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Learning Digest:
Collaborating with care-experienced young people

1. Collaborating with care-experienced young people: Learning Digest Summary

This is one of three learning digests for the evaluation of the Barnardo's Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships, based on learning from CJSPs and the wider literature. Some key principles identified for collaborating with care-experienced young people include sharing power between those who plan and deliver services and those who are the recipients; enabling reciprocity; and acknowledging lived expertise as an asset. Building trusting relationships is crucial for full participation and co-production, which takes time and investment. However, collaborating in a target-driven system can seem counter-intuitive, due to resource constraints, legal duties and approaches to outcomes measurement. Therefore, collaboration requires a shift in working cultures and practices, prioritising the relational aspects of the work. Throughout, it is necessary to enable and support young people's agency and feelings of self-efficacy, demonstrating the effects and impact of their collaboration efforts. In summary, successful collaborative work involves setting realistic goals, demonstrating consistency, commitment, and transparency and sharing the impact of work undertaken.

2. Introduction

This is one of three learning digests, produced as part of the external evaluation of Barnardo's Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships (CJSPs or Care Journeys) in Brent and Plymouth. Its focus is on sharing learning around collaborations with care-experienced young people. It begins by outlining some of the definitions and principles behind collaborative working, drawing on literature around involvement and co-production. It then goes on to explore the following themes, identified as key to learning how to achieve collaborations that work well, from both Brent and Plymouth CJSPs' experiences, and supported by the wider literature:

- **Build trusting relationships and make them matter**
- **Working collaboratively in a target-driven system is challenging/counter-intuitive**
- **Enable and support young people's agency and self-efficacy**

Previous interim evaluation reports produced so far as part of the programme, can be found here. Plymouth care Journeys and Brent Care Journeys websites provide more detail about each CJSP and their work.

The focus of the other two learning digests are partnerships between the statutory and third sectors, and systems change in children's social care. Together, these three learning digests have been produced to support those involved in CJSPs in each area, and Barnardo's

and its partners who might be looking to set up similar programmes elsewhere. They are also of interest to anyone seeking to contribute to the improvement of social care, including young people and adults who are care-experienced, commissioners, funders, other third sector and statutory sector organisations, community groups, and researchers.

Cross-cutting themes

Whether seeking to increase or improve collaborations with young people, partnerships between local government and the voluntary and community sector, and/or systems change, the following are key to each area, and probably more besides. These may seem obvious, however it is quite common for partners and initiatives to over-promise and expect that achievements can be made without the following, so it seems important to state them here:

Time – relationships, partnerships and systems change take time and need time allocated, to get started, to maintain and develop work towards agreed goals. Whilst changes can sometimes be quick and radical, these have after-effects that also need time for settling, processing and rebuilding following quick actions – whether that is in relation to teams, infrastructures or working processes.

Investment of money – whilst the aim of work may be to increase efficiencies and make cost savings, developing new ways of working and new partnerships needs investment to begin with, so don't expect savings to be there from the start and ensure you have allocated upfront funds to support the new relationships and changes you wish to make.

People - are central to developing collaborations with young people, partnerships with other organisations and initiating changes to systems. Easily forgotten and sometimes neglected, work that is about human beings being supported to thrive in communities, requires those leading and delivering such work to be focused on relationships with people at all levels.

Communication – a common difficulty in many different types of projects is communication – much of the time, people feedback there is not enough, or communication does not happen through appropriate channels, or is not accessible or transparent. It is possible that however good you are at communicating, it will never be enough because different people have different needs and are receptive to different types of communication at different times. So ensuring you have resources and make efforts to communicate, in as many different ways as you can and at different times, without bombarding people, the better.

Balance quick wins with longer-term work – finding ways to have some impact in the short term, whilst working towards what can be embedded and live on long-term helps achieve buy-in and support from stakeholders, whether citizens or professionals. This means not being set on approaches whatever the cost, being open to opportunities that arise whilst keeping a focus on overall goals and intent. Sometimes it's about implementing what has been learned to work elsewhere, learning from other's experiences, whilst being attuned to what might need to be different in this context, which may require some innovative thinking, and testing out.

