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Bright Spots programme: What makes life good for children in care and care leavers?

**Listening to children and young people's
experience of care in a new way**

**Focusing change where care experienced children,
young people and care leavers feel it is needed most**

Truly listening: Learning from the Bright Spots programme

(Micky Anderson) Hello, I'm Micky Anderson, Data Lead CELGIS, where I have a particular focus on data around children and young people with experience of care. I'm going to briefly introduce the Bright Spots programme, which have recently piloted with three local authority partner areas in Scotland. These are Aberdeenshire, East Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway, and we'll hear from them later in the session.

There are two parts to the Bright Spots programme. The first is subjective wellbeing surveys of children and young people in care and care leavers to understand how they feel about their lives. The second part is action planning and change in response to what our children and young people tell us, putting their wellbeing, their feelings and experience right at the heart of what we do. Bright Spots has been delivered in over 60 English and Welsh local authorities since 2013 by Coram Voice and I will outline several important aspects of the Bright Spots programme that made us keen to try it in Scotland.

The first is that the surveys were co-developed with care experienced children and young people and were specifically developed for those with experience of care. Breadth and inclusivity were a key aspect with the surveys covering children as young as four. We liked the trusted adults model where someone the child or young person knows introduces the surveys and supports them with completion when needed.

The surveys are tried and tested and provide an opportunity for comparison against other care experienced children and young people and against their peers in the general population. The primary attraction for us though, was the focus on action. And if you're interested in impact, there are a wide range of examples of change, in the online practice bank that Coram Voice have

developed. Although the legal and policy context is different in Scotland, feelings are pretty much universal. For the Scottish pilot, we looked at the survey content closely, but decided to test the surveys with only relatively minor tweaks, particularly to language, so that professional terms like placements and contact were changed.

The support CELCIS provided to the local areas included: introductory presentations to local stakeholders, provision of support materials to work in groups, regular meetings with local leads, twice weekly response rate updates, full survey analysis and reports and presentation at dissemination events. The key benefit of Bright Spots for children and young people are that it brings their experience to the fore. On paper, it looks great if a child hasn't had a change of social worker. But if that child feels that the worker was too busy to see them, that tells us something really important about the quality of that relationship. Issues like stigma, body image, and even access to pets are surfaced. And children and young people can see and be involved in change activity and response to what they've said. For professionals it augments and supports existing engagement activity, and lets them hear from more of their care experienced children and young people. I'm not going to sell Bright Spots as a panacea, but it gives professionals something tangible to get their teeth into. And personally I was really blown away by the energy, enthusiasm, commitment and creativity of the working groups in all our partner areas as they sought to engage as many children and young people as possible. This was reflected in the response rates they achieved with two of our partner areas hearing from two thirds of the children in care and the other hearing from 70% of their care leavers. All the areas are now in the process of disseminating and absorbing the survey findings and are moving to that all important action planning phase.

(Grace Fletcher) I am Grace Fletcher, service manager for family support and young people in East Ayrshire.

(Andrew Dick) My name is Andrew Dick, I am a social work manager for corporate parenting in Aberdeenshire Council.

We're always really interested in Aberdeenshire to hear from our young people and to think of different ways that we can reach them. We saw the information about the Bright Spots project and we thought this was yet another way to really creatively hear from our young people, particularly the voices of our looked after and care experienced, young people. We were really interested in the fact that the Bright Spots project give us the opportunity to hear from a really wide range of our young people. We have lots of different projects going on in Aberdeenshire to listen to our young people, but sometimes it can be the same voices that we hear and the Bright Spots project we felt give us a really good opportunity to hear from a really wide range of young people.

In particular as well, we were really interested in the fact that it allowed us to listen to some of the harder to hear voices, thinking about perhaps the voice of our younger children. And the fact that the Bright Spots project give us the

chance to hear from children as young as four years old, which they are often voices that are much harder for us to hear compared to our older young people.

(Grace Fletcher) So East Ayrshire is committed to The Promise and we felt that the Bright Spots was a really good vehicle for finding out the views of our children and families and young people. We also felt if we were genuine and saying that we wanted to put the voices of our children and young people at the heart of everything that we do, then this was an opportunity for us to take part in this Scottish pilot. So we were really keen to apply and were delighted that we were successful in getting that.

