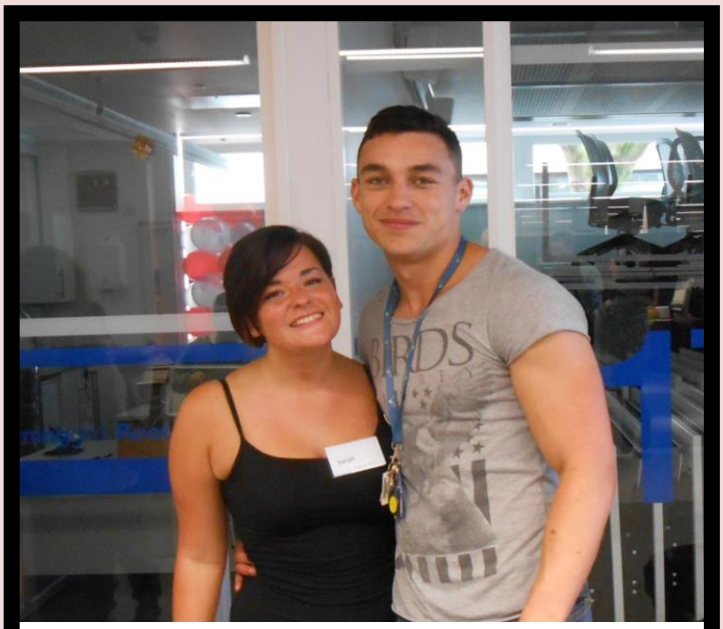
Coventry Voices of Care Council

Annual Report



Coventry VOICES of Care Council

Welcome to the Annual Voices of Care Report, we are Sarah and Jamal; we are care leavers and both members of the Voices of Care, Coventry's local Children in Care Council. We are also undertaking an apprenticeship within the Participation Team for Coventry City Council who supports Voices of Care by capturing the views of young people and providing events and other opportunities to get involved within Coventry.

We thought it would be a great idea to share all the amazing work that we have been doing over the past year. It has been a pleasure to be able to put this together for you.

<u>Objectives for the coming year</u>

1. **Young people training professionals about what it's like being in care**
2. **Monitoring the Protocol system to ensure the Voice of The Child is properly reflected and responded too.**
3. **Identify more opportunities for young people to take part in decision making**

Voices of Care is an independently constituted group which works with young people and care leavers within the Coventry care system; giving them a voice and an input into the decisions made around the services they access. In addition, we get involved in various works with other departments within the council and its partners to provide professionals with service user's point of views, e.g. recruitment and selection panels, consultations, meetings with elected members; this is all on a voluntary basis. We are also contracted to do work for both Coventry and Warwick universities to provide service user workshops, interview potential undergraduate social work students and those applying to do their masters as well as grading portfolios, presentations and leaflets. In addition to lots of fun days and consultation events we also organise the annual celebration event for LAC children to celebrate all achievements of young people and care leavers.

Our aim is to improve the standard of services for young people by notifying heads of services about service user's views. We aim to create a better experience of the system for the young people that come after us. Voices of Care also provide an opportunity to show LAC in a positive light and highlight children and young people's success and achievements.

The Voice of Care Council meets monthly to discuss issues, changes and decisions within the services that may impact them and other service users. Elected members and senior managers often attend these meetings to give LAC an active role within decision making and to receive honest views and opinions directly from service users.

We as Voices of Care Members have written this report to highlight some of our achievements over the year and to talk about the work that we have been doing to support the development of services. We will also be talking about our annual events that are supported by Voices of Care and the Participation Team.

Over the last year we have recruited new members for our group, due to the increase in numbers we decided to split the group into three mini groups depending on age. We now have the Junior Group (ages 8-11yrs), Senior Group (12-16yrs) and our Care Leavers (16+). This is a great way to get a wide range of feedback from different ages that focus on certain services. For example, our youngest group will not yet have been introduced to the Route 21 Service as it is aimed at 16+ so this is an area our VOC Care Leavers group focuses on.

The Coventry Pledge was created by the LAC and elected members. The Coventry Pledge is a set of promises that the council services have made to all looked after children and young people in the care of Coventry City Council as corporate parents. VOC work hard to make sure that Coventry City Council is keeping the promises it has made in the pledge; part of that scrutiny is done via an annual survey to all of LAC and Care Leavers. The results of the survey are shared across Children's Services and its partners.