3. Definitions and principles behind collaborating with care-experienced young people

The focus of this digest is on collaboration with care-experienced young people in the design, development and delivery of services and participation in decision making with the wider children's social care system. We deliberately use the term 'collaboration' here due to its breadth, allowing us to capture learning within the programme about a range of practices including co-production, co-design, and other participatory approaches to working with care-experienced young people.

Collaborative approaches have become increasingly popular over the recent decades. Policy makers across the political spectrum have embraced the concepts of participation, co-production and co-design as means of empowering people and communities and improving services and outcomes. Increasingly a concept of collaboration or co-production has appeared in national legislation governing the statutory provision of care services to both children and adults (Care Act 2014 and Children and Families Act 2014).

There are many approaches to, and definitions of, collaborative work and these vary in relation to their goals and context. However, across the spectrum there are several shared features.

It is clear from the available evidence that there is **no one right way to collaborate with young people**. These practices always take place within a specific context with variable services, cultures, resources, and power relations. Each attempt must be responsive to these contextual factors, responsive to the needs and desires of those involved, and as a result those involved must have to tolerate a large degree of uncertainty in both approach and outcome. Nevertheless, drawing on the wide-ranging literature, there appear to be some common themes in terms of the factors that need to be present for these processes to be successful.

All such approaches involve a greater **sharing of power** between those who have traditionally planned and delivered services and those who have been recipients of them. They tend to place an emphasis on:

- **equality**, where barriers are broken down between professionals and non-professionals.
- **reciprocity**, where people get something back for putting something in.
- **mutuality**, where people work together to achieve shared objectives (SCIE, 2022).

For example, Boyle and Harris (2009) noted that: 'Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours'. While total equality between those who use and those who provide services is comparatively rare, there is a growing movement towards equalising the power in decision-making, particularly around resource allocations.

These approaches also emphasise the value of diverse perspectives on an issue and in particular the value of **lived experience**:

> It just means 'working together to produce a product, service or activity.' It is based on the idea that many heads are better than one. It also celebrates the value of direct life experience (rather than only professional expertise) in planning, designing, delivering, and reviewing services. **(Rathbone et al., 2018)**

Collaborative approaches also emphasise the **active participation** of people receiving support from services[1] and/or citizens in processes, often in contrast to traditional services where they are seen as passive recipients. The Design Council (2015) states *"Co-design is a process of designing products, services, or systems with end-users, rather than for them".* This can require a reframing of processes with an emphasis on the **skills and strengths** of service users, away from a traditional deficit model, which focuses on 'needs' or 'problems'.

Ultimately these approaches have an ethical and political underpinning and are not simply instrumental. Instead, they aim to change the culture of organisations to become agents for change rather than just being service providers (SCIE, 2022).

[1] When naming people who receive services generally (so not specific to children's social care), we are using the following terminology: recipients of services, experts-by-experience, citizens, or service users, as defined by SCIE. When speaking specifically about care-experienced young people, we say so or say young people for ease of reading.

4.   Collaboration in The Care Journeys Strategic Partnership Programme

Collaboration with young people has been a core feature in the initial conception of CJSPs, forming part of the partnership agreements between Barnardo's and the two participating local authorities and captured in the agreed evaluation outcomes.

Increasingly Barnardo's as an organisation has placed emphasis on the importance of lived experience informing their work. In its latest Voice and Influence of children and young people strategy, Barnardo's states that

> The voices and lived experiences of children and young people are at the heart of Barnardo's. They inform, shape and influence what we say, how we work and the decisions we make in every part of our charity.
> **(Barnardo's, 2021)**

and in relation to its culture, it makes a *"commitment to understanding the principles of Voice and Influence work: sharing power; establishing parity of esteem and acknowledging lived expertise as an organisational asset."* (Barnardo's, 2021).

