

# Project Evaluation

CR Stocks-Rankin



# Foreword

We are pleased to present the final project evaluation for Relationships First.

The Relationships First project is an exploratory demonstration project. From the outset we spoke openly about the project providing a new way of working which had not been tried before. In many respects we were taking a leap of faith. Over the life of the project we invited many people to support and engage in the delivery of our ambitious project plan on the basis that what we were seeking to achieve – putting love and relationships at the centre of services across Falkirk Council- was the right thing to do. We sought to create a movement and were delighted with each ripple experienced.

Despite many challenges expected when grappling with a new approach, we were also met with a great deal of interest and enthusiasm.

We faced a significant challenge with the reduced participation of some of our younger group members. This was felt deeply within the group and considerable effort was made to listen and understand and work together to find solutions/ensure the door remained open for re-engagement.

In 2020 when COVID-19 pandemic struck, bringing about lockdowns with restrictions on contact and activity; our project could have ground to a halt. Rather, this brought group members together using the online environment to full effect. Our shared core values, integral to our work, reflected in the group's determination and perseverance to stay connected, prioritise relationships and progress with the development of our co-design prototypes. Our plan and milestones were adapted and rewritten underpinned by an ongoing trust in the process and sustained commitment towards achieving our outcomes.

We learned a lot more from our engagement in this work than we ever imagined and are grateful for this experience. We are delighted that our work has created much interest with plans in place by Falkirk Council to embrace service co-design and develop this further.

A heart felt thanks to everyone involved in the journey.....so far!

*Evelyn Kennedy and Dr Gayle Rice, Co-Leads of Relationships First*

# Introduction

The Relationships First project is an exploratory demonstration project. The aim of the project was to enable young people and members of the workforce in Falkirk to design leaving care services that privilege love and place relationships at the heart of service provision ([www.relationshipsfirst.net/faq](http://www.relationshipsfirst.net/faq)).

Funding was provided by The Life Changes Trust, as part of their workforce development funding stream. The project was delivered by Designed by Society in partnership with Falkirk Council from July 2018 - April 2021 (with a short break in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

This report provides evidence on the progress made towards five core outcomes:

- (1) Participants recognise the range of skills they have developed and are confident in applying them in other settings.
- (2) Participants understand how their contributions are being used to improve leaving care services.
- (3) Workforce feels more knowledgeable and enabled to support and connect with young people relationally as they leave care.
- (4) Falkirk Council has a clearer vision and people with knowledge, skills and confidence to co-design relational Leaving Care Services.
- (5) A shared sense of purpose has been created between people with care experienced and members of workforce.

The evidence and analysis presented in this report is based on 15 interviews with project participants and observation of presentations by the team. This evaluation complements the previous learning review of the project (<https://bit.ly/3v54UyC>). In both this report, and the previous learning review, the Relationships First project contributes to the emerging evidence base on the outcomes of co-design.

# Summary



As a demonstration project, Relationships First modelled a different way of working, one that puts love and relationships at the centre of services in Falkirk Council.

