



The Village Scotland Midpoint Evaluation

Background

The Independent Care Review¹, commissioned in 2016, spent three years engaging with care experienced children, young people and families. From this, seven reports were produced in 2020 outlining where Scotland's care system had gone wrong and how things could be done better. The Promise² was made as a result of these findings, recognising that the current 'care system' isn't working, and ultimately existing to ensure that children and young people in Scotland can grow up loved, safe and respected.

As part of this extensive, important piece of work, it became clear that there was a need for support to be made available to care experienced parents of young children, and parents to be, to support them on their journey from pregnancy to parenthood. A partnership between Care Visions³, Early Years Scotland⁴ and Scottish Attachment in Action⁵ was created, supported by the Promise Partnership⁶ and Care Visions Fostering and following a successful application to the Good Childhood Fund, the Village concept was born.

All three organisations have in different ways experience in supporting parents with care experience. All have heard from parents the ways in which they can feel stigmatised due to past experiences of care and how the experience of becoming a parent can have additional challenges when your experience of 'professionals' has not always been a positive experience. The organisations brought in strong voices of experience and by working together, The Village was born.

What is the Village?

The Village is an accessible, independent online community which provides knowledge and support to care experienced parents and parents-to-be. The information and help available helps to improve confidence and outcomes for parents and their child.

Despite significant effort on the part of policy/decision-makers, organisations and individuals, stigma unfortunately remains around care experienced individuals, the impact of which is often intensified when they become parents. The Village was designed to break down this stigma - for example, parents are seen as able to choose to join (there are no referrals) and then have the choice of being part of the community and or linking with a Village team member who can offer a listening ear, specific advice or general support. Parents identify areas in which they would like support. This approach immediately changes the power dynamic, as parents actively choose to engage and be involved, which adds value to the community overall, as what is provided is driven by what parents actually want and need, not what others think they do. Referrals are not accepted from third parties. The aim is to empower parents and allow them to have full control of their involvement. Participants are recruited through marketing The Village offering through social media. There is also no requirement for parents to prove their care experience at any point. Instead, all are welcomed into a trauma-informed, safe and confidential space where support and guidance are made available in a manner which best suits those accessing it.

The Village community has had co-production at its heart since inception, and active participation is central to the ethos and operation of the Village. This is particularly important for people whose experiences have left them anxious or mistrustful around professional services or feel that they are stigmatised because of their care background, which no matter their age now, can make asking for help more difficult. There are no assessments made or case records kept, unless there are serious welfare concerns 'what is said in the Village, stays in The Village'. All team members are skilled practitioners with regular opportunities for supervision and professional development.

Those working within The Village are also acutely aware that while few people are fully prepared to become a parent, this can be even more challenging for those with care experience, as they may not have had

It takes a village to raise a child....



positive experiences of being parented themselves. This approach lends itself to a strengths-based offering, where there is a clear recognition that most parents want to be the best they possibly can be, and that there is more support available within a community than there is as an individual. It is recognised that support and praise will help, criticism and stigmatisation will not.

The relationship is recognised as being the most important feature, however, can be the most expensive resource. Using the digital platform allows for the relationship-based approach, available to fit around busy parenting lives; at a significantly reduced cost creating a safe online space helps break down barriers of geography, as the Village can reach out to parents across Scotland, including the islands and more remote rural areas. Combatting digital poverty, then using platforms people are already on, creates an ease of use and sense of availability. It is also a more sustainable way of doing this — there is no travelling to and from venues, for example, and the hints, tips and information does not require to be printed and sent as they are all available online.

The Village aims to take a strength based, collaborative approach. To this end, the use of language is extremely important — we are a community, not a project, and those who work with our parents are highly skilled but referred to as the Village team members, not staff members, or support workers, or experts. The Village is facilitated online, predominantly via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Posts on these social media platforms offer soft supportive messages and information in the first instance. There is then a hope that care experienced parents accessing these will go on to become a Villager, where they will complete a participation agreement via which they receive more individualised support from the highly qualified, dedicated and empathetic team. In doing this, participants are assured that very little personal data will be collected, their parenting will in no way be evaluated and that The Village is independent and led by people who have care experience or strive to understand the potential impact of care experience. It is recognised the thing we share is that we are all unique and all of our past experiences can impact on our parenting styles.

