

Learning Digest 4: Outcomes for care-experienced young people in Brent and Plymouth Care Journeys



Changing childhoods.
Changing lives.

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Glossary

Alpha Labs: Co-design phase activities run by Brent Care Journeys where young people were given the space to test and develop ideas to support late entrants to care, with the aim of identifying suitable project ideas to take forward into the Beta phase. In each session the group of young people were led through a semi-structured process by the service designer and project workers, first agreeing areas of focus and then designing possible solutions. In the first co-design phase, the group selected two project ideas to take further, one of which was the **Welcome Packs**.

Bright Spots: A survey of children in care and care leavers developed by Coram Voice to anonymously collect data on the experiences of these groups of young people. More information can be found at: <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-programme/>.

Find Your Future: A one-to-one programme run in Plymouth focused on helping care leavers to achieve positive destinations (such as, but not limited to, education, training and employment) through one-to-one work. It was seen as a key entry point to Care Journeys, as the one-to-one work was viewed as a less intimidating route into the project compared to immediately starting with groupwork.

Journey Bags: A Plymouth Care Journeys project whereby bags were filled with practical and emotionally supportive items to be delivered to first-time entrants into care to help aid them in their transition into the care system. Bags are packed to be suitable for recipients of different genders and age groups. More information about the buddy bags concept can be found at: <https://buddybagfoundation.co.uk/>

Rent guarantor scheme: A scheme proposed by Plymouth Care Journeys whereby the local authority would have a legal requirement to act as a rent guarantor for care-experienced young people who were seeking to rent accommodation.

Service design: Service design uses a human-centred approach to understand and improve the experiences of people receiving those services. It involves activities, infrastructure, communication, people, and material components that impact service quality and user interactions. Based on Design Thinking, service design is iterative, and collaborative, encompassing three non-linear phases: Discovery, Design, and Delivery.

Walk a Day in my Shoes: A Plymouth Care Journeys project through which several care-experienced young people each decorated a pair of shoes to reflect their experiences of being in the care system. The shoes were displayed during various internal and external events, where viewers could use a QR code attached to each pair of shoes to access the text and audio explanation of that young person's story told in their own words. Notably, the display was also presented at Parliament to raise awareness and generate publicity around the initiative.

Welcome Packs: One outcome of the first round of **Alpha Labs** workshops in Brent. These were packages of essential items put together to support young people entering semi-independent accommodation for the first time. They are now a commissioning requirement for all semi-independent accommodation providers across Brent.

Introduction

Background and structure of the report

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 purpose of this report is to focus explicitly on the outcomes for care-experienced young people in Brent and Plymouth - those who were directly involved in Care Journeys and the wider population of care-experienced young people across the two geographic areas. It also aims to share learning around measuring outcomes for similar cohorts of young people for any future evaluations by Barnardo's or other organisations.

This report can be read alongside the other two final learning digests which look at the wider learning and impacts of the programme beyond those felt by young people, with one report focusing on the Brent Care Journeys partnership (BCJ) and the other on the Plymouth Care Journeys partnership (PCJ). Previous evaluation reports produced as part of this programme can be found [here](#).

Following the introduction, the report summarises the evaluation methodology before bringing together evidence on outcomes for young people. The report finishes with general recommendations. A more detailed description of the evaluation methodology is presented in the Appendix.

Care Journeys Strategic Partnerships (CJSP)

CJSP was one of Barnardo's Core Priority Programmes as part of their 10-year strategy (2016-2025) focusing on outcomes for care-experienced young people. CJSPs were established in Brent and Plymouth in 2019 and ended in 2024. Plymouth and Brent CJSPs aimed to achieve transformational change within the children's social care system and create better outcomes for care-experienced young people.

Both Plymouth and Brent CJSPs used a service design approach to explore current issues for care-experienced young people and ways to develop solutions. This resulted in a range of pilot projects being implemented for different amounts of time. Plymouth and Brent CJSPs also ran activities aimed at addressing immediate challenges faced by young people. These activities were mainly developed in collaboration with care-experienced young people. Both CJSPs had a core group of young people involved in a range of activities and others in wider reach activities. In Plymouth overall there were fewer young people involved in Care Journeys than in Brent. For an overview about activities undertaken in Brent and Plymouth see the learning digests on [Brent](#) and [Plymouth](#) and the previous interim reports for [Brent](#) and [Plymouth](#). Individual activities are also referenced in this report.

Evaluation sources and limitations

Data for this report has been gathered throughout the five-year period of the evaluation from 2019 to 2024, including a final round of data collection in the last nine months of project delivery to update on progress and impact up to that point. Qualitative data was drawn from interviews with young people, staff and stakeholders and quantitative data from surveys and Local Authority datasets (for a full list see the [evaluation webpage](#)).

