

Learning Digest 6: Plymouth Care Journeys



BARNARD'S

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Introduction

Scope of this digest

This is one of three learning digests that together comprise the final phase of the independent evaluation of Barnardo's Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships (CJSPs or Care Journeys) in Brent and Plymouth. The evaluation was undertaken by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations between 2019 and 2024. The focus of this digest is to reflect on key learning from Plymouth Care Journeys (PCJ or Care Journeys) which aimed to enable transformational change to the local children's social care system for care-experienced young people. It considers examples of progress towards improvements that have made or could make a positive difference to the experience of young people entering, living in and leaving care. It also takes account of challenges experienced, where intentions did not perhaps result in expected changes, within the lifespan of the programme.

The approach taken in writing this digest is to offer opportunities for reflection and consideration, to support both partners, and other local authorities and voluntary and community sector organisations when designing, setting up and delivering similar interventions in future.

Digest Structure and Content

The digest begins by providing a summary of activities undertaken since the [Interim Evaluation Report 2](#) (published in July 2022), as reported to the evaluation team, as well as highlighting some key learning up to that point, from previous reports. It then goes on to present insights from PCJ, based on data analysis of interviews with stakeholders, focusing on project aims related to partnership working and systems change. Analysis includes interviews with both Barnardo's and Plymouth City Council (PCC) staff, undertaken between October 2023 and March 2024, as well as:

- further analysis of interviews and meetings undertaken since the beginning of the project.
- reviews of all reports produced by the evaluation team over the project lifespan.
- drawing on other data available through the Plymouth Care Journeys website, Plymouth City Council Ofsted reports and information about Care Journeys published on Barnardo's and PCC's websites and in media outlets.

Insights offered also refer to the wider literature around innovation, within and outside of the children's social care system, and the social and economic context within which Care Journeys was being delivered. The report ends with some questions and points for consideration for statutory and non-statutory partners when setting up similar innovation programmes.

Caveats and limitations

Despite efforts from the evaluation team to visit Plymouth in its last eighteen months to undertake interviews, focus groups and observe meetings and activities, it has been challenging to do this. This was partly due to issues such as train strikes, staff changes and absences within both partner organisations. In addition, strategic decisions to withdraw the funding investment earlier than anticipated led to key staff leaving their job roles sooner than expected, which seemed to contribute to difficulties in arranging interviews. It was also challenging to identify and reach interviewees for online and telephone interviews, and we are very grateful to those who agreed to be interviewed and helped us identify further people who could offer additional perspectives.

What activities took place as part of PCJ since the Interim report 2?

In summary, activities delivered since July 2022 include the:

- setting up and early implementation of a Lifelong Links Service (discussed later in this report).
- employment of a care-experienced young person as a project assistant.
- delivery of the 'Walk a day in my shoes' project.
- delivery of Journey Bags.
- 'Friday Hub' drop-ins continuing up to the Hub's closure at the end of 2023.
- continuation of the Positive Connectors service.
- ongoing one-to-one and group work with young people involved with Care Journeys, facilitated by Barnardo's staff.

To find out more about these activities, please see below and [previous reports available](#). Previous evaluation reports and learning digests identified aspects of PCJ that were working well as well as challenges faced, the enablers and barriers towards programme success, with recommendations to support ongoing improvements. Those highlighted below have continued to be reported in the final data gathering phase and are relevant to this digest.

Key strengths identified included:

- strong senior commitment from both partners during the set up and initial phases.
- increasing the focus of the local authority on the experiences of care leavers, such as an improved care leavers' covenant.
- valued, approachable support for young people who engaged with Care Journeys.

Challenges included:

- staff turnover in PCC and the Barnardo's teams, which impacted on strategic and project delivery decisions and implementation.
- limited evidence to show that an increasing number and diversity of young people were benefiting from the work of PCJ as it developed.
- budgetary pressures, exacerbated by COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, which impacted on both partners' investment into the ongoing work of Care Journeys.

Enablers to a programme like Care Journeys include:

- joint ownership of partners in decision making processes.
- having space to experiment and fail.

Barriers to a programme like Care Journeys include:

- slow bureaucratic processes that delay decisions and actions.
- different understandings and expectations in relation to how systems change is defined and what it looks like.

Recommendations and considerations identified included:

- to explore how increasing the number and range of young people engaging in activities, might help demonstrate how PCJ's ways of working can directly benefit more young people. This includes those who may face multiple barriers to participating.
- how a relentless focus on relationships, communication and leadership at all levels may help the ending go as well as its beginning.

This report now goes on to discuss themes, identified through the last wave of interviews and through reflecting on the final activity phases of PCJ. These build on learning and themes identified and discussed in previous learning digests and evaluation reports. It is recommended that learning shared in previous reports is considered alongside learning shared here, as this report attempts to add to what has already been said. The report ends with some considerations and recommendations for future projects of this kind.

What key learning can be taken from the experience of designing, delivering and ending PCJ?

This section, the main body of this digest, brings together and analyses key learning from PCJ activities, designed to improve the local system for care-experienced young people. It reflects on their potential sustainability and explores some challenges experienced. Consideration of outcomes experienced by young people are considered in a [further paper](#) and so are not the focus here. However, it is assumed that system improvements are related to, and help enable, improvements in young people's outcomes, particularly when system improvements are embedded as 'Business as Usual'. Learning has been brought together under the following thematic headings:

- Additional resource enables additional support for young people in care, whilst influencing system changes at the same time.
- Reframing power relationships between local authorities and voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners can help create a more holistic focus around young people's needs.
- Innovation partnerships require effective, timely decision-making processes, otherwise new initiatives can stall and momentum lost.
- Having permission to fail may be easier said than done, particularly at times of extreme resource constraints, and in a difficult Ofsted rating context.
- Endings of programmes may be as important as their beginnings, and yet can be easy to neglect or avoid.
- Ensuring that governance works well enough, with adequate processes in place, is an ongoing task.