At present, 23 families have signed participation agreements and are receiving tailored support from the team. To date, the Village has 110 followers on Facebook, 187 on Twitter and 85 on Instagram. Our small team of 1.5 FT are also aware that more parents with care experience may be accessing the information but may not have their own social media accounts for their own reasons.

The Village offers a range of practical support measures, ideas and information around pregnancy, birth and beyond. Our community is open and available to any and all parents and parents-to-be with care experience — it has been, and continues to be, accessed by a broad range of individuals, all of whom have varied socio-economic status and live in different local authority areas from Aberdeen to Dumfries and others in between. The confidential, trusting nature of relationships within the community means that regardless of their situation, care experienced parents feel welcome and safe in accessing support and guidance.

The team can answer questions on what to expect at appointments during pregnancy and at birth itself. They can be there to provide advice and assistance round bathing and feeding their baby and, when the time comes, weaning and potty training. The team are also supported to offer information on income maximisation, ensuring families are in receipt of all that they are eligible for, as well as the likes of entitlement to nursery, health, employment etc. The Village is able to provide baby and toddler sensory packs and books, which are extremely useful for young children's development, as well as vouchers for supermarkets for families who are in need of additional support. Recognising that digital exclusion is a significant issue for many, internet hubs/mobile data have been made available to parents without readily available digital access.

A popular offering to both mothers and fathers is baby massage. Baby Massage has significant benefits, such as bonding, closeness, secure attachments, and physical contact. It provides increased feelings and levels of love, responsive care and ability to soothe and comfort baby, as well as increased levels of relaxation and quality of sleep. Baby massage supports parents' ability to understand how to treat wind, colic,



Baby Massage sessions have proved popular with mums and dads

teething and distress and their overall understanding of their baby's body language and behaviour. Perhaps even more than these benefits, baby massage facilitates one-to-one quality time between parent and baby, increasing parents' knowledge and confidence around nurturing their baby and the importance of communication. The wide-ranging benefits of baby massage extend well beyond the sessions themselves.



Not only is The Village, which has only been in existence for six months, benefitting those who engage, but the work is having a wider-reaching impact on care experienced parents overall. The Scottish Government's flagship early learning and childcare (ELC) policy, which increased the number of hours of funded provision from 600 to 1140 hours per year in 2021, expressly mentions care experience⁷, noting that 2-year-old children of care experienced parents are entitled to access funded entitlement. This in any way means tested — quite simply, if a parent has experience of care, their child is eligible. Parents who met the criteria within the Village, however, found that while the policy itself was sound, its execution was not. Parents within three different local authority areas, who The Village linked closely with,

had different experiences when attempting to secure a funded place for their child, and the council staff with whom they spoke did not always recognise the need for a trauma-informed/responsive approach around this issue. We were also made aware of people who chose not to claim the hours due to the stigma felt through application processes and concerns of the stigma they would encounter from nursery providers. Although there was a shared understanding of potential benefits, serious concerns were raised as to whether the policy is being implemented in the way that ensures most benefit. As a result, in line with the philosophical basis underpinning the Village that “support and learning help me, stigmatisation and shaming does not”, a Charter was developed ensuring a best practice guide is available to local authority managers and workers who deal with these queries. We aim to roll this out across all areas in Scotland to ensure a unified, clear message around eligibility for 2-year-olds with care experienced parents.

Who is involved?

The Village has three part-time team members who come from the partner organisations. The steering group is made up of individuals who we had worked within different environments, who are able to share their views at each stage in the process and who through their professional roles bring to the group additional skills and experiences. Everyone involved in the Steering Group is a parent, and the majority have care experience. The Village also has an Oversight Board, which meets regularly, and which is made up of the Chairs of three organisations, offering governance and supporting the operational decisions of the Steering Group.

Feedback from participants

The Village is comprised of Villagers themselves, who have signed up to the commitment and who access direct support from the team, and Followers, who ‘like’ and ‘follow’ the social media platforms. Often, Followers are professionals who engage with care experienced individuals, such as social workers, health visitors, third sector workers etc. The vast majority of both Villagers and Followers are parents or parents-to-be.