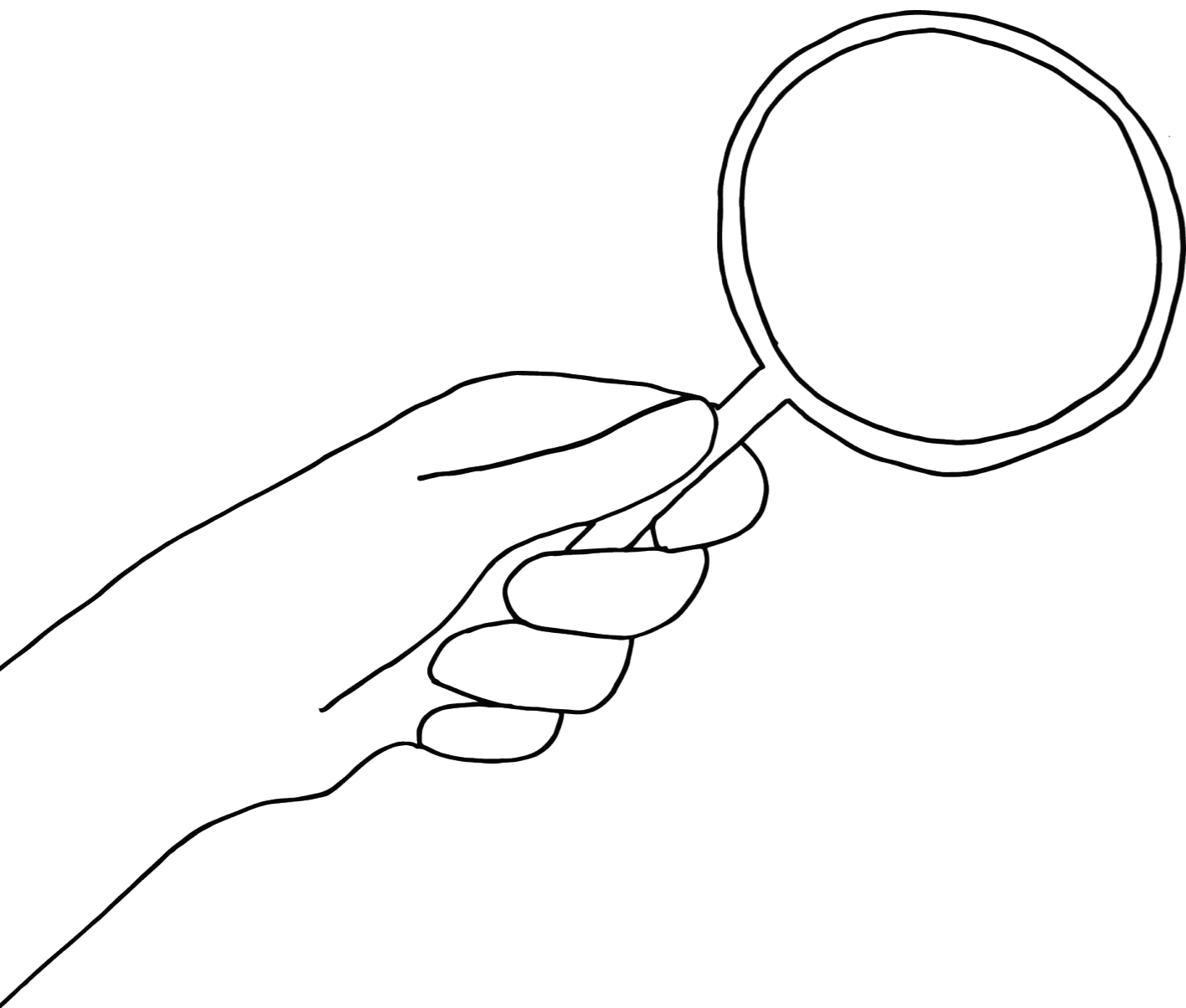
There is strong evidence that the project achieved the majority of its ambitions, as defined by the project's five core outcomes. There were clear gains for participants in the development of skills and personal assets, particularly in the ability to work cooperatively, creatively and analytically.

As a result of this project, there is now a cohort of public servants in Falkirk Council who are more able to work relationally with care experienced young people. Senior public servants who were involved in the project are now more confident in the value of co-design as an approach and would use it again.

But the project did experience a significant challenge, which affected the achievement of one of the outcomes, this being 'A shared sense of purpose has been created between people with care experienced young people and members of workforce'. Most of the citizens involved in the project reduced their engagement or departed from formal involvement in the project. The reasons for disengagement are not clear but seem to include competing commitments or disagreements on the project's ability to challenge culture and practice in Falkirk Council.

In weathering this change, the project has maintained its commitment to produce three co-designed proposals for improving the 'care system'. As a legacy resource, there is also a project website which shares the process, tools and learning ([www.relationshipsfirst.net](http://www.relationshipsfirst.net)). Falkirk Council has recently been awarded funding from the Corra Foundation to further develop this work.

# Approach



Evidence in this report is based on 15 interviews with participants in the Relationships First project: four young people, nine public servants and two members of the coordination crew.

Interviews were conducted in between February 26th and March 12th, 2021. The timing of these interviews occurred after the team's presentations to the Falkirk Champions Board, and the Children's Commission Leadership Group but before their presentation to the Corporate Management Team.

Interviews were organised around a structured set of questions that focused on the five core outcomes of the project. Interviews were carried out over Zoom and used creative methods. For example, a deck of strength cards, Deckhive, was used to explore skills gained as part of this project ([www.deckhive.com](http://www.deckhive.com)). An online whiteboard, Miro, was used to explore individual contributions to the project ([www.miro.com](http://www.miro.com)). Notes were taken in the interviews, and recordings made as a backup to verify comments and quotations.

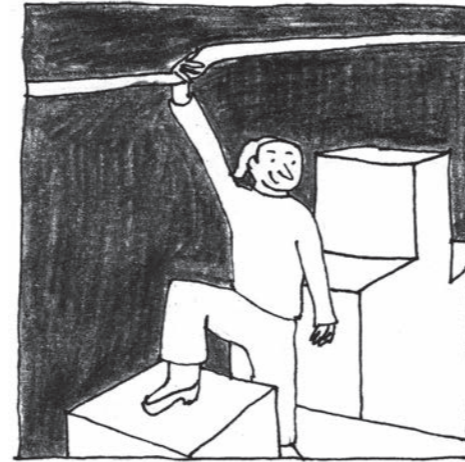
The analysis of evidence used a thematic and content analysis to understand what particular outcomes mean for people involved in the project. For example, the evidence helps us to understand what it means to 'connect with young people relationally' (outcome 4) or how a 'shared sense of purpose' is developed and maintained (outcome 5). The analysis also includes an assessment of how much progress was made towards each outcome and any limitations or tensions that the team experienced. In this way, others can see where the project made the strongest gains and where there were barriers to impact.

