

Making change happen:

Reflections and impact from the Bright Spots programme Scottish pilot



Hello, I'm Mickey Anderson, data lead at CELGIS. And I've been part of the team that worked with Coram Voice to bring the Brightspots programme to Scotland. The Brightspots programme includes two subjective wellbeing surveys, one for children and young people in care, and one for careleavers. The surveys which were co-designed with children and young people, aim to understand how they feel about their lives and what is important to them and ask about a range of different factors including important relationships, stigma, school life and hobbies. Responding to what children and young people have to say as the second part of the programme. In 2021, we brought the bright spots programme to Scotland and worked with three local authority partner areas. These were Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway and East Ayrshire. Each partner area undertook both Brightspots surveys. And these work carried out in all three areas in early 2022. We've been blown away by the energy, enthusiasm and creativity, both in the facilitation of the surveys and the commitment to action planning to improve the lives of children and young people since receiving the findings. And we'll hear more details shortly from local authorities that took part. Now, over a year on, we're delighted to be able to open up the Brightspots programme to another three local authorities in Scotland as we embark on an extended pilot. Applications are open now and local authorities are encouraged to submit an expression of interest form which is available on our website.

Hello, my name is Grace Fletcher, Service Manager for family support and young people working in East Ayrshire.

Hello, I'm Andrew Dick, I'm a service manager with Aberdeenshire Council and I was the lead for the Bright Spots project in Aberdeenshire when we participated in 2021 to 2022.

After having some time to look at the findings of the surveys, what did they tell you about what you're doing well for your children and young people in care and care leavers?

Grace Fletcher

So, we reported back a list of the findings to young people in a template, and the good thing was that most of the young people in a care setting felt safe. That was about 97%. But what we wanted to do was find out about the other percentage and see what we could do to make that better. Most of the young people felt that the adults who cared for them had an interest in their education and their learning and felt they had a trusted adult who really cared about them and was there for them when they needed support, enjoyed really positive, fun activities, particularly access to nature. They felt really involved in decision making, which was something that we were really happy with. And most of them felt they were getting taught life skills. Again, the care leavers in particular found that they really enjoyed having access to the internet at home, and also a smartphone. And they had really good relationships with their carers and workers and wanted to maintain them when they moved on. They really appreciated having somebody who asked them how they're getting on, told them when they had done really well and believed that they'd be a success. And one of the big things that came up was having a pet was a real emotional support for children and young people, and also gave them a sense of responsibility.

Andrew Dick

So the benefits that we found of participating in the Bright Spots project were that it told us a great deal about our young people. We found out in our survey of young people who had left care that there were a number of positives that they told us about when we asked them about their experiences. We found out from them that they had very positive views about their relationships with their Throughcare and Aftercare workers. We received a number of very positive comments about the support that young people felt that they received from their Throughcare and Aftercare workers and that was extremely reassuring to hear. We also heard from young people that they felt that they had been very well supported in terms of access to digital technology and internet access. We noted that we had run the surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic, where there was a lot of activity and effort around ensuring that young people were supported to be able to access digital technology and digital connectivity. So, we were pleased to hear that the efforts that had gone into that had been vindicated. We also heard from young people who had left care that they felt well supported in terms of their financial situation as well. And that was one area that was very surprising to us because when we ran the surveys that was the start of the concerns in terms of cost of living, and we were concerned about our young people and how well they may be supported in that area. But it was reassuring to hear that they did actually feel well supported about that.

What did the survey findings tell you about what would make things better for your children and young people in care and care leavers?

