## **Executive Summary**

Friendship networks and relationships with communities are important parts of the lives of looked after children and young people (LACYP). Much of legislation, policy, practice and research focuses on 'the care experience' itself, as distinct from young people's everyday lives and their connectivity with wider environments. Considerable lack of understanding remains about what being 'in care' means. This often results in prejudice and stigma. Groups set up specifically for LACYP offer opportunities to develop networks and relationships with adults and young people, and to raise awarenesses. Transitions may happen early and be experienced frequently by LACYP, however, they can offer new opportunities and positive relationships with different people. Meaningful participation in communities such as schools is an important factor in developing stability in relationships. Concepts of participation and empowerment form part of an ecological framework which locates the community context as central to building resilience for LACYP. What constitutes community cohesion and connectedness for LACYP requires a fine balance between the interests of protection and participation. Successful interconnectedness is a matter of shared concern for all. The key challenge remains that of identifying how stable community relationships for LACYP may be strengthened and supported to dynamic mutual benefit.

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**Key words** looked after children; young people; participation; social networks

# Communities in Care

## Introduction and background to the review

The scoping review on which this short paper is based is one of a series of small studies commissioned under the Arts and Humanities Research Council *Connected Communities* research programme. The review set out to establish what is known currently about the relationship between 'community'<sup>1</sup> and 'looked after children and young people' (LACYP)<sup>2</sup> and the corresponding implications for future research. Findings from the review inform four short practice- and policy-based guides. An extended version of this paper provides further information about the project, including details of the consultation workshops held with young people<sup>3</sup>.

### KEY MESSAGES

- From an ecological perspective, secure relationships formed with families and carers lay the foundations for establishing networks which form part of community life.
- Positive relationships with family, friends, informal and formal carers, teachers and wider social networks are crucial to development and contribute towards continuities, connectedness and stability.
- Understanding the perspectives of LACYP about their networks needs to be ongoing, as there are frequent changes in contexts and cultures.
- Transitions may disrupt relationships and networks. 'Starting again' requires particular life-skills which enable the rebuilding of connections and a sense of belonging.
- Participation helps in developing meaningful and sustainable relationships from within community contexts.
- Balance is needed between an 'ordinary life' and developing understanding in communities, to combat stigma about what 'being in care' means.

<sup>1</sup> We take AHRC's broadest thinking as our basis for what is entailed in the term 'communities':

*"cooperative or interactive groups sharing a virtual or physical environment and aspects of identity (such as location, race, ethnicity, age, history, occupation), culture, belief or other common bonds and/or a shared interest in particular issues or outcomes"*.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this review, we define LACYP as any child looked after by the Local Authority, including children who have been taken into care, through care or emergency orders, and those who are looked after on a voluntary basis under section 20 of the Children Act, 1989. Government statistics (Department for Education, 2011) indicate that there are approximately 65,500 children 'in care' in England and that young people age 10 - 15 are the largest group in the looked after children population. Reasons for being placed in care include: physical or sexual abuse; neglect; ill-health or disability of a parent; family in acute stress; family dysfunction; being disabled or having SEN requiring residential care; remanded by Youth Court to LA care; being orphaned; and behavioural difficulties.

<sup>3</sup> This can be found at: [http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/hshsc/staff\\_hull/2394.asp](http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/hshsc/staff_hull/2394.asp)

Few would disagree that an ecological approach to children's lives has great potential to enable life chances<sup>(43, 44, 47, 98, 105, 117)</sup>. The multi-faceted interaction between individual development and context which underpins an ecological perspective is enshrined in statutory guidance for those working with children and families<sup>(32)</sup>. Notwithstanding the apparent consensus which surrounds the value of an holistic approach to enhancing children's lives, much of the research literature about LACYP focuses on 'the care experience' itself. Strikingly little centrality is given to factors beyond the family, the immediate services being experienced and their overall effects, or their potential for enhancement. In terms of the daily lives of young people who are looked after by local authorities, the roles of context and culture – and thereby community – receive little emphasis.