In this report, the Relationships First project has contributed to our understanding of the impact of co-design, just as just as the earlier Learning Review identified early project impacts on people involved, and the tensions and opportunities associated with these experiences. As co-design is currently an under-evidenced approach, more evidence is needed about common outcomes, tensions, and enablers to support its use and application, as well as a more nuanced understandings of its contribution.

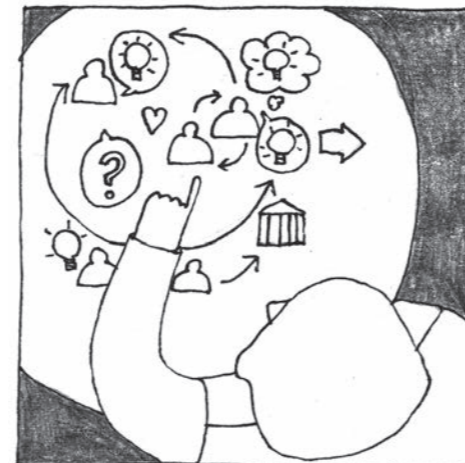
## Outcome 1: Participants recognise the range of skills they have developed and are confident in applying them in other settings

### Citizen's responses

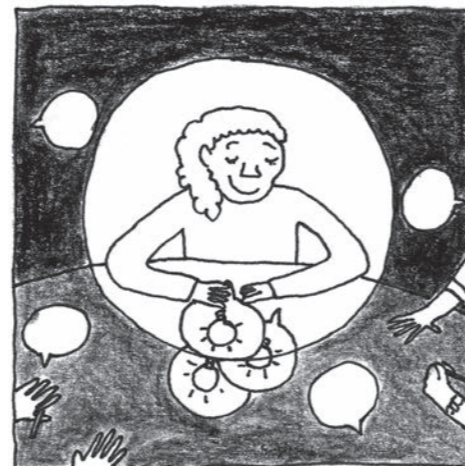
**Determination** - For some citizens, staying involved in the project for the two years, despite other commitments, was a sign of determination. Another signal of determination was overcoming challenges, like a nervousness with public speaking. As one Citizen put it: *"Determination has been improved for me personally, doing something for as long as we've been doing it. Because you can lose passion and lose focus, determination has been something that's been important for the project"* (Citizen 1).



**Insightful** - Being insightful was a skill that citizens developed on this project. Citizens brought knowledge about their experience of care, and the 'care system'. They also gained insights from other people's ideas and learned about how other people like to work in a team. As one citizen noted: *"I got more insight into everyone in the other team's and their ideas. It felt normal to have insight into other people's ideas. It's just what I expect of teamwork"* (Citizen 4).



**Patience** - Citizens strengthened their patience as part of the project. Citizens described patience as the ability to be calm when working in a group or to repeat explanations so that others can genuinely be understood. For some, patience is something that can be developed through challenging circumstances. As one citizen put it: *"There were a few nights when everyone's patience in the room was tested. I got to be more patient with other people and that situation"* (Citizen 4).



**Cooperation** - Citizens strengthened their ability to participate as team members, which included being able to join in, share one's ideas and help shape the project. Teamwork skills were also described by citizens as being supportive of other team members and their ideas: *"We can fill each other's cup up and make sure we're all okay as a team to do that ... checking up on each other. We all asked each other if we were doing ok"* (Citizen 2).



**Decisiveness** - Citizens described decisiveness as being able to voice an opinion on what to do and why. As one citizen put it: *"In the past, people would ask 'what do you think' and I'd say, 'I agree with everyone else' ... now I can put my opinions across"* (Citizen 2). Decisiveness also involves actively bringing ideas together: *"Got to be taking what everyone's said on board and do something with it. That was very important for the project"* (Citizen 1).