Fit for life

- We will make sure you are cared for by people who can help keep you safe and healthy and can teach you to look after yourself
- As you grow older and are ready to move on, we will make sure you are prepared for life – including managing money, looking after your health, cooking healthy food and taking care of where you live

Your views count

- We will listen to you, involve you in decision making and be honest about plans being made
- We will give you the opportunity to tell us what you think makes a good social worker, foster carer and residential worker
- Where possible we will give you a choice about where you live, for example living with other children/young people

Safe and sound

- We will make sure you live in a safe and comfortable place, where you can have your own belongings and special things around you
- We will respond to your concerns about safety

Investing in your future

- We will make more work experience and apprenticeships available for young people in care through city council connections
- We will make sure you have financial support and help with managing your money

You can do it

- We will help you get a good quality education
- We will make sure you can participate in school activities and have the right equipment for school or college
- We will support you to try new leisure or cultural experiences and have a chance to follow a hobby

Coventry cares about you

- We will make sure you know why you are in care
- We will give you the opportunity to have an independent visitor
- We will support you in your contact with family and friends
- We will make sure you have a significant adult taking an interest in your education and life

Voices of Care & Politics

Voices of Care is all about reviewing and where necessary challenging policies, decision making and improving services. Although it doesn't always seem like it, we are actually involved in politics. This is something we learned whilst working on a massive European project with Warwick University about young people and politics. A few of Voices of Care members were filmed for a documentary about young people and their views on politics alongside Coventry Youth Council. This film has now being shown to the council leaders in Coventry and others around Europe involved in the project. This was a really interesting project to get involved in and we all felt like we learnt new things and gained skills from attending the filming and the conference.

Life Story work

The VOC group have been involved in many different projects over the past year one of which including Life Story Books. A Life story book is full of memories, activities, details and photos about their life for a young person to look back on, remember happy times and reflect on who they are and where they are from. This book is important for young people from foster care and adoption to have as it can help them to remember where they have lived, schools they have attended and all other information they might want to know as they get older. This book explains the reason why they were in care or adopted and might also include some difficult information that would need to be completed with an adult for support. The work we have been doing is looking at how we can improve these books so that the young people have move involvement in their completion so that it is more personal and suited to them. We discussed the different experiences we had with our own life story work, what we felt was missing, anything we didn't like about our own books and what we think could make the books better.

An example of a Life Story book was made based around what the Voices of Care thought would be the perfect book and our ideas were given to the Fostering Team who works on life story books with young people, with a recommendation to further develop how life story work is currently delivered in Coventry.

Route 21 and the Independence Project

The Voices of Care- care leavers group have been working closely this year with Route 21, our local care leaver's service. Together they have focused on developing the service by taking on board the views of its service users. Route 21 provides social work and personal adviser support to young people aged 15 to 21yrs, (up to 24 years if in education or training), who are beginning the transition to leaving care and those who are now living independently. The social workers and personal advisers work directly with young people and undertake a variety of specific tasks in partnership with their carers; as agreed in the young person's Pathway Plan.

One of the improvements we have been supporting is the new Pathway Plans. A Pathway Plan is a document used by the young person and Social Worker to look at all areas of life and put plans in place for the future. It is a chance for the young person to say what they want to achieve and discuss how things are going.

We were invited to a meeting with the Route 21 staff to look at the draft of the new plan and we discussed as a group about what we thought should be added and taken out. It was useful for Route 21 to hear our opinions as service users to help them provide the best service for the young people that they can.

Another issue was with the finances provided by Route 21 and the young people not understanding their entitlements. This was also discussed within our meetings and there is now a clear set of finances that was negotiated with the Route 21 team and Voices of Care.

Voices of Care have been involved in creating a money matters leaflet that is a breakdown of all the entitlements for LAC young people and care leavers under the Route 21 service. We discussed with managers what should be included within the document, its design and presentation of information. We have also created a film for the Route 21 website to clearly explain the leaflet and all the entitlements that are available to the young people.

We have also been involved with developing an independence project with Matt Clayton, one of the managers at Route 21. The project is looking at how young people should be supported during the transition from care to independence. Together we created a pack that is used to monitor the skills needed prior to independence. We looked at things such as cooking skills, cleaning, and house maintenance; we also identified who could provide these skills. Finally we considered the difficulties of moving home, to ensure a young person has a good support system and how difficulties can be overcome or minimalized.

Commissioning

Over the past year Voices of Care has been involved in supporting a number of commissioning processes within Coventry City Council. We look at the services and identify questions to ask tenders about how the service they are proposing will benefit young people and how they will include young people within the design, delivery and on-going evaluation of the service. Potential tenders are then shortlisted and the young people are given the opportunity to sit on a clarification panel alongside professionals to determine which tender is the most suitable.