These are each now explored in turn.

Additional resource enables additional support for care-experienced young people, whilst influencing system changes at the same time

As mentioned in previous reports and digests, Plymouth Care Journeys helped enable actions and activities that were unlikely to have happened otherwise. For instance, since the beginning of PCJ, young people could participate in wellbeing workshops, undertake social action projects, and get one-to-one and group support from staff who were highly experienced, approachable and flexible. Since the [Interim Report 2](#), the development of the **Lifelong Links** project received investment from both Barnardo's and Plymouth City Council. Barnardo's allocated funding for Barnardo's and PCC staff to receive training, as well as staff resource, whilst PCC enabled two staff to participate in the training and seconded one 0.5 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff member to implement the project. This shows a level of commitment from partners to the partnership and its aims:

“[...] they allocated resources [...] and that sort of demonstrated a real commitment to the partnership.” (Manager)

Other activities that continued to develop since summer 2022 and which were new to Plymouth included **Journey Bags**, **‘Walk a Day in my shoes’** and the **‘Friday Hub’**. Each of these activities are now briefly described, with a summary of their potential contributions to extending and improving support available for care-experienced young people, and their contributions to improving the care system for young people.

Journey Bags was a partnership with the Buddy Bags Foundation, who fundraise for and provide bags for young people moving into emergency care, including those who need to leave home quickly because of domestic violence. Barnardo's and PCC staff worked together with care-experienced young people to decide on the bag contents, packed 200 bags, supported by the Buddy Bags volunteers, and which, at the time of reporting, are being given to young people as they enter care. Data was not available from those staff or young people directly involved in giving and receiving the bags. However, if young people feel more supported and cared for on entering the care system, partly because of receiving such bags, it has the potential to make a big difference in someone's life and their future care journey. For instance, Brent Care Journeys successfully implemented a similar activity, **‘Welcome Packs’**, for young people entering Semi-independent accommodation. This system improvement was taken up by Brent Council and is now embedded as standard practice locally. Further evaluation of the Journey Bags scheme might be useful to help see if this relatively light investment at the entering care stage could support greater benefits for young people as they settle into new environments.

Walk a Day in my shoes was a creative social action project, identified in the second interim evaluation report as an example of how the PCJ's ethos was enacted. It demonstrated how equality and mutuality between care-experienced young people and professionals was promoted through its design and delivery. It did this through enabling young people to share their stories around entering and leaving care, increasing awareness of the issues faced by young people navigating the care system. It also supported work taking place locally and nationally to promote care-experience as a protected characteristic and corporate parents being a guarantor for young people moving into rented accommodation. The exhibition of shoes and associated stories were seen in the Houses of Parliament and at PCC offices. PCJ staff supported young people to continue conversations with politicians, using their stories to speak about the challenges of moving into rented accommodation without money for rent deposits and without a guarantor. It was reported as being influential in PCC's decision to commit to viewing care-experience as a protected characteristic, strengthening the authority's commitment as a corporate parent as well as engaging national politicians in using their influence at a national level on such issues.

Friday Hub was a drop-in staffed by a variety of agencies offering healthcare, employability and other support for care-experienced young people. It took place in the space where Plymouth Care Journeys was based administratively. This was separate from but close to city council offices and brought multiple services (such as health workers and employment advisors) into one space, tailored to and accessible for care-experienced young people, every Friday afternoon. As a model, the Hub demonstrated how a space - separate from the council building which may be heavily associated for a young person with traumatic memories of coming into care - could provide a supportive environment with services tailored towards the needs of care-experienced young people. As discussed in previous reports, it was experienced as a friendly, non-triggering environment, valued by young people and professionals alike.

“It’s an environment where [young people] felt safe, where they felt they could sit, they could go in there, just to do their laundry, they could go in there to do different things.” (Manager)

Interviewees reported that, at the time of writing, this model was being adapted by PCC as part of a new capital build, so that there will be a new hub for care leavers, staffed by PAs and social workers, as well as other agencies. This new development could build on the good practice initiated by the Friday Hub and provide a service that could bring tangible benefits to the wider population of care-experienced young people.

As these examples show, generating new projects that are tested through a programme like PCJ not only can be beneficial to the individuals directly involved, they can also influence actions towards improving local systems longer term. Relatively little investment can demonstrate the potential for big differences to individuals and be utilised when making longer-term investments, such as with the Friday Hub and the recognition of care-experience as a protected characteristic. This links to the next section, which considers how PCJ helped create a more holistic focus around young people’s needs, through the partnership between PCC and Barnardo’s.

Reframing power relationships between local authorities and voluntary and community sector (VCS) partners can help create a more holistic focus around young people’s needs

Since 2008, local authorities’ children’s social care services have increasingly been commissioning provision that addresses specific outcomes. This has enabled a focusing of diminishing resources on identified priority areas, usually targeting higher levels of need (National Audit Office, 2019)¹. This contrasts with previous approaches which combined specific commissioning models alongside broader grant and other funding programmes and partnerships, which enabled local communities, charities and other bodies to identify needs (sometimes with their local authority) and suggest approaches that might meet these. Whilst children’s social care has always had to deal with under-resourcing, since broader funding programmes have disappeared and commissioning models have tightened in focus, there has arguably been less opportunity for non-statutory organisations and local authorities to collaborate on a more equal level.

¹ National Audit Office (2019). Pressures on children’s social care. National Audit Office: London. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Pressures-on-Childrens-Social-Care.pdf>

Funding and commissioning power has perhaps become more strongly held by local authorities, with key performance indicators (KPIs) used to measure and hold to account contractors' performance. This has potentially made it difficult for commissioned projects to change or broaden their direction, to better meet individual needs, because funding has been focused on meeting these pre-determined KPIs and contracted targets. However, PCJ seems to have enabled a change in this power dynamic. Through Barnardo's bringing their own funding to Plymouth, initiating the collaboration and agreeing with PCC the aims of PCJ (and that young people would collaborate in deciding the direction and content of this work), they helped enable a more equal power relationship to develop.