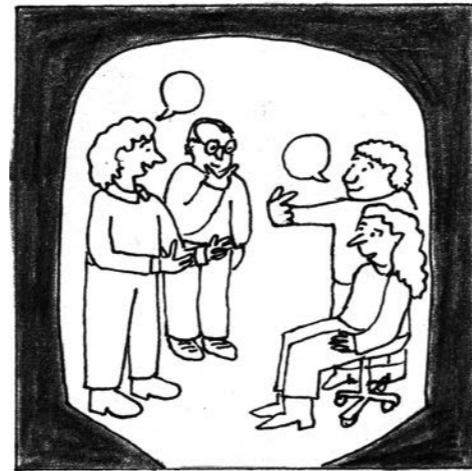


**Analytical** - Being analytical was a skill that some citizens felt they brought to the project and used to support its development: *"I'm a strategic thinker, I think about all the things that need to happen and all the things we need to do to change services. I like to be thorough and think about all the things that could go wrong and all the responses we need to have if the Council didn't like what we had to say"* (Citizen 3).

## Outcome 1: Participants recognise the range of skills they have developed and are confident in applying them in other settings

### Public Servant's responses

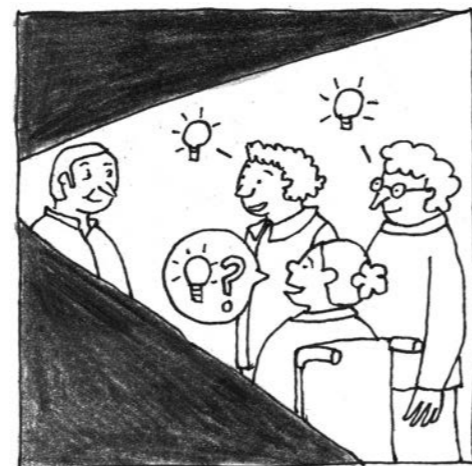
**Cooperation** - Public servants made gains in their ability to cooperate, describing this as a strength that enables one to both recognise and work with others' viewpoints. As one Public Servant put it, cooperation means *"having that awareness of your own skills and other people's skills, when to put yourself forward and when to hold back, working in this way has really enhanced my skills in working together"* (Public Servant 8).



**Determination** - Public servants also noticed gains in their determination. Seeing the project through to the end and not letting down the young people involved in the project was also important to public servants. The skills involved in determination include, being able to adapt one's work and personal life to fit the project, staying focused on tasks and outcomes and seeing the project as more than just short-term piece of work but rather a vision connected to their core values.



**Open-mindedness** - Open-mindedness is a strength that public servants deepened as part of this project. Being curious and not making assumptions about others were said to be core to open-mindedness. Public servants talked about being able to be more appreciative of one's own privileges, and more able to challenge preconceptions. Another important aspect of open-mindedness for these interviewees was remaining open to other people's experience, even if it differs from one's own.



**Analytical** - Improved analytical skills were an important gain for most public servants. Examples of analytical skills include being able to ask questions so that they produce useful answers, especially in terms of research, or distilling a range of ideas into one proposal. For some public servants, the project has improved their ability to make strategic choices based on analysis. For others, analytical skills have brought more self-reflection and the ability to develop oneself and practice.



**Brave** - Being brave was a strength that public servants improved as part of this project, both in terms of seeing one's own bravery and helping others to be brave. As one interviewee observed: *"Being involved in the project it reminded me I have all these skills and it made me brave again. I used to think of myself as a brave person. I had forgotten that, and the project made me accept myself on a lot of levels"* (Public Servant 5).



**Creative** - Public servants were able to strengthen their creative skills through this project. The project involved lots of opportunities for creative expression, such as poetry, blogs, film making. As one public servant put it: *"I have been blown away about other people on the project, their passion, how they've managed things, their creativity. Lots of groups paused during Covid, but we kept going. It's about modelling. The creativity of this project has been amazing"* (Public Servant 1).

## Outcome 2: Participants understand how their contributions are being used to improve learning care services

All participants could see their contribution to the Relationships First project. Most public servants were able to provide multiple examples of their contribution. In contrast, citizens involved tended to identify one primary contribution - telling their story. Some citizens also identified the analytical contribution they made to strategic thinking in the project.

All of the citizens interviewed described their contribution in terms of 'their story' and their knowledge and experience of care. In particular, some citizens emphasised that their contribution was to show the diversity of care experiences: *"I was able to put my experience behind my opinions. All our lives are different so not everyone who has been in care has the same experience"* (Citizen 2).

