

## Ep.7 Let's Go Further

Should the care experience be made a protected characteristic?

Our guest in this episode, Josh MacAlister, makes the case that it should be. As Executive Chair of [What Works for Children's Social Care](#) and the lead writer on last year's [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), Josh has learned a lot about what life is like for those who live in care.

Josh says that care-experienced individuals are the most disadvantaged group in society and that we all miss out if they cannot fulfil their potential. Nevertheless, this can change. Josh provides his recommendations for how society, including educators, can better support care-experienced people.

Join us for an important and eye-opening conversation about a group whose stories are rarely told.

### About Josh MacAlister?

Josh is the Executive Chair of [Foundations](#) -the What Works Centre for Children and Families. He is also Co-founder and Chair of [SHiFT](#).

Josh founded the charity [Frontline](#) in 2013 and led the organisation for eight years before leaving this role to chair the government commissioned independent review of children's social care. Josh led the review with a focus on hearing from those with lived experience of and thinking afresh about how we support children to grow up with safety, stability and love. The [review](#) concluded in May 2022 and set out a radical plan to reset children's social care so that it backs those who love and care for children- families, communities and then the care system itself.

## Transcript

### Joe Mcloughlin 0:01

Hello, and welcome to Series 2 of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the Skills and Education Group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm Joe Mcloughlin, Foundation Manager at the Group, and in this series, I'm speaking to people from inside and outside the education sector, about equity, diversity and inclusion. In this episode, we're talking about care experienced individuals and education. And joining me is Josh MacAlister, the Executive Chair of What Works for Children's Social Care and the lead writer on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, published in May 2022. What I'd like to ask you is what is a care experienced individual, like, under what criteria would someone qualify?

**Josh MacAlister 0:42**

It basically describes somebody who spent a period of their time as a child, or a young person below the age of 18, growing up in foster care or residential care. And there's some very specific reasons why someone might be care experienced who doesn't fall into that category. But that is, that's the main category. So basically, a young person who spent some of their time growing up in a foster home or in a children's home.

**Joe Mcloughlin 1:09**

How is that background, that kind of where you grow up likely to affect the educational outcomes of those learners?

**Josh MacAlister 1:16**

Well, there's a few things really. So one is when a child comes into care, having left their birth parents, their birth family, because often there's been some really damaging experiences for them growing up, and they've seen witnessed or experienced directly things which mean that they've not had a happy or safe childhood. And of course, that has a lasting effect on young people for a long, long time. So sometimes being in care as a proxy for children having suffered a great deal of emotional trauma early on in their life. So that's the first thing to consider. The second thing is that the very experience of being in care can for a lot of young people result in them not being able to form and have long term stable loving relationships with adults in their life, either because they enter a foster home that isn't quite the right fit for them, it might have meant that they've needed to move quite far away from where they were growing up previously. Or it might be really difficult for them to settle, because they don't want a new family that you know, they've already got a family that they've had a difficult relationship with, or because they're living in a children's home where it's staffed by paid members of staff who often do a really fantastic job. But in those circumstances, it's very hard to form a natural loving bond and relationship. And so all of that can mean that the experience of growing up in care can be quite lonely and isolating. And those lack of lifelong loving relationships makes it harder for you to have a sense of your own identity of a sense of belonging, and anyone working in education will know that those are kind of foundational ideas for anyone showing up in a classroom or a lecture theatre or a workshop and being able to access education fully. So they're I mean they're just two of, I think the big things to consider when we're thinking about care experienced people in education.

**Joe Mcloughlin 3:15**

It's kind of those experiences already kind of inform and influence behaviour, attainment and aspiration, kind of the things that are supposed to shape a learner's experience even before they get into the classroom.

**Josh MacAlister 3:26**

Exactly. I mean, one of the things that's really hard for people who are not care experienced to empathise with, and I include myself in this because I am not care experienced. But having learned a lot from those who are, if you have a family network in your life, however dysfunctional your family might be and most families are pretty dysfunctional, you've always got this invisible, strong web of relationships, that kind of net of support and love that is pretty unconditional. And it's just out of your eyesight, and it's always there, and it carries you through life. And if you have grown up in care, it's very possible, indeed likely that that web won't be there in the same way and may not be there at all. And I think that missing piece of your identity changes your perception of the world in a fundamental way. Now, that experience means that those who've grown up in care have got something really special to offer the world and there are incredibly impressive, remarkable human beings that have grown up in care that have gone on to achieve inspiring things. We could talk a bit about that maybe later on. So this is not a predestined outcome. But because of that life altering experience of the care system, it can mean that young people have a have a different perception of risk, different perceptions of relationships, have a need for some of their basic rights and needs to be met that other children and young people take for granted as they should take for granted because everybody should have those have those rights. So I think for those who have not grown up in care, to try and imagine those, those life altering changes is really important. You know, if a child in your classroom is living in foster care, it's not just that they're living in foster care, something's happened for them to end up living in foster care. And that experience of foster care may be very different to normal family life.