(Andrew Dick) So we were really keen to invest as much time and energy as possible in making the Bright Spots project a success in Aberdeenshire. So we set up two working groups, one for each of the surveys, one for our looked after children and one for our care leavers. And we made sure that we tried to identify as many young people as possible who could participate. We also put a lot of time and energy into identifying who the trusted adults would be, who would support young people to complete the surveys. So for example, with our looked after children, we tasked each member of the working group with being responsible for one or two children and families teams in Aberdeenshire. And they liaised really closely with those teams through the course of the project. They supported those teams to understand what it was that we were doing. And then they supported them as well to identify for each young person who the trusted adult would be. And we felt that by doing that, that actually contributed quite heavily to the success of the project by each team having a link to the members of the working group, and really drilling down into each young person and who would be best placed to support them to complete the surveys.

(Grace Fletcher) So basically, there was an opportunity for us to do one or both surveys, we opted to do both - Your Life, Your Care and Your Life Beyond Care – so two surveys. For children and young people in a care setting and those who had left care. This entailed setting up multi-agency groups for both - so basically, a Tuesday and a Thursday every week from October 2021, going forward to just before Summer 22. This was multi-agency input and was really well attended. Again, it's the wellbeing of our children and young people, it's corporate parents, it's not just down to social work, it's everybody in the local authority and all other corporate parents. So the surveys then went live in January, and finished in March. So we then got the reports back from CELCIS and we're in the midst of actually pulling together what the feedback has told us and what our next steps would be. And then taking that to the children and young people through an event.

Also, in order to get children and young people to participate in the surveys, we had to do a lot of awareness raising, we had a number of events planned. And we did things basically through the schools and through the college and through a number of partners, including Who Cares? Scotland. So there's a lot of awareness raising and then support for people to participate. And one of the big things was introducing the concept and identifying trusted adults, for young people. The trusted adults, particularly for the very young children, would tell

them to complete the survey. But all children and young people were offered a trusted adult so that they had somebody to discuss it with or check it out with, and more importantly from our point of view, trusted adults would check up with the children and young people after completion, just in case any of the questions had raised some issues or there were sensitive areas for them that they would require some support. So we just checked in with them. So it was quite busy.

(Andrew Dick) I think the Bright Spots survey has allowed us to show our children and young people that we're really interested in listening to what they have to say, I think by going and asking them what they think about what works well for them and what things need to be improved, they know that we're listening to what's important to them and want to make things better for them in the areas that they're identifying need to be improved. I think there's still work that we need to do in terms of showing our young people that haven't given us all of this information, that we're going to do something with that information and put it into practice. And that's certainly the focus of our energies going forwards now that we've got the results of the surveys, and it will be really important to show our young people that were taking on board the things that they've told us in the surveys. One of the things that we're doing just now is that we're working with some young people to produce a video to tell them about the results of the surveys. We ran some events for staff on Microsoft Teams to tell them about the results of the surveys, but we recognise that that wasn't necessarily the way that our young people would want to engage with us to hear about what the surveys were saying. And so we tried to be a bit more creative, and think about how best to engage with them. And we talked to some of our young people about what would be the best way to communicate with them about the results of the surveys. And they told us that using digital means, such as a video would be a better way to communicate rather than holding an event on Teams.

(Grace Fletcher) So the relationships between multi-agency partners has obviously improved because there was a real commitment. So attending once a week, for the many months, that I've said to you, between four and five, takes a big commitment, and a lot of people said they might not be able to attend every one. Some people didn't but I have to say the majority of people really worked hard to come along and to contribute. The other kind of positive that came out of it was with us working together and focusing on children's wellbeing. People were beginning to look at their own role and realising that sometimes their interaction with children and families and young people was quite narrow, just looking at the purpose for them. So whether it was a health visitor, whether it's a teacher, whether it was housing officer or whatever, that they would be with children and young people and families and they would be focusing on what they were there for. And given the responses for some of the surveys, I think people were thinking we need to think a bit more widely, we need to look at concerns about children and young people's wellbeing and just taking the time to ask how they're feeling, what their frame of mind is like, if they are feeling pretty happy or positive for the future, or if there's something bothering them, if they're feeling low, if they're not feeling safe. All of these issues came up. And I think

people felt, actually, this is on me as a corporate parent, so when I'm in doing whatever my particular role is, it's also good for me to check out on a human level, how is this person feeling and how are they doing? And is there anything that I need to either do to support or flag up to colleagues to support? So that was a really good outcome in terms of just thinking more widely than your base role.