In terms of areas that hadn't gone so well for young people who had left care, what they told us is that transitions was a particularly difficult time for them, and that Aberdeenshire could be getting better at the support that we give to young people when they were moving on from care. That's given us a real area of focus in Aberdeenshire. We also heard from young people that relationships with family and friends when they had left care was an area where they required more support as well. With regards to children and young people who are in care, we heard a number of positive areas where they felt that they had been well supported in Aberdeenshire. We heard from the surveys that young people had had a great deal of continuity in terms of the social worker who was assigned to them and responsible for supporting them and that was very positive to hear. In terms of children and young people who are currently looked after we heard a number of positives from them, they told us that they had had a great deal of consistency in terms of the social worker who was allocated to them and who was responsible for supporting them. They also told us that they had a very good understanding of why they lived away from home - a great deal of young people told us that they had that understanding. We also heard from children and young people that they were listened to, and that their views were regularly sought as well and that was very reassuring to hear. For young people who weren't living at home currently, we heard from them in terms of areas that needed to be improved. We heard that there was a low percentage of young people who were seeing their parents and seeing other people who were important to them as much as they wanted to, compared to other areas of the country, and we also heard that although young people had consistency of social workers, they felt that we needed to improve the trust and relationships that they had with their workers, and that very much gave us an area to be focusing on in terms of improvements to be worked on.

Grace Fletcher

One of the big things was their children wanting to have more say over family time - who with and how often. Sometimes, if they might not wish to see a parent, or they might not be able to stay up here where they wanted, to make sure that shouldn't stop them being able to spend time with a brother and sister, for example. Also, that children who had been in a care setting with other children, although they weren't necessarily in group living, they wouldn't be brothers and sisters, but they felt almost like they had that sibling relationship, so wanted to be able to keep in contact there as well. There were concerns about bullying, particularly in school, not being listened to, or fully understanding why they are in a care setting. Stigma, particularly language and lanyards, and relationship descriptions. So, when you're in the community with a worker, it's really important to ask the child how you would want to be introduced, and that might just be by name, but there had been some experiences in the past of being introduced by the status in terms of being in a care setting.

A lot of our care leavers said they want to be better prepared for leaving care, having support prior to leaving care, during and after the transition. One of the big things was a consistency of workers, they felt that workers moving on often made people feel left alone, and they'd lost that relationship there.

No surprise to us is that managing money is extremely difficult, and it's always been extremely difficult for young people who have moved on from a care setting, but it's particularly difficult just now. They were asking for more opportunities for work experience and further education, but actual real employment, where they can get enough money to be able to pay their bills and have a reasonable social life. Again, there was a bit about not always feeling safe in the local community and asking for better support for mental health and wellbeing, and one of the big things was managing to keep in touch with young people who have moved away from East Ayrshire, so they wanted to maintain relationships.

We decided, Given that the Bright Spots programme had given us such a rich vein of information, we decided that the current Corporate Parent Plan, which had another year to run, we decided to end that early and design the new one going forward around what our children and young people have told us, and one of the major areas of focus for us is moving on -that's in relation to the transitions that the young people told us that they wanted an improvement there. We're establishing a Care Sense Check Group to hold us to account quarterly. So, we've got multi agency meetings continuing, but on a quarterly basis, and they will report into our strategic Corporate Parenting Group, and the Corporate Parenting Group with the elected members. So, one of the things that we wanted to do was get a sense check group with those young people, and we recruited some of them from the events that we did earlier on in the year, because people were keen to see us keeping to what we said we would do - take action - and then basically, pull us up if we didn't.

One of the other things that we want to do is develop the role of the trusted adult. Because that was something that those who participated in the role of trusted adult felt was really good, and it was a range of people who could do that - a lot of them were support staff, but other people who perhaps wouldn't have had that opportunity. Some of the participation leaders were able to support children and young people to complete the surveys and felt that notion was something that could be developed, because it could be whoever they choose to be their [the children and young people's] trusted adult. So that's something that going forward we would like to work on.

Do you have any examples of changes that you have put in place since learning about the findings to help improve experiences for children, young people, and care leavers?

It's really important for us when we're taking part in Brightspots to actually listen to - and enact upon - that was one of the things that they said to us that you know, actually this needs to make a difference. So, finance, again we have recognised that. So Year on year we've raised our tenancy (payments) but again, following the Bright Spots information, we raised our tenancy set up grant to £3,000 and in April again this year, we've raised it to £3,500 so it is a significant increase. We kept the Weekly Living Allowance at the increased rate that was introduced during the pandemic - when that stopped through the DWP we kept the Weekly Living Allowance at the same amount. And over the winter period again, realising the cost-of-living crisis, the cost of fuel, etc. we increased that for the winter months by £30, and between April and May we brought the increase down to £20. We recognised it would be really difficult to suddenly move from, you know, that extra money down, and people were given plenty of notice that that would be what they would be getting for the week. Besides that, we always help young people out if they're needing help financially or in any other way, but that was just in terms of what they could plan to have and it was in recognition of their increased costs.