There was less qualitative and quantitative data received from PCJ and Plymouth City Council (PCC) than had been anticipated, including no further quantitative data in the final data collection round. This means that the data used to analyse the final phase of this programme in Plymouth was limited. In addition, while the evaluation team sought to collect data on the wider populations of care-experienced young people in Brent and Plymouth who had not directly engaged with Care Journeys, this information was not readily available. Consequently, this has affected the ability to fully understand the impact Care Journeys had more broadly. Furthermore, due to the evaluation's timeframe, it was anticipated that determining any long-term outcomes for young people was not going to be possible and therefore all described outcomes relate specifically to the period during which Care Journeys was running. Finally, as this report is intended to be an overview of the impacts the programmes had on young people, it does not provide in-depth descriptions of each outcome area. Instead, it focusses on summarising key insights and learning related to outcomes for young people from Care Journeys.

Methodology for capturing young people's outcomes



This section summarises the context of the evaluation and how different evaluation methodologies were used to measure outcomes for young people. A more detailed description of the methodology can be found in the [Appendix](#) which also provides two detailed examples.

The evaluation of the CJSPs, despite the challenges related to the fluid nature of the programme, allowed for a dynamic and iterative “test and learn” approach. While the evaluation maintained its planned developmental, process, and outcomes approach, methods and data collection techniques were adjusted as needed, in line with the development of Care Journeys. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic the evaluation team changed to remote interviews and when routine data was not available, additional surveys were developed.

In line with existing literature on measuring outcomes for care-experienced young people, the evaluation adopted a comprehensive approach that included both qualitative and quantitative data. Additionally, in accordance with literature recommendations, the evaluation incorporated a broad range of outcomes to ensure a holistic understanding of the programme's impact, including outcomes such as social connections and personal wellbeing that may not be easily quantified.

Furthermore, prioritising the voices of young people and addressing ethical considerations in data collection, the evaluation team ensured authentic representation of participant experiences. Generally, the evaluation utilised trauma-informed data collection methods to address the unique needs of the population of care-experienced young people.

In the spirit of Care Journeys more generally, where possible the evaluation was co-designed or adjusted based on feedback. For instance, an evaluative rubric was co-designed with both Brent and Plymouth CJs, to help enable clear articulation and agreement on outcomes and identification of relevant data sources.

Outcomes for young people directly involved



Outcomes for young people directly involved in Care Journeys have been summarised into four broad outcome areas, with evidence outlined in subsequent sections to support each of these.

- Social connections, relationships and support networks
- Mental and physical wellbeing, confidence, sense of identity and self-esteem
- Skills, knowledge and understanding
- Pursuit of personal goals (education, employment and training and other positive destinations)

Although outcomes are presented in separate sections, they are connected and mutually reinforcing of each other. For instance, increased social connections can support young people's wellbeing, while raised confidence can encourage young people to pursue their employment goals.

Social connections, relationships and support networks

Young people felt they had built positive, supportive relationships with peers and Care Journeys staff

Many of the young people who were interviewed talked about the strong, meaningful relationships that they had developed with other Care Journeys peers throughout the course of the projects, and how important these had become to them. One of the reasons why these relationships seem to have been so strong was because, for several young people, this was the first time that they had been able to develop social connections with peers who shared their experience of the care system. For this reason they felt more understood and accepted within these new friendship groups.

“You all see each other for who you are rather than what’s happened to you.” (Young person)

This was a key outcome in this area, with several young people saying that their new relationships extended beyond Care Journeys activities as they were communicating with their new friends on social media or seeing them in their free time. There was also a strong sense of these relationships contributing to young people's personal development and growth. Interviewees described how they had become de facto mentors to some of their peers, or how their new friends were able to encourage each other out of their comfort zones.

Other mutual benefits of these peer relationships that were mentioned by many young people were the increased sense of support they provided and a decrease in feelings of loneliness. Part of this came from a growing understanding that they were not alone and there were other young people who shared similar experiences. Some young people also talked about having social anxiety which had previously prevented them from socialising. However Care Journeys, through their understanding and encouraging staff, had provided a safe space for them to meet and make friends with other young people.

“I felt alone for many reasons for a long time ... and I couldn’t find people. This lets you know you’re not alone and you can find where they are.”
(Young person)

The increased sense of support felt by several of the young people who were interviewed came not only from new relationships with their peers, but also from the connections that they had built with Care Journeys professionals. Some of the support received from professionals was practical, such as sending care packages during COVID-19 lockdowns. For many young people though, it was the emotional support provided by Care Journeys staff that had a notable impact on their lives. Several of those interviewed talked about how caring the staff had been, and how they were some of the only people that they could turn to when facing difficulties in other areas of life.