(Andrew Dick) So we were absolutely delighted in Aberdeenshire with the response rates that we received to our Bright Spots surveys. For our looked after children we managed to engage with 68% of our young people who were identified as eligible for the surveys. And that far exceeded our expectations. We were really quite concerned at the start as to whether young people would be willing to engage with it and complete surveys, but they far exceeded what we thought we would get in terms of response rates. And that gave us a really broad representation of the views of our young people. We were particularly impressed by the response rates that we got for our younger children, our four to seven year old age range, we still managed to engage a huge number of those young people in the process through the use of trusted adults and the support that they gave to our young people fill it in. And similarly for our care leavers, although the response rate was lower in terms of 41%, we still felt that was a really good response rate because our care leavers were completing those much more on their own compared to our looked after young people who had the support of a trusted adult to fill them in.

At the time that we ran the Bright Spots project there were a number of competing demands going on at the same time. We were still in the midst of the COVID pandemic and it was over the time of Christmas and New Year where the Omicron variant was particularly prevalent. Plans to conduct things face to face had to be re-articulated and we had to be more creative and do more things virtually. During the time we ran the project we also were battered in Aberdeenshire by two fairly significant storms as well and lots of attention was diverted into our response to that particular crisis as well. Despite those things we persevered with our project and felt that we got really good response rates and listened to as many of our young people as possible and we think that that has given us a really good foundation for going forward to think about some of our improvement work and the areas where we need to get better. Alongside that it has given us a real opportunity to see the things that we are doing well in Aberdeenshire and make sure that we continue to build on those successes and make sure we don't rest on our laurels.

(Grace Fletcher) So we had hoped that the 'Team Around The Child' had identified that the lead professional would identify the appropriate trusted adult for all the children and young people that they worked with. Given pressures of work and priorities, that didn't happen as smoothly as we anticipated it should. So we went back to the drawing board and engaged with the named persons in the school. So that was a really good help because the response rate for the surveys for the Your Life, Your Care was low, disappointingly low. But once we got the name persons involved, they were able to support and encourage young

people in the schools to participate. And that included in the early years settings, our colleagues there as well. So the response rate then up for that. So having had to change tack, we hit a bit of a brick wall, but we were able to consider how else to do it. And I think going forward in the future, we would have a pronged attack, where we would want the lead professionals to take a lead role in identifying but also the named persons, which was helpful. So some of the other issues were there's a different landscape in England. So this is a Scottish pilot. And so in particular, the language in the survey could be quite difficult because we use different language to describe different roles in Scotland. Also, we've got a large looked after at home population, which they don't have an England and feel that we included them in the younger age group - this in the Your Life, Your Care group - but it would probably be better to have specific questions for the looked after at home population. We've also got a larger kinship population than England so these things was positive feedback, if you like from a pilot's perspective. You would expect to come across some issues and challenges which we've been able to identify and going forward, hopefully, that would help in terms of re-wording some of the surveys or adding on. So we fed that back to colleagues in CELCIS.

(Andrew Dick) The surveys came at a really good time for us because we were also looking at our corporate parenting plan around about the same time and thinking about how we also take account of The Promise plan 21-24 as well. So it's given that opportunity for the results of the Bright Spots surveys to really inform that plan going forward. We've got a number of activities within our corporate parenting plan now which are very much informed by the results of the surveys. For example, transitions was an area that was identified by our care leavers as an area where we needed to get better at. They felt they got really good support once they'd gone into aftercare, but in terms of that move from being looked after to transitioning to independence, they felt that was a really difficult time and an area where we could get better at. So we've set up a working group to look at how we improve our transitions process, thinking about how that transfer over from children and families to throughcare and aftercare happens. And alongside that, what sorts of supports and resources are we offering around about transitions, thinking about how we improve upon our continuing care provision and things like that to get better at those kind of areas.

(Grace Fletcher) So there's some things, like in terms of stigma that we would want to address really quickly. And so a lot of young people have said that they don't like being out in the company of workers where they've got the lanyards on and their badges. So workers need to have them work for them to be able to identify themselves appropriately. However, they shouldn't wear them, they should have them in their bags or pockets or whatever when they're out. One of the other things that came up was - and we can't have a blanket answer for this - but acknowledge that if children and young people are out with adults if they are in a care setting - they are out with workers or if they are with social workers and they bump into people that they know or the workers bump into people that they know, then there is an issue about how the relationship is

described, whether that's a worker relationship, whether it's a friend relationship, whether it's just names such – this is Joe, this is Jeanie - or whether or not people want to refer to themselves as this is my auntie or my dad whatever, because there is a whole range of settings, including foster care. Some children and young people will not want to identify carers, as their parents, but there wasn't a one answer fits all. But I think that the lesson for us is that people need to ask every individual child, how they want to be described when they're out with a worker, what that relationship will be to anybody that they bump into. And that's something that's very quickly addressed. And if it takes away some of the stigma or some of the embarrassment, then that is something that we have already addressed, we have raised that. But we need to keep that highlighted so that it's not a one off thing, that we are actually doing it for everybody constantly.