An easy win was to get rid of our lanyards when we're not in the office or in education or those kind of settings, if you're out in the community with young people, they felt that was a real stigma and they told us that actually, in their view, the adults feel superior when they had a lanyard on, so that was a very quick one [to change]. We carry them with us for identification purposes when we're out and about, but we don't have them in view.

One of the other quick wins was to look at different venues for meetings away from social work department, so we've tried out a variety of places that young people feel safe or feel engaged. We've moved around to different community centres and some of the kind of much more chilled out rooms that we've got for education etc. so that's been tried.

Another thing they told us is they quite like to know about new workers, so we've made introductory contact cards with a photo and a pen picture. That's been received really well, so we are going to roll that out. In terms of the language, being really aware of how you introduce people, that's an ongoing thing, because it'll be a personal thing to them, but we've looked at changing the language in Child Protection Meetings, for example, to be much more family friendly, and less daunting. We are revisiting the Pathway Planning to be more driven by young people and ensure that they experience the transition as a journey, and not like an event, like you've left care, end of.

One of the other big things again was talking about how pets made them feel, so we have, with partner agencies, we've accessed some activities for pet therapy. We've also

supported young people to have pets and look after their pets, and where people aren't really able to fully look after the pet, we've introduced pet share, where a couple of young people that would like to have time to have a dog, but worry that they could manage it full time, we support them to share that responsibility, so that's quite good.

In terms of involvements [participation with children and young people], we had Pizza and Coke, which was young people speaking directly to seniors, and elected members. We've revamped Pizza and Coke, we are now calling it the Care Experienced Cabinet, and the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee meets with the Care Experienced Cabinet to agree the agenda for the next meeting, and then obviously, people that they wish to hear from are invited to that meeting.

We've asked children what could we do to make them feel more safe, address bullying, and give them more responsibility. We've looked at a few ideas they have given us, and we've used the ring doorbell for young people's flats so that they can see who's at the door and have a bit more control of that, and it's, it's also common just now, a lot of households have it, so it wouldn't make their place stick out, having a camera on it for any reason.

Andrew Dick

In terms of areas that we have begun to work on since the completion of the surveys, we recognise that there were a number of areas where young people told us that there were things we needed to get better at. We've used a lot of that to inform our corporate parenting plan, in Aberdeenshire and make sure that our plan was informed by the voice of children and young people. There are a number of areas in our Aberdeenshire Corporate Parenting Plan which are directly informed by the results of the Bright Spots surveys, and we've drawn attention to that in our plan as well. We think that's been a really good way of ensuring that our plan is underpinned by the voice of children and young people who use our services.

We were very keen to take account of what young people in our Beyond Care survey told us about needing to get better at transitions and we've given key focus to that area in the time since the completion of the surveys. We have embarked on a number of changes in Aberdeenshire, about how we support young people in relation to transitions through the establishment of a working group consulting with children and young people about their experience of transitions so that they can tell us about how to get better at that transitions process. We are close to completion of that work and we're looking to bring together our findings and then launch a new approach to transitions in Aberdeenshire and we're really excited about that change and the benefits that that will bring to young people moving on from care.

One of the areas that we were keen to take account of in the survey which was completed for children and young people who are currently in care was in relation to relationships between children and young people and their social workers. They told us that they had had a high level of consistency of social worker, but that didn't always translate into positive trusting relationships between them under social workers. So, we were keen to think about how to address that area, and how to delve further into that area. We have taken forward an activity whereby we have undertaken an audit of case files, where we have looked in detail at the relationships between children, young people under social workers, and pulled together findings from that. We will use that to make recommendations about key expectations around about time spent between children and young people and their social workers and ensuring that there's a key focus on the relationship that exists between children and young people and their social workers when they are looked after, away from home. And again, we feel that's a key area that we've been able to highlight and focus on through the Bright Spots surveys.

