

Children in Care Project – Evaluation Report by Christine Wilkinson

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A **Background**

I am an artist, writer and trainer. I am known for my work involving arts projects with so called ‘Hard to reach’ groups and around difficult issues. For 17 years I have been running courses to train artists who want to work on issue based, participatory projects in community settings and training local authority staff. I have worked on engagement projects at a number of museums and galleries, including British Museum and Tate Modern. My own work is in collections in Liverpool, Reading Museum, Houses of Parliament and museums abroad.

B **Collecting information**

I had a meeting with Jon Potter of Company Paradiso to discuss the project. This project became known as the ‘Handle With care’ project. I attended the opening of the exhibition at Reading Museum, where I was able to talk to participants – including young people, museum staff and staff from other partner agencies. I devised questionnaires for young people and staff. I observed a session of creative writing with 10 young people, informally interviewed them and staff, and recorded my observations of the session. I interviewed Brendan Carr from Reading museum.

It can be very difficult to get systematic evidence from young people in this kind of creative context; it can be counter-productive to try. Young people in care often have to interact with a series of adults who have an ephemeral and partial interest in them, however well intentioned. Many will have very good reasons to be suspicious of adults. Depending on the situation, it may be better to rely more on observation than interview or form filling.

There is also a confidentiality issue to consider. The primary concern for staff who work with these young people is to keep them safe.

Permission to record sessions I attended by taking photographs was initially refused. Then some limited photography was later permitted.

The **Minister for Children and Families**, Tim Loughton spoke on Radio Berkshire about the project and the issue of permissions and this transcript became part of the exhibition:

First I’d like to say that it’s a really good job that Radio Berkshire have done in highlighting the issue of fostering, and Fostering Fortnight is an important way of raising profile. In the last year we’ve done quite a lot for children in the care system and this involves dealing with and listening to children themselves. We’re keen on promoting the Children in Care Councils up and down the country where children can come together with others and say “this isn’t right” locally and to get a better deal for children in care.

Permission for Sleepovers

Foster parents need to know that getting permission is a big myth. It is really important for children who find themselves in the care system through no fault of their own to have as normal and conventional a family life as possible. It is a nonsense that foster parents should have to get special permission for children to have a haircut or for sleepovers. Special permission is not in law and not something I’ve put out. If a Local Authority is telling you that, tell them to come and speak to me. And only if there are very special reasons – and these should be set down at the outset – should they need to get special permission for these things.

Otherwise, for goodness sake, get their hair cut, you don't need to get someone crb checked for your children to spend a sleepover.

You can listen to this interview and others from our broadcast week in full on www.companyparadiso.co.uk, Listen Again, 2011.

*What were the major problems that your agency had to overcome to engage in this work?
Problems?*

Concerns over anonymity

Worker Louise Hopkinson, Child Participation Development Officer, Bracknell Forest

*What were the major problems that your agency had to overcome to engage in this work?
Problems?*

Ensure that all managers were happy to be involved and get consents

Worker Rebecca Bond, Corporate Parenting Project Manager, Windsor and Maidenhead

If the project was to continue, if there was a follow-up, or it was going to happen again what would you do differently?

Changes I would make Ensure that workers were aware of boundaries in terms of not sharing individuals' information etc.

Louise Hopkinson

The issue of protection and permission was a big one for this project. At government level there is a desire for flexibility and 'common sense' yet participation officers in the 6 boroughs of Berkshire were getting a different message from line managers. In one borough, for example, young people in care were not allowed to tell or share their stories at all, anonymously or not, so could not take part in the exhibition element of the project.

In the process of collecting information and attending and observing events, it became obvious that this is a very successful project and that the principle of 'telling your story' is important. In conversation with young care leaver, she said that having an acknowledged and respected history, gave her a grounded, included feeling. She felt that as she had not found a place within her biological family, it was even more important to feel a part of the wider world. This boost in confidence and acceptability was even more crucial for her as she was in the process of doing her A levels and considering her future.

It is obvious that this museum based project is not only a well informed record of our times but also helps children and ex-children in care to begin accumulating cultural capital, a past, present and future that connects them.

I have seen that it is important for children and ex-children in care to see their own lives and experiences, and those of older care leavers reflected upon and valued in a museum space.

This project, in partnership with the museum, has been able to bring together a target group of common background involving care.

Children young people and volunteers and workers have said that the benefits include:

- Being amongst others who share their experiences
- Feeling that their experiences are valuable because they are 'listened to'.
- Seeing the evidence that their experiences are valuable because they are collected as a museum resource.
- Being 'experts' in the subject of this work.
- Understanding themselves to be both givers and receivers not just to one another but to future museum visitors.

- Experiencing that museums are welcoming, growing environments with which to be involved.
- Having fun.

C Has Children in Care met the original aims?

1 To engage children in care and ex- children in care in expressing, learning about and preserving their individual and shared heritage

What was the most important or best thing for you about the project?

Meeting new people like me and being able to participate with the group in a creative activity.

18 year old care leaver

During the workshop I observed the participants taking part in exercises which allowed them to reflect on their experiences, hopes, and fears. Jon Potter led them gently through the process, keeping focus and listening to their ideas. He reflected their ideas and their initial writing back to them with genuine interest and enthusiasm. He worked with them individually to help them achieve what they wanted.

Do you think the project achieved its original aims from your perspective?

Yes. Entirely.

The project has had really positive outcomes for the young people. They became more involved in their own heritage and more expressive of their ideas.

Worker

It's been brilliant! Listening to others opinions – what they said, what we agreed on, what we didn't and how we could reach a conclusion. Kind of surprised me.