(Micky Anderson) Although the Scottish pilot began in 2021, the Bright Spots programme originated almost a decade ago in England, and now takes place in both England and Wales. Over 20,000 responses from children and young people have been collected over several years, enabling local authorities to make long-term, sustainable improvements in the care they provide to their care experienced children and young people.

North Somerset Council – the first ever local authority to take part in Bright Spots - has worked alongside Coram Voice since the programme began in 2013, and run the surveys for children, young people, and care leavers every year.

At the beginning of their Bright Spots journey, they found that children and young people often weren't sure who their social worker was and didn't have a clear understanding of why they were in care. One young person said: "they know everything about us but we know nothing about them".

As a result, the council's social workers designed introduction cards to give to their children and young people when they get a new social worker, which include photos and 'get to you know you' information like their social worker's favourite foods, animals and places. And when they meet with their social worker after the first time, their children and young people are also given a 'Guide for Me' keepsake box which includes a colourful booklet for writing and drawing in, pens, post-its, a memory stick where they can keep photos and other mementos, space for them to keep special items, and child-friendly information about their rights.

For other local authorities, Bright Spots has also given them an opportunity to dispel assumptions and gain a new insight into the lives of their care experienced children and young people.

(Toby Wilson) Hi, I'm Toby Wilson. I am a team manager for the voice and participation team in West Sussex County Council and we've been doing Bright Spots since 2018.

We have been doing Bright Spots since 2018 and we've been doing alternate years of care leaver Bright Spots and then young people looked after Bright Spots, and I think initially we were hoping to hear the wider voice of children, so

wider than just those young people that come along to our Children in Care Councils or Care leaver Advisory Boards, because there's people who want to go to there, they are, we find, a small number and sometimes and they're the ones who are in quite settled placements, but we want to hear everybody's views. So I think that was a big thing for me in terms of why we wanted to do it was to hear those voices that sometimes we don't get to hear.

And the other thing that really appealed to me was the idea of benchmarking against other authorities. So it's one thing saying, oh, you know, all young people in care, feel anxious about school or they're embarrassed by adults or something. But to know that that's based upon what you might be doing within your own social work environment made it very powerful to get other teams on board to be able to say this is quite unique to West Sussex or, equally, because it's Bright Spots - it's not bad spots - this is what we're doing fantastically in West Sussex.

And there is always, when you are trying to sell these things to directors and assistant directors, there's a bit of sort of shoulder puffing that they want to do to say look what West Sussex are doing better than anyone else. So you can use that as a tool to highlight the brilliant things that we're doing.

So yeah, a more representative view of children and I think we were hoping to shape the services from a young people's point of view. So it wasn't just the survey. What I liked about it was that action plan time afterwards where we can work with young people to implement that across the services and making sure that they can embed some direct quotes or direct findings from the survey into their work as well.

I think that not only has it enhanced our relationship with children and families, it's certainly enhanced our relationship as a team within our Council. So it's meant that bringing other services on board to say this is where we're going to create an action plan together with young people, that's meant that they're really embedded into every single little bit of the way that we work with young people.

I think having young people working on the action plan and there's a constant you said we did in terms of that - you know we heard you and this is what we're doing now. And because, let's say for example, the fostering teams are involved in that, then when they're doing their training, they're highlighting again those exact points where young people have said this is what we really enjoy and this is what we think need to be improved. So, it's one thing me saying it, but hearing it directly from young people and having that in the presentations means that families hear that we are listening and they don't just think, oh, you know, where's this gone? We've told you 1000 times about this. It is constantly made reference to.

And also I think being honest and saying, you know, there are some things that we know and we've heard we need to improve on. It's saying that, as a whole, we recognize this is an issue we need to improve on and together we're going to work on it. And this is the plan that we're going to do. So I think other teams have found that's really helpful in terms of the conversations that you can have.