How did you go about speaking to your children and young people about the findings of the surveys?

First of all to say I think the surveys gave us a really good insight into how best to engage directly with our children and young people in Aberdeenshire, and they gave us some really good ideas for how to engage further following the completion of the surveys. So, one of the first things that we embarked on doing was recognising that young people had given us a great deal of information about themselves and thinking about how to make sure that we fed back to them about what we were doing with those results that it wasn't just that they had completed the surveys and then that was the project over. One of the things that we were keen to do was make sure that we engaged with young people to tell them about the results of the surveys in a way that made sense to them - it didn't use lots of complicated language or lots of complicated statistics - but that made sense to children and young people. So, we made a video that we think was quite easy to understand that told young people about the key findings of the surveys, and crucially that we were going to do something further with that to make sure that we made changes in Aberdeenshire to recognise the areas that they felt that we needed to get better at.

Grace Fletcher

In terms of how we fed back to children and young people we actually arranged six events around the school clusters, around our heart communities which is built around the schools, and we did after school events with them with food, activities and a tabletop quiz. The tabletop quiz was built around the findings of the surveys, and we had a giant big foam dice, and we had a really interactive and depending on what number the dice went on to, that was something that we would discuss and double check that actually what we thought they had told us and what we felt their findings were, were accurate. What we were planning to do was, was along the lines of what they wanted to be done better and they could give us further information at these points as well.

Have there been any challenges in implementing any of these changes?

In terms of some of the challenges, I suppose, it was a big challenge holding throughout the process until the completion of the surveys, two multi agency meetings a week over a long period of time. We had really good commitment to that. It began to fall off afterwards, and I think the challenge is to keep everybody invigorated and keep everybody now that we've got the findings, just to make sure that we keep it as an active and live agenda and take it forward.

Andrew Dick

I think everyone would recognise that there are always a number of competing demands and challenges. And so, one of the things that we've been keen to think about in Aberdeenshire is just about how we drive forward the changes that are required of us following the completion of the surveys. And we would recognise that it does take time to implement these changes, particularly if we want to continue to consult with children and young people and involve them in the changes that we make as a result of what they told us. And so, what I would say is that we are continuing to implement the findings of the surveys. While it is taking some time for us to drive forward the results of the surveys and ensure that we implement them, we are reassured that their work is ongoing and that we are continuing to implement the changes that young people have told us that are important for them.

What has the local authority and the workforce gained through participation in Bright Spots?

We were really pleased in Aberdeenshire about the level of investment that there was in the Bright Spots project, right the way from senior management level all the way down to the workforce on the ground – people got really involved and engaged in the programme. So, from a senior management level, there was strong endorsement and support to carry out the project. And in terms of our wider workforce, there was really strong investment and enthusiasm around about the project. The Bright Spots project is very much focused on supporting young people to complete the surveys based on the trusted adult model, and our workforce got really involved in supporting young people to complete the surveys. And that was borne out in the really positive responses that we got to the completion of the surveys. So, we had 68% of our eligible looked after young people completing the surveys, and 41% of our young people who had moved on from care completing the surveys and that very much was down to the enthusiasm and involvement of the workforce getting behind the project and supporting young people to complete the surveys or encouraging them to complete it.

Grace Fletcher

I think people always talk about partnership working in multi-agency working and we have done that and we've got really good examples. I suppose taking part in Bright Spots,