11 year old participant

2 To engage a new audience for heritage, in particular children and ex-children in care who may not ever have attended or contributed to traditional heritage centres, and build their self-esteem and positive identity

We were delighted to be a partner in this project. For us at Reading Museum, working with these group, who may be unfamiliar with the work of museums is not a box ticking exercise. It is a moral imperative. We do it because it is the right thing to do and it reaches beyond the museum doors.

Brendan Carr – Community Engagement Curator, Reading Museum

'Being listened to' was the most common comment of the participants about the creative sessions, together with 'Did something I was proud of'.

It was amazing to see my stuff in a museum case with stuff from other people – people like me.

Young care leaver

During the 4 week duration of the exhibition, Reading Museum had 2,000 visitors. They were not necessarily new visitors, but it crucial that were able to expose museum visitors to exhibits which tackle social issues.

Brendan Carr

At the session I observed, young people chatted, spoke up in turn, stayed quiet, listened, made space for each other, tolerated disruption, joined in when expected to, joked and giggled, asked questions and responded enthusiastically to prompts and suggestions. One was keen to show me the writing she had done at a previous session – she had learned it off by heart. It was about abuse and a domestic 'storm' and ended with the line: I miss hating you.

3 To create a greater sense of belonging for our participants through enabling them to contribute to a high visibility heritage project in Berkshire

It is very important for Reading Museum to reach out to people in danger of social exclusion.

Brendan Carr

This project is centrally concerned with addressing social exclusion. It combines the creation and use of cultural resources with appropriate understanding of the needs of these young people who either experience exclusion or are at risk of being excluded from many social and economic opportunities and benefits. The work is empowering because it targets young people's options for empowering themselves.

The young people not only gained confidence, as evidenced in the exhibition and their writing, but most seem to have made an investment in their own identity, which they could build on. The boost to self-esteem contributes in turn to other outcomes.

I am really impressed with how well the young people articulated their thoughts and their enthusiasm and pride in the completed work. I feel excited about future projects.

Worker

4 To reach and inform a wide audience for the project through presenting the material in an accessible and positive form with key partners Reading Museum and Radio Berkshire

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Brendan Carr

My observations were that workers and artist were working alongside and with the children – there was no sense that the adults were there as people who know more than the children; this was a partnership and the adults and children were doing activities together. The workers were writing poems too.

The children behaved like people with specialist knowledge, engaged in the important work of creating heritage material. The artist was their 'technician', helping them explore the options for themselves. Adults and children working in partnership together and in a democratic manner, listening, sharing celebrating and encouraging were experiences with which many of the children were unfamiliar.

It was sometimes difficult to get things out. It's hard to be really honest about what how you feel about what's happened to you and what you want now. But we had help in getting it out in writing and put things into a poem and express ourselves in a better way than getting angry.

10 year old participant

5 To produce materials that enable future generations to understand more about our subject through clear, high quality written and audio material at Reading Museum, Reading Local Studies Library and on our website.

The Chief Executive (Michael Coughlin) was very moved by the exhibition. Elected councillors have now requested that the exhibition be shown in the council offices, after it returns from being shown at Langley Academy, Slough and Slough Museum. This is the start of its legacy.

Brendan Carr

The young people gave evidence of a sense of empathy and feelings of tolerance. They showed motivation to make progress on their projects (for example writing lines of poetry about their experiences) and were able to express positive and negative responses to their experiences. The activity gave them valuable opportunities to reflect positively on their self-esteem. This is a unique collection of evidence about children in care making comparisons and sense of their lives.

D Any difficulties?

The two difficulties identified by both the museum and by the workers responsible for the children are related and in part caused by the delays in confirming funding by HLF.

The workers said that they would have liked to have been more involved at an earlier stage:

Do you think the project achieved its original aims from your perspective?

It would have been useful to have been involved earlier.
Worker

Do you feel you received sufficient information and support to contribute to the success of Handle with Care?

**Aspects were useful
Information written to engage senior management earlier
and more notice would have been useful.**
Worker

Similarly:

The biggest problem was translating the material produced and collected by the project into something accessible for museum visitors. We were very clear in describing the kind of resources needed for display. This objects, etc got to us very late and gave us time constraint problems in terms of labelling and presenting the work suitably for museum visitors. Having said that, this is a common feature of our work with community groups and everything turned out alright on the night. I understand that, with funded projects, consultation and shaping the application with partners can be carried out before, but the work cannot begin until funding is agreed. If there are delays, it causes problems.
Brendan Carr

The museum was very kind and accommodating throughout this work. The children's workers were always enthusiastic and supportive. It was frustrating that delays in getting funding confirmed shortened our lead in time and resulted in us having to hit deadlines without the run up time we normally consider essential. However, everyone worked together and the results far exceed my expectations.
Jon Potter – Company Paradiso

E Other comments:

I enjoyed everything!
Worker

I have gained an appreciation of the value of creative inputs.
Worker

The artists added value to the project with their enthusiasm, energy and ideas! The creative aspect was great and both Jon and Lemn really worked well with the young people.
Worker

As an individual, I have gained ideas, confidence, enthusiasm for using the creative arts with young people.
Worker

The engagement of the young people and the outputs (poems, words, ideas, museum resources), have been positive outcomes; as has the development of a shared language between the group and engagement of young people from different areas.
Worker

All the young people that attended engaged with the work – usually the challenge is to get them to come along.
Worker

If there was a follow up, I'd like to try to engage a large number of Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead children in care and care leavers.
Worker

Thank you for letting me be part of the project.
Young care leaver.