

## **Case study: Care leavers in North Yorkshire**

A council building might not seem like the most obvious location for a Christmas wreath-making workshop. But last December, a small group of care leavers attended North Yorkshire Council's offices in Northallerton for a festive workshop with a difference. The three young participants had been invited to discuss their experiences of care and how this is reflected – or not – in administrative data, which they did while winding holly and tying ribbons in bows.

The workshop was led by Dr Caitlin Shaughnessy, a Research Fellow in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex, as part of the Children's Information Project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Dr Shaughnessy had already run a more straightforward session to gather the views of young people who are actively engaged with care leaver forums in the county. But central to the project's aims is to seek out voices that might otherwise go unheard – which is where the idea for a more creative approach came about.

"You want to get people into the building, and inviting them to a workshop on data is not the best way to do that," says Dr Shaughnessy. "So we did a wreath-making workshop, as one of the personal advisors is also a florist. While we were making these wreaths, I tried to talk to them about their data and what they thought was collected, and how they felt about that."

Over the course of the last year, Dr Shaughnessy has also shadowed five young care leavers in their interactions with their personal advisors, and looked at their online records with their permission. This has enabled her to trace data from how these interactions are documented, all the way through the system to national dashboards.

The project aims use these findings to add nuance to current performance indicators, which are described as a "blunt tool" by the council's Head of Effective Practice and Quality Assurance, Samantha Clayton. She gives the example of data on whether a care leaver has a job or not. Although this binary yes/no question is important, Clayton says it does not always reflect what matters to a young person.

"For some of them, the question is: is it the job they want to do? Is it a secure job, that gives them career progression? Is it a job that's going to enable them to achieve the lifestyle that they want? It's all very soft, isn't it - it's difficult to measure, because that's all subjective," she says.

Through bringing children's voices into the data that is collected about them, the project hopes to add this missing layer of subjectivity. Clayton says that at North Yorks, social workers are already working on including voice – but that this is not the case across the country, as different councils have different data systems and levels of resource. Case files, she says, are written with great sensitivity. As well as recording information with a view to the files being inspected by Ofsted, social workers also incorporate information which children have told them matters, so that it will also form a meaningful record for them when they leave care.

"They might want to know what they got for their birthday. Did they have a party? Who came? Did they have a good day?" she says. "It's a snapshot in time."

Crucial to the success of these efforts, Clayton believes, are the skills of the social workers and their relationships with the young people in their care. This is especially true of young people who might not want to engage at all.

“Some of these young people have had complicated lives, so day-to-day living is very challenging for them. So sometimes they don't want to talk about this, because it's about going back to something that they don't think is very positive in their life,” she says. “Individual workers know their young people very well, and so they know their peaks and troughs, in terms of their mental health, and if they want to engage with stuff, or don't want to engage with stuff. So it's almost about picking the right moment.”

She also notes that some children in the care system can feel that there is far greater information known about them than there is known about their peers. The project aims to give greater transparency and agency to children about the information that is collected, and how it is used. “It is about their life. That's what people forget,” she says. “And it's not public viewing. You know, our lives aren't all out on a washing line for everybody to see. But I suppose if you're a child in care, it perhaps often feels like you're overexposed.”

A key challenge that she sees is the burden of data collection on “cash-strapped” local authorities, with central government regularly demanding different information in addition to, rather than instead of, existing data. “Sometimes it just feels like there's quite a lot of asks, probably that then don't come back round,” Clayton says.

The project aims to address this issue through more effective use of data to improve services, right from the start of a child's journey with children's services until after they leave care. The team will produce policy and practice briefing papers and summaries focused on meaningful outcomes for care leavers, with specific suggestions about how existing data can be used effectively to provide new insights.

Ultimately, all of these efforts are about improving the lives of some of the most vulnerable children and young people. This is what Clayton is hoping for.

“My hope is in consulting with the young people and talking to them about what's important to them is you get more nuance, and it's more relevant,” Clayton says. “I'm hoping that this gives us a lot of learning, that can make us think about decisions we make when children are very little.”

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## **Further information**

The project is a close collaboration across disciplines and organisations. In addition to Professors Feinstein and Sharland, the directors of the project include also Lisa Holmes Professor in Applied Social Science in Sussex University, who leads on implications for children's social care and on ethics; Polly Vizard an Associate Director at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion at LSE is leading work on understanding child and family need; and Dez Holmes director of Research in Practice is leading the work on Local Authority impact.