

National Confidential Forum: Reflections on participant experiences

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Abstract

The National Confidential Forum is an acknowledgement forum established to capture and communicate the experiences of people in residential/institutional care in Scotland. People provide the Forum with accounts of their childhood experience of care and its longer term impact on their lives. We have heard from more than 150 people of all ages so far and with an analysis of 52 recent testimonies now complete, emerging findings are being prepared for Scottish Government. In practice, testimonies provided to the Forum encapsulate people's personal histories and all stages of care: before, during and after - sometimes long after, allowing us to investigate the legacy effects of care. In this early paper, the role and function of the Forum is explained in union with an exploration of participants' reasons for attending a hearing, and their experiences and benefits of speaking with us.

Keywords

Care experience, residential settings, institutional settings, acknowledgement

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The National Confidential Forum

The National Confidential Forum is an acknowledgement forum, established to capture and communicate the experiences of people in residential and institutional care in Scotland. People provide us with accounts of their childhood experience of care and its longer term impact on their lives.

More than 150 people of all ages have now spoken with our expert staff who provide support and guidance throughout the process. Some testimonies have been written and sent to us but the vast majority have been told to us confidentially, in person in a quiet room at our offices, but also in other settings such as prison, safe community spaces, or elsewhere. People sit with us for two hours to share their journey through the care system and often their full personal histories; all stages of care; before, during and after – sometimes long after.

The Forum is a place where people can come and describe their experiences and the effects of those experiences, in their own words and at their own pace – it is a fundamental and crucial element of the Forum model. Testament to the model is that participants in the Forum tell us that they feel able to describe even the most difficult experiences to the extent that suits them. We do not ask direct questions but participants have described the good and bad of care they experienced as children with many speaking of neglect, maltreatment, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse that they experienced while they were meant to be protected, supported and nurtured in care.

Personal accounts and testimonies are powerful and relevant in a way that other information is not and the Forum is particularly significant in providing a space for those voices. It is a fairly unique opportunity for care experienced individuals to come and speak to us about anything they wish to share or convey. It is our role to then use those accounts to identify key issues within the care system and around the lifelong impact of childhood experiences.

To establish a full and proper picture of those experiences and accounts of care, we recently completed an analysis of 52 testimonies to identify themes, patterns

and trends in order to write a findings report for the Scottish Government. The ages of participants who have spoken to the Forum so far mean the experiences on which our findings are based cover accounts of care from the 1940s to the early 2000s. While participants discussed in excess of 100 institutional or residential settings, it is more accurate to describe these as placement moves since some participants reported staying in the same setting more than once.

Participants speak of diverse and mixed experiences and reflect at length about their time in care and long after. Sadly, we hear many accounts of intense loss; loss of relationships, loss of education, loss of childhood, in short, a loss of opportunity which often has a profound effect on participants many years after their time in care. While people regularly share accounts of strict regimes, neglect, indifference, abuse and brutality, they also highlight – though in fewer numbers - experiences of warmth, compassion, kindness and empathy from family, friends or those associated with homes and other settings; valued relationships that had a positive impact on their childhood or in their subsequent adult life. Crucially, we hear a great deal about the lifelong impact of care; the legacy effects of lives shaped by those childhood experiences that encompassed their identity in the many years after care, their personal achievements, adult mental and physical health, employment, education, housing, finances, and relationships with parents, siblings, wider family as well as friendships, romantic partners, children and grandchildren. Many also comment on the changing care experienced landscape over the years.

People come to the Forum for a range of reasons but they usually expect that what they share with us will be used to improve the care system and the mechanisms that govern, support and surround it. By understanding people's experiences and the lifelong impact of care, suggested improvements will be based on real experiences and clear recommendations can be provided to Government.

It is well established and now widely recognised that care experienced individuals face disadvantaged everyday realities compared to their non-care experienced peers. A significant common variable is their encounter with the care system. If you want to know how to fix or improve a system or service, you

must ask the people who have experienced it – they are the experts, and everyone who spoke with us had something important to say.

Participant experiences

Why come to the Forum?