When talking to participants, they are benefitting in a number of significant ways as a result of participating in the Village. From practical support to advice and information, not only is the need for this project clear but so too are the ways in which it is having a positive impact on children and families.

“The world needs more people like you...”

Parents who have become Villagers have remained as Villagers, and followers have recommended the Village to their peers. The reach has continued to increase, and engagement levels improved. No one has chosen to leave or unfollow The Village.

7. <https://www.mygov.scot/childcare-costs-help/funded-early-learning-and-childcare>



The launch of The Village earlier this year brought together professionals and care experienced parents and parents to be

A safe space

Villagers have made clear that one of the main benefits of participation is that they are given a non-judgmental space in which to ask questions and seek support which, without the trusting relationships built up with the staff team, they would have felt uncomfortable or stigmatised in doing.

“The girls just understand — I don’t have to explain myself or talk about how certain things in my past affect my parenting, they just get it and give good advice and suggestions”

“To me, the Village means supporting me as a mum, regardless of my past history. It’s a safe place where I can have a confidential discussion with a friendly, caring and knowledgeable staff member”

Another excellent example of the success of the project can be demonstrated in the data collected from participants which shows that if they or their child needed support and/or guidance, they would be more likely to reach out to the Village in the first instance, before then considering their health visitor, GP or local social work department.

“I feel that the Village is a safe space where there’s no judgment - the team and other Villagers are all very relatable”

An online community

Parents told us that their previous experience of services only available during office hours and set times, could be disruptive to other aspects of their lives. Services and appointments were set around the professionals' availability and were often inflexible for participants. This was in part down to the small staff team being unable to be in multiple locations throughout the country, but mainly in recognition that there could be further stigmatisation if participants were known to be attending a local community centre or church hall because of their care experience. The use of social media, and more personally telephone and video calls, was felt to be much more appropriate, more in-keeping with the way that people access support from family and friends, and ultimately took away any possibility for stigma. This is also one of the reasons why internet hubs and mobile data have been made available to Villagers — so that they are able to establish and maintain engagement with the team and the posts on social media.

This approach has been the correct one to take — it means that care experienced parents/parents-to-be are able to engage as much or as little as they wish and there's no expectation on them to commit to in-person sessions. It is, for example, greatly appreciated that Villagers are able to send a quick text or a Facebook message to the Village team, as this is something which fits well into their lives, as opposed to having to wait until a certain time or place to have contact with staff.

“It's a great support”

It is interesting to see the way in which both Villagers and Followers have accessed the community and helped it to grow. From the former, the majority heard about the Village via word of mouth from other organisations or Early Years Scotland, whereas the latter almost exclusively saw information which had been re-tweeted and re-posted on social media.

The Village

There for you... it takes a village to raise a child

Care experienced led collaboration supported by
CareVisions, Early Years Scotland, Scottish Attachment in
Action and The Promise