Barnardo's could influence the programme aims, decision-making processes, allocations of funding and evaluation, resisting KPIs. This opened opportunities for young people to be part of defining what activities should focus on and work towards, including the agreed themes of loneliness and isolation, identified through co-design. It seems that through this process, Care Journeys supported PCC to develop its involvement work with care-experienced young people, beyond the scope of, though closely supported and advocated by the participation team.

Barnardo's staff attended strategic meetings with senior PCC staff and were able to use these spaces to influence, helping hold the local authority as a corporate parent to account. Through activities with young people (as already mentioned), Barnardo's also supported PCC to increase its focus on the needs of care leavers. This was perhaps most significant in influencing PCC's investment in more PAs to support this cohort of care-experienced young people, their adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic, and greater attention being given to the housing needs of care leavers.

'I don't think it's the sole contributor, but it's all helped' (Manager)

'Walk a day in my shoes' was praised by many at earlier stages of the evaluation, as it was able to gain recognition in Westminster, through directly advocating for corporate parents (local authorities) to be rent guarantors for young people leaving care and needing to access rented accommodation. At the time of report writing, this hasn't resulted in a specific commitment, however it has raised awareness of the issue, which has been supported by further activity undertaken by Barnardo's at a national level (Smith, 2023).²

Likewise, the **Friday Hub** demonstrated how it is possible to facilitate a multi-agency approach to support a specific population group. Through seeing the benefits of the Friday Hub for young people and professionals, PCC have decided that this needs to continue and are investing in a similar model, at the time of writing. These examples, as with other PCJ initiatives, developed organically outside of commissioning arrangements, may not have met commissioning criteria and so might not otherwise have been designed, without the umbrella support of PCJ. Time will tell how much these initiatives improve outcomes for the wider population of care-experienced young people. However, interviewees gave examples of individual young people beginning to access different projects and support with Barnardo's and PCC, because of their PCJ experience and relationships built.

This indicates how difficult it is to predict and know what outcomes will arise from which types of intervention. However, relationships are key to achieving young people's outcomes. Siloed social care interventions that neglect this and focus on crisis response, because of a lack of resources, repeatedly fail children and families, leading to 'a system that has started to spin out of control' (MacAlister, 2022)³. Plymouth's ability to invest in continuing a care leavers' hub is due to Government funding being made available in response to recommendations in the MacAlister review. This could mean that having PCJ in

² Smith, N. (2023). The case for a national rent guarantor and deposit scheme for care leavers aged 18-24 in England. Barnardo's: London. Available at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Rent%20guarantor%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

³ MacAlister, J. (2022). The Independent review of children's social care: The final report. DfE: London. Available at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

place may well have put Plymouth in a better position to be able to gain such funding and incorporate more holistic approaches to its local offer for care-experienced young people.

Other successes reported from the partnership between Barnardo's and PCC include an improved local care leaver's covenant and a more holistic understanding of positive destinations beyond the traditional perspective that this means employment, education and training. If there hadn't been this broader focus, than the very real housing needs of care leavers might have not been considered. Finally, this work was enabled through some effective relationships between individuals working strategically and operationally for each partner, as well as the visibility, availability, skills and passion of Barnardo's workers in their support for individual young people.

Innovation partnerships require effective, timely decision-making processes, otherwise new initiatives can stall and lose momentum

PCJ involved governance arrangements (discussed further [below](#)) involving a partnership board structure, meetings and terms of reference. Over the course of PCJ, operational working between the two partners also developed, for instance through collaborating in the set up and delivery of **Journey Bags** and **Lifelong Links**. However, in both of these cases there was some stalling of progress, due to delays with key decisions being made. As the [section](#) on permission to fail explores, these delays are likely due to resource constraints, including staff changes in both partners. However, these delays can hamper benefits reaching young people and influencing services more quickly.

It can also create a loss of momentum, which then may impact on the motivation and morale of staff working for each partner. On time-limited projects, this can create a negative spiral where, rather than efforts accelerating towards the end to ensure a good ending and future legacy, activity dwindles away, which can increase any frustrations. Unfortunately, there is some evidence of this happening in PCJ, which we attempt to explore in more detail in the case study of **Lifelong Links** below, to support learning for future interventions.

There were some indications of delays in **Journey Bags** being used operationally. Initially packed by April 2023, by April 2024 the bags were held by PCC's fostering team and said to be being given to young people entering care at that point. However, there were some reports of bags being held in cupboards during 2023, with social workers unaware of their existence and whilst PCJ awaited sign off from PCC on the protocol for how the bags would be managed and distributed. It is unknown specifically why this took so long. It is possible that this was due to staff shortages. However, overall, interviewees agreed that Journey Bags could make a big difference to young people and was a valid intervention with the potential for a good legacy. Some interviewees expressed frustration at the delay with implementation, and without monitoring data, it is not possible to report on usage or outcomes for staff and young people receiving journey bags.

Despite this, 200 journey bags have been funded and are a resource for young people entering care and have the potential to improve the experience of moving into care. From anecdotal feedback, there are indications that both social workers and young people who have been given bags, have responded positively to them. Whether Journey bags will be continued once current batches are distributed is unknown. This is returned to later, in the discussion around [endings](#).

Lifelong Links –

A case study illustrating some challenges when implementing evidence-based interventions from elsewhere

Introduction: What was Lifelong Links and how was it envisaged?