It is an important aspect of the person-centred Forum model to ensure that the participant guides the focus of the hearing. Even if those who have attended a hearing at the Forum have been in contact with other agencies, organisations or support, it is very unlikely that any participant will ever have had the chance to speak for two hours about their experiences, and certainly not to guide that discussion, free from challenge.

There is a very strong sense from all the testimonies that participants were relieved to finally have ownership and control of their own biographical account. For most, agency and the idea of ownership was typically lacking when they were younger and in care or soon after. A significant development over the past year is that we are now able to provide participants in the Forum with a written copy of their testimony, should they wish one. There has been a high uptake from participants and our impression is that the provision of written testimonies reinforces the sense of being heard and enhances the acknowledgement function of the Forum.

Most who attended a hearing explained that the process of providing a testimony in this format was cathartic. Motivations for coming to the Forum were varied, ranging from a desire to offload, to be heard and acknowledged, a demand for greater transparency and openness in the system, a need for justice and closure, and above all, a sense of obligation and responsibility to ensure that their experiences could be a source of protection for others, and instrumental learning for Scotland.

Until recently, some were unaware that there are mechanisms to formally provide their experiences of care. Many realised it was time to share their experiences and while they were finally ready, they remained apprehensive about their attendance. We understand that depending on people's experiences,

it can be a difficult prospect to contemplate and some participants found it challenging to agree to come along and even cross our threshold to speak with us.

It's been a lot for me to make that phone call

As [a supporter] said I've taken a big step to even step in this building today and speak to youse guys. That's the first step of a whole process. It's not going to be resolved today it's going to be months down the line, it's years down the line...

In fact it's been far more emotional than I thought it would be than just actually come and read a bit of paper, I just compartmentalise and that would be that ... I think it's been very valuable for me to come

I never spoke a single word it tae anybody till well late in ma thirties probably even forty ... and like I say even now I find it really hard ... I can barely thinking about it, never actually getting the words to ...

Reflecting on their time with us, some were very clear in their own mind about the impact of their narrative; attending a hearing was a way to formulate and make sense of their history.

It's good to talk

It is common to hear participants describe the benefits of providing a testimony; as a release, a relief, a chance to offload, easier than they expected, satisfying, therapeutic, and quite liberating to finally have the chance to share their accounts of care. That was an unintended benefit for many.

... a relief, a godsend, really enjoyed speaking with you – didn't think I would.

Forum Member: So, did anything come up for you in the break that you feel you'd like to add or reflect on or?

I guess I'm just feeling the benefit of having this conversation, you've both got a really nice approach so thank you

Forum Member: That's really nice so thank you

I'm really pleased I've done this, pleased I've talked about it. It feels better.

It's good. It's like, what do you call it? It's like you go down memory lane and two attentive people listening to you.

It has been a kinda release for me in many ways as well.

But it was lovely talking to youse both. I suppose the only thing I'd like to say is it's actually given me a great deal more, not only satisfaction, but value having had the opportunity to even look at it evaluate it and talk about it. No like it's taken anything off my shoulders that's no what I meant at all, what I mean is it's actually given me a...it's put into context what actually happened and it's actually made me feel even more eh comfortable, positive, happy about it

It's been therapeutic writing this testimony so thank you for giving us the opportunity.

Well, I shouldn't say this but I think, I quite enjoyed speaking to youse.

Forum Member: Thank you

I didn't think I would, but I did. As I say, I'm quite wary of who I talk to, you know what I mean? Difficult to trust. It always has been, it always has been. I did have a big mouth at one time, you know?

Reflecting on their hearing at the Forum, it did not go unnoticed by some of our participants that while they recognised the opportunity to share their experiences and unburden themselves, they remained cautious of opening up old wounds and reliving past difficulties.

It shouldn't be hidden; it should be spoken about because it's part of me. It's a healing process for me to move on because em I think em I don't think em me just putting it on the back burner is the best way forward `cause I think em like discussing it to people like yourselves it's kinda, it's opening a can of worms but at the same time it's release. It's getting something off my chest or something that was on my mind for a long time and it has held me up I mean obviously for all those years as in jobs and that stuff like that `cause I am quite a... I know I'm talking to you now but `cause of my medication I have... I am a very kinda quiet, person.