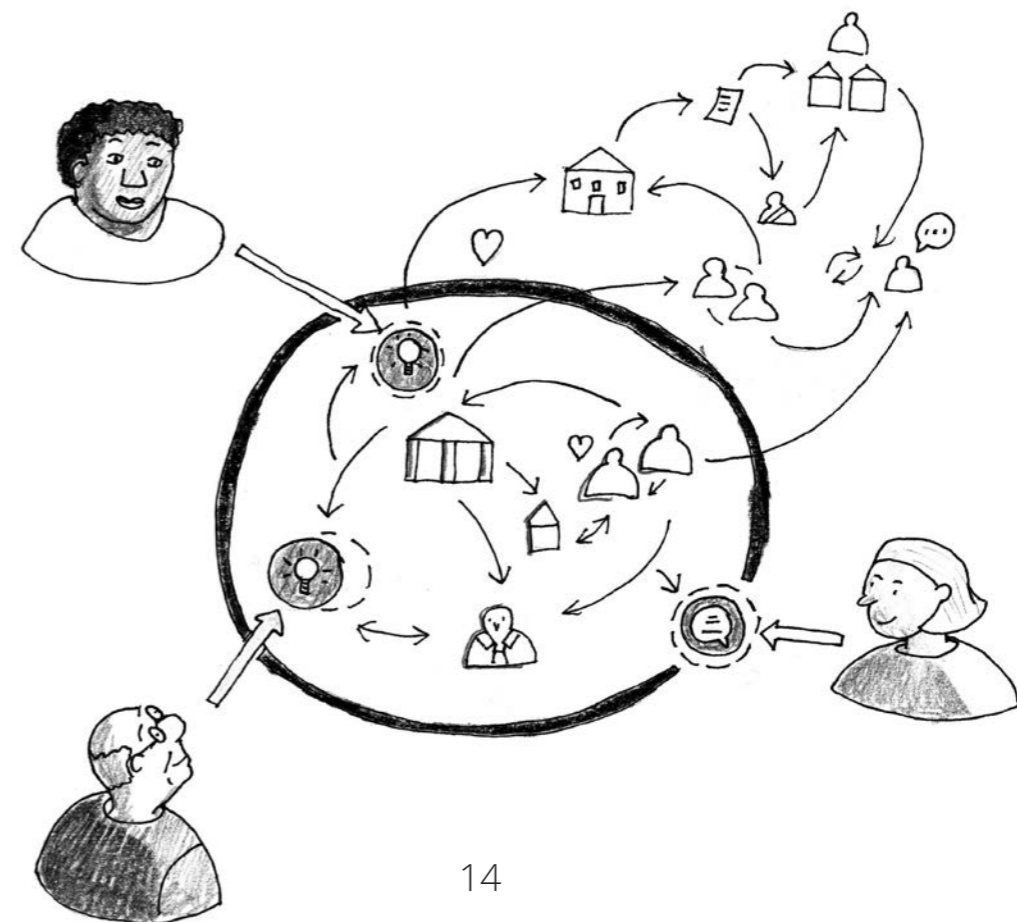
Two of four citizens interviewed also talked about their analytical contributions, for example the need to include divergent views in their co-designs. As one citizen observed: *"From the early stages of the project ... the direction wasn't clear and if you don't know what's going on, you start to lose determination. I was saying we've got to make everything clear, and look at all sides of the issue, and that's when the direction changed"* (Citizen 1).

The eleven public servants interviewed described their contribution in more varied ways that clustered around six themes:

- i. Enabling the participation of young people
- ii. Co-designed innovations for Falkirk Council
- iii. Relational and emotionally intuitive ways of working
- iv. Creative ideas and practical solutions
- v. Translation of knowledge about the Council and the 'care system'
- vi. Actively sharing knowledge from the project with colleagues, sowing the seeds for wider learning and change.

Enabling the participation of young people was an important contribution for many public servants. As one public servant noted: *"I was able to scaffold the process for one of the care leavers who was in my group, I knew how to chunk up the research project, how to break it down and make it more manageable, change the language and vocabulary so that it was easier to understand, helped the young person feel more included"* (Public Servant 2). Sharing particular skills was also an important contribution for some public servants. For example, creative skills: *"Creatively, I think I've been helping everybody else, like with the blog posts, folk weren't sure how to write it and I was like 'you can take any element of the work we've done'"* (Public Servant 5).

While most participants saw their involvement in the project as a contribution to improving 'the care system' in Falkirk, they were also cautious about claiming contribution to any concrete improvements in leaving care services, as they were not sure whether their co-designs would be adopted and go on to have the desired impact.





## Outcome 3: Workforce feels more knowledgeable and enabled to support and connect with young people relationally as they leave care

Public servants voiced a range of ways they are more enabled to connect relationally with young people with care experience. When asked about feeling more knowledgeable, one public servant noted: *"Absolutely, 100 percent. I was a complete outsider as I came in. When I started the project, leaving care was new to me. I was interested in helping young people. I approached this a complete a novice, I had no idea of the terminology. I have a much better understanding now."* (Public Servant 4).

Public servants identified how they were applying that knowledge at work, and in their personal lives.