Lifelong Links is an intervention, developed and trialled by the Family Rights Group between 2017 and 2020, which had demonstrated evidence of its effectiveness in supporting young people in care to have a positive support network around them. It involves the training of Lifelong Links coordinators who work with young people to identify contacts they would like to link with, bringing people together through a Lifelong Links Family Group Conference and developing a plan that supports young people during their care journey and into adulthood.⁴

In spring/summer 2021, Lifelong Links was proposed by the then PCJ Children's Service Manager as part of an overall 'Links' service in Plymouth, (see also [Interim Report 2](#)). A business case was presented in autumn 2021 for implementing Lifelong Links as a method to help address the PCJ themes of loneliness and isolation and a service that could be part of the PCJ legacy. Positive impacts were anticipated for service delivery and care-experienced young people. Initially, the proposal was to instigate a version of Lifelong Links that built on the strengths of what Barnardo's and PCC could offer together, integrated within existing provision. The proposal identified the need for the secondment of 1.5 FTE staff members from PCC to be part of a partnership team setting up and delivering Lifelong Links. The business case expected the Links Service to be launched in October 2021, completing in March 2023, benefiting over 200 young people, giving time for its legacy to be embedded for the future beyond PCJ.

How did Lifelong Links develop in practice?

Whilst negotiations between Barnardo's and PCC took place, and decisions were being made as to how Lifelong Links should be implemented, it was decided that other PCJ activity would be paused, beyond regular ongoing work such as the Friday Hub and Project Acorn. The negotiation and decision-making process faced inevitable challenges with some long delays. Interview data suggests that these delays were for a range of reasons. These included:

- negotiating different opinions as to how involved the Family Rights Group (FRG) needed to be.
- once their involvement was agreed, the contracting with and training from the FRG.
- some late engagement with the family Group conference team at PCC to ensure the provision could be accredited, demonstrating best practice in line with the evaluated Lifelong Links programme.
- ongoing staff changes, and budget constraints, which seemed to add to delays in PCC agreeing to a secondment of an 0.5 FTE post, rather than the 1.5 FTE post proposed.

⁴Holmes et. Al (2020). Lifelong Links Evaluation Report. DfE: London. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60104f74d3bf7f05c3182253/Lifelong_Links_evaluation_report.pdf

“I just feel that we weren’t ever really, truly connected and joined up in terms of what that resource could actually look like.” (Manager)

Unfortunately, it seems that pausing other activity, whilst negotiations and agreements around Lifelong Links took place, led to a hiatus in much of PCJ work for over a year. The seconded arrangement then faced its own challenges, with two rounds of recruitment and the eventual successful appointment beginning in the summer of 2023. By this time, young people started being referred to and supported by the service, approximately two years since it was proposed.

Without monitoring data, it is not known how many young people were ultimately supported through Lifelong Links, but interview data suggests this was minimal.

“we’re all focused on Lifelong Links and there just isn’t the volume of referrals to keep us all busy.” (Staff member)

This lack of referrals seemed to be partly due to challenges in engaging social workers and other officers who might refer or support young people involved in the service. As had been experienced in the original project (Holmes et. al, 2020), professional concerns focused on potentially inappropriate links wanted by young people, the potential for traumas to be re-triggered and the need for professionals around the young person to be available to provide additional support and help manage any unexpected or distressing outcomes.

By June 2023, it was known that PCJ would be ending in April 2024, so there was not enough time to take new people through Lifelong Links. Therefore, the team had to stop taking on new referrals. By Winter 2023, PCC were reported to have brought the Lifelong Links service ‘in-house’, with Barnardo’s no longer involved. By April 2024, PCC interviewees reported that considerations were underway around how the service will be implemented in future. It is not known if or how this might transpire at the time of writing.

Reflections on Lifelong Links

The development of Lifelong Links in Plymouth from conception to implementation helps demonstrate how an intervention with an evidence base from elsewhere does not necessarily lead to predictable outcomes, because of different contextual factors. One reflection from Barnardo’s and PCC staff was how, although a good idea, Lifelong Links was not conceived or developed with the involvement of young people or officers who might be involved in its implementation.

“[...] had Lifelong Links been a young person chosen or a young person led initiative, it would have been different. [...] I also understand why they threw all their eggs into that basket [...]” (Staff member)

By not including young people or practitioners in decisions around Lifelong Links, PCJ was perhaps not embodying its key principles of co-design, testing and learning towards systems change.

Further, Lifelong Links had seemed a pragmatic approach to ensuring long-term impacts for care-experienced young people and a PCJ legacy. However, the time that lapsed between idea, commitment and actuation may arguably have been a contributing factor to decisions about where budget efficiencies should be implemented.

Finally, there is still scope for Lifelong Links to be embedded, helping improve the local offer for young people involved in the care system. It has the potential for positive impacts in young people's lives, even if it is not possible to evidence this at the time of writing. Significant investment was made by both partners into Lifelong Links and it is hoped that if the service itself is not continued, the learning shared here will be helpful to inform future interventions or innovations.

Learning points from Lifelong Links

When discussing and agreeing to implement interventions, it is important to check who is part of the conversation, who isn't and who needs to be. This helps ensure that the theory behind the intention is tested and refined as needed, to help arrive at a decision informed by the knowledge and experience of all of those who may help in, or benefit from, its delivery.

A further learning is around how PCJ's energy and resources seemed to become focused on Lifelong Links with very little other activity taking place alongside it. This, along with a lack of monitoring data or engagement with the evaluation by local managers (partly due to staffing changes) has perhaps contributed to a sense of less being achieved by PCJ than could have been expected. Therefore, as mentioned in the quote above, focusing on one intervention, putting 'all eggs in one basket', can potentially endanger funding, staffing resource and relationships between partners. It is worth carefully risk assessing before making such decisions, particularly when there are time limitations.

Finally, when embedding interventions that have an evidence base from elsewhere, it is important to ensure that the evidence is fully reviewed, with barriers and enablers assessed, and conversations held about how these might work in a different context, and any mitigations necessary. This could include working with key partners/team members expected to be involved, addressing how it might work in this context, what might be different, how the barriers previously found might be addressed if they arise, and how any enablers might be built on.