It was interesting for us to learn just how powerful the act of simply being listened to and acknowledged can be for people, particularly for those that may have been denied that opportunity in the past, or previously had their voices minimised.

I believe I want to leave some kind of record to show I existed

I do feel a sense of relief ... that somebody's actually listen sat and listened to me

Yeah listened to that's big ... yeah that's what you want, people to listen to you and not judge you

I've probably said more today ... than I have in the last thirty five years ... it's been in my mind for years, it's always at the back of my mind ... it's a weight off ma mind. It's something I've always wanted to do. I just wanted somebody to listen. That's all I ever wanted

Participants were also keen to impress upon our listeners, the need for a culture of openness in the care system; an innate sense of transparency. That and the acknowledgement function of the accounts of care can help towards closure for some.

Very much, shh, shh, under the carpet and getting told try here or go here it's like everybody wants to pass the buck. Naeboddy want's tae come tae the realisation that eh, what's really happening to vulnerable bairns ... well that's good, it's good that it is getting spoken about and I'm glad that I've been here to share the tiniest wee bit of information that hopefully youse'll find somewhere some good to do somebody some good.

That's basically, that's basically my kinda what I want to get out of this whole situation what is, how do I get... I need some kinda closure on it because I think I've just carried the guilt for too long. It's a guilt that's not my guilt, it's somebody else's guilt but I've carried it ... it's not my guilt and it's taken a long time. It's taken a lot of kinda prodding from [partner] to say move yerself just go and dae it, you know what I mean? If [partner] wasn't there I probably wouldn't have done this. I wouldn't have had the confidence to do it and em and I think em plus yer diggin up parts of your life which are not nice

I decided then to come myself really because I am hoping some closure, some acknowledgement, the [residential] school experience I had wasn't healthy

It's kinda, instead of kinda guidance and support to maybe to kinda point you in the right direction, kinda support you to get to where you want to be or ... that's what kinda, that's what hopefully that's what I want to get out of this whole exercise to get kinda closure on that part

Improvements in care

However much personal value was gained from speak at the Forum, the aspect that far outweighed any other benefit for participants was the knowledge that providing their account would go some way to improving the situations for, and treatment of, others. While some accounts of care were positive, many were not and participants reported an exceptionally strong sense of responsibility to provide their account in the hopes of protecting children currently in care; that their experiences should not be replicated in the current or future experiences of Scotland's children. Almost all participants referenced this in some way.

That's what I want to do. I just want – I don't want it to happen to other people. I think the world's hard enough and I think if you are neglected, abused, bereaved or any of reason for you to be in a care home, there is a reason for you to be there. Nobody wakes up in the world and goes 'I want to go into a care home the day'. There is reasons you're there. If you're in there, you're in there to be supported. I just want them to be supported the best way possible ... and if I can come and tell my story to help that person then that's all I can do.

Yeah, I just hope that you can find something in my story. I don't know if I've told you enough but - that could help someone ... that would be wonderful.

I'd love to help them any way I could, anyway I could.

Honestly, anything to help these kids these days in care, I will go and work voluntary with these kids because I love it.

I think this has just been maybe a long time coming for me and I'm so glad that I've done it. If I can help just one person, I'm glad I've done it.

Protect other children, that's my priority, you know

Ah'll be a voice for people that's no able, ma sister especially, you know?

As far as the children's home goes do all that you can because I don't want children today going through these sorts of things.

If I've brought anything here today that would protect one child that's worth it ... anything today that helps to stop social workers making the same mess it is worth it.

I think the biggest motivation for me was to try and give my information out that would help others ... the biggest thing for me would be to do that.

So, the only reason I'm doing this is partly to make sure it doesn't still happen.