Examples of collaboration in CJSPs

Within Brent and Plymouth CJSPs, professionals and young people with lived experience of care have collaborated in a wide range of ways. Below are some of the main forms of collaborative working:

- As colleagues (where care-experienced young people have become employees of Barnardo's)
- Through co-design of products, processes, training, and events
- Co-delivery of training and events
- Collaborative recruitment processes involving both professional and young person panels.
- As researchers and research participants

- Care-experienced young people participating in governance processes (attending board/ council meetings, reviewing and feeding back on local authority materials)
- As advocates and public speakers at events
- Developing multi-media outputs such as films and audio, and theatre pieces
- Developing peer group activities that are then led by care-experienced young people.

5. Learning theme 1: Build trusting relationships and make them matter

Much of the literature on collaborative approaches refers to the importance of building relationships between professionals and people receiving services. This is often seen as a foundation or pre-condition for the full participation of service users in co-design, co-delivery and co-production. It may seem obvious that this is key. However, funding arrangements and programmes are often set up with the expectation of collaboration, even co-production, from the start, without allowing for the time needed to build trusting relationships that enable collaborations to work well. For instance, this definition of co-production explicitly refers to the quality of relationships built:

> An asset-based approach that enables people providing and people receiving services to share power and responsibility and work together in **equal**, **reciprocal** and **caring relationships**.
> **(Co-production Network for Wales, 2018)**

Evidence from the evaluation of CJSPs so far strongly supports this view and emphasises its particular importance in relation to working with care-experienced young people. Often for this population of young people, as well as building a trusting relationship in the here and now, it is also about repairing negative experiences of previous relationships with professionals. Often in their journeys into and through the care system, care-experienced young people have had poor experiences with professionals and people in positions of

authority, where they have not had influence over decisions that impacted their lives. As a result, care-experienced young people may be initially suspicious of being open and honest with professionals and may view them as untrustworthy, being watchful for signs of unreliability.

> ...going through the social care system, it builds an inherent lack of trust. I think for young people - in professionals and in the system – in not doing what it says it's going to do and just coming through adolescence and all those kinds of challenges that that brings, alongside the kind of trauma that these young people have been through. **(Local Authority staff member)**

Counteracting the lack of trust many care-experienced young people have developed from their experiences of the care system and those in positions of authority is a key task for professionals seeking collaboration and may mean that before engaging care-experienced young people in more collaborative activities they need to build trust and demonstrate that this trust is well-founded.

> I think it has to be all about the relationship with the young person. **(Local Authority staff member)**

> It is only through a journey from **good faith** – into evidenced belief – that people with experiences of broken trust, disconnection, and prevalent feelings of powerlessness step into this space. i.e. are willing to offer their Lived Experience. **(Care Journeys staff member)**

Both Care Journeys teams have this as the central aspect of their approach and qualitative data drawn from both areas illustrates the many interpersonal factors that contribute to building strong personal relationships.:

- That building relationships takes time and can't be rushed.
- The importance of reliability, consistency and from professionals –This must be continually demonstrated through action in doing what you say you'll do, and being reachable when young people need or want to get in touch.
- Openness, personal warmth, and approachability
- Staying authentic, as an adult/professional, acknowledging the differences with younger people but showing interest and respect towards them, without trying to 'be a cool young person', adopting their language or manners as a way of 'fitting-in'
- Showing respect through paying attention, listening, and taking seriously the views and opinions of the young people. This includes presenting back to young people the ideas/understanding generated from their involvement (see example of film planning below)
- Acting in good faith by, for example, saying when you don't know and not promising things you can't achieve or guarantee.
- Having optimism and a belief in the possibility of change or positive outcomes.