there was a real coming together and a real sort of agenda for taking this forward for listening to our children and young people, and really hearing what they've got to say. It was obviously about wellbeing, so it's about how they were feeling how they were experiencing it. It wasn't something about 'how good is housing?', 'how good does 'whatever'?', it was basically, 'how do they feel and how are they experiencing it?', and we need to respond to that, so it was completely different. So, one of the things that a colleague in health had said that we all go into families with our own roles and our own hats on, but actually having participated in Bright Spots, it's really important to just check in [on] how the young person's feeling, how a child's feeling, and actually have more, kind of, wider wellbeing understanding and conversation, rather than just what your particular role is. There is a real buzz amongst the participants, a real keenness to hear and find out, so there was really good attendance. That's really difficult to sustain and it was sustained, and I think, obviously, that was a real common agenda. People really got behind the whole notion of Bright Spots. Most importantly, from us, we have heard from our children and young people. That's the largest survey and exercise that's ever been done in East Ayrshire, to capture as many voices as we did, to truly hear from them, and act upon what they've told us. And again, as mentioned earlier, that now has set the agenda for the Corporate Parenting Plan going forward with we've ended the existing one early, so that we can take what they told us on to the formal Corporate Parent Plan going forward.

How would you sum up the experience of being involved?

It was really exciting, actually, to be involved in the pilot, one of the first in Scotland and the colleagues and Coram Voice and CELCIS were really responsive and supportive. And actually, because it was fully supported by our Head of Service and senior management, to listen to our young people and act upon what they've asked of us, that has given us what we need in this time of real, tightening your belt and all that sort of stuff, if this has come from the voices of our children and young people, we need to see how can we manage to do what it is that we need to do for them, and not hide behind resources or anything, because we're committed to actually doing what those young people asked of us. It's been quite, has been quite humbling, in a sense, because you know, they haven't asked for much. It's actually about how do we treat them. And if we genuinely want to be a real Corporate Parent, then the litmus test has to be: 'Is this good enough for your child?', then that's good. If it is not, then it's not. And again, I suppose just everybody experiences things differently. So, we need to be able to respond in different ways and respond in individual ways, but it's been such a rich vein of information, and it's been, it's given us ammunition, if you like, in terms of taking the agenda forward, because it's actually come from our young people - our children and families and yes, the experience has been really good. It was hard work, but people were really committed to it, and I think what we've got at the end was extremely worthwhile doing and I would recommend people doing it because if you really want to be a good listener and act upon what our

children and young people are telling us, then Bright Spots is an excellent vehicle for being able to do that and [to] listen to and hear where children are saying.

It was it was an opportunity that we felt it was really good that we had the independence of CELCIS analysing the information, which really mean that it wasn't something that we were fabricating or controlling, and so that's what made it so real. That actually, we got the surveys, and when the surveys were sent, they were anonymous, and they were sent straight to CELCIS, who then analysed and came back to us. So, I think that's what made it real, and that's what maybe got the sort of response rate as well because people were confident that they could maybe say what they wanted to say without offending anybody and it was going to be independently analysed. So, I think it gives real credibility there.

Andrew Dick

I would say there's been a number of benefits to Aberdeenshire in participating in the Bright Spots project. It's been really rewarding to see the numbers of young people who actually participated in the surveys. And that gave us such a wealth of information about what's important to young people in Aberdeenshire, because so many of them told us what they thought. The project also brought about some really good collaborative working between everybody involved as well. We had really good buy in from our senior management in terms of supporting the project. And for those who were actually involved in delivering the project, there was really good collaboration between everyone involved, and we even had a bit of fun along the way. We were really pleased about the breadth of the project. The fact that the surveys covered children as young as four all the way up to those who had left care aged 25-26. We felt that was such a good way of capturing as many of the voices of young people as possible.

We were really pleased in Aberdeenshire that shortly following the completion of the Bright Spots project, we had our joint inspection of children at risk of harm, and our participation in the Bright Spots project was highlighted in our inspection as an area of good practice as to how we were consulting with children and young people and how we were using their voice to develop our services in Aberdeenshire.

My reflection would be that the Bright Spots project was a really creative and innovative way to consult with children and young people and make sure that their voice was heard, which can then be used as a way of informing the way that we transform the services that are delivered for them. I would say through the project there was great support from CELCIS and from Coram Voice which meant that although it did feel like a big piece of work at times, it also felt manageable and achievable. And that was borne out in the success of the project in Aberdeenshire. So, I would say if people are keen to explore different ways to engage with young people and to demonstrate to them that we're really interested in what they have to say and that we want to use that to make sure the

services we provide are right for them, then people really should give consideration to taking part in the project.

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