To conclude this section, it seems that there were several factors that led to delays with both **Journey Bags** and **Lifelong Links**. However, delays linked to decision-making processes within the local authority point to some challenges with the project governance, which required smoother and more timely processes than the local authority system perhaps allowed for.

This is returned to in the final section of this digest when governance is considered further. Before then, two other aspects of learning are briefly explored – around having permission to fail and the importance of endings.

Having permission to fail may be easier said than done, particularly at times of extreme budgetary constraints.

A key point mentioned in some interviews has been the importance of PCJ creating an environment where there is permission to fail. This has been in the spirit that innovation requires some risk taking, meaning that success cannot be guaranteed, and that rich learning can be achieved from initiatives not working out as planned. The exploration of Lifelong Links above is perhaps an example of this. However, its lack of success may have contributed to the withdrawal of funding (though clearly financial constraints and staff changes played their part too). This could lead to a sense that ‘failure’ is not perhaps acceptable after all. It would be understandable that there may be some truth to this perception, particularly when resources were so stretched due to the challenging social and economic context within which PCJ operated.

For instance, since the 2010 coalition government’s austerity policies began, there have been significant reductions in funding for youth work, as part of overall funding cuts to local authority budgets. Between 2010 and 2018/19, there has been a real-term reduction of 71%, from £1.36bn to £398m, spent on youth services by local authorities (including universal and targeted services) in England (YMCA, 2020)⁵. At the same time, spending on and referrals to late intervention services increased. Barnardo’s in partnership with other national children’s charities have reported that between 2010/11 and 2018/19, whilst there was a 46% decrease in funding for all early intervention services for children and young people (including youth services and family support), there was a 29% increase in late intervention services (such as safeguarding and children in care)⁶. This was in the face of a 23% reduction in funding for all children and young people’s services to local authorities from government.

It was perhaps partly due to this context which inspired both Plymouth City Council and Barnardo’s to work together on this innovation. However, since PCJ began, there have been the additional impacts of COVID-19 and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. Both seemed to contribute to increased referrals to children’s services and an increase in children and young people entering the care system. All of this has substantially increased resource and budget pressures for each partner at the same time as income has been falling and staff turnover has increased. PCC has also been operating against a backdrop of difficult Ofsted visits, which have stated that local services require improvement.

As mentioned in the [Learning Digest on Partnership Working](#), children’s services can be very risk-averse because of the high risks and life-and-death responsibilities held by individual staff and the service. In this climate, both PCC and Barnardo’s took a risk that is worth celebrating because the ambition was there with some additional investment to support it. However, it faced perhaps too many challenges along the way to be able to fully achieve its ambition.

“I just think it’s been terrible timing for the partnership throughout, if I’m being really honest, because of the changes in managers on both sides. I think if this had been a different time and place, it might have had a very different outcome.” (Staff member)

Combined with the usual difficulties in establishing good partnership working, as explored in previous reports and the Partnership Working Learning Digest, PCJ had perhaps too many factors acting as barriers, for it to be a total success. However, it is possible that legacies will be traced back to PCJ in

⁵ YMCA (2020). Out of Service: A report examining local authority expenditure on youth services in England and Wales.

⁶ Action for Children, National Children’s Bureau, NSPCC, The Children’s Society and Barnardo’s (2020). Children and young people’s services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19.

the future. These may be seen in the skills and competencies of staff, the differences made to individual children and young people, and to the influences in service delivery that may not have otherwise happened (such as the planned care leavers' hub). Likewise, as the digest on young people's outcomes considers, a small number of key PCJ staff were consistent for many of its years and worked directly with young people. Their interactions and support for individuals may well have been critical for those young people and may have bigger impacts that may never be counted or measured by anyone other than those individuals.

Whilst it is not possible to be conclusive, it seemed that the more senior the managers in both partners the more positively they spoke about the work of Plymouth Care Journeys. The closer staff were to practice, the greater the sense of disappointment and frustration in how PCJ developed in its last couple of years. This perhaps reflects feelings that despite some good practice involving a passionate and committed team, practitioners and young people experienced more the impacts of management changes, decisions, and the difficult social and economic context.

Endings of programmes may be as important as their beginnings, and yet can be easy to neglect or avoid.

There is a gap left by the earlier than expected ending of PCJ. A consistent message from different interviewees during the final phase of the evaluation, was that activities delivered as part of PCJ included a series of good ideas with some meaningful work taking place with young people. However, the sharp ending led to perceptions that little thought or clarity had been given as to what comes next.

"[...] it was beneficial for the young people, but it ended without an ending, a proper ending." (Manager)

There were reports of attempts from PCJ managers to hand work over to PCC staff to ensure some sustainability and a smoother ending. However, with PCC staffing challenges, overstretched services, and PCJ staff leaving because their posts were coming to an end, it is perhaps unsurprising that this has been experienced as unsatisfactory with not enough handover. As an example, the closure of the Friday Hub (necessary due to PCJ needing to vacate the building), seemed to leave a vacuum in support for young people.

"[...] now [the services] have stopped because that building is no longer available and there's nowhere else where we can continue this. So a gap has been created." (Manager)

Local authority staff have been reported as trying to pick up this work and reconnect with the different services involved in the Hub. However, if clearer handover processes had been planned for and agreed at strategic and operational levels, this scenario may have been avoided. That this seems to have been very challenging to ensure reflects not only on the sudden premature ending of PCJ, but also the high turnover of staff, leaving gaps in programme memory, commitment and capacity.