Our study set out to know more about the dynamic relationships between LACYP and their communities, the contribution which LACYP make, the positive value which LACYP place on being 'in care', the role of resilience and the influence of transitions. Four core questions guided the study and serve to locate the debate introduced here. The main findings in relation to each core question are summarised and a short discussion introduces each section. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

## **FINDINGS<sup>4</sup>**

### **1 Conceptualisations of looked after children and young people**

An extensive range of legislation and policy is geared towards the improvement of outcomes for LACYP<sup>5</sup>. Clearly, there are likely to be drawbacks associated with being identified as a member of a disadvantaged group. Crucial to LACYP are the issues of stigma and prejudice. Conversely, at times these disadvantages may be outweighed by the positive benefits which come with being identified in this way, such as belonging to groups set up specifically on behalf of LACYP.

Over time, children in care were seen as 'outsiders' who were perceived at worst as a risk to community well-being and at best as undeserving of community life. To some extent, these notions may be seen to continue to underpin policy insofar as bringing together damaged or dysfunctional children is avoided where possible<sup>(24, 39, 45)</sup>.

- Stereotypical assumptions held by communities at large frequently serve to support the stigmatisation of LACYP<sup>(30, 53, 58, 62, 71, 93, 100)</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Search procedures identified a considerable range of potentially relevant literature. Few studies focus specifically and at length on the role of community in the lives of LACYP and while this confirms the rationale for the study, it means that relevant literature is drawn from a range of diverse sources, including material concerned with: looked after children; children's participation; social exclusion; and social networks.

<sup>5</sup> This includes *Quality Protects* in 1998, the *Every Child Matters* framework in 2003, *Care Matters* in 2006 and the *Children's Plan* in 2007. Policy and legislation for LACYP can be found at the Department for Education website: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople>

- Alienation from culture, communities and geographical spaces has implications for attachment to people, as well as to places and spaces. This may manifest in various ways, such as negative self-esteem and poor outcomes (27, 64, 72, 77, 84, 124).
- Young people living in residential care may experience unwelcoming or unreceptive responses from their neighbourhoods, depending on levels of awareness and the extent to which the home raises its own profile by engaging locally (14, 55, 114, 129). Equally, there may be implicit benefits for LACYP in the apparent solidarity which comes with residential care and with living alongside young people who share that experience (37, 38, 123, 124).
- Young people may prefer to retain privacy about their looked after status in order to function as 'normal' within communities such as schools. This may mean that young people and staff are uncertain about sharing personal information about LACYP (20, 51).

Communities may be viewed as a positive resource for young people, holding much potential in terms of nurturing, protecting and safeguarding vulnerable children (63, 64, 107, 108). Positive community conceptualisations and resources offer potential strengthening channels of support for LACYP.

## **2 How do LACYP relate to and interact with the concept of 'community'?**

The relationship which children have with communities has become visible relatively recently, largely through a focus on participation and rights. Stable relationships may be mediated through community interactions, for example with families, schools, local groups such as faith groups, leisure and sports teams, neighbourhoods and wider community resources. Virtual spaces offer potential co-existing 'real' life and virtual identities (50, 126). These elements, alongside sustaining positive family relationships, are important for children and young people (10, 11, 12, 21, 23, 31, 32, 48, 49, 52, 57, 73, 111, 115, 121), as they enable participation in life beyond the immediate family.

Creating and sustaining community interactions, networks and friendships may represent major challenges for LACYP and especially those who have particular needs, such as disabled young people (42, 75, 79, 85, 88, 93, 110, 127). Lack of placement stability may influence stability in relationships (65, 66, 89, 112, 117, 119). Groups dedicated to the interests of LACYP may offer capacity to assist with personal development, empowerment and transitions (123).

