

Research Space

Journal article

Listening to the voices of care experienced individuals and communities – the disconcerting values of the Government Children's Social Care Review.

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Listening to the voices of care experienced individuals and communities and the disconcerting values of the Government Children's Social Care Review

The Department for Education and the appointed chair of the Government Children's Social Care Review have come under sustained criticism for their approach to this longed for review. Both the tone and approach have been criticised for their clumsy disregard for the esteem and wellbeing of our care experienced individuals and communities. One-sided power dynamics have also been inherent in the review thus far and these are always difficult to spot and elusive to challenge. However, the risk of damaging consequences is tangible and must be confronted and reframed even though finding a way to do that with meaningful positive impact is challenging. This article offers some principles to underpin such reframing particularly in relation to the attempt to capture the voices of care experienced individuals.

One-sided power

It is only government who can order and facilitate a government review and choose the person to chair it. However, it is also government who dictate policy that dictates how the care system runs and dictates the financial and other resources it will allocate to that system. In that context many have called into question the legitimacy of this longed for review, the suitability of the chair, and the ensuing compromise of its status as independent. However, within such questioning there remain genuine concerns about the [mis]handling of power and the multiple voices who will not be heard. In a recent Tweet in response to calls for more information and greater transparency the appointed chair stated:

"I understand everyone is eager to know more but it defeats the point of handing power to the Experts by Experience Group if I take big decisions like this before they are in place." 16th February 2021@JoshMacAllister

It is good that there is a commitment to the Experts by Experience (EbE) Group having power but rather than removing barriers to them achieving their full power Mr MacAlister sees it as fundamentally his power to give to them. Unfortunately, this is the antithesis of good social work practice in relation to the achievement of agency by care experienced people who are likely to have variable but sustained experiences of prior disempowerment. If care services are to improve as a result of the review it should have focused from the start on the removal of structural barriers to full participation to enable agency and power.

Personal connection

It is many years since I had my own experiences of receiving care and social work services. I rarely speak of them in any setting but they were both beneficial and exceptionally harmful. My own harmful experiences resonate with many who have articulated theirs more courageously and coherently than I can. They have done this through their work to enhance understanding of experiences of care, as advocates and champions of the need for a care review, and through supportive networks and mentoring. My journey

took me through working in care homes (some within the private sector were short lived as I would not collude with abusive practices), qualifying as a social worker and now in an academic leadership role. However, one of the things I have found most difficult to witness, throughout my journey and within this review, has been the promise and then denial of opportunities to speak to individual experiences – to bear witness to truths in order to create a better future for those yet to experience care systems.

The drive to capture care experienced truths and the need for ethical governance

One consistent claim by the chair has been to place care experienced people at the heart of the review and to provide many opportunities for their voices and views to be included. However, this has been in the context of some significant barriers, reinforcement of those barriers, and an uninformed approach about how to do this safely and sensitively. Somewhat late in the day plans were put in place to identify sources of ‘support’ for the possible re-traumatising of individuals who may wish to share their experiences. However, this can really only be helpful if other processes are in place to begin with.

If this were a research project (and there are many similarities – gathering evidence (data), recruiting participants (the EbE Board and then others), publishing findings (initial, interim, final reports), some basic governance arrangements would have been put in place. First, the approach would have been subjected to peer and then independent review especially as there is only one person leading the review and not co-chairs or a team of people holding each other to account. Next, the suitability of those interviewing participants or running ‘focus’ groups would have been ascertained. It is unclear if there will be meetings with children on their own but presumably a decision will need to be made about consent, participation, and the robustness of evidence if others are present. There is no transparency about whether DBS checks have been undertaken and who will be asked to consent if children participate. Indemnity insurance would have been evidenced in case harm is done to participants. There should have been a published safeguarding plan to cover the possibility of disclosures that require intervention. At this point support for possible distress caused by sharing experiences would have been identified. An anonymisation or pseudo-anonymisation plan would have been in place (and scrutinised) to ensure compliance with data protection including how to manage the complex nature of the scope of confidentiality when capturing care experiences. All of this should have been transparent to ensure those sharing their stories could give informed and continuing consent to participate and have their stories used. Finally, it has not been clear how and if care experienced people will be recompensed for their time. This is ‘bread and butter’ work for researchers and ethics committees.

