

**Research Space**

Book chapter

**The Association of Care Experienced Social Care Workers**

**Melville-Wiseman, J.**

# The Association of Care Experienced Social Care Workers

Janet Melville-Wiseman

Trevor Rodgers-Gray

“Leave no stone unturned to ensure the profession learns from failings of the past”  
(ACESCW Manifesto 2021)

## Introduction

The Association of Care Experienced Social Care Workers (ACESCW) was formed in June 2021. It was the original idea of Ian Dickson following the highly successful and influential Care Experienced Conference in 2019. Although Ian has now delegated the development of ACESCW we are immensely grateful for his pioneering work that has led us to where we are today. It is a national organisation made up of a diverse group of people with different outlooks, perspectives, and priorities, but all of whom have the shared experience of care as children and young people. However, we are all now practising within social work or social care (as social workers, social care workers and providers, managers, students, and academics) or are recently retired from those roles.

This chapter presents a collation of the thoughts, views and experiences of ACESCW's inaugural members about the organisation and why it is needed.

It is difficult for us to articulate the significance of the ACESCW personally, and perhaps more so, its value to others. The reasons for this are multifaceted, although a key explanation is that there was no 'space' where we could be open and share who we are. With the formation of ACESCW that space was created. The ACESCW provides a new experience of 'care' – care for those with shared heritage as children and young people, care for the impact of profound and painful journeys undertaken however recent or distant, and care to create a new environment for those yet to become care experienced social care workers. As with the most effective and influential values based organisations it has developed from the bottom up by people with lived experiences of care and who know why things need to be challenged and changed.

This chapter has given us an opportunity to answer two important questions. What is the value of ACESCW to us or to others and how can ACESCW support, influence and perhaps challenge social work and social work education? Contributors have chosen whether to be identified by their full name, first name, or a pseudonym and this reflects one of the shared experiences of enduring stigma in relation to being care experienced. The group are collectively pioneers to challenge and change this stigma. In addition we present the ACESCW's manifesto developed by Ian Dickson and others in the first days of ACESCW.

**What is the value of ACESCW to you or others?**

To address this question, it is necessary to reflect on our experiences prior to the formation of the ACESCW. Whilst we are a diverse group, there are some experiences that are common to many of us.

*"We all relate to the same emotional turmoil and experiences of oppression by being looked after by the state and then being on the other end of support" (Mary Carter).*

However, our experiences in relation to our places of work have not always reflected the value that our earlier experiences bring and have often been very difficult. Some examples reflect an erroneous assumption that in spite of being fully qualified, we may not be up to the job with:

*"...accusations of being 'too close', 'too involved', 'not having the distance needed', and other such phrases" (David Anderson).*

Such experiences, mean that many care experienced social workers have hidden, and continue to hide, their care-heritage.

*"I've never shared with anyone at work my care experienced past because I feared judgement and 'reduction' to only that side of me" (Karin Heber).*

This is echoed by, Marie:

*"I have never been able to discuss the dichotomy of being care experienced and working in social care. I often found myself wondering where I fitted. It was like I needed to choose a team. I am either a professional who has succeeded or the care experienced person who will never be professional enough" (Marie).*

This naturally leads to a lack of authenticity and feelings of shame. As Annette painfully recounts:

*"[the] repeated lies about a fundamental part of my identity made me feel shameful."*

She goes on to say,

*"I felt conflicted between allowing the gift of empathy to shine a light onto the path that I was walking with families, honouring how my own story could help others to start to make sense of theirs, [versus] the value of having a sense of belonging in the workplace." (Annette Frewin).*

A deep need to belong and a safe space to call 'home' is another theme common to many of us. As Kyla, says,

*"I was living in the borderlands, that space where you have one foot in and out - yet don't seem to sit anywhere" (Kyla).*

The longing is expressed clearly by, Annette:

*"I was thirsty for a deeper connection with other social workers who had been through the care system" (Annette Frewin).*

The value of the ACESCW cannot be overstated in terms of being accepted for who you are, to *"listen and feel heard"*, (Mike S.), and to have a safe space:

*"...where friendships will form...to sit in both the world of care experienced and working in social care...where both worlds intertwine" (Marie).*

As Karin shares:

*"I find it very refreshing to be able to share my experience with fellow social workers. It feels good to be open, honest, and accepted/not judged at our meetings. It validates my beliefs" (Karin Heber).*

However, it is not the only motivation of the ACESCW. Our care experience means, *"...we all bring powerful and monumental insight to the profession" (Mary Carter).*

As David Anderson notes, the song lyric, *"Come from the Shadows"* captures the bottom-up emergence of our Association. Indeed,

*"...there has been a passionate and strenuous effort to reclaim the narrative by people who have experienced care" (David Anderson).*

Thus, we are, *"in position where we feel ready to speak up, challenge and educate the profession"*, (Mary Carter).

