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Conference Review

Lovin' Care Gathering – hosted by Children's Homes Quality

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A heart-warming experience at the 'Lovin' Care Gathering'

'Make care incredible – with love part of the deal' was the slogan for the event which set the tone for a thought-provoking and inspiring day - and it was just that!

Children's Homes Quality (CHQ) is a small organisation with a big heart. They provide independent services to children's homes across the country, supporting them to provide outstanding care to the children in their homes. The organisers, Margaret Davies, Training and Development Lead, and Valerie Tulloch, Director, certainly delivered on their promise to stimulate thought and reflection and to motivate those attending to develop their love-led practice.

The gathering, which took place in May, was a heart-warming and transformative event that left delegates feeling both inspired and motivated.

We know how privileged we are to work in this sector, whilst also being acutely aware of how challenging it can often be. This day created an exciting, almost electric, atmosphere, igniting us all with a sense of energy and a passion to rush back to our homes and dive into our work of making a profound difference in the lives of our children.

From the moment delegates walked through the door, it was evident that this conference was special. Seeing many familiar faces from the previous conference, hosted by CHQ in Birmingham in 2022, there was a strong sense of community, and the room was filled with warmth, unity, and a shared commitment to making a positive impact on the lives of children in residential care – with love leading the way.



Organised by the passionate and dedicated Margaret Davies, this conference was born from a dream she had, to gather individuals in the residential childcare sector and unite them in a love-led revolution. As she welcomed everyone to the gathering, held in the beautiful setting of the Midland Hotel, she described how the event had evolved from what started as a simple idea. There was a sense of pride that made me feel lucky to be there, absorbing all the wisdom and knowledge the day had to offer.

During Margaret's speech, she recognised the positive steps taken in the sector to identify love as an essential part of a childhood. However, she also pointed out that a significant cultural shift is necessary within the sector. We need a culture that places secure attachments, based on loving, consistent relationships, at the foundation of every decision we make about children, and there is still much work needed to make this a reality.

To bring about this cultural change, the sector needs to change its priorities at all levels, from individual practices within homes to the policies and actions of agencies and governments.

Margaret highlighted specific issues within the system, such as the lack of resource and encouragement for young people to stay beyond their 18th birthday in children's homes. This lack of support can disrupt the lifelong connections and sense of belonging that young people in care so desperately need. Additionally, the system often does not provide a pathway for young people to return for support when they require it, further obstructing their ability to form genuine and lasting attachments.

It was encouraging that institutionalised language was referenced as a barrier to forming genuine loving attachments, underscoring the need for a cultural shift towards more compassionate and empathetic approaches in the sector.

This introduction set us up for a day of discussions and actions aimed at addressing these issues and working together towards a more loving environment for children in care.

Valerie Tulloch, Founder and Director of Children's Homes Quality, delivered a compelling call to action. She urged conference delegates to reflect and find ways to integrate the principles of 'Lovin' Care' into their roles, thereby making an impactful difference. 'Lovin' Care' seeks to dismantle barriers and challenge unhelpful narratives about the role of love in residential childcare, which is so important because the cost of these barriers is that young people grow up feeling unloved and unlovable. These principles encourage us to be bold and brave and to implement love-led practices, by shaping our leadership, workforce and environments to create the conditions where love can safely flourish between children and adults.



Valerie's powerful message deeply resonated with the audience, leaving everyone with a sense of responsibility and hope. She invited all to be part of a 'love revolution', underlining the importance of love as a driving force in providing quality care to children.

Keynote speakers and workshop presenters

CHQ put together a remarkable line-up of speakers who were all experts in their field and deeply passionate about the power of love in the care sector. Their talks came firmly from their own unique perspectives, relevant to their work, or life, experience.

One of the standout moments of the day was a heartfelt presentation by Scott King, a care-experienced man who shared his raw personal journey through the care system. His emotional and moving account of how 'love saved his life' left a lasting impact on the room. His story served as a powerful reminder of the significance of loving attachments in the lives of children in residential care.

During Scott's talk, what stood out the most was the clear lack of transparency from those in charge of his care, regarding the genuine nature of the bond that his foster carers had formed with him when he was a child. As a young person Scott moved from one home to another, from one set of caregivers to the next, but one piece of crucial information remained undisclosed: his carers had loved him.

Scott vividly recounted the transformative impact of accessing his care records as an adult, where he learned that the foster parents he had perceived as rejecting him for many years had, in fact, wanted to adopt him as a child. He wondered what a difference this knowledge could have made, if social workers hadn't thought it was in his best interests to keep this from him.

Perhaps he wouldn't have felt so rejected and so angry. Perhaps the love his foster carers had felt for him had the power help him in ways we can only imagine. As over 100 people listened, captivated by Scott's message, I couldn't help but feel proud of how far we've come as a sector, and hopeful that we can continue to spread the word and make a real difference.

In a presentation titled 'Love on the Brain', Dr Shona Quin, another enlightening speaker, delved into the fascinating and scientific aspects of love's impact on a child's brain development. Her presentation provided delegates with valuable insights into the neurological and psychological effects of love on children in care. Dr Quin's research highlighted the importance of creating love-led environments within which children can thrive and heal from their trauma, whilst captivating us all with the scientific evidence that love has healing powers on the brain of a child.



