# Looked after children and young people and their communities

**Leslie Hicks**

**Project team members:**
**Diane Simpson, Ian Mathews,**
**Karin Crawford, Harriet Koörts with Kevin Cooper**

Arts & Humanities Research Council    CONNECTED COMMUNITIES    UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN

## Project background

The disadvantages for young people of being 'in care' have been documented extensively. A range of evidence points to the potentially negative impact associated with entering the care system and the effect this may have later on a young person's life chances. Although existing policy and guidance is based on an holistic view of looked after children and young people (LACYP), little emphasis has been placed on maximising the positive influence of wider cultural connections and contexts in terms of daily life.

## What did we do and why?

We investigated what is known about the relationship between young people living in care and the different communities which form part of their lives. Our intention was to help to open-up debates about how these connections might be strengthened to assist in enhancing the self-esteem, identity and development of young people and improving the transition into and out of care.

## Four main aspects to the project:

1 A scoping review of existing work
2 Workshops with young people
3 Main outputs: two discussion papers
4 In addition, short policy and practice guides



## What do we know?

**Our scoping review focused on:**

1. The extent to which LACYP are conceptualised in research, policy and practice as a 'community' – as distinct from being regarded as an administrative category
2. How LACYP themselves relate to and interact with the concept of 'community'
3. How transitions for LACYP influence their experience and perception of 'community'
4. The role 'community' plays in empowering and promoting the resilience of LACYP

## 1 The conceptualisation and meaning of 'community' for LACYP, i.e. the meaning of what it is to be a 'looked after' young person

- do LACYP form a 'community'?
- different perceptions
- how LACYP have been categorised over time and the way in which these views continue to inform contemporary care policies and perceptions
- 'hidden histories'
- international dimensions

**2    The interaction and relationships between children and young people and 'community'**

- **the continuities that communities can provide**, e.g. the advantages that may arise from a child remaining in the same school, the ability of faith groups to provide ongoing support and the importance of neighbourhood 'place and space' in promoting stable relationships

- **how these continuing connections may be identified more readily and encouraged** as a way of promoting individual wellbeing and community cohesion

- **how being a member of the 'in care community' could be used positively to enhance** self esteem, identity, personal development and facilitate transitions

**3    Transitions into, within and out of care: the ways these influence LACYP's experience and perception of 'community'**

- transitions are particularly influential for young people who have already experienced trauma or abuse, as these may adversely affect existing relationships, disrupt education, create practical difficulties, break friendships and cause mental distress

- young people often make transitions relatively early due to living in care

- some of the ensuing new relationships and changes may have a positive effect on LACYP whilst others may be negative in their consequences

## 4    Resilience, empowerment and participation

- the importance of protective networks, including those provided by communities in bolstering children's ability to cope with and survive adverse circumstances

- the capacity and resources within the potential community of LACYP and how these might be mobilised to increase self-reliance, maximise empowerment and improve quality of life

## Testing the review findings with groups of young people

- relationships with different communities are very important

- young people who have similar experiences form an understanding and vital community, e.g. groups for/of LACYP

- there is an inherent tension in relationships with different communities, primarily in relation to the need for an ordinary life and the need to increase communities' awareness about what 'being in care' actually means

Community is about people and the relationships we have with them

... the neighbours think that the children in kids' homes are bad but it's sometimes only just the one kid that's the bad one, breaking windows and it's going everywhere, so you're part of that community that they think is bad and it really isn't

I was speaking to a man on the bus the other day and he said where are you from then, and I can't say where am I from because I've moved in so many different places, I'm from everywhere, so like it's not a specific place.....  When they say how many foster carers have you had then, I say 38 and they say 'God, really'. Yes, that's why I can't actually say that I am from ...... *[place names]* or anywhere because I've moved to so many places. And you get so many friends in so many different places, every time you move you have to start a whole new friendship. Which is a bit difficult.

## Key messages

- Positive relationships with family, friends, informal and formal carers, teachers and wider social networks play a crucial part in the development of LACYP and in contributing towards their connectedness and stability
- Viewed from an ecological perspective, secure relationships formed with families and carers lay the foundations for establishing networks with people which form part of community life
- School and leisure activities are an important source of continuity and a means of making friendships and building communities as part of day-to-day life
- Transition into, within and out of care may be disruptive of established relationships and networks. 'Starting again' requires particular life-skills which enable the rebuilding of connections and a sense of belonging

## Key messages

- Distinctions between 'consultation' with LACYP and 'participation' are important. Consultation most usually links to gathering opinions. Participation helps in developing meaningful and sustainable relationships from within community contexts.
- There are vital sensitivities to take into account for LACYP in terms of developing networks. Crucial here is the balance between the need for an ordinary life and the need to develop awareness and understanding in wider communities in order to combat stigma about what 'being in care' means.
- **It is crucial to understand the differing perspectives of LACYP about their networks**; this needs to be done in an ongoing manner as there are frequent changes in contexts and cultures.

A summary of our scoping review
can be found at:

http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/6066/

**Project contact:**
Dr Leslie Hicks
School of Health and Social Care,
University of Lincoln, Brayford Pool,
Lincoln LN6 7TS

lhicks@lincoln.ac.uk