- Community conceptualisations of LACYP may represent an important barrier to making and keeping friends, thereby increasing a sense of isolation and loneliness (30, 39, 67, 93, 100, 108).
- Establishing a sense of home within new environments requires awareness of the balance between vulnerability and resilience. This is an especially sensitive area in relation to those seeking asylum (70).
- Ordinary lives and familiarity with families and communities may have been lost by some, such as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) (69). Practitioner

skills in responding to young people's emotional lives – the 'domain of connection'<sup>(68)</sup> – make valuable contributions towards resettlement.

- A move away from potentially damaging circumstances may be beneficial in the short term; implications for leaving care and returning to home communities need to be considered carefully<sup>(34, 41, 55, 67, 99, 114, 125)</sup>.
- Black and minority ethnic young people experience wide disparities within care, including discrimination and placement instability; these may serve to exacerbate feelings of a lack of a sense of belonging. Those leaving care may find it particularly difficult to interact with wider communities<sup>(7, 8, 9, 27, 94, 109)</sup>.
- Kinship care<sup>6</sup> has advantages related to retaining children within their ecological network. The benefits are set against a risk of compounding social exclusion due to any inherent poverty and disadvantage<sup>(1, 7, 18, 56, 82, 91, 101, 112, 113)</sup>.
- There is some empirical evidence to indicate international variation in participation in the local community by young people living in residential care. More positive experiences are likely to be found where collective life is regarded as valuable to well-being<sup>(95)</sup>.
- Explicit commitment to the role of community in the well-being of LACYP has been shown as beneficial internationally (e.g. in the USA<sup>(36, 60)</sup>, Japan<sup>(5)</sup>, Australia<sup>(87)</sup>, Finland,<sup>(124)</sup> and in England<sup>(74)</sup>).
- Movements through and out of care – potentially coupled with transience prior to care – may lead to dislocation and disconnection within families and communities as well as detachment from place and space<sup>(3, 6, 79, 88, 93, 127)</sup>.

Ordinary experiences are vital in the lives of LACYP. Understanding their social worlds requires locating their narratives within context. This may help in enabling a sense of agency for LACYP<sup>(46, 59, 92, 106, 127)</sup> and in taking account of the importance of interactions with their wider environments.

### **3 How do transitions for LACYP influence their experience and perception of 'community'?**

Transitions are key features in the lives of young people and offer the prospect of learning new behaviours and approaches to life. They are of particular importance in establishing independence<sup>(28, 54, 98, 118)</sup>. The experience of being looked after is characterised by fluid and evolving sets of relationships with a changing population of people which influence the connectivity LACYP may have with communities and the continuities which these may offer.

While young people may value transitions as potentially they allow access to new opportunities, a move away from unhappy relationships and improvements in a sense of wellbeing<sup>(93, 113, 127)</sup>, entry into care can be disruptive of existing friendships and connections and may bring difficulties in sustaining these<sup>(67, 93, 100, 110, 117, 120)</sup>. Additionally, movements between placements may promote feelings of insecurity and

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'kinship care' relates to children and young people whose parents are unable to care for them and who are looked after by relatives or friends

isolation. Such shifts are demanding of social skills and require flexibility in the face of a history of damaging experiences (75, 93, 100, 110, 128).

Young people leaving care face a range of potentially disruptive issues and concerns, focused on geographical dislocation and loss (e.g. of family and friendship ties; existing care communities; and neighbourhood networks). Transition at this time may lead to a sense of disempowerment and isolation. The effects may be exacerbated for particular groups, such as black and minority ethnic care leavers, whose experience of community and care may be compounded by experiences of racial discrimination and disadvantage (2, 7, 16, 17, 29, 67, 75, 81, 93, 99, 116, 118, 124). Further to this, young people leaving care may be ill-equipped with the life-skills which enable them to make connections and build networks (6, 41, 80, 83, 96, 103).

The role of networks and community relationships may enhance the potential effects of new and positive opportunities which assist in maximising potential. These are especially relevant when making transitions.