“I found it really hard to trust anyone but with [Care Journeys staff member] I know I could trust them with anything and they would help me get through it.” (Young person)

There is mixed evidence around the impact on young people’s relationships with peers and professionals outside of Care Journeys

Many young people involved in Care Journeys reported that they had developed important relationships and strengthened their support networks with peers and professionals who were also directly involved in Care Journeys. The evidence around how it impacted their wider support networks was more mixed, perhaps reflecting the complexity of relationships, particularly for care-experienced young people. Some young people reported that the support they had received from Care Journeys professionals had increased their trust in other professionals, such as nurses and mental health workers, thereby increasing their likelihood to access other professional services. However, some young people reported that they still did not feel supported by social services. On the other hand, interviews with PAs suggested that Care Journeys had helped in improving relationships between PAs and some of the young people they supported. This was either through encouraging the PAs and social workers to organise more activities with young people, like paddle boarding and puppy yoga, or through enabling young people to open up and connect with their PAs more than they did before.

“They can see me as a human being ... they feel I actually care about them.” (PA)

There was less evidence available regarding whether Care Journeys impacted the relationships that young people had outside of its sphere, with other professionals, peers, family or carer networks, wider circles of friends, classmates or colleagues, or whether young people had gained a greater understanding of what healthy and unhealthy relationships look like and how to build and maintain them. This is reflected in the survey data from PAs in Brent, which suggests that less than half (47%)

of the young people they worked with had seen improvements in social connections, relationships and networks, while a quarter (27%) had seen a little or no improvement. There were however some activities in both Brent and Plymouth aimed at improving relationships with others outside of CJ. In Brent, for example, one event celebrated intergenerational connections, involving birth and foster parents, as well as care leavers' young children.

Mental and physical wellbeing, confidence, sense of identity and self-esteem

The evaluation has identified a significant body of evidence supporting the broad outcome area focused on young people's overall wellbeing and confidence. For instance, in Brent, a substantial majority of PAs surveyed (87%) thought that the young people involved in Care Journeys had shown positive changes in relation to this outcome. In both Plymouth and Brent, many young people participating in Care Journeys were reported to have improved confidence and self-esteem, being more able to use their voice and feeling a sense of empowerment. The evaluation further revealed examples of engaging in Care Journeys leading to improvements in having a sense of identity, greater mental and physical wellbeing, and reduced isolation.

Young people involved in Care Journeys increased their confidence and self-esteem

There is particularly strong evidence that when young people established trust with Care Journeys staff, were entrusted with responsibility, and engaged in group activities and projects, they experienced notable increases in confidence and self-esteem. For example, in a survey conducted among young people in Brent, the majority stated that Care Journeys had helped them become a more confident person and enhanced their ability to advocate for themselves. Furthermore, there were examples demonstrating that young people felt more assured speaking up in group settings and during meetings with professionals.

“And when I stand back, especially there's one particular young person, where before I'd seen her in a participation session [...] she wasn't that confident. And then fast forward, she's involved in Care Journeys and I can see her, just the growth that she's done. It's really good. She's going to go places.” (PA)

Taking part in Care Journeys has helped some young people interviewed and/or surveyed to be more confident to learn and gain new skills, take positive risks and be more in control over their lives.

Young people experiencing an increased sense of identity

Generally, Care Journeys seemed to support young people in embracing their identity and expressing their individuality by actively listening to them and providing opportunities to connect with peers. Surveys conducted among young people in both Brent and Plymouth revealed that they felt more comfortable in being themselves. This was particularly mentioned in relation to young people's care-experienced status as well as regarding other aspects of their identities, such as being LGBTQ+.

Young people showing improvements in wellbeing

Interviews and observations in both Plymouth and Brent highlighted the positive impact of participating in Care Journeys on young people's physical wellbeing, such as through increased physical activity, improved sleep patterns, and a greater focus on taking care of their health. In Plymouth, responses to a pre- post survey indicated that most young people surveyed reported enhancing their knowledge of self-care, increasing their understanding of how to manage their mental health as well as how to access wellbeing support. Overall, there were many examples of young people feeling less stressed and anxious, as well as more optimistic about the future.

“My mind is able to like, get away from like other things and just get focused on things like this, positive things that benefit me.” (Young person)

Improvements in mental wellbeing also link to reduced feelings of loneliness and social isolation (for more details see section). Engaging with other young people helped some participants foster a sense of belonging and connectedness. In Plymouth, there was even a statistically significant improvement for young people who participated in group activities on a loneliness scale.