- More knowledgeable about the system and about care experienced young people
- Applied learning from this project at work and home
- Actively sharing learning beyond project activities
- More skilled in system change
- Changed on personal level as a result of participating in the project

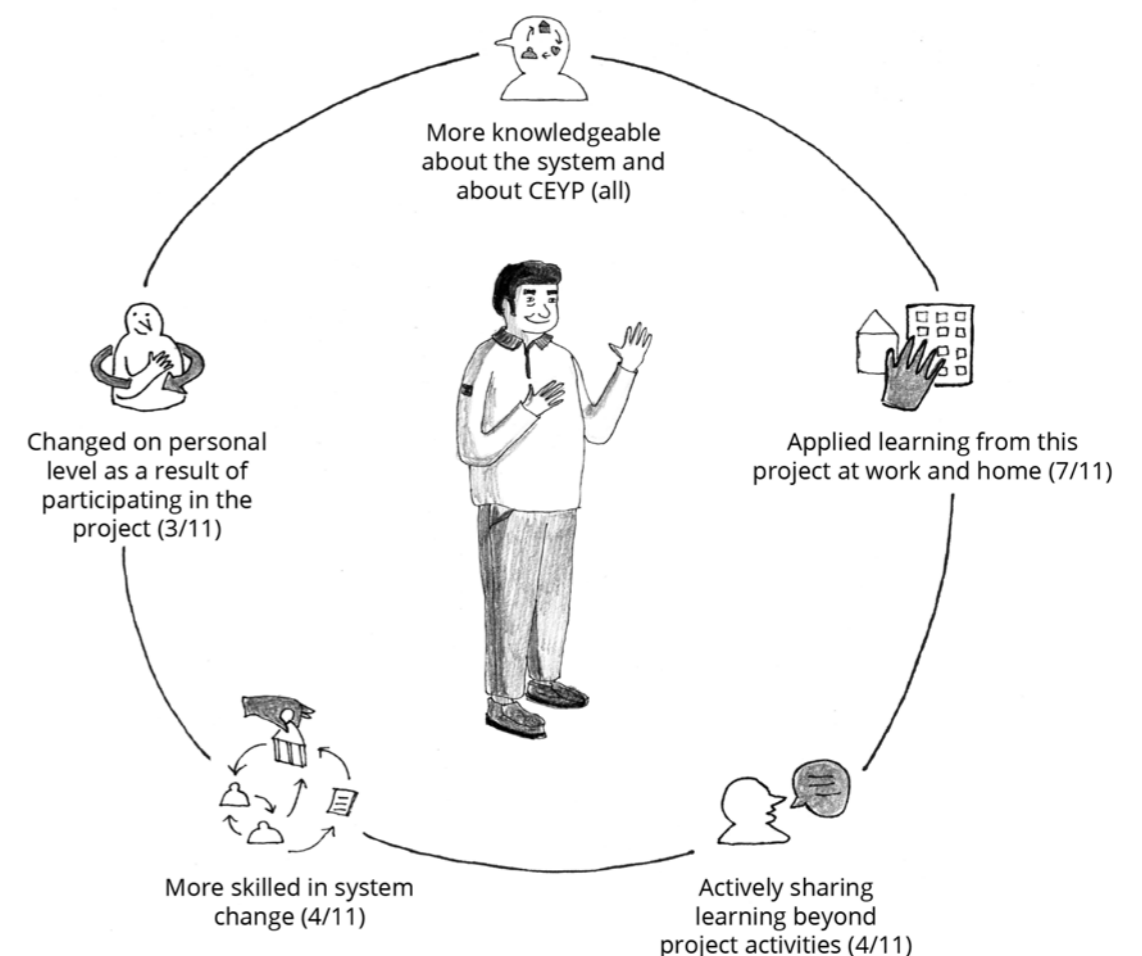
As one public servant noted: *"I am comfortable and confident in sharing what I've learned. When the Council introduce new things, I do find myself getting more involved at the start of the service or policy. People will see one side of someone, so it's about helping people realise there is a more complexity. I challenge people more."* (Public Servant 8).

The ability to engage relationally with care experienced young people, or the wider system, is also enabled by self-reflection and self-development. As one public servant observed: *"I am a completely different person than I was at the start - a lot is about self-reflection and learning about myself as well as care leavers"* (Public Servant 5).

For some, these skills can also apply to wider system change initiatives in Falkirk Council. As one public servant notes: *"I definitely feel more skilled to support that system change. I'm able to draw on a wider knowledge of experience and bring that into my everyday role. It's integral now"* (Public Servant 2).

The progress made on this outcome exceeds the focus on leaving care services. All public servants interviewed voiced that they were more knowledgeable on the 'care system', including but not limited to leaving care services. There is now a strong group of public servants at Falkirk Council who have more knowledge of both 'care system' and the process of system change. More importantly, this cohort has already practiced this knowledge at work, and in their personal lives.