I think there's loads of things that have really developed in terms of practice and the way we do things in West Sussex as a result of Bright Spots. One particular thing that came out of the result of the consultation, the survey, was West Sussex was seen as somewhere where young people felt embarrassed by adults or embarrassed about something they had said about them being in care. And it was 24% of young people said this was true compared to 12% benchmarked against, you know, the rest of the country. And so we talked to young people and worked with them trying to get to the basis of what was all that about, you know, what was it, and when did it happen? And it turned out it happened mainly in the school environment and through a long process of working with Designated Teachers and the education team and young people, we found that it was around the stigma of being in care was heightened by that being announced to the class.

So for example, the teacher might say oh you know, you have got an appointment with your social worker this afternoon and they the whole class would say this or even if they would make it worse by not saying anything and just saying off you go, you're going, you're leaving us aren't you? And so then when they came back to the class, the kids said oh, where you been? Where have you been? And they'd have to almost lie about something that is a perfectly normal part of their life.

So what we did, what the Children in Care Council did, was work on a series of videos, which they called Treat Me The Same, and they basically said we want to be treated the same as - you would any other young person. And so they worked across the board, specifically with schools, designated teachers, social workers, looked after nurses and they said, we don't want to be taken out of class because it affects our education. And equally in terms of some reviews that were taking place in school time that they said, you know, we want to go to the reviews, but we don't want to go out of class. And so there were choosing not to go to the reviews, so that affected their involvement in their care plan and involvement in their care process as well.

So across the board what we got was service leads agreeing to reduce where at all possible anytime that they were going to be taken out of class. And that really reduced the numbers of in school time meetings from something nearer sort of 40% right down to about 5% or 8% now. So that's really made a difference and that's because young people have said this is the effect that it has on me. Rather than saying, oh, I don't like going to meetings, they've said no. It's the effect on my subjective well-being. And I think that's the key with Bright Spots. All the questions are about subjective well-being, how does it make you feel? And so being able to express that, tell them how they feel, tell them the effect it has upon them. This survey has been a brilliant tool for reducing that stigma and making sure that they can enjoy their education and still take part in their reviews as well.

I think and the biggest challenge has been getting those responses, so getting

young people to feed back to us. We deliver our Bright Spots through designated teachers in schools. So we asked for the support of the virtual school and that was really important from the start to get them on board in terms of how we're going to speak to our young people and equally not to make them feel singled out to say, oh, just because you're in care, you want to need to come out and fill this thing out. And so we're really careful about how and when they filled it out and how they were asked to fill it out.

And one issue, combined with that, was when we did the survey in 2020, obviously we were involved in a lockdown, so there was [COVID] 'bubbles' and a lot of students couldn't take part in networking and couldn't see their designated teacher. So it meant that we really had to think a bit more creatively in terms of how we get them to complete it. And we've got around that by sending out responses by post and they could send those back to us by freepost envelope.

And that really really helped in terms of getting the numbers in in such a difficult time. Hopefully that won't happen again. But I would say yeah, the big challenge is getting people actually to complete it it's making sure that we keep saying have you had this opportunity to have your voice heard, getting the promotion out, making use of children and family workers and support workers as well. Because it just needs to be that trusted adult relationship for them to complete it with them.

And the other thing was around communication and translation. So with young people, two sets of young people, first of all those who for various reasons might be you know our SEND young people, so with special educational needs, and it's making sure that we've got the key worker linked into them who can perhaps answer those questions on their behalf by knowing by that relationship that they'll have built up over time with the young person. Because one thing that was really important for me was we didn't want exclude anyone and we didn't want to say this is the voice of all the young people in West Sussex when it clearly wasn't. You know when we had self-excluded. So making that accessible to young people.

And also 12% of our looked after young people are children seeking asylum. So for some of them, English isn't their first language and it might be a language that they're not familiar with communicating in. And so again, we used the workers or translation services or even young people themselves - we have got some care leavers who were really keen to help out and to ring up young people and translate it for them over the phone. So those are some of the challenges, I think, within that. But they're the ways that we've got over it.

(Micky Anderson) These experiences show how participating in Bright Spots not only provides local authorities with an insight into the lives of their care experienced children, young people, and care leavers, but also the opportunity to listen to a wide range of voices and age groups and get feedback on the changes they make to understand the impact these might be having when they repeat the surveys.

In the words North Somerset Council: "By doing the survey every year, having a strong focus on children's wellbeing and making improvements, it's had a

powerful impact on the care we provide. It's truly reinforced to us the need to have services for children's care designed using the views of our children, young people and care leavers."