Vignette 1: Young person gaining confidence and social connections¹

Jesse had recently moved to a new area. They felt isolated and alone, with their anxiety making it very difficult for them to join social groups and make new friends. Their PA encouraged them to go along to a Care Journeys activity, but since Jesse wasn't comfortable meeting lots of new people at once, Care Journeys staff agreed to meet them in a public place first so they could get to know each other.

Once Jesse felt more comfortable, they started attending weekly groups at Care Journeys. While usually they would feel nervous around people of their own age, they quickly found that here, the other young people understood Jesse's past and accepted them for who they were. Several of the young people swapped contact details, and Jesse started speaking to them online throughout the week, and even sometimes meeting up with them in person outside of Care Journeys. This meant Jesse felt less lonely as they now had more friends to talk to.

Jesse reported that their confidence had improved drastically through the mutual support from their new friendship group, but also from the encouragement of Care Journeys staff who were always telling them 'You can do this' when they came across a new challenge. They felt their self-esteem had improved too, and now felt more comfortable smiling at people across the street and going into town on their own.

¹ Vignettes are composite narratives of different young people interviewed across Plymouth and Brent. Names used are pseudonyms.

Skills, knowledge and understanding

Young people show an improved understanding of the care system and the ways they can have an impact on it

One of the clearest changes seen in this area was the improvement in participating young people's knowledge of the care system itself. This included a more thorough understanding of how different processes and procedures currently work, and more awareness of the diverse range of experiences and perspectives of others who are living and working within it. For example, some young people commented that because of Care Journeys they had learnt a lot about the interactions that unaccompanied asylum seekers had had with the care system.

“It opens your eyes up to more than just your own view on things. You get to hear other people's experiences and you get to understand the system a bit better.” (Young person)

Young people also reported having a better understanding of, and greater sympathy towards, authorities within the care system. In interviews, some young people commented that they were more aware of the 'struggle' around deadlines and budgets that staff members (both within and outside of Care Journeys) were facing, and that they knew staff were endeavouring to support care-experienced young people despite these obstacles. These changes in understanding were well captured in a short film produced by BCJ about young people's views of the care system.²

In addition, young people who had been involved in projects like **Alpha Labs** in Brent or the work in Plymouth advocating for a **rent guarantor scheme** said that they had developed a broader knowledge of issues that are present throughout the care system at a national level. Furthermore, they were not only aware of what problems exist, but had also developed an understanding of how their skills and experiences put them in a good position to help tackle these problems, which fed into a greater motivation to do so.

“You've got a unique ability to be able to help with these things cause you've lived it, it's lived experience.” (Young person)

Young people involved in CJ also reported a greater knowledge and understanding of the different services available to them and their entitlements. For instance, most young people from BCJ who completed a survey about their experiences, stated that they felt clearer about how the care system works, their rights and what will change when they grow older.

Young people report developing useful and enjoyable skills

Young people interviewed talked about how their participation in various Care Journeys projects had helped them to develop a number of new skills in different areas. Activities like creating the Welcome Packs and receiving training in communication tools and design thinking in Brent or organising groups and events in both Brent and Plymouth had helped them to develop teamwork, communication and marketing skills, which some young people said would be useful for their education or employment.

² Elephant in the room: <https://vimeo.com/842558092/fc29fb54a2> [accessed 5.8.24]

Others had enjoyed picking up skills that had been the focus of specific group sessions, some of which would also have broader benefits throughout their lives. These include learning how to cook, how to approach different types of exercise, or how to avoid online scams.

“I really enjoyed the idea of just using the technology we have now to help people with just normal life skills that maybe they didn’t learn growing up. And the fact that you don’t, it helps people with like different difficulties.” (Young person)

However, while young people did point to specific areas in which their skills, knowledge or understanding had improved, the quantitative data presents more of a mixed picture. In a recent survey asking PAs in Brent how Brent Care Journeys had impacted the young people they worked with, they responded that 53% of the young people they worked with had improved their skills, knowledge and understanding (such as understanding of wider sources of support, new skills such as leadership, technical, and social skills) as a result of their involvement in the programme, while for 20%, PAs had not seen any improvement at all. This may suggest that the number of young people who enhanced their skills and understanding through Care Journeys was limited, and dependent upon the specific part of the programme that they attended. It could also imply that PAs were less likely to be aware of or see tangible or quantifiable improvements in areas around people and communication skills like teamwork, or which were more specific, such as drawing skills. And it is possible that acquiring and demonstrating any new skills, knowledge and understanding may be influenced by other factors in young people’s lives at the time, which it was not possible to get information on.

