



2021 United Nations Day of General Discussion: 'Alternative Care'

Introduction

In 2017, the Independent Jersey Care Inquiry published its findings on historic failings in the oversight and operation of Jersey's alternative care system¹. Since that time, much has changed – not least, the appointment of an independent Children's Commissioner for the island (which was the very first recommendation made by the Inquiry's report). However, there is still a long way to go before the letter and spirit of the UNCRC are fully incorporated, not only into Jersey's legislature, but also (and perhaps most importantly) into its collective consciousness.

The good news, though, is that 'children's rights' is a phrase that is heard more and more often now, in Jersey's parliament during political debates, in the media and, hearteningly, in the island's schools and youth organisations. This latter development is, to a great degree, due to the widespread success of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools award scheme, which is funded and supported by the Children's Commissioner's Office. There are now 34 schools in Jersey, spanning primary and secondary, that are working towards either bronze, silver or gold awards².

What has perhaps been lacking thus far, however, is a platform for the island's care-experienced children and young people to express their thoughts and feelings to a wider, more international audience. And so it was for this reason, in particular, that we were delighted to learn that the theme for the next Day of General Discussion was to be 'Alternative Care'. There is a deep well of experience to draw on here in Jersey, and we have already found, even in these early stages of working with local, care-experienced young people on this project, that there is a heartfelt desire to engage constructively and creatively with this theme.

How we have prepared for this submission

It was felt that, rather than prepare a more formal, academic paper for this preliminary phase of the DGD, it might be more appropriate to use as much first-hand material as possible, to illustrate some of the persistent themes and reactions that have come up so far.

We have conducted in-depth interviews with children and young people between the ages of 14 and 24, both male and female. Their collective experiences encompass a range of alternative care settings in Jersey, including residential care, foster care and leaving care. For the purposes of presentation here, we have anonymised their comments and clustered them under headings relating to themes that were common to all responses.

¹ <http://www.jerseycareinquiry.org/>

² <https://www.childcomjersey.org.je/what-we-do/rights-respecting-schools/>



Experiences of alternative care in Jersey: their words

Relationships

Staff need to understand that the children are more important than whatever is taking their attention on their computers. I'm only allowed one hour on the phone per day, and my relationships and mental health are suffering.

Staff don't know what to do when children are in crisis, and they can't be bothered. I'd rather speak to strangers. I feel isolated and the staff don't want to spend time with me, but I can't see friends either.

People are memorable, and the relationships you have with them – people who care.

There needs to be a better vetting process for staff who work with young people – they need to be psychologically fit, and they need to fit the profile, meaning they should be motivated and act as mentors.

Our trust has already been destroyed because of what we have experienced – it is hard to build this again.

You need to have the right people – this isn't just a 'job'; this affects our lives and our future. There is a big impact, because they're coming to our house, so they need to be there for us.

I think young people should be involved in the recruitment and training of staff. Staff should have training, so that they have the knowledge, awareness and insight to care for us.

You can't actually teach someone to care – they can only do that if they want to, and because they have the right values and motivation.

Staff also need to be able to recognise the signs. They need to build relationships and get to know us, and slowly gain our trust.

There is a difference between working in care and actually caring.

You can tell instinctively when staff care, and they are in the minority. Most staff do not actually care – you can tell that they just want to come in, work their hours, get paid and go home.

Time is precious, and needs to be spent with us, getting to know us and sharing experiences with us, not just being in 'the office'.



Children's Commissioner for Jersey Promoting and Protecting Children's Rights

The idea of 'Home'

There's this feeling that this is not my house and, if I want to leave, I'm not allowed to go anywhere after the doors are locked. I can't even leave my room at night, and if there's a member of staff I don't like on shift, I'm stuck with them for eight hours.

It's like a mini prison – the staff rotas don't work, and I've had 24 social workers assigned to me so far. The one I have now is amazing but children who are looked after should have just one permanent social worker.

You just get a feeling that this isn't your house, because your friends can't visit – or else, it's only in communal areas, so there's no privacy. And there are so many rules, but staff don't actually talk to us or with us about what is important to us. It doesn't feel like 'home' when there has to be that many rules.

We don't have a say in who we live with and sometimes the matching isn't good. You end up staying in your room sometimes. And some people aren't a good influence.