Circumstantial features may also play a role in creating the conditions to build strong relationships with care-experienced young people, for instance, staff being independent from and not having statutory functions in relation to young people. Care Journeys staff, employed by Barnardo's, could offer stability, whilst young people navigated the instability of moving from children's services to post-16 or post-18 services, which could involve a change of home and social work staff.

> I mean we're in a system which is chaos [...] so that's what we facilitated, to try and create that sense of safety there by building relationships that keep going. And that's the rewarding thing on both sides.
> **(Care Journeys staff member)**

And they have the time to invest in a young person before the young person decides whether to engage in more depth.

> For example [CJ staff member] just spent two full days with one person trying to engage them.
> **(Care Journeys staff member)**

Relationship building in Plymouth Care Journeys helps create the conditions for collaborative group work

Plymouth Care Journey has engaged a significant number of Care Leavers in the area and provided a range of opportunities for participation and collaboration.

Key to the engagement with these young people was the relaxed and informal atmosphere they were able to create at their premises, a space for young people and professionals to interact in where relationships could be built in a non-pressurised setting. Having project staff who were regularly and consistently available and approachable, with the time for relationships supported the development of collaborative groups.

> ... [PCJ staff members are] understanding and supportive, they'll sit down and listen to you and help you out. That's pretty much what I've needed while I've gone through all this [...] so they've been a role model for me. **(Young Person)**

> I know that people literally light up when they walk in and see [CJ staff member], and they are dying to tell him about anything from, 'Oh my God, I got a motorbike to [talk about] this weekend. It's a very friendly relationship. **(Local stakeholder)**

Staff and stakeholders were keen to stress the time this process can take, and the additional effort staff often make to build the trust necessary for young people to engage. In particular, PCJ staff undertook outreach work, meeting young people individually in places that they felt comfortable in, before eventually bringing groups of young people together.

> The team will go out, meet with those young people over a period of weeks, meet them where they feel comfortable out in the community, bring them into our office, maybe meet with one other person from the group until they bring together as an informal group. [...] And I think that makes the difference in terms of not just bums on seats in the first place but retention." **(Care Journeys staff member)**

Co-creating a film with young people through Brent Care Journeys begins by sharing possibilities and listening

A key aspect of co creating a film with young people in Brent was the professional producer listening to the young people's ideas and involving them in the design phase. For this, the producer created a 'discovery day' to meet the young people, hear what they liked, and explore what they wanted the film to achieve and how it should feel.

Since it was the first experience for young people to be part of a film, the producer started by **sharing examples** of short films, **facilitating discussions** to hear the young people's preferences and ideas. The producer took these ideas and produced a 'proposal' for the film, which he presented back to the young people, **asking for feedback**. This was essential to confirm that the plan clearly represented what young people had tried to communicate in the discovery session and ensure that their ideas would be actioned.

In summary, really listening to young people and adapting the plan to match their ideas and interests was a key enabler for collaboration in the film production process.

6.   Theme 2: Working collaboratively in a target-driven system is challenging / counter-intuitive

This theme closely inter-relates with learning shared in the learning digests on partnership working and systems change, as the target-driven system of children's social care can make relationships at all levels of the system challenging. However, it could be argued that targets set by national and local government can be most counter-productive when it comes to collaborations with young people, as this section explores further.

Seeking to build strong and trusted relationships between professionals and care-experienced young people is seen as good practice across the sector, not just in building the conditions for meaningful collaboration. However, the use of relational practice in children's social care, and therefore collaborations with young people in co-design and co-delivery, is often made difficult by a range of systemic issues:

- Constraints on resources can limit the time of professionals to invest in relationship-building, particularly in services where crisis management necessarily takes precedence.
- Legal and policy frameworks that govern statutory provision often prioritise efficiency, risk management, and procedural requirements, which are often reflected in the wider professional culture and training frameworks.