As it stands, PAs are continuing to work with very high caseloads of care-experienced young people, with some high, risky levels of mental health and housing needs. It is natural that when staff are feeling the pressure of these immediate issues, they may not feel able to take on responsibility for services that were previously held by Barnardo's staff within PCJ. And without the senior leadership capacity to support the taking in and organising of services, there is a risk that some of the successful work of PCJ might be lost or forgotten.

On reflection, there was arguably great attention given to the beginning of Care Journeys, with shared enthusiasm by both partners, attendance at partnership board meetings, and a range of different activities taking place. These included a launch event and the set up and publication of a Care Journeys website. Whilst not explicit, there were perceptions expressed during early interviews that the partnership and work of Care Journeys would continue beyond its planned lifespan. Whilst this is often an ambition in time-limited initiatives, which can help bring in support and commitment, the reality of this happening is very challenging without explicit discussion and work by both partners. Otherwise, talk of and work towards an ending can be avoided, overtaken by the language of legacy without the necessary transparent work towards ensuring one.

In the last eighteen months of Care Journeys, there is evidence of individual workers working towards ending with individual and groups of young people. In addition, new young people were not involved, to avoid raising hopes before disappearing. This important work towards ending included celebration dinners with young people. However, attention from managers was necessarily perhaps focused on winding up activity, moving out of the building, bringing staff contracts to a close.

Staff in both partner organisations expressed disappointment at the sooner than expected ending and a sense that information sharing about the ending and work on its legacy was not as clear or transparent between the partners, as it could perhaps have been.

As with relationships in general, the ending of project partnerships can be challenging, as explored in the previous [Learning Digest](#). Endings within the children's social care system are arguably even more important, bearing in mind it is a system involved in some life-changing difficult endings for children and young people when they enter care and again when they leave. And for a project which was focused on positive destinations it is perhaps reflective of the wider system that it was very difficult to ensure a wholly positive ending/destination for PCJ. And this is also perhaps where conversations about sustainability can be unhelpful, avoiding the difficulties for staff and organisations about bringing projects and work to a good enough ending, that takes account of the successes as well as the inevitable disappointments. Whilst there is some guidance available for funders when thinking about endings (NPC, 2022)⁷, there seems to be very little literature or guidance around the endings of relational projects. This is partly why this space is given in this digest. Although it is likely that everyone involved in PCJ will have already moved on to their next project or focus by the time of publication, it is hoped that experiences of this ending may inform how future endings are approached.

⁷ Mannix, M. & Mann, C. (2021). How to responsibly end funding relationships with charities. Blog. Available at: <https://www.thinknpc.org/blog/how-to-responsibly-end-funding-relationships-with-charities/>

Ensuring that governance works well enough, with adequate processes in place, is an ongoing task.

Partnerships like PCJ require flexible systems and processes in place, to be developed, refined, with regular review between partners, that support the governance of the partnership. These can include commitments to working groups, board memberships, and other communication and decision-making arrangements. This is alongside risk and conflict management processes, minimum levels of engagement to support viability of the partnership and programme delivery, with agreed timeframes for decisions and actions. These can ensure that each partner fulfils its role and that when there are inevitable problems and misunderstandings, these can be addressed and worked through. It is also helpful to check that there are routes for all involved to have mechanisms through which they can input into and influence decisions, so that good governance supports good practice, and vice versa.

Whilst there was enthusiasm, a readiness to begin working together and commitment to be in partnership in the early years, challenges faced over the funding period, including COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, and significant staff changes, perhaps contributed to the challenges faced when there were delays and difficult decisions to be made. Criticisms included that the partnership wasn't strategic, that it was an additional ask to bring different people to this table, when they were already meeting within other partnership meetings e.g. corporate parenting meetings, safeguarding boards etc. Interviewees also reported that without progress at a fast enough pace to encourage individuals to invest their time towards partnership efforts, it would struggle to maintain commitment and support. This is not a new issue as local authorities, charities and other partners working in the public sphere navigate 'business as usual' activities alongside new projects and programmes. Although there was senior commitment from both partners, the reduction in funding and staff changes – including senior staff in both organisations – alongside the impact of COVID-19 and cost of living crisis, and challenges with getting approval or sign off for activities/processes, all perhaps contributed to a slowing down of activity and progress with the aims of the partnership.

“Don't think it's been as joined up as it could or should be.” (Manager)

Strategic partnership board meetings did not continue as a regular event, seemingly leaving gaps in how both partners reported to and made decisions with each other. It may also have affected how they worked in partnership as the project developed, with these gaps in evidence as the programme ended.

“When you've got continuous management changes, you start to lose trust in your own systems.” (Staff member)