Public servants involved in the project have recently been asked to bring that knowledge and experience to other change programmes with Falkirk Council, such as the Family Firm project (funded by the Life Changes Trust): *"Recently had a reach out from the Family Firm programme - who want mentors for young people. Opened it up to the team, and really want other people to get involved if they want. Got a few people getting involved so definitely taking that forward"* (Public Servant 6).



## Outcome 4: Falkirk Council has a clearer vision and people with knowledge, skills and confidence to co-design relational Leaving Care Services



Members of the 'Coordination Crew' for this project had a project management and oversight role for the project. They acted as liaisons with the Corporate Management Team, and other senior leaders in Falkirk Council. The Coordination Crew also had responsibility for facilitating and supporting the participation of young people involved in the project.

As this project concludes, the members of the Coordination Crew have more knowledge and confidence in the potential of co-design to support the development of relational leaving care services – and the 'care system' more broadly. As one team member noted: *"Everyone is looking to be more efficient, and service design is a big topic just now. When involving young people, the word co-production has been diluted. What they're often doing is consulting, but really feel that we did do is real co-production. This work is a frame of reference for me to go back to. Because of this project, I have knowledge that other people haven't"* (Coordination Crew 2).

The Coordination Crew can also see opportunities for the use of co-design approaches in other service improvement exercises. But members also voiced a caution about having the skills to lead another co-design project: *"It's knowing the potential, doing research and creative ways of doing things. We just don't learn in public services how to do this. Service design has really taken off. We would want to take this on but would need support"* (Coordination Crew 1).

Beyond the opportunities for co-design, the Coordination Crew can see possibilities for improvement of the wider 'care system' in Falkirk, beyond the project's focus on leaving care services: *"There has been a real frustration around what we do about corporate parenting. We've been struggling to get materials and now we've got this research from our own area. The website and all the workings are there. I just feel we're in a good place. And now we've got more people engaged. Locally we've got a lot to draw on alongside that bigger drive of The Promise"* (Coordination Crew 2).

Since the evaluation concluded, members of the Coordination Crew have reported that Falkirk Council have been awarded funding from the Corra Foundation to employ a member of staff to continue the development of this work. Early conversations have also been had with the Council's organisational development and human resources teams about introducing corporate parenting into the induction process for the Council.

## Outcome 5: A shared sense of purpose has been created between people with care experience and members of the workforce

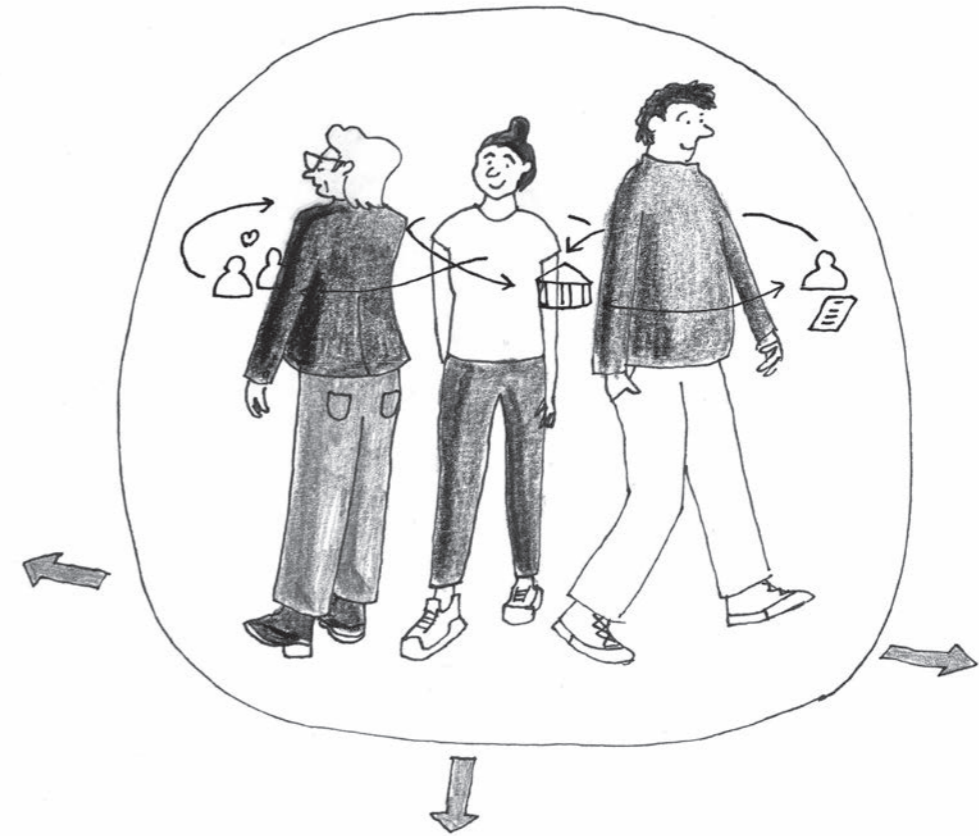
Most people involved in the project shared a strong purpose for the change that they felt needed to occur within the 'care system' in Falkirk. Interviewees described this change to the system in two ways (i) the workforce is able to connect relationally and (ii) young people should experience love and kindness in their encounters with the care system. This core purpose seems to have remained consistent for those who remained engaged in the project, which is a notable accomplishment.