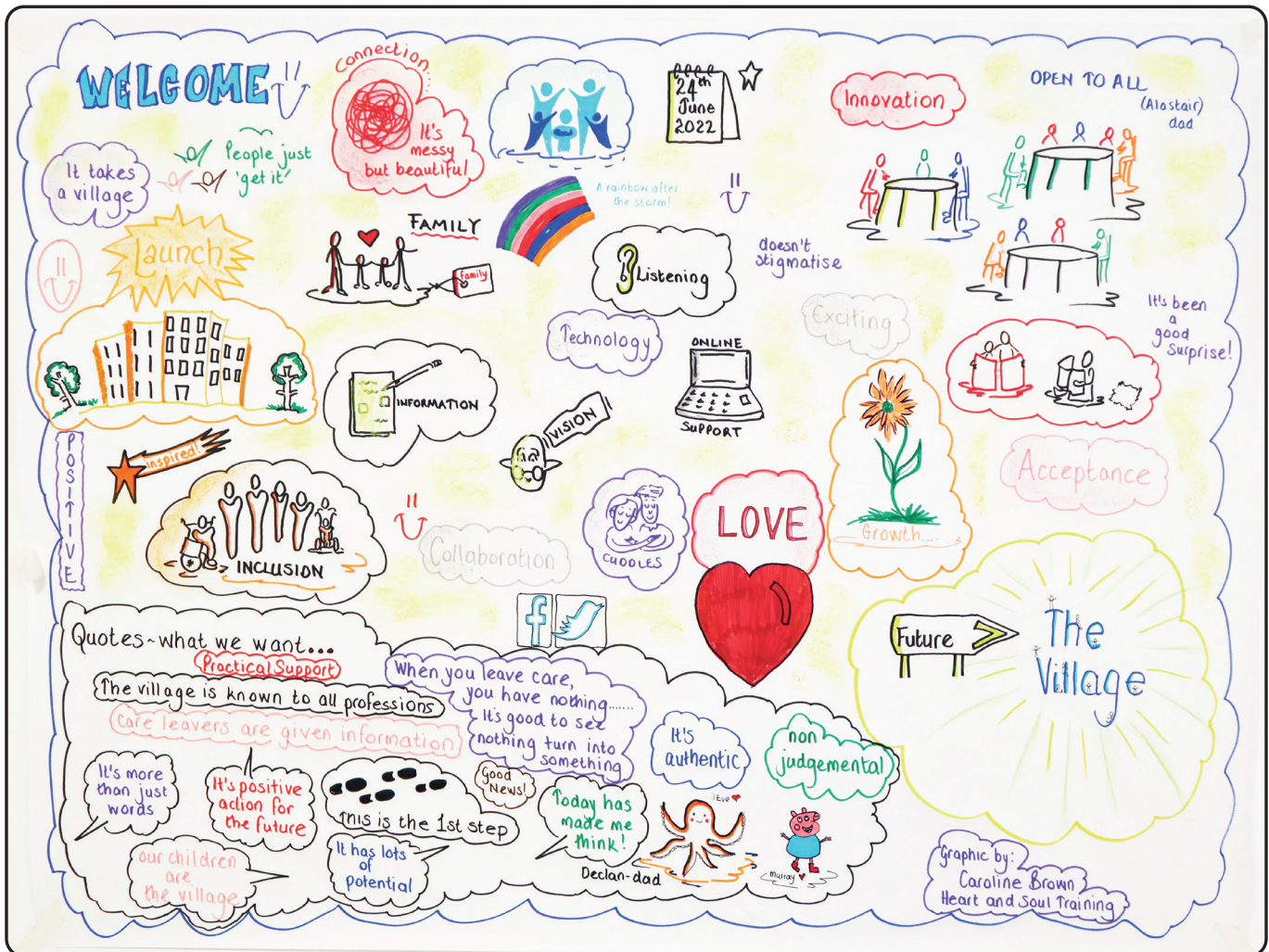
**A LISTENING EAR
COMMUNITY**

**SUPPORT
INFORMATION
ONLINE SESSIONS**

**LIKE-MINDED
CONFIDENTIAL**

A place to learn

The content shared on social media has been extremely wide-ranging and has covered a variety of topics relevant to pregnancy, birth and beyond. Posts are written in an informal way, designed to invoke conversation and engagement. The team have posted information about financial support, such as the increase to the Scottish Child Payment and how to claim for other benefits, mental health, baby loss awareness, top tips for playing with children and making low cost, no cost resources, the benefits of baby massage, what to pack in a hospital bag, what to expect during each trimester of pregnancy and so much more. This content has been very well received, with Villagers and Followers knowing they can ask the team to look at other topics in more detail, such as weaning, dealing with 'toddlerhood' and different types of behaviours, gentle parenting and how to engage with other services, in the knowledge that this will be taken forward and suggestions acted upon.



A place to build relationships

Breaking down the stigma around care experience and establishing trusting, safe relationships is truly a benchmark of this vital project. It is one of the contributing factors to every Villager surveyed clearly stating that they would recommend the Village to others. Parents and parents-to-be are also extremely appreciative of the approach taken, such as not having to prove care experience, not having to be referred to the project and, overarchingly, not being assessed or evaluated as parents. 80% of those surveyed said that this is what they liked most about the project overall, demonstrating the importance of just how important the relationships built between Villagers and the staff team are.