Pursuit of personal goals (education, employment and training and other positive destinations)

Overall, there is more limited evidence that Care Journeys directly facilitated young people to attain education, employment, and training (EET) goals, although there were some individual examples of this. For instance, both Brent and Plymouth CJ employed young people directly through the programme. There is also evidence indicating that Care Journeys contributed to young people gaining various skills needed for EET, to determine their future goals, and working towards achieving them. Additionally, Care Journeys has been shown to increase young people’s motivation to create positive changes within the children’s social care system. In Brent, a significant majority of PAs surveyed (80%) observed positive developments among the young people engaged in Care Journeys concerning the pursuit of personal goals. This indicates some success in supporting young people to achieve a range of goals, not just those directly relating to EET.

Young people report an improved sense of purpose and future goals

Participating in Care Journeys has fostered some young people’s motivation to have a positive impact within the social care system. Several examples from young people interviewed highlighted how they wanted to support other care-experienced young people, whether through volunteering their time, making structural changes to the care system or as their future career path.

Moreover, Care Journeys has also helped some young people to find out what they want to do in the future, guiding them towards clarifying their aspirations, supporting them with their motivation to pursue their goals and revealed opportunities that they had not previously considered available to them.

“It’s opened my eyes up to different opportunities. I now believe if I wanted to, I could start my own project like this.” (Young person)

Care Journeys has supported young people towards education, employment and independent living

On a practical level, there were many examples of young people acquiring different skills needed for employment or independent living, such as budgeting, applying for funding, and interviewing. Moreover, young people have also reported significant growth in skills such as teamwork, project management, leadership, effective communication, and proficiency in English (see section ‘Skills, knowledge and understanding’ for further details).

Several concrete examples showcased how involvement in Care Journeys, with particular support from Care Journey staff, has facilitated young people to successfully apply for employment or education. In Plymouth, for instance one particular project ‘**Find Your Future**’ focussed on young people’s career opportunities. In Brent, a small number of care-experienced young people have been directly employed as assistant project workers, and some have progressed to higher education.

“Opportunities to be able to get jobs within Barnardo’s, which is good as most companies or charities won’t give you those opportunities and won’t think about the wants and needs of the children they work with.”
(Young person)

Overall, some of the young people interviewed highlighted that the confidence they gained through Care Journeys was instrumental in empowering them to pursue their future aspirations.

“I found out I’ve got a new job starting tomorrow, I wouldn’t have had the confidence to go for it if it hadn’t been for Barnardo’s.” (Young person)

Vignette 2: Young person supported by Care Journeys to learn new skills and enter education

Nathan found out about Care Journeys from their PA and decided to go along to one of the co-design activities, where they met other care-experienced young people. Joining different activities helped them to gain a range of skills. For instance, they learned how to work as part of a team but also take up different roles. Working on one of the projects also gave them interviewing practice and generally improved their communication skills. In addition to taking part in group activities, Nathan received some one-to-one support from one of the Care Journeys staff. This helped them to start thinking about what they want to do in the future and made them more aware of the different options out there. Nathan realised that they wanted to go to college and staff encouraged them to apply. They were also given further contacts to access support for seeking funding and finding accommodation.

Outcomes for the wider population of care-experienced young people

In addition to the outcomes experienced by young people who were directly involved in Care Journeys, the programme also intended to benefit wider communities of care-experienced young people living in Plymouth and Brent. These broader impacts are difficult for the evaluation to evidence, since many occur at a system-level and so will only become apparent after a time period beyond the length of this study. In addition, while the evaluation team sought alternative sources of data, most of the available data focused on the young people directly interacting with Care Journeys rather than the wider population of care-experienced young people. However, the evaluation has been able to identify some areas in which there were signs that this wider group of young people has been affected in a positive way, or may be affected positively in the future.

The development of Journey Bags and Welcome Packs aims to directly support other young people in the local areas

Both Plymouth and Brent Care Journeys collaborated with young people to develop tools aimed to support the wider population of care-experienced young people in their local areas. In particular, PCJ's **Journey Bags** and BCJ's **Welcome Packs** are likely to provide tangible changes for children and young people. They offer practical and emotional support for those entering the care system for the first time (in the case of the Journey Bags) or those entering semi-independent accommodation (SIA) (with the Welcome Packs). Furthermore, the Welcome Packs have now become a commissioning requirement for SIA providers across Brent, which means that all care-experienced young people entering SIA in the borough will now receive a pack with basic essentials to support them in their first few weeks and months in their new accommodation.

“All the young people love the Welcome Packs. Professionals as well, including social workers, comment about how good it was.”