### **How can ACESCW support, influence and perhaps challenge social work and social work education?**

It would be unacceptable to make pejorative judgements about a doctor and their ability to practice if they had experienced serious physical or mental health problems before their training, during their training or during their practice – in fact it would be outlawed in the UK by the Equality Act 2010. However, the law does not yet provide the same protection for Care Experienced people when they become social care and social work practitioners. One aim of the ACESCW is to challenge this situation and the underlying stigma that currently exists. In doing so we remember that Care Experienced people did not chose the life they had to lead and if some welcomed the opportunity to be in care it was because there was no better alternative. We also did not choose the system that provided that care and which often exacerbated our original traumatic experiences. However, we have chosen our careers and provide unique perspectives which are not to be stigmatised or used to make us lesser professionals. Annette describes a training session she delivered on the use of life story work and included some of her own:

*"After the presentation, I was praised for my bravery in sharing my own life story book with the team, but in my head, I questioned, why shouldn't I and why am I being looked at with faces of sympathy, shouldn't we all feel that sense of empowerment to share our stories as these are what make us who we are and they aren't to be ashamed of."* **(Annette Frewin)**

Hannah shared the unique connectedness we have with the people we work with and how that is not always valued:

*"Care experienced Social Workers have lived through much of the adversity affecting families today, and have a great deal of knowledge and wisdom from this which enables us to positively contribute to the lives of those we support. Sadly, not all professionals can recognise the strength of having care experienced Social Workers in practice and we sometimes face stigmatisation, both consciously and unconsciously."* **(Hannah Ide)**

Marie highlights the personal impact of these experiences of what is inherent stigma and prejudice towards us:

*"I am yet to attend an ACESCW meeting where there is not discussion regarding unfair judgment of someone who is care experienced whilst at work. I am yet to sit through a meeting where someone hasn't been judged or treated different because they are care experienced. It is hard to hear that the people we work amongst can struggle to accept our histories."* **(Marie)**

It is sometimes difficult to comprehend the reasoning behind these attitudes or where allies might be found. Annette described an all too familiar management response:

*"One of my colleagues shared with me that I needed to be careful at work as they were aware that management had been questioning whether some of my emotional responses were provoked due to me growing up in care; I was so disheartened to hear that..."* **(Annette Frewin)**

Challenging such stigma can be impossible in isolation which is why supporting each other and challenging stigma collectively is a core aim of ACESCW. Our membership is already over 70 and is likely to increase substantially. So instead of stigma we would like our experiences to be a source of celebration and positive regard:

*"When will our care experience status be celebrated instead of being a barrier? I want people to understand that care experienced people don't stop becoming care experienced once our files closed. I am senior social worker now and the importance of my care experience has not lessened. My care experience is a large part of my identity and that is still the case 15 years on."* **(Marie)**

ACESCW can also bring unique insights into how providers of services, lecturers and researchers should work alongside service users in a collaborative and connected way:

*"The best social work in my opinion is co-produced and promotes connection between service user and service giver - ACESCW is all about the grey area, the void in between service user and service giver: the place which could change how practice looks, the place where practice is reflexive and reflective."* **(Mike S.)**

Here Karin cautions against the incongruous 'othering' of us in spite of training and the imperative to do the opposite:

*"...despite our expected anti-oppression values we continue to "other" service users. We 'normal' social workers against 'vulnerable/care experienced/disabled/disadvantaged...' service users whilst ignoring the fact that we are all human beings who may require or benefit from support at different stages in our lives. Hence "experts by experience" are never social workers with experience of eg care, addiction, prison etc."* **(Karin Heber)**

The establishment of ACESCW also provides us with an opportunity to influence policy and practice as key stakeholders in different debates and for those developing policy to draw on our rich and unique perspectives. This will be a key part of our work recognising that urgent changes are unlikely to happen without us representing our perspectives to those who have the power to change things:

*"Despite me challenging the use of the term 'LAC' and 'CIN' in the local authority: how are children, young people and families 'lacking' and doesn't the acronym of 'CIN' automatically portray people in a negative light? The response I was given to this was 'this is how it is; we can't change it; we can only do our part as individuals as we are responsible for our own practice and we do not speak these terms in front of families'".*  
**(Annette Frewin)**

We would also wish to support Care Experienced students or newly qualified workers through a buddying or mentoring scheme and will be looking into how this might be facilitated. We will also be looking at how we can provide input into education and to act as consultants to other organisations who are committed to an inclusive approach to care experienced professionals.

Kyla states her hope that ACESCW can:

*"...provide over site of any policy/guidance relating to care experienced students and practice. I feel it's vital to use lived experience to push for change and work to improve systems for children and families at all levels."* **(Kyla)**

So, finally, what is the value of the ACESCW? Put simply, the "ACEWSC is at the beating heart of the care experienced community", **(Mary Carter)**.