- New family environments may offer opportunities not experienced previously in terms of building positive relationships (89, 103, 127).
- Leisure activities which promote social connections include potential benefits, e.g. links to a key adult and enhancing esteem and developmental skills, thereby supporting continuity through and out of care (15, 40, 46, 74).
- Community organisations help in offering models and mentors for young people, these form part of supportive networks at specific points of transition, such as when leaving care (25, 40, 46, 74).
- Some LACYP may experience an identity which is 'on standby' or 'lost' due to being in a position of powerlessness as a result of awaiting placement moves (78, 130).
- Disabled children may be more often isolated and disconnected from communities, especially if they are ineligible for receiving adult services. This is particularly relevant to those who are leaving care; transition to independence might include a move away from family and community (4, 13, 86, 97).
- Formal and informal support networks are important in ensuring a successful transition to independent living (35, 89, 90, 103, 118).

Transitions, although potentially enhancing, may dislocate immediate relationships for LACYP. Acting to strengthen links with communities and networks may offer valuable continuity, support and connectedness in the lives of young people.

#### **4 What role does 'community' play in empowering and promoting the resilience of LACYP?**

'Empowerment' and 'resilience' form a major part of contemporary debates about young people and their participation in social life. They go some way towards promoting the identification of 'risk' and 'protective' factors and serve to support functioning within social life.

- Relationships in childhood are seen to enhance resilience and promote a wider sense of well-being, with friendships providing an element of protection against risks, for example, helping to identify which spaces are safe and at what time of day this is the case <sup>(107, 117)</sup>.
- Resilience may be enhanced further by the young person distancing themselves from risk, e.g. geographically and emotionally, and from negative elements of community and friends, neighbourhood and family <sup>(26, 33, 114)</sup>.
- The identification of 'risk' and 'protective factors' helps by providing a 'strengths-based' focus for intervention <sup>(54, 76, 98, 102, 104, 117)</sup>.
- Communities within care may be viewed as offering resources which promote resilience, for example, the 'communities of understanding' in residential care can assist when young people are leaving care <sup>(22, 24, 26, 37, 38, 61, 100, 114, 119, 129)</sup>.
- Raised visibility within the community may help LACYP to establish a sense of identity and belonging to a place, thereby promoting resilience <sup>(64)</sup>.
- A positive sense of identity and meaningful participation at school are seen as important factors in promoting resilience and mitigating some of the difficulties associated with being in care <sup>(20, 29, 117)</sup>.
- School environments are important to LACYP as they offer the opportunity to develop continuing connections and contacts outside of the care system <sup>(19, 40, 65, 74, 100, 122)</sup>.
- A major element in building resilience lies in the importance of establishing a trusting and supportive relationship with an adult. The making of these positive relationships enhances self esteem and enables positive contributions within and from the community <sup>(29, 33)</sup>.

For LACYP, the concepts of risk, protection, participation and empowerment form part of an ecological framework which locates the community context as a central plank in building resilience.

## Implications and recommendations for future research

We can see that the literature supports the principle that relationships with communities of differing forms hold advantages for LACYP in terms of their positive development and ecological stability. However, there is little empirical evidence which focuses on what this entails or how it may be brought about in a manner sensitive to the desire to live a normal life. Our research indicates that there are important gaps in knowledge which merit further attention:

1. The everyday experiences of LACYP in relation to participation in diverse communities and networks (e.g. children in care councils, virtual communities) and correspondingly the experience of communities in relation to the engagement and involvement of LACYP.
2. The differences and similarities in the above respects between the experiences of LACYP and other young people, including diverse and marginalised groups.



3. The factors which enable LACYP to participate and achieve in communities and community life and any mutually supportive connections which might be developed.
4. The factors which help to foster a sense of belonging, to promote well-being and to enable success for LACYP within communities and correspondingly the part which communities might play in developing inclusion.

Taken together these questions have implications for what constitutes community cohesion and connectedness for LACYP. Clearly, there is a fine balance to establish between protection and participation. Successful interconnectedness is increasingly a matter of shared concern; the key challenge remains that of how stable community relationships for LACYP may be strengthened and supported to mutual benefit.

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## The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

*"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."*

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

[www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx)