I just think it just gets swept under the carpet too much and if it's no spoken about, if there's nae communication then nothing's ever gonae to get done about it

Anecdotally, it appears a relatively high number of participants were motivated by their own care experiences to actively pursue fields of employment in their later adult lives that support young people and advocate change for those experiencing care. A range of occupations in the health and social care professions were mentioned; social work, advocacy, youth services, mentoring, and support work. It is important to note however, that this is an emerging finding so we must exercise caution. While there are strong indicators this is the case, further analysis is needed to explore and fully validate this assertion.

In an attempt to challenge stigma and negative stereotyping of care and care experience, some participants came forward to highlight the positives aspects of their care. They wanted their attendance to demonstrate that care experienced people can achieve as much as their non-care experienced peers despite a less advantaged start in life.

...nothing really bad happened to me

She said no, just talk about everything

I said I'm up for that

Forum Member: And actually it's really valuable to us

Yeah, it's really good

Forum Member: It is, it's very valuable to hear all experiences, good and bad

You don't hardly hear a lot of good in care

I can't mind if it was the telly or facebook and then when I read through and I thought "oh, I could put something on that, 'cause mine was more, I would say mine was positive than – ken, bad – not anything bad.

Despite hearing about some positive aspects of care, some of the positives could only be regarded as relative.

The homes have made me who I am today ... I love them for that, but its social work I have a grievance with. The homes obviously, the physical abuse I think shouldn't have went on. I don't understand why they did do it.

Forum Member: The restraint?

Yeah that's what we called it ... so, I know it's still abuse but, you know, I hope these days that does not go on in children's homes now

That's good, thank you. I want to think that children are so innocent they must be protected, especially ones who already, for no fault of their own, are already vulnerable ... I think that there was a lot of people who were there and genuinely trying to care for me and look after me but weren't even aware and I think that some of these people must know that and there's some of these people that are in these positions that need to start looking at more for the signs you know.

And I thought, yeah I've been in care. And it's a mixture of good care and bad care. Maybe I could point out the good bits and they can get copied and the bad bits ye can do something about.

Forum reporting activities

With the Forum having received Scottish Government confirmation of a funding extension to March 2021, we are accelerating our reporting and engagement activities to amplify the voices of institutional and residential care experienced

individuals to better learn about and understand their diverse range of experiences in care and the impact of that care.

Within the year, the Forum expects to produce a range of main and supplementary outputs, including; an upcoming Summary Report highlighting the emerging findings from analysis of 52 testimonies provided to The Forum building on the findings from our *What We Have Heard So Far Report* covering the first 18 months of the Forum.

A range of supplementary reporting outputs will follow that will likely include: participant experiences of coming to the Forum; a methods paper detailing how our analysis was achieved; hearing reflections highlighting learning and improvements at the Forum; participant messages to Scotland; and a comprehensive series of thematic outputs variously focussing on education, health, relationships, criminalisation, employment, social networks, stigma, sibling separation, accessing records, instant adulthood, relationships in adult life, post care instant adulthood and so on. Lastly, policy and practice recommendations will be synthesised and prepared following stakeholder consultation of findings, to integrate findings into identified policy and practice implications for Scotland.

These reporting activities and the supporting engagement work will add to the current evidence and develop a body of learning and insight, helping to ensure the Forum's activities have the most sustainable and positive impact. It is the Forum's role to use people's experiences to make a difference, identifying key issues around the lifelong impact of childhood experiences, and ultimately improve lives of care experienced individuals.

If you want to find out more about the Forum – who we are and what we do, contact us free on 0800 121 4773, email information@nationalconfidentialforum.org.uk, or visit our website at nationalconfidentialforum.org.uk.

About the author

Martin McKee joined the National Confidential Forum as Research Associate in July 2018. He is an experienced social and public health researcher and fieldwork manager who has worked in both public and third sectors for nearly 10 years in areas as diverse as health and wellbeing, social care, education, housing and regeneration, criminal justice, employability, and culture. His work to date has included a range of evaluations and social impact studies focusing to what extent complex interventions, programmes, and services are successful, often in relation to socially disadvantaged and marginalised groups. He is currently leading the Forum's research programme analysing the testimonies received to date to amplify the messages from those with care experience in Scotland. This in turn will promote policy and practice recommendations to the Scottish Government.