We are here and will support each other:

*"Peer support and empowerment are so valuable to me, and I am grateful to have this as I grapple with some of the challenges and rewards that being a care experienced practitioner brings" (Kyla).*

*"I am in awe of the lives we are all living, despite challenges. We have friendships, bring up children, have fun, have loving relationships and contribute towards a better world. I want to celebrate that. I want our voices and experiences to be heard instead of being hidden by shame and secrecy. I want professionals to come alongside us and celebrate with us. I want them to embrace our care experience." (Marie).*

*"We have come to realise that our own individual feelings are not isolated, and we are not alone." (Mary Carter).*

*"...being able to reach out to other care experienced social workers and hear how much they've achieved is truly empowering." (Hannah Ide).*

*"We don't want others to go through what we were forced to go through, or we want others to experience the love and care we experienced (or both)" (David Anderson).*

We are, *"happy that ACESCW has formed, and [we're] excited for the journey ahead!" (Hannah Ide).*

This chapter invites allies to support us with this essential initiative and for care experienced people in our professions to find a safe space:

*"My hope is that by us joining as a group to share some of our experiences with you, hearing and seeing these stories will help you to discover that the silent stigmatisation is not your isolated experience, so it is important to fearlessly challenge any injustice you may encounter or see someone else encountering." (Annette Frewin)*

If you would like to join us there will never be a requirement to disclose your history but will be welcome to join. As David encapsulates:

*"Too many in the professions carry their experience alone, sometimes fearful of being 'found out'. Others – myself included – are at a stage where they choose to share some or all of their story...Our history – whatever it is – can be used as an asset. It is time, time to come from the shadows. ACESCW will be the conduit for that emerging force". (David Anderson)*

## ACESCW Manifesto

### Preface:

The dichotomy of having lived experience of a care system, alongside being an adult representing a profession that provides care, is a complex position to take. We, the members of ACESCW, are familiar with the need for truly relational practice, and recognise the importance of capturing life stories and narratives; being trauma aware and understanding development beyond trauma. Our daily practice includes routine reflection upon our 'use of self', the 'wounded helper', and the significance of constructing and reconstructing meaning.

### ACESCW will:

1. Create communities of care, by enabling peer support and mentoring, discussion groups and inquiry
2. Educate, harness empathy and empower, through use of learning materials, resources, Consultancy, research, experience and evidence based practice
3. Be proud of our profession, our practice and our journey; which should be protected. We will stand tall and united, be a badge of identity, and raise voices of care experienced people and the profession, challenge the orthodoxy and furthermore lobby and seek to inspire children in care and care leavers.

ACESCW will provide an opportunity to tap into the often unseen potential from extremely proud professionals who have experienced the care system, whereby there is a chance to seriously help others.

### Membership

ACESCW will be open to care experienced social workers of all grades and roles, and to all social work students on approved training courses. It will also be open to all those working professionally in social work roles who may not have qualified as social workers.

### Management and administration

ACESCW will be managed and administered by an elected Board; elected by the membership. This Board may include:

- A Chair/co-chairs
- A secretary/secretariat
- A treasurer/fund raising lead officer
- A pastoral care/welfare lead officer



□ An education/training officer

□ A media/press officer

Volunteers from the ACESCW may be invited to stand for office in these lead roles, or to act as team members working as part of sub teams under these leads, to address these specialist areas of interest.

### Confidentiality

ACESCW will respect the confidentiality of its members. No lists of members will be placed in the public domain or shared without prior permission of the membership, and correspondence, minutes or information from the Association will not name or identify individual members so that confidentiality & anonymity can be protected at all times.

### Focus of ACESCW

ACESCW will focus on several key areas, in brief:

#### I. Pastoral care

ACESCW will seek to offer individual and group support to the members. It will be a safe place to be, to gain support and encouragement, advice, a place to vent safely, a place to obtain peer support by 'buddying' and to support wellbeing, for example:

#### II. Challenging stigma and discrimination

ACESCW will challenge the stigma and discriminatory attitudes displayed towards care experienced social care workers and social work students with government and politicians on their behalf, for example, advocating for care experience to be a 'protected characteristic'.

ACESCW will actively promote the many positive images and unique insights that the care experienced bring to the profession.

Members of ACESCW, with their massive diversity of skills and experiences will offer a forum to share information and advice to its members about issues of interest to them as a group, or between individual members.

#### III. Political lobbying

ACESCW will represent the interests and cause of care experienced social workers, social work students and social care workers, to politicians, professionals and those making decisions that potentially impact upon the members of the group.

#### IV. Training

ACESCW will seek to offer training and information about working as a care experienced professional in social care, and the issues and insights that brings and it will consider how best to use them for the good of the members, those we work with, and the profession.

#### V. Research

ACESCW will seek to support and promote research that promotes insights and learning into the care experienced and working as a care experienced professional in social care.