- The measurement and outcome orientation of the sector means that re-focusing on building meaningful relationships can be challenging to measure and quantify in ways that are satisfactory to commissioners. However, the measurement approach is not necessarily achieving good life outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Therefore, the prevailing emphasis on performance metrics in social care can make it difficult to prioritise and evaluate relationship-based collaborative approaches. Put simply, **it is often easier to not collaborate** in systems that prioritise professional skills and experience, and emphasise predictability, efficiency and replicability of processes. As one interviewee phrased it *"the system rewards compliance"*. Seeking to introduce approaches that disrupt predominant power relationships will inevitably cause friction in your interactions with the wider system.

A focus on achieving predefined outcomes can risk overshadowing the importance of meaningful engagement and collaborative relationships with young people. It may lead to tokenistic collaborations (if there are any) and rushed decision-making, potentially placing care-experienced young people as passive recipients of decisions taken elsewhere (which links to the next theme). This could undermine the possibility of strong, trusting relationships. As one stakeholder stated:

> The system offers no opportunity for collaboration [between YP and staff], only intervention [...] you need to encounter people as collaborators – not as 'service users'. **(Care Journeys staff member)**

> Cocreating or working with lived expertise is impossible in target driven environments. **(Care Journeys staff member)**

This issue is acknowledged in the wider literature on co-production:

> This may be particularly challenging for large organisations as co-production puts an emphasis on personal relationships. Organisations will need to move away from centralised and hierarchical structures (where power remains in the hands of very few people) so that they can support co-production. **(SCIE, 2022)**

Throughout Care Journeys, there has been a tension between collaborative ways of working and the wider structures and cultures in children's social care. Most prominently this has been apparent around the breadth of engagement with young people (i.e., the number of care-experienced young people engaged in projects) and the depth of the engagement (i.e., the quality of relationships formed and the depth of collaboration). It is easier, and the wider system is better set up, to measure and report on numbers than the quality and depth of relationships.

This friction between permitting local teams to build relationships with young people that are emergent and the pressure to demonstrate reach and impact of the work, highlights the reality of programmes that exist within commissioning, quantitatively accountable environments, that seek to ensure that public (or charitable) funds have been spent responsibly and fairly. Increasing pressures on resources and services can create an even greater emphasis on generating and demonstrating achievement against countable outcomes. This is counter-intuitive to the concepts of collaboration.

In both projects, local authority partners in particular have expressed concerns about the breadth of engagement. In part this is understood to be about a desire to maximise impact for young people. However, it also reflects the regulatory and monitoring pressures to produce quantifiable outcomes, and can lead to young people feeling like they are not seen as human beings within the system.

The challenge, therefore, for undertaking collaborative projects within this system, is creating a shift in culture and orientation to build receptiveness and a more supportive and fertile environment for collaborative practices. There may also be a need for developing alternative measures for the evaluation and monitoring of collaborative initiatives within the existing framework. In short, if collaboration is to work and take hold it must go hand in hand with system change.

One way of addressing this tension is to explicitly prioritise the relational aspect of the work and resist the setting of targets:

> We seek to minimise any conditional basis for activity. In short, we will never prioritise a systems-led driver, desire or priority over a relational one. **(Care Journeys staff member)**

The second is to take steps to create a more hospitable environment for collaborative work, as the following vignette demonstrates. The vignette also highlights the importance of investing in the professionals who are key to delivering good quality social care for care-experienced young people. Their involvement in collaborations with young people requires them to be supported to work differently and creatively, with the time and space to try things out and learn. Such an investment could help with staffing retention challenges, may improve relationships between young people and professionals, and bring the benefits of both young people's and staff members' experiences of what does not work well and how this can be improved.

Creating a more hospitable environment for collaboration with young people through working collaboratively with professionals: Brent – Alpha 2

Having demonstrated early success in co-design work with young people, and in response to feedback, Brent Care Journeys began Alpha 2, a service design cycle with professionals. They recruited a group of 10 professionals from the local authority and wider local services, to identify service issues and design solutions that would make a difference. Crucially, as part of this, the participant professionals were tasked with involving care-experienced young people in their projects, as collaborators, critical partners, and research participants.