(Placement provider)

Some stakeholders believe that Care Journeys has contributed to a shift in attitudes and practices amongst local authority staff

There are also indicators to suggest that the Care Journeys partnerships have impacted the attitudes and practices within the local authorities around care leavers in general. Members of Plymouth Council believed that activities like the **‘Walk a Day in my Shoes’** project had led to an increased visibility of care leavers, which one interviewee believed had contributed to care-experience being treated as if it were a protected characteristic within the council. There were suggestions that new working practices modelled by Plymouth and Brent Care Journeys, along with the collaboration facilitated between staff and care-experienced young people, had changed the way that some local authority employees

were working. They were now seeking to go beyond their statutory duties to enhance the support they provided for young people, and ensure that young people were at the centre of any new service. Furthermore, in Brent, Care Journeys and young people were involved in developing resources for new foster carers to help improve the relationship between foster carers and the children and young people in their care.

Care Journeys has raised the profile of care-experienced young people in national organisations outside of the care sector

As well as impacting local authorities, both Brent and Plymouth Care Journeys sought to influence bodies outside of the care system with a national reach. BCJ codesigned and then delivered training for Ofsted inspectors of SIAs and codesigned and coproduced an interactive activity on how the cost-of-living crisis has impacted care leavers. This has been taken on by the Executive Director for the Financial Conduct Authority to be used in internal training sessions. In addition, there are indications that further services, like job centres, would like to be trained by Barnardo's. Meanwhile, PCJ's **'Walk a Day in My Shoes'** project was showcased in Westminster and reportedly led to 25 MPs pledging to support care leavers in their local authorities. This also drew the attention of Plymouth's local MP, Luke Pollard, who supported PCJ to lobby for a national scheme whereby local authorities would act as rent guarantors for care leavers.

"In terms of raising the profile of young care-experienced people nationally and opening up these conversations, I think Care Journeys has done a really good job of that." (Staff member)

In Brent, Care Journeys sought to change the way young people are recruited and employed. In addition to recruiting care-experienced young people to the BCJ team itself, the project developed a tiered system of payments and rewards to properly recognise young people's contributions, while allowing flexibility in terms of roles and navigating possible complications with the benefits receipt. In keeping with their emphasis on equity and shared power, this meant that BCJ was able to move away from simply offering vouchers to young people as recognition. The project was able to demonstrate this approach in practice leading to its adoption by Barnardo's which has the potential to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with lived experience nationally.

Most of these changes, particularly those focused within the local areas, are likely to have positively impacted the broader populations of young people, at least in the short term. This is also supported perhaps by the wider context of increased investment in supporting care leavers in the UK over the last few years, for instance with the increase in the care leavers' allowance and the care leavers' apprenticeship bursary. It is still unclear, however, the extent to which these changes are embedded within the systems and therefore how far they will continue to have an impact beyond the life of Care Journeys.

Conclusion, learning and recommendations



Conclusion

This digest focussed on the outcomes for young people, both those directly involved in Care Journeys and for the wider population of care-experienced young people across Brent and Plymouth. As outlined here, the evaluation found a range of positive outcomes for the young people who were substantially involved (such as attending several activities or being involved over a long time period), as these were the people who were interviewed or surveyed.

Young people participating in Care Journeys reported having developed more positive relationships with peers and staff, though there was mixed evidence regarding the impact on relationships with peers and professionals outside of Care Journeys. Increased confidence, self-esteem, and wellbeing was reported by many young people. Many also developed a better understanding of the care system and acquired useful skills. Some young people reported an enhanced sense of purpose and future goals, with anecdotal evidence suggesting support for transitions into EET.

It was not possible to directly evidence the impact Care Journeys had on the wider population of young people that were not involved or only marginally. There was the perception from staff, however, that Care Journeys influenced attitudes and behaviours among local authority staff and that care leavers were higher on the agenda, in both Brent and Plymouth. This together with some practical tools that have been developed during the programme and were partly implemented in the local authority or other organisations, have the potential to make a difference to a wider group of care-experienced young people. This includes potential benefits beyond Brent and Plymouth. More is said about these system changes in the [PCJ](#) and the [BCJ](#) digests.

Reflections on the evaluation design and measuring outcomes

Designing and delivering the evaluation of Care Journeys, while also drawing on wider literature and experiences of measuring outcomes for young people, led to several lessons learned as well as reinforced the importance of specific methodological considerations:

- The evaluation as it was commissioned was very ambitious, including both an economic evaluation and the use of comparator sites as a counterfactual to begin with. Time was spent testing the feasibility and value of these approaches for CJSP before settling on a more developmental and process evaluation.