Although there was agreement on the purpose, there were tensions in the relationships and participant's engagement in this project. Group dynamics on the project changed substantially. The majority of citizens elected to leave the project or take on a more consultative role. There are differing views on what prompted young people to disengage, ranging from new commitments in their life and changes in their health to fundamental disagreement about the direction of the project and its ability to challenge culture and practice in Falkirk Council.

For some public servants, this disengagement diminished their sense of accomplishment on the project: ***"Definitely feel that the vision was strong and bought into. Don't know if people are wholly satisfied with the end result"*** (Public servant 11). As another public servant shared: ***"There were lots of positives and more positives than negatives, but that negative is quite significant"*** (Public Servant 2).

Based on these findings, there are two observations that might be useful for other projects wishing to undertake a similar co-designed approach. First, engagement over multiple years is a challenge. Second, the project was funded to focus on workforce development, something that not all citizens will view as a priority.

Despite the change in group dynamics, the project has produced three co-designed proposals for Falkirk Council. Not all of the co-designs include direct input from care-experienced young people. But each proposal reflects the research findings (<https://bit.ly/3xfli0m>), and experiential



learning (<https://bit.ly/32AVm2c>) which formed the basis of the initial stages of the project. Feedback on the proposals has been overwhelmingly positive. See these blog posts (<https://bit.ly/3asGvew>) about the presentations to the Champions Board, the Children's Commission Leadership Group for the Falkirk area, and Falkirk Council Corporate Management Team.

Most people interviewed cautioned that the real challenge is to ensure that the purpose of the project is made real through the ongoing work of the Council: ***"It has been shaped by everybody on the project. It's been a privilege to be part of the project, we had the chance to develop that shared vision. The challenge is to bring that wider"*** (Public servant 8).

In particular, three citizens (of the four interviewed) voiced scepticism about whether the purpose would be achieved: ***"Hopeful it will make a change, but think it'll just sit on a shelf and gather dust"*** (Citizen 3).

# Conclusion

As a demonstration project, Relationships First was funded to model a different way of working, one that genuinely privileges love and puts relationships at the centre of services in Falkirk Council. In reflecting on the evidence presented in this report, I conclude that the project successfully:

- (1) Created a learning environment in which participants could both develop and test out their knowledge and skills;
- (2) Supported public servants and young people with care experience to try building relationships which privilege love and to learn from that experience;
- (3) Co-designed innovations in the 'care system' for Falkirk Council.

Relationships First helped participants strengthen their personal assets and skills, although some participants gained more from the project than others. Across all interviewees, three common strengths were developed: determination, cooperation and analytical skills. Most interviewees observed that were more confident in these strengths and more able to use them in other settings beyond the project.

But the citizens who were interviewed identified fewer specific skills and assets. Only two of the four citizens who were interviewed said they were more confident in their skills. Public servants also had a much stronger sense of their contribution. Citizens involved in project tended to conceive of their contribution in terms of telling 'their story' and were less able to see their impact beyond sharing their experiences of care.

Relationships in this project did experience tensions. There was a significant change to the relationships when the majority of citizens reduced their engagement or departed the project. The reasons for this disengagement are not entirely clear and seem to range from disagreements on the direction of the project to competing life commitments. Many of the public servants voiced sadness at the disengagement of the citizens from the project.

The project produced three strong co-designed outputs that have been shared with the Falkirk Champions Board, the Children's Commission Leadership Group and the Corporate Management Team. Those who remained involved in the project had a strong sense of purpose, which did not change. As most of the citizens involved in the project left the project, or took on a more consultative role, the final co-designed outputs could be said to be less reflective of citizen's ideas than the project originally envisioned.

As a demonstration project, there was no clear roadmap for this work. But it has left one behind in the Relationships First website ([www.relationships-first.net](http://www.relationships-first.net)). As one public servant noted: ***"I just feel like we're in a good place. Locally we've got a lot to draw on alongside that bigger drive of The Promise ([www.thepromise.scot](http://www.thepromise.scot)). All the workings are there on the website. If we want to do it again, the website is there. Just a fantastic resource!" (Public Servant 1).***



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[www.relationshipsfirst.net](http://www.relationshipsfirst.net)