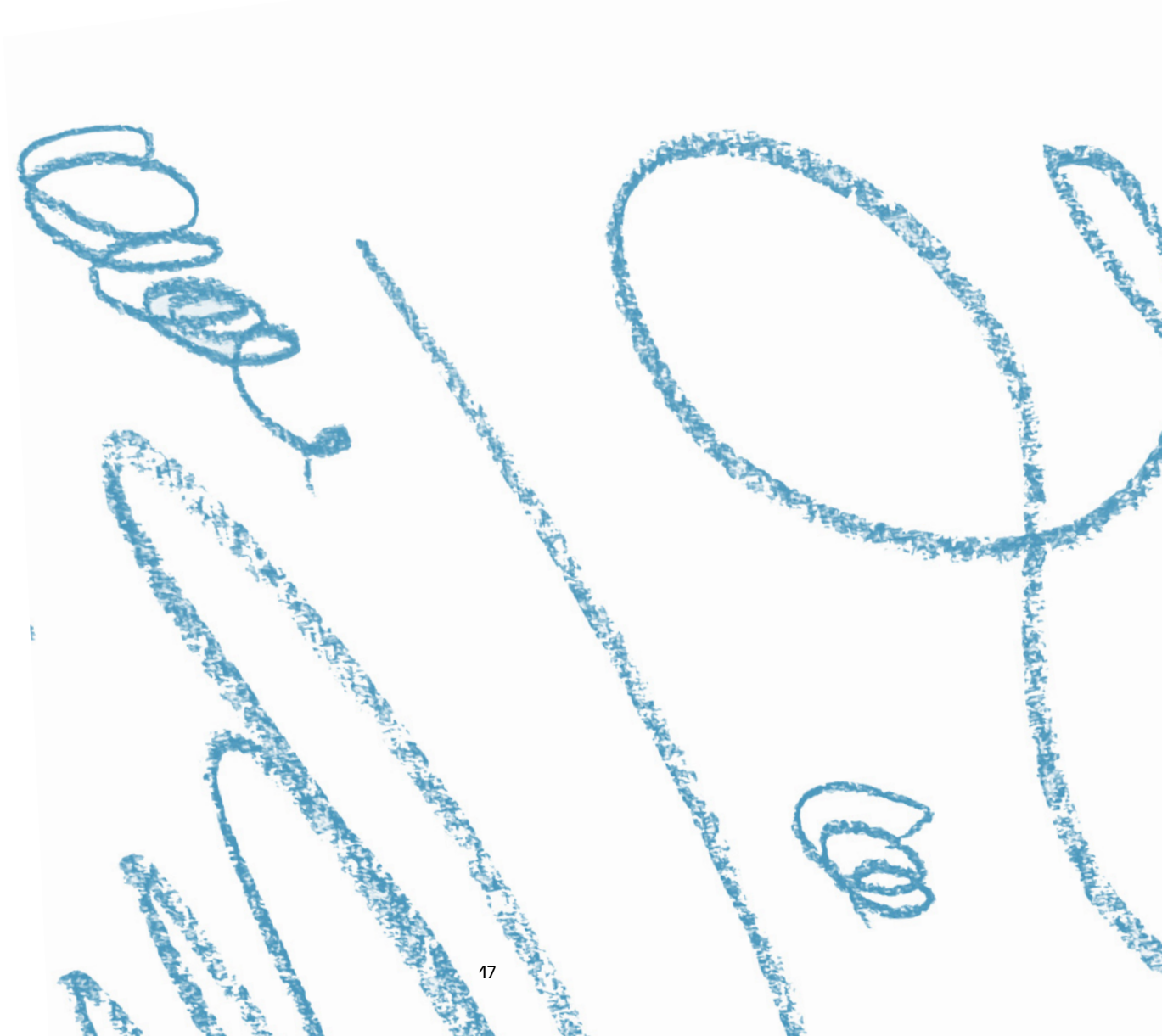
As explored more generally by the LGA⁸ there are ways to help partnerships become more 'fleet of foot', not hampered by traditional decision-making processes through shared foundations, a relational culture, effective structures, capacity and resources. These can support working and collaborating across the splits between the statutory and VCS sectors, navigating the different cultures and requirements that each face. For instance, the split between social workers and VCS staff working with young people may be inevitable and at times can be helpful (e.g., Barnardo's were perhaps able to present themselves to young people as being 'different', therefore able to build trust and involve young people who might have been wary of statutory services). However, this split can at times be counter-productive.

⁸ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/toolkit-partnership-working-voluntary-and-community-sector>


“Barnardo’s have the space and the time to do some of the nice work if I put it that way.” (Manager)

From reviewing data from the programme start, there were indications that perceptions of ‘us and them’ were present throughout. For instance, as well as Barnardo’s initiating and significantly funding the partnership, it commissioned the evaluation and some service design and Theory of Change work in the beginning. The language of the programme (service design, alpha and beta phases etc.), was brought in by central Barnardo’s, as well as by the evaluation team (e.g. evaluation rubric). The different terminology used was fed back as inaccessible to some practitioners, managers and young people. Likewise, often interviewees called PCJ ‘Barnardo’s Care Journeys’ and this wording was seen in local media articles. Therefore, perhaps a communication protocol and guide also need to be implemented as part of partnership programmes, so that the language of partnership is there throughout, with the naming of different programme aspects co-produced, with diversions from this language being challenged and changed when noticed.

Likewise, greater co-location of staff, shared training and development sessions, joint working/shadowing and sharing credit for all successes (and failures!), at all levels, might also support a greater sense of truly working in partnership. This is said in the knowledge of the challenge of staff vacancies and low staff retention. However, if there are these agreements in place and they are monitored at agreed intervals, it perhaps helps when trying to hold each other as partners to account, and to ensure that the partnership maintains focus, despite contextual challenges. It cannot be underestimated though how difficult this might be, particularly in the context the project was working within.



Reflections, considerations and recommendations for future programmes



Overall reflections

Care Journeys began with the ambition to create transformational change in the children's social care system. Whilst it may be that this level of ambition helps bring partners into the work and is an admirable aim, the experience of Plymouth has perhaps demonstrated how challenging this is, and even more challenging to measure progress towards this. This is particularly the case with the social, economic, and organisational contexts that have surrounded Care Journeys. Bearing in mind the budget envelope for this work was very modest, (between £2-£300,000 per year compared to the £1,000,000s of pounds spent on children's social care in Plymouth), it has had some potentially significant influence – in the care leavers' covenant, the adoption of care experience as a protected characteristic, as well as raising awareness around care leavers' housing needs, including the proposed role of corporate parent as rent guarantor. Finally, amongst other impacts felt by individuals, there are the Journey Bags, Lifelong Links and upcoming Care Leavers' hub as legacies.

Having said this, achieving the aim of transformational change was always going to be a challenge. Against a backdrop of austerity policies, COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis, local authority cuts, political instability, challenging Ofsted inspection results and significant drops in income for both partners, it is to be celebrated that PCJ contributed ideas and tested interventions that could help young people in reducing loneliness and isolation. And, as can be seen from the young people's outcomes digest, some very positive outcomes were experienced by young people involved.