Support

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service [CAMHS] is not 24 hours and, even after going to the Emergency Department, I still had to wait 18 months before getting help.

Counselling should be offered in residential homes as standard. Young people should be able to seek support from the right people when they actually need it most. Not like CAMHS – that was a joke. It did not work at all for me.

Children and young people need a sense of safety and stability.

There needs to be more help and support with transitions, moving from place to place.

We need to be supported to have more 'family time' – more time and preparation should go into this. There can be a heavy emotional impact when seeing your parents again after being separated. I met my own, and this was really difficult for me.

There needs to be better support from CAMHS: young people in care need more mental health support. There needs to be more time and perseverance from professionals – it takes time to build relationships and learn to trust.

Young people should be supported to build life skills – things like cooking. Preparation for living on your own, learning about nutrition, budgeting, planning, and so on.



Children's Commissioner for Jersey

Promoting and Protecting Children's Rights

Strengths

Too many people focus on the negatives of care, instead of thinking about the positives as well. And I want to say that, from my perspective, the experience can be positive.

I'm talking about things like Jersey's 'care leavers offer'³ and the entitlements that this brings, like driving lessons and that sort of thing. Also, the level of support I receive is something I value.

I have memories of activities like a boat trip and seeing dolphins for the first time. I wouldn't have had that experience if I hadn't been in care.

Going on nice trips, creating memories. Other children at school go on holidays and talk about this when they get back to school. We should be the same. Just because we are in care, why should it be different for us? Why should we miss out?

Leaving care advisors are so important – mine was my 'ladder': she was there for me, helping me to climb one step at a time. She helped me to believe in myself and helped me believe that I could be anyone and I was not 'written off'. My leaving care advisor did a brilliant job – she really made a difference to my life. She was amazing! I would probably be in prison if it wasn't for her. She helped me achieve.

We should be able to build memories, have keepsakes such as photos, so that if we ever have a family of our own, we can show them and share this with them.

I had positive experiences with social workers, too, and felt listened to by them. The same thing with my leaving care advisor.

We need more activities to enjoy, creating memories to look back on of proper life experiences, like days out or maybe even going on holiday – happy times to remember.

I want to help to make care better for children in the future. I feel like I can understand what they need, as I myself have lived the system.

There's a lot I can say that's positive about my time living in care: the staff didn't view it as just a job or a pay cheque. They tried everything and genuinely wanted to help, because they cared.

So I think that staff should spend time with the children and young people in their care – they shouldn't just sit in the office.

I feel like young people who have been in care often focus on the negatives, but they should also be helped and supported to look forward and to focus on the positives as well.

And my experience was that, no matter what, no matter how much you shouted or behaved badly, the staff would always sit with you and help you.

I want to have a good life. With help and support, young people in care can be successful.

³ <https://www.gov.je/News/2020/Pages/CareLeaversSupport.aspx>



Children's Commissioner for Jersey Promoting and Protecting Children's Rights

Voice

Children and young people should be involved and should be listened to.

There's no freedom in residential care here. I have no control.

I'm not invited to meetings. Decisions are made without me.

I think that young people in care are not being properly informed about what's happening to them, and that leaves them with the feeling that they do not have control over their lives.

Not being heard and not feeling safe about sharing information with staff.

There is a general lack of trust for adults who work in care. What's been done to make that right is too little and too late.

I'm not listened to... I feel like a robot but I'm not a robot.

The complaints procedure is not strong either, and there's no follow-up even if a complaint is made – no response, no feedback or action.

There's just a lack of participation about what is going on in the house – and SO many social workers.

How we are approaching the DGD

The young people we are working with have reached the unanimous conclusion that they would like to focus on the idea of 'Home' as a basis for the work and discussions leading up to the DGD itself in September. The seed for this idea came when one young person introduced us to a Welsh word that they had learned and come to deeply appreciate: that word was *Hiraeth*.

Hiraeth is among those words that can be categorised as fundamentally untranslatable but is understood by the young people we have been working with as a sense of nostalgia, yearning or grief for a home to which you can never return or perhaps have never even known in the first place.

So far, the response to this concept has been amazing, and we are very excited to see where it takes our group of young people in the coming months. It has been a real catalyst for creative expression.