- Both partnerships developed a Theory of Change for Care Journeys with external support. Additionally, the evaluation developed two evaluative rubrics for Brent and Plymouth: one focussed on young people's outcomes and another one on the strategic partnership outcomes. However, there was no integration between the Theory of Change and the rubrics, and they served different purposes. Aligning them more closely could have enhanced their use, making them more useful to support decisions for the programme delivery.
- Although the evaluation aimed to co-design evaluation methodologies and tools in the spirit of the programme, this was not always possible, often due to logistical challenges. If this had been possible, it could have potentially increased the engagement of young people in evaluation activities, and helped make sure materials were as appropriate and as sensitive as possible.
- The rubric, along with the integration of qualitative and quantitative data including data from different sources (e.g., professionals and young people) helped to ensure that there was a broad understanding of the different outcomes. However, it was noticeable, as also supported by literature, that different outcomes mattered to young people than to professionals or at least young people may have slightly different interpretations of the same outcome (e.g., life skills). Therefore, it was essential that qualitative outcome measurements were used in the evaluation design, in order to capture some of these differences.

Recommendations for programmes with care-experienced young people

The evaluation also offers general recommendations to delivering programmes in children's social care, based on the experience of Care Journeys in Brent and Plymouth. This links to the learning digest '[Collaborating with care-experienced young people](#)'.

- Ensure that young people are provided with a variety of ways to enter the programme (one-to-one work, groupwork, introduction with PA or another trusted professional present as support).
- Provide adequate opportunities for new services to model novel ways of working with young people that support and involve existing staff, to enable 'learning through doing' and better enable a smooth transition once the project ends.
- Arrange programmes and/or events focused on enabling the young people to build relationships with family and carer networks, friends and professionals outside of those directly involved in the project and potentially outside of the care sector.
- Give young people ample opportunities to take on positions of responsibility or roles where they are able to advocate for themselves and for others.
- Ensure that young people are able to be actively involved and see the results of projects designed to improve the care system, so that they do not see projects as merely 'all talk and no action'.
- Look to engage organisations and individuals outside of the care system who are able to champion the needs of care-experienced young people in different settings.
- Work to broaden the cohort of young people involved in different projects so that many different voices can be heard.

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Appendix – Methodology



Methodology challenges on outset

The evaluation³ faced a number of methodological challenges at the outset due to the nature and complexity of the Care Journeys Strategic Partnership Programme.

Given that the programme worked with a vulnerable population, it was essential to keep their needs in mind and design the evaluation methodology sensitively. This meant using trauma-informed data collection approaches, considering the necessity of additional form filling requirements as well as the overlap with data collection activities of the service design team.

As it was a partnership programme, rather than a commissioned service, with a focus on co-designing innovative ideas to address existing challenges in the system with care-experienced young people, there was no clear activity plan. The programme was emergent and fluid in its scope and reach. This posed challenges for knowing what to evaluate and what outcomes to measure for whom. Additionally, there were attribution challenges due to the existence of other services on offer for young people who were not part of Care Journeys.

Story of the test and learn approach of the evaluation

The overall evaluation approach remained consistent, focusing on a developmental, process, and outcomes-oriented evaluation. However, there were changes in methods and data collection techniques throughout the evaluation.

The initial evaluation design met Level 3 of the Maryland Scale, as it included a plan to compare outcomes between participating and comparator sites. Other methods included retrospective case study interviews with young people, quantitative analysis of SSD903 and other social care datasets, and a cost-benefit analysis linking outcomes to measurable cost savings or changes. Additionally, co-design workshops were planned to design evaluation tools with children and young people.

However, the implementation of the evaluation encountered numerous challenges due to the complexity and organic nature of the programme. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, led to changes in the delivery and required adaptations to the evaluation process. One of the key challenges was related to the routine child-level data collection by the local authorities. Firstly, gaining access was a challenge but more importantly, indicators used in routine data collection did not measure all of the expected Care Journeys outcomes. Therefore, there was the need to set up additional primary data collection methods. These included: retrospective surveys of Care Journeys participants, facilitators rating post-sessions of specific group activities, pre-post surveys for participants of particular group activities, and PA retrospective surveys about the young people they were supporting.

³ The focus of this section is on the evaluation methodology concerning measuring young people's outcomes not the partnership-level progress and outcomes. Additional methods to capture the partnership-level outcomes included action learning sets as well as staff and stakeholder interviews.

Methodological example 1: Professional retrospective survey

Description: In addition to surveys of and interviews with young people, the evaluation designed a survey that could be completed by professionals about the young people who were engaged in Care Journeys. The target sample for the survey were personal advisors (PAs) responsible for young people that took part in at least one Care Journeys activity. Designed as a retrospective survey, it asked PAs what difference (if any) the programme has made to young people involved in the activities. The survey asked both closed and open-ended questions for each young person under the care of the respective PA.