Dr Quin delivered an outstanding presentation on 'neuroplasticity'. She eloquently illustrated this concept by projecting an image of a wheat field, featuring a well-trodden path running through it. She emphasised our capacity to forge new neural pathways in a child's mind through the consistent and loving nurture they receive. Much like the creation of a fresh trail through the field with each daily walk, we hold the power to shape a child's neurological development through the repeated expression of love and care.

It was great to hear from Liz Mitchell, Project Development Manager of the Love InC Project (Aberlour, Scotland's Children's Charity). It was clear to see that Scotland is leading the way in loving practice.

Following the commitment made by Scotland's First Minister in 2016, for Scotland to 'come together and love it's most vulnerable children to give them the childhood they deserve', The Love InC project have been working hard to understand the barriers to children experiencing loving bonds in the care system - and to make meaningful change. We were treated to Liz's insights into the Love InC project, which were inspiring! She provided a comprehensive overview of the project's journey with a strong focus on the important link between love-led practice and trauma responsive care. The audience were left with a clear understanding of its positive impact.

Following a panel Q&A with the keynote speakers in the morning (and a delicious lunch with the added energetic buzz of people using the time to debrief on the powerhouse morning), there were several great workshops on offer in the afternoon. My only criticism was not being able to attend them all as it was almost impossible to choose.

I attended a workshop with the incredible Mary-Anne Hodd, lived experience trainer and adviser, on the topic of interdependence and how lasting relationships with children can support successful transitions into adulthood.

Mary-Anne's reframing of the term 'care leaver', in saying 'we didn't leave care, care left us', is a powerful and poignant reminder of the challenges young people face when they turn 18, as the relationships they've come to rely upon often abruptly disappear.

Mary-Anne's thought-provoking reflection on the term 'independent', a commonly pursued goal for young people in care, highlighted the shared understanding that it often conveys a sense of self-reliance and isolation. This realisation highlights the need to shift the focus from mere independence to interdependence.

The concept of interdependence emphasises that these transitions are not solely about self-sufficiency but also about the relationships and support systems that surround and sustain young people during this critical phase of their lives. This



perspective highlights the importance of the relationships and care they continue to need as they transition into adulthood.

Other workshops on offer included:

'Lovin' the Leadership' was an insightful workshop facilitated by Valerie Tulloch, Director of Children's Homes Quality, where delegates learned about the transformative powers love-led leadership can have on the staff, as well as children.

'Safe Loving Touch' by Clair Davies MBE, consultant and trainer, was so popular that the organisers had to change her room to fit the audience in!

'Developing emotional intelligence' was facilitated by Eithne Staunton, registered manager and independent consultant, who encouraged delegates to develop their awareness of their own emotions and how they might affect the children we care for.

Matt Langley and Ben Thomas, registered managers of Lovin' Care Children's Homes, delivered a workshop specifically focusing on the issues men face with love-led practice.

And finally, a workshop was held by Liz Mitchell, Andy Finlay and Rhianne Ewen from Aberlour, Scotland's Children's Charity, who invited attendees in to learn about their love-led approach to recruitment for care experienced young people within the Love InC Project.

The children's homes community

Throughout the day, there were numerous opportunities for networking and connecting with like-minded individuals in the field. These interactions allowed delegates to exchange ideas, share experiences, and build a strong community of people committed to the cause of love-led care.

During the event, delegates were encouraged to document their thoughts and ideas, which were then displayed for everyone to see. A common key takeaway from this exercise included the importance of fostering more affection and care within the staff team, serving as role models for these relationships, and establishing a genuine love-led environment. For me, this experience emphasised that to genuinely cultivate love-led practices within the team it's imperative for leadership to embody and demonstrate a love-led approach (as the old saying goes - lead by example). This insight highlights to me the significance of leadership in setting the tone for the entire organisation, and how a love-led approach to leadership can benefit the outcomes of our children.

The 'Lovin' Care Gathering' not only provided a platform for learning and inspiration but also demonstrated the empathy, compassion, and dedication that exists in the residential childcare sector. It was clear that the organisers had poured their hearts and souls into this event, and their passion was infectious.



A great success

In conclusion, the 'Lovin' Care Gathering' was an extraordinary conference that successfully brought together individuals from the residential childcare sector to inspire and promote love-led practice. With its powerful speakers, educational workshops, moving personal stories, and informative presentations, this gathering left delegates with a renewed sense of purpose and a deep commitment to bringing love into the picture for children in care. Margaret and Valerie deserve commendation for their vision and dedication in making this event a resounding success. It is events like these that have the potential to bring about real change and improve the lives of vulnerable children.

About the reviewer

Amy Robinson has worked in residential children's homes since 2009. She has held every position from support worker to responsible individual and now enjoys using her experience in her role as an independent trainer and consultant. Observing the many changes the sector has seen in the last 15 years, Amy has fostered a deep appreciation for and interest in trauma responsive and attachment-based care – care that holds relationships to be at the heart of everything.