Four project groups emerged, with two being particularly successful. The first was a group seeking to address job satisfaction and retention of staff through a change to the expenses policy that would allow frontline staff to pay for 'relational activities' with the young people they work with. The second group sought to develop a tool for staff working with expectant parents. Some of the challenges experienced included professionals struggling to find time to participate, sometimes facing expectations that collaborative work would be done in addition to their main roles:

> It felt for management to understand the need to prioritise the project was quite difficult, the expectation was of you to fulfil your day-to-day role as well as do the [service-design] work. **(Local Authority staff member)**

A participating professional described the experience of working with young people.

> Engaging with the young person was the main thing. She really appreciated being asked for her opinion and being asked how she would like to be worked with. She came up with an excellent idea. This got pitched to a room of young people who were all giving their opinions of their experiences with services. It was a genuine privilege.
> **(Local Authority staff member)**

Not only did professionals report enjoying working with and feeling motivated by young people in a different way to their day-to-day roles, but it also seemed to change views about the importance of collaborative approaches to social work practice. This increase in understanding, experience and skills among relevant professionals has broadened the number of staff able to work collaboratively, increasing receptiveness and senior buy-in.

> Now that we've done this piece of work, and it's gone to panel and it's been recommended that it should be implemented I feel there's definitely been a change – there's been a shift. **(Local Authority staff member)**

> I went into the training mindset, it feels like training […but…] It has changed our practice, changed our culture, and helped our working practice. **(3ʳᵈ sector partner)**

7. Learning Theme 3: Enable and support young people's agency and self-efficacy

A further theme from the wider literature and the experiences of Care Journeys in Brent and Plymouth, is the importance of care-experienced young people knowing that they have had an impact and that their time, energy, and input from their lived experience has made a difference. In this way, young people's sense of agency and self-efficacy is supported, helping sustain collaboration, with everyone feeling the benefits of their efforts.

Care-experienced young people often report feelings of powerlessness, having experiences which leave them feeling that they cannot affect change. This is both in relation to decisions that directly impact their lives and to wider problems they may see in the care system.

> Growing up in care, there's a lot of things you see that should be fixed. But you always think that if I tell someone about this, no one's gonna actually sort it out. **(Young person)**

> I feel like a lot of the time a lot of the decisions that are made are made by the people on the top, the commissioners, the councillors and stuff. They don't often get to meet us and they don't often get to see the impact that certain decisions that they make have on us. [...] **(Young person)**

Therefore, when engaging care-experienced young people in collaborative processes, careful attention needs to be paid that these experiences are not being compounded. However, because children's social care is a complex system, it means that the effects from care-experienced young people's inputs, can be difficult to identify and demonstrate. As observed by one interviewee:

> I absolutely trust that [...] it influences people's thinking and influences decisions that senior leaders are making. But we can't always know how that's happening, so it becomes difficult to feedback to young people ... **(Local authority staff member)**

For this reason, when undertaking collaborative work, it is important to consider how this will yield identifiable benefits within the time scales that young people are involved, on top of any longer-term, strategic work. This is emphasised in Barnardo's (2021) voice and influence strategy: *"Co-design: Children and young people work with us as equal partners to*

*define a problem and then define **tangible solutions** that can be delivered".* In so doing, the experience is likely to support the growth of care-experienced young people's sense of having autonomy and being able to make a difference.

This theme has support from a substantial body of psychological theories, such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), Attribution Theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977). These emphasise the key role of individuals seeing the tangible impact of their actions in the world as a route to developing a sense of competence and self-efficacy, in turn leading to increased motivation, self-esteem, and well-being.

While these theories are applicable to general psychological development, it is easy to see why these ideas are particularly relevant for care-experienced young people who are likely to have experienced a greater sense of powerlessness than the general population. As the examples below demonstrate, both Plymouth and Brent Care Journeys have involved collaborations where young people could see the difference that their input made. It seems that in both cases, supporting care-experienced young people to have an influence, counteracted previous feelings of powerlessness and contributed to the development of tangible outputs.