Coventry University & the University of Warwick

Earlier this year we were involved in the interview process of applicants for the undergraduate social work course at Coventry University and the masters course at Warwick University.

The involvement within the recruitment of social work students, which CWDC have described as 'the best practice nationally' meant a young person and an academic tutor sitting together in each interview and marking each applicant accordingly.

The Warwick University interviews focussed a lot more on communication and the understanding of social work as the applicants were applying for a master's degree. Part of the interview process involved members of Voices of Care and applicants sitting in small groups to discuss various issues within social care; after each session VOC marked applicants on their levels of appropriate interaction.

As well as our involvement with the recruitment process we are also involved in a lot of other work with both universities. This includes presenting our own workshops, the marking of student's portfolios, sitting on the service user forum, delivering presentations for service user experience days and question and answer sessions. This gives the students an opportunity to hear about some of our real life experiences and our views on "what makes a good social worker" and the meaning of good practice from a young person/service users point of view.

Skills to Foster

We've been involved in the skills to foster course, which is the first part of foster carers training while they are undergoing their initial assessment. Every member of Voices of Care over the age of 18 has been involved in delivering the course along with a member of the fostering team. The feedback from new carers has been amazing with most saying that talking with a care leaver and hearing their views and experiences was the most rewarding part of the training. Many of the people who attended have gone on to be foster carers and have attended some other events that we've put on.

Voice of the Child Training

Vicky White **(Lead Social Work Practitioner)** came to speak to us about the training of newly qualified social workers. This resulted in us having a discussion around the voice of the child and how it could be better recorded with evidence of how the child's wishes and feelings have been considered during decision making.

The young people felt this was an important message for Vicky to hear directly from them as Voices of Care are passionate about promoting the importance of the voice of the child in all areas that have a direct impact upon them.

As a result of the discussion with Vicky we looked at Protocol, which is an electronic system for recording individual cases, to identify how young people's views are captured. From this there has been a new case note section added to the system called "The Views of the Child" as well as a separate section below for any actions that are agreed as a result of the child/young person's views. Both of these sections are mandatory and are to be completed by the social workers and other professionals that do direct work with children and young people.

In addition two members from our Voices of Care Council have been working to develop a workshop aimed at social workers and other professionals, this workshop will be delivered by young people about the impact that professionals decisions have on the young people they work with.

Fostering Film

Earlier this year we made a film, talking about our positive experiences of foster carers for the Foster Carers Association event at the welcome centre. We worked with Barry Fitzgerald to produce this in a short space of time. It was shown for the first time at the event and we got great feedback. It is now being used as part of the Skills to Foster training course as well as other training within the social work sector.

Events

Each year we put on a celebration event. This event is to celebrate the achievements of all Coventry looked after children. This is an annual event that brings together looked after children. This is an amazing event with a great turn out; providing children/young people, foster carers, social workers and other professionals the chance to meet each other. The prom styled ceremony celebrates the achievements of looked after children and young people in their school and home lives. Over 200 nominations are received from foster carers, social workers, teachers and other professionals who work with the children. In addition some lucky children and young people are chosen for extra special rewards in recognition of their outstanding work to help and support others. This is a great opportunity to high light young people's achievements and boosts their confidence for doing something great.

Rough Close

During August we took approximately 20 young people to Rough Close, an outward bound facility owned by the Scouts in Coventry. The event was spread over 2 days and was organised by the Participation Team who work with children and young people to develop their skills around them having a voice.

This event was planned to look at recruiting new members for our Voices of Care Council group. It has recently been decided to split VOC, due to its large numbers, into three separate age groups, primary, secondary and seniors. To gain new members, we invited children and young people on the trip. This gave them an opportunity to find out some information about Voices of Care, and to get to know each other and The Participation team. During the event we provided activities and developmental opportunities such as team and confidence building and other essential skills training. This was done in a relaxed atmosphere where they could make new friends, gain skills whilst having a nice two day break during their school holiday.

Each of the two days had different activities for the young people to take part in. On the first day we had a surf simulator, life size board games, sumo wrestler suits and large bouncers to keep the young people entertained. The Participation Team lead the group through each of these activities giving them all the opportunity to get to know each other and gave the team a chance to get to know them. They then had a large take-away pizza lunch together in the log cabin whilst talking about what Voices of Care do and whether the young people would like to get involved. All of the young people seemed eager to find out more about the group and come along to the meetings.