The causes of division

Our shared and individual experiences were shaped by people, time and place and to a large extent good or bad luck. We disclose them if and when it is right for us to do so. We have *shared* experiences that no-one can take away. It has therefore been puzzling (and distressing) to see divisions emerge between people with such unifying experiences and collective hopes and priorities for the future. It is even more distressing to see the same people blaming themselves for this division. One alternative way to understand this

though is to consider a transactional analysis model. I do not agree with Eric Berne's gendered descriptions in '[Games People Play](#)', but perhaps there is a kind of inadvertent game of 'Let's you and him fight' going on here.. In the third possibility for why this 'game' is played Berne describes a scenario where two men are manipulated into fighting over a woman only to find that she goes off with a third while they are fighting. The chair tweeted in February:

"Incredible to have had over 1,000 applications to join the Experts by Experience group! I've been inspired reading about the amazing work that these experts do to bring about positive change for children & families. Thank you to all who applied." 12th February 2021 @JoshMacAllister

It later transpired that this number would be rapidly whittled down to a shortlisted 40 who would then be interviewed for the roughly 15 places. Anger and distrust soon emerged as there was little transparency about how this was undertaken and how the EbE Board was 'chosen' and by whom all in a very short space of time. It was then some time before other opportunities to participate emerged. Again these were for small numbers of people and were not inclusive, only giving opportunities to participate during the working day and for those with access to on-line booking and participation.

The risk of uncritical notions of love

The chair's early statements about what the future might include for children (colloquially referred to as "*Josh's early plans for the review*" and his "*big questions*") included ensuring children experience *Safety, Stability and Love*. I always have significant concerns about the uncritical use of the word 'love' especially when it is used to define what any vulnerable person might need. I have previously undertaken research on where the need for love has been exploited by people in positions of power including social workers. A quick review of current Social Work England misconduct cases in the public domain found the following:

You did not maintain professional boundaries in that you sent Service User A a Facebook message on 29 September 2017 as set out in Schedule A.

"Hi [Service User A]. Both you and your daughter have found such a soft place in my heart. I always wanted to say this, but couldn't because of my position. I have missed seeing you since I left [Private]; hope you're doing well. You have always been so beautiful; you truly are the most beautiful person and I always longed to kiss you whenever I saw you. I miss seeing both of you and your loving daughter so much; I've always loved seeing you..."

Typically, the social worker did not attend the hearing but in mitigation stated his marriage was breaking down and he was drinking. However, the service user in question when interviewed stated:

...her trust in professionals had been ruined. She recalled Mr Kelly's involvement, all the intimate details she had shared about her life, her thoughts and feelings. He had been in her home and she had trusted him, to now know that all the time Mr Kelly had these feelings was difficult for her to come to terms with.

In determining his removal the legal advisor:

... drew the panel's attention to paragraph 105 of the Sanctions Guidance which states:

'Abuse of professional position to pursue a sexual or improper emotional or social relationship with a service user or a member of their family or a work colleague is a serious abuse of trust. Many people will be accessing social care for reasons that increase their vulnerability and that of their family. Pursuit of a sexual or improper emotional or social relationship with a vulnerable person is likely to require a more serious sanction against a social worker.'

This case is one example of a professional exploiting the trust of a vulnerable person, and her and her child's struggles. He imposed his own ideas about where and when expressions of love may be appropriate and it was harmful to this family. It is hard as a profession to deal with the fact that some social workers will abuse people in this way and justify it by calling it 'love'. It is therefore worrying that the review's uncritical notions of love, could provide reinforcement for such professionals to pursue abuse in the name of carrying out what the review had called for.

Conclusions

At the start of this process there were fundamental questions about the approach being taken and lack of trust in the skills and experience of the chair. These views have not been held universally but there is now division within care experienced people which is a fundamental reflection of that. The chair has previously been party to divisiveness within social work education perceived by many as at odds with social work values. Hurtful and divisive discourses remain perpetuated by Frontline that their students are uniquely the 'brightest and the best' people for social work.

[Minikin](#) (2021) articulates useful ideas about divisive approaches in her paper on *Relative Privilege and the Seduction of Normativity*:

"...when the values and goals of the organization sit well with individuals there can be a greater sense of calm, collaboration, and a feeling of achieving together.

... However, when there is a conflict in values and goals, tensions rise and the containment of those can be a source of significant stress for the individual. People may feel both a pull to adapt to the norm in an effort to belong and stay with the group and a conflicting pull to individuate and express difference. This can be a great source of tension, especially if the longing is for both."

So the message to the review is that unless and until social work values are more central within the review processes, and those with relative privilege within it address the tangible conflicts, division will continue and the review will not be fully respected.

It is also vital that the review navigates potentially dangerous waters around uncritical notions of love and does not continue to fall into the trap of it becoming shot with its current soft focus lens.

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