Often, there are also unseen legacies that can live on in how professionals involved take on what they have learnt through the experience, and how this is used to continue developing and improving the system at a local and national level. Although PCJ may no longer be in existence it is likely that staff from both organisations will continue to be working in and around Plymouth, and/or the children's social care system. These legacies may be in how individuals work, attitudes that change and partnerships that might develop in different ways, for instance, in the other ongoing and future collaborations between Barnardo's and PCC (such as family hubs).

However, the ambition of the programme and what this might look like in reality perhaps needed further exploration and discussion between both partners on an ongoing basis. This is alongside the testing out of different ideas and a relentless focus on seeing what might take off and benefit wider groups of young people, following those threads and allowing interventions that were not gaining traction to be put aside.

Summary of learning points identified through this digest

Having considered key learning from the experience of PCJ, the following learning points can be summarised as follows:

Decision-making processes

To keep listening, involving and supporting young people and operational staff to develop, co-design and input into decisions at every stage of a programme - as these are the people that will feel the greatest impacts from decisions and will have insights into practical considerations that strategic leads may not be privy to.

To risk assess and perhaps to resist pauses in overall activity during time-limited interventions. In the face of slow and delayed decision making, operational work still needs to continue and be visible, otherwise momentum and willingness to support interventions can be lost.

To hold dynamic risk registers for new innovations, as a communication mechanism with stakeholders around decision-making on what to push through, what to abandon and what the cut-off points are for these decisions – not that these will necessarily be known in advance, but so that the risk is equally held, discussed and transparently managed together. This could be part of a mini-Theory of Change for testing out interventions.

To perhaps, when designing and planning interventions, to undertake exercises such as “[...] the theory of inventive problem solving and creating braver and safer spaces.” (Tucker and Stanny, 2021).⁹ This would involve spending time exploring the counter-factual of plans, so that there is discussion of what failure would look like and the approaches that could help minimise any barriers and blocks. This might help enable an environment for assumptions to be surfaced, different voices to be heard and resistances to be worked with. This might help the idea of failure be faced by all and a dialogue to take place about what permission to fail looks like and how this might be managed, taking account of contextual challenges.

Endings

To begin, and continue, discussing the ending of projects from their beginning, regardless of sustainability ambitions.

To take care not to invest too much in the start of a project without considering how the work will be ended, and the investment needed in this from all partners.

To recognise that endings can raise difficult emotions and so attention to this can support everyone involved to end their relationship with the project and each other without either the disappointments dominating (which can lead to successes being sidelined), or the successes dominating, (which can lead to important lessons being forgotten).

To find ways to maintain communication at all levels towards the ending, helping the transition towards future project partnerships.

Governance

To develop and review governance processes, including agreed communication protocols that support the working between and through partner organisations and professions, generating shared language and opportunities for deeper understanding through activities for instance co-location, shadowing and shared training and development sessions.

⁹Tucker, C. & Stanny, C.J. (2021). Promising Failure: Driving Innovation by Exposing Imperfection. *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning, Vol 2 (3)*. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1339248.pdf>

Further recommendations

These recommendations are drawn from insights and reflections shared by interviewees as well as those developed by the evaluation team when reviewing the data and reflecting on the overall process of designing, delivering and ending PCJ. As each programme will be different, the art of this work is suiting decisions to context, and so these are suggestions to support thinking when planning and delivering programmes, rather than clear dos or don'ts. One key learning from the PCJ experience is that it is incredibly difficult to predict what might work, what might not and where most influence of change might arise.

Recommendations include to:

- use action research processes, embedding learning, developing and iterating along the way, gathering evidence and responding to this in plans. This includes the taking up learning from elsewhere but also from the existing local and immediate context.
- explore tapering up and down of funding across the project lifespan - Being wary of investing too much at the start, but to build the investment and momentum through ongoing planning, testing, learning, piloting, evaluating, planning cycles, slowing down towards the end.
- consider commissioning a learning and evaluation partner (rather than an external evaluator), to work alongside projects, including giving attention to the ability of the evaluation team to have a presence at a local level, to support the programme as a 'critical friend'. TIHR is increasingly working on projects of this kind using this approach, which incorporates Theory of Change development and monitoring, and could be more inclusive of the different partners – from young people through to strategic leads.
- consider plans at the partnership set-up stage, for how agreements between those in senior leadership are communicated, shared with and open to influence and improvement from those working at an operational level as well as the communities which the plans are aimed at supporting. This might include a set of prompting questions such as who is sitting around which table, where are decisions being made, where are they going to get stuck and what can be done to ensure this doesn't happen?
- develop a strategy for who to connect with, at what stage of the partnership and for what reason, to strategically engage with those who present greater added value at specific times.
- ensure that co-creation involves all key stakeholders – including operational professionals and young people – and to notice when the balance moves towards one group at the expense of the other. Linked to this, the engagement of social workers and PAs perhaps also needs specific attention and focus – possibly through joint training, giving professionals space to be together, spend time with each other, to be innovative, to see how their collaboration is supportive to their everyday work and might save resources.
- Using evidence already available during early project stages, for instance, the Bright Spots survey results. This had involved over 70% of the local care-experienced population and could have usefully provided evidence to inform the beginning of work. Arguably this could also have engaged social workers and PAs earlier in PCJ's timeline, which might have made a positive difference.
- use the LGVA toolkit which offers helpful questions (mostly relevant to partnerships of this kind) when setting up future partnerships between local authorities and voluntary sector organisations.

- stay relentlessly with the ethos and values of a project, alongside monitoring it all along the way.

Finally, on programmes like this, there might be value in having a working group focused on how the partnership is ending its work. This group could:

- help ensure handovers are appropriate,
- agree who does what to ensure as meaningful a legacy as possible, and
- ensure that communications about the ending is jointly held and managed by partners, keeping individuals, partners and teams, who have been involved along the way, informed appropriately.