“I’ve found the personal relationship building the most beneficial thing about interaction with the Village team members”

As should be the case with a positive relationship, the Village team are learning as much from the Villagers as they are imparting onto them. In a feedback session, one participant noted that disclosing care experience can be very difficult and can lead to re-traumatisation in some cases. They went on to make clear that they have very much appreciated the support from the Village and gave feedback on the initial discussions and how this could have been improved. The team members were very grateful for this constructive feedback and, as a result, have ensured that participants are under no obligation to disclose unless this is something that they decide to do in their own time.

A way to empower

Engagement with the project has been an empowering experience for parents and parents-to-be. They have made clear via anecdotal feedback and conversations with the team that they feel much more

confident and able in their parenting — some have noted that even being able to seek reassurance about certain things they are doing with their child without fear of judgment has been extremely beneficial.

“As a parent it’s easy to doubt yourself, especially when you’re doing something that you didn’t have experience of in your childhood. It’s good to know that I can approach the team to double check and it always feels good when they agree with me. There are also times where they’ve offered additional advice or support which has been really helpful”

Empowerment has also come via team members supporting Villagers to consider the likes of further or higher education or employment, when they may have not been engaged in either of these for some time, if at all. As well as this, engagement with other care experienced parents and parents-to-be has empowered Villagers to want to become more involved with policy and decision-making processes.

“From talking to others in the Village it’s clear that we could be doing more to campaign for system change that we need to see. We want to use this as an opportunity to build more of a community to influence wider systems change”

A service like no other

It is also important to note that one of the key successes of our community is its uniqueness. The Village is the only dedicated space for parents-to-be and parents of children under 5 to come together, share information and be supported in a non-judgmental, welcoming and confidential way. The staff team have established important, trusting relationships with children and families which continue to be nurtured as the community grows. Participants have made clear that one of the benefits of the Village is that while Village team members/Steering Group/Oversight Board don’t know everything about everything, they do not simply act as a signposting service to others. The team in particular will strive to do all they can to support queries and concerns, will seek advice and information from other organisations, then come back to the families themselves with answers. This takes away any repetition of situations and circumstances, which can be difficult and traumatising and keeps a strong bond between the team and the Villagers.

“This important organisation is providing supporting that has never existed in a coordinated way before”

From experience, many Villagers have not had access to this type of service before and, as such, are grateful for the ‘one stop shop’ which takes into account individual circumstances and provides tailored support, advice and guidance.

Another key theme upon which has received feedback is the level of non-judgment and confidentiality which Villagers are afforded. As has been previously alluded to, minimal data is collected, there are no referrals and the parents themselves are in no way being evaluated. The team have worked extremely hard to develop and grow relationships with the families and it is down to their professionalism and dedication that this trust has been built. This has empowered parents and parents-to-be not only engage initially with the community, but feel they are able to open up to the team in a way which suits them, receive trusted advice and support, and use this as part of their parenting journey.

A way to work with others

Not only is the Village of benefit to those who access it from a personal point of view, but external agencies are grateful of the support that it gives. It is, however, important to be aware that the Village

does not share information with other agencies. Some of our followers on social media work within the care sector and have signposted The Village to families .

“I’m a social worker with a fostering agency. One of my young people has a daughter and I sent her information about the Village when I first heard about it. This has given her the opportunity to connect with others in a similar position as her, which is wonderful”

The nature of the community means that in the type of scenario noted above, the Villager is able to share this information, but the Village will not.

Ensuring agencies such as health, social work and the third sector are aware of The Village is important for growing and strengthening the community created by the Village. The more people and organisations are aware of The Village, the more they can pass this onto care experienced parents and parents-to-be that they know or work with.

The future



Feedback has clearly demonstrated that this project is working both with and for the people it was created for and, as such, has the potential to be successfully rolled out far and wide. The Village is continually developing and growing — babies have been born and welcomed into the community in the short time since its inception and parents have been supported to nurture, love and support their children’s development. The team work closely with Villagers to ensure that the content being created is reflective of what they want or need to learn about and this is done with real care, good nature and support.

The team, Steering Group and Oversight Board, who it is important to reiterate have direct experience of the care system (either by being care experienced or learning from care experienced individuals), have worked hard to create something which is new and innovative, providing genuine, independent support to allow care experienced parents and parents-to-be to give their children the start in life that they did not have. The process has been one in which learning has been key to the development and as we continue to grow learning will be at the root of the growth.