Balancing the need for tangible outputs with the ambition of your project when collaborating with young people requires careful consideration. Establishing clear and achievable goals in dialogue with care-experienced young people that set realistic expectations and help ensure that tangible outputs can be attained within the available resources and timeframe is key. Equally it can be helpful to emphasize the value of the process as well as the impact. For instance, while tangible outputs are important, there are clear benefits to the collaborative process for both professionals and service users. Acknowledging and celebrating the progress and positive changes made, even if the final outputs are not attained or are yet to emerge in the process, can also be good learning experiences.

Plymouth Care Journeys social action groups lead to '*Walk a day in my shoes*'

During co-design activities as part of Plymouth Care Journeys, care-experienced young people expressed the wish to develop social action groups. This led to the idea of young people and professionals developing discrete projects with limited timeframes and tangible, deliverable goals. The aim was to sustain the benefits of group work, create an empowering effect of making a difference, while ensuring that young people did not feel bogged down in bureaucratic processes with little identifiable impact. The first of the social action groups was **'*Walk a day in my shoes*'**. Young people made designs on white plimsolls as a way of illustrating their journeys through care, with QR codes that linked to a website sharing more of each young person's story. It engaged approximately 20 young people who, through the project, could share some of their experiences of being care-experienced, addressing stigma and increasing understanding. These were then used to engage local and national stakeholders in conversations about the experience of being in care, including presenting to the local MP, Barnardo's policy team and others.
A participant described the benefits:

> I've not got a bad word to say about it [...] The fact that Barnardo's is making real change. Actions speak louder than words. In [a different participatory project] you're talking about things but not seeing change.
> **(Young person)**

8. Conclusion

Working collaboratively with care-experienced young people in a meaningful way in the children's social care sector means prioritising strong and trusting inter-personal relationships between professionals and care-experienced young people as a foundation for any further collaboration. As this digest has highlighted, learning from CJSPs reinforces the wider literature that building relationships requires time and resources to not feel rushed or tokenistic; that professionals need to be reliable, consistent, transparent, respectful, and approachable, with strong listening skills, engaging in collaboration in good faith and with the sense of the possibility of making change. This process of relationship building can be supported by formal or actual independence from statutory services. The processes of building trust and comfort may be resource intensive, requiring preparatory and individualised outreach and support.

Managing tensions within the wider system: A key learning from this work is that undertaking collaborative work in the children's social care system can be counter-intuitive and very challenging as the wider system's structures and cultures are set up to create targets, which even if they are not achievable, provide some certainty and clarity. Therefore, such initiatives need to think creatively about how to demonstrate impact to stakeholders that capture the quality and depth of collaborative work and may at the same time need to go hand in hand with attempts to foster culture change within the wider system to ensure it is more hospitable to such practices going forward.

Seeing impact: Once working collaboratively with care-experienced young people, particular attention should be paid to the setting of realistic goals that are able to deliver tangible/ identifiable outcomes that can be seen and make a difference to young people, within the resources and time frames of the project. Seeing and feeling the results of their efforts helps young people to build a sense of self-efficacy, agency and confidence and a belief in the possibly of change.

Whilst it is difficult to get buy-in from a risk-averse system that is over-stretched, under-resourced and target-driven, it may just be the stepping away from this and the bringing back of young people into the centre of children's social care that can help achieve greater outcomes where other, more familiar approaches have not seen success.

9. References

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10. Contributors

This learning digest was brought together by Matthew Gieve and Heather Stradling with support from Nicola Stokes, Anna Sophie Hahne and Lucia Bertello from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations as part of the external evaluation of Barnardo's CJSPs. Care Journeys and Local Authority staff members, young people and local stakeholders in Brent and Plymouth were part of the conversations contributing to this digest.

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