On the second day the young people returned and engaged in further activities organised by the workers at Rough Close. They lead the group in archery, before taking them to a Go-Karting course. We then had a second lunch together with the young people and one last discussion before letting them know about the next follow up meeting with our new recruited members of Voices of Care.

Coombe Abbey Activity Day

During October we took a group of looked after children within the ages of 8-11yrs to Coombe Abbey Park for an activity day. This day was aimed at our youngest members of VOC.

We took the group to the park to take part in outdoor team building games. One of the leaders from Coombe Abbey ran a den building activity with the young people within the woods of the park. We then enjoyed the food prepared by the Parks cafe called 'Herons' before the group enjoyed their last hour on the parks adventure play facilities.

The activity day was a great success; all the young people were excited to do more activities with Voices of Care as well as share their views about being in care.

Carters Event

After talks with 'Carters', a new bar and grill that opened in Coventry we managed to team up with them to put on an event for LAC aged 12-16 yrs. Carters have their own sponsors called 'Scorpion Sports' who printed T-shirts with the Voices of Care logo for the young people to wear on the day and for us to use at future events. The butchers that supply Carters heard about what they were doing and donated all the meat for the day.

We made the event a VIP theme with use of the booths and big screens. We had a quiz for the young people to enter where the winner won an IPod touch. We also opened the cocktail bar and made milkshakes with whipped cream and sprinkles, fruit smoothies, mocktails and fruit salad. The Nintendo Wii was hooked up to the big screen and we played song and dance games as well as the Wii boxing. Everyone who came said they had a great time and really enjoyed the food.

The event allowed foster carers and young people to have fun together, learn more about Voices of Care and we also took the opportunity to run a couple of surveys about services the council and its partners provide.

Christmas Party

The Participation Team worked hard to organise the annual Christmas party for looked after children in Coventry. This is the biggest event of the year for us and we had loads of activities and entertainment for the young people to enjoy, as well as the chance to socialise with other young people in care. We invited just over 300 children between 0 – 12 years old and had a great turnout. All the young people had the opportunity to take part in activities such as; circus skills, face painting, balloon sculpture, bouncy castles, nail art, head massage and henna. Games, lucky dips and a visit to Santa's grotto finished off the day.

Each year presents are donated by businesses from around the city, Coventry City Council employees and Elected Members. Councillor Ruane worked extra hard this year to boost the amount of donations that we received and we had a great response with over 500 presents donated.

The annual event was held at the Welcome Centre where they provided a lovely Christmas themed venue and packed lunch bags for all of the young people and carers. They also created a lovely grotto where the young people were greeted by elves and received their gift from Santa.

All the elves and Santa kindly volunteered to make this day a success. As well as other volunteers that ran various activities including nail paining, arts and crafts, Disney princess characters and also the local Christmas Pantomime characters kindly attended to surprise the young people. We also had a lovely Christmas Sweet Cart donated to us that provided all the children with pick'n'mix sweets to take home; and a donation of homemade cakes for the Lac Nurses within Coventry who came along to meet all the young people.

Foster Carers weren't left out due to an Adult raffle that included great donated prizes e.g. family tickets to Cadburys World, an overnight stay at Coombe Abbey, Hockey Tickets and many more.

We received great feedback from the event. Here is an example,

"We would like to say a very big thank you for a wonderful Christmas party on Saturday!
I am a Foster Carer, I took my 3 year old little boy who I look after and he had a fantastic time!!! He particularly enjoyed the bouncy castles, the disco - he asked for 'Taylor Swift' several times!! and Santa, his little face lit up when we went into the grotto.....I found it all a little emotional!
So a massive thank you to you all, you do a fabulous job and certainly helped to make our little boys Christmas special!"

Meeting with Elected Members

An important part of VOC is the opportunity to meet with elected members and senior staff every school holidays. These meetings are well attended by both young people and professionals. The 2 hour meeting is chaired by the young people and they also decide upon the agenda.

The sessions are a great opportunity for young people to describe what being in care is like from their perspective and to give first hand examples of the impact policy and practice has on their lives.

The meetings have been taking place for some years now and the young people feel they are listened to and have an impact on decision making.

Coventry City Council House.

We hope you enjoyed reading about some of the exciting things we have got up to this year.

Voices of Care will continue sharing their views with decision makers and services whilst also encouraging looked after children and care leavers to try new things.

If you would like to know more about the Coventry Voices of Care you can contact us by:

Telephone: 024 7683 2989

E-mail: voices@coventry.gov.uk