Enablers: Having a senior local authority staff distribute the survey, rather than the evaluation team, helped to increase the response rate. The clear description of Care Journeys (including example activities) together with a user-friendly design ensured completion was self-explanatory, as evidenced by no incomplete responses.

Challenges: Balancing brevity and simplicity to maximise response rates with the necessity for useful data posed a challenge during survey design.

Value: The added value of the survey was hearing about the differences the programme has made from a professional perspective. This enabled the evaluation to triangulate this data with interviews and survey data conducted with young people. While the evaluation team also interviewed a small number of personal advisors, the survey was a more time-efficient way to hear from a greater number of staff, though data was less detailed than interview data.

Other adjustments involved utilising available reports from the **Bright Spots**⁴ survey, a stronger focus on observations of activities, and the inclusion of monitoring data requirements. The evaluation also introduced an evaluative rubric which was co-designed with both CJSPs. This tool aimed to help articulate and agree on outcomes for young people (and for the partnerships) with criteria underlying the outcomes. These could then be used to subsequently identify the data sources that would help assess whether these outcomes were achieved or not. Further changes included the absence of a comparator site and a cost-benefit analysis as well as changing to one-off interviews with young people instead of longitudinal case studies. The evaluation methods were adjusted with ethical approval and safeguarding processes in mind, as mentioned above.

Drawing on existing literature on measuring outcomes

In trying to identify outcomes for young people brought about through Care Journeys the evaluation used a broad set of outcomes as well as both qualitative and quantitative data. This approach aligns with findings from the literature on measuring outcomes for care-experienced young people, emphasizing the need to pay attention to a diverse range of outcomes and not merely those that are easily measurable or quantifiable (Bakketeig et al., 2020). Objective outcomes measured using validated instruments are valuable to gauge the impact that a service has had on children and young people, but other factors such as quotidian security, emotional connections and personal wellbeing are often the outcomes that young people themselves are most interested in (McNeil, Reeder & Rich, 2012; What Works for Children's Social Care, n.d.). Various approaches are needed to collect this type of data including, importantly, hearing directly from young people themselves.

⁴ See the glossary for descriptions of terms in bold.

However, while including the voices of young people is imperative to gain a more accurate picture of their experiences and thereby develop effective recommendations, there are multiple ethical issues that need to be addressed in collecting and reporting this data. Using gatekeepers (in this case the Care Journeys staff) to act as intermediaries and producing detailed information sheets for young people to read before speaking with the evaluators were recommended actions that the evaluation team took to mitigate some of these risks (Williams et al., 2024). In addition, the literature warns against exploiting this type of data and using it to skew the evaluation narrative by painting a more positive picture than that suggested by other outcome measurements (Johnson et al., 2024). Evaluators in this project therefore had an ethical imperative to ensure that the information that was gathered directly from the young people was represented in authentic ways to accurately report what it was that the young people wanted to convey.

Methodological example 2: Interviews with young people

Description: All young people invited to interview for this evaluation were contacted via Care Journeys staff, who provided an information sheet summarising the purpose of the evaluation and explaining the interview process. Most young person interviews were carried out either in person or over the phone since Care Journeys staff advised us that this is what they would be more comfortable with. Each young person was asked to complete a consent form, which was provided digitally to young people in Brent to make it more accessible, and all young people were offered remuneration of a £15 voucher of their choice as a thank you for their time. In addition, in Brent, one of the young people who had been involved with Care Journeys was not confident conducting their interview in English since it was not their first language, and so the team sourced a telephone interpreter to help facilitate the interview.

Challenges: While these interviews provided very useful information about the young people's experiences, there were some challenges that arose as part of this process. Some young people who were contacted via the messaging application WhatsApp were unresponsive to contacts made or were not available for interview at the time that was arranged with them. In these instances, Care Journeys staff often acted as intermediaries, contacting the young person on our behalf to remind or encourage them to participate. For interviews involving interpreters, it is important to allocate additional time to arrange logistics and undertake the interview, as well as identify budget for additional costs. The dynamics of having a third person present is also worth bearing in mind, as this may help or hinder an interviewee's comfort with the interview process.

Value: The value in the interviews with young people lay largely in learning how much Care Journeys activities meant to those who had been involved. Once rapport had been established between the researcher and the young person it allowed for in-depth data to be gathered. Accessing interpreter support for young people who needed this enabled the evaluation to hear about the value of Care Journeys for those young people who may be the most disadvantaged and who often do not get the opportunity to be heard.