**Joe Mcloughlin 5:21**

Are there moments in kind of a life course or a trajectory almost where you can see those- that perspective playing out kind of are their patterns as kinda care experienced individuals grow, where you find that they do certain things that learners who aren't care experienced don't do or do at different rates?

**Josh MacAlister 5:37**

Well, I think, I mean, it's very difficult to generalise but for example, the teenage years where every teenager is learning about who they are, and trying to establish their own sense of identity, that very process for someone who's grown up in care might be slightly different, because they're trying to establish and find their own sense of identity, when they may not know much about who their mum or dad were. And they might have brothers and sisters that they've not seen for years and not been able to keep in contact with and might be worried about what their future holds. And whether the people they're living with at the moment are always going to be there with them. So teenage years can be really tricky for those that have grown up in care as can the transition to, to adulthood. The sort of 'care cliff' as it's sometimes called, at reaching 18, which actually can for some young people feel like it's a care cliff at 17, or 16, where

they may end up living in semi independent or independent accommodation without anyone providing full time care for them, which, which is, you know, a really bad part of the current care system that we that we have. So you might be teaching somebody who is 16. And they're living by themselves fending for themselves, doing a lot of things, for and by themselves that other peers in their class don't even need to think about or contend with. So that transition to adulthood can be really tricky. And then one of the things I learned from those who've been in care who were at university is actually the period of time after graduating can be really difficult as well, you know, lots of effort often goes into supporting those that have been in care at university. But the transition out of university into your first job and into your first flat completely independently by yourself can be a major, a major, major change. And actually, as lots of people know, students now many of them go back and live at home in the summer, and get support from parents when they've graduated. And there's a bit of a soft landing for them. That may not be there for those that have grown up in care.

**Joe Mcloughlin 7:39**

I wanted to talk a little bit about the Review of Children's Social Care that you published last year, you put in there a quality education as the second of five missions that can transform the lives of care experienced people. And I just wanted to ask, what does quality education look like to you?

**Josh MacAlister 7:55**

Well, I think a good place to start with this is that 40%+ of those that have left care, but recently, so those that are 19-21, 40%+ of that group are not in education, employment, or training, compared to 12% of all other young people of the same age group, which is a shocking figure and tells us that we're missing out on the potential of so many young people who've got that care experience who have got so much to offer, the world of work the world of education, whether that be in apprenticeships or at college or at university. So we're missing out on huge potential as a country because so many care experienced people are not being supported into work and into education when they when they become a young adult. So it's a it's a massive problem for the country not just for not just for education. So the importance of quality education in that is that for young people for children who are in care, school in particular can be a really important stabilising effect on children who have got disruption in a lot of the rest of their lives, their relationships with teachers, heads of year tutor groups. I've heard lots of children and care leavers tell me that those relationships were some of the most positive and important to them, in fact, you know, my career started as a teacher and I got interested in this whole area, partly because I worked with a group of children who themselves were in care. So the caring, attentive, ambitious teachers, whether in school or college can be a very grounding positive effect for those that are in care.

**Joe Mcloughlin 9:35**

Then would you say then that the that sort of pastoral work that personally supportive work that educators do is the is the kind of the primary part of a quality education when sort of dealing with kind of care experienced learners or would you say it's the essential bit that helps the other stuff to happen?

**Josh MacAlister 9:51**

Yeah, it's I mean, it's necessary but not sufficient, right? There should be alongside that high care. There should also be high ambition. And for those that have grown up in care, and again, I've heard lots of stories of young people growing up in care where their potential is overlooked, because their lives have been so disrupted and chaotic for reasons that are not their own fault. And I think it's really important for educators to look past what those experiences might have been, to be able to see what's possible and to, to have real ambition for these young people. There are so many examples in the education system where if this young person in care were your child would the same decisions be being made about them and what they're capable of. And, you know, a great example of that, and it's certainly not the be all and end all of it. But a good example of that is that 7% of children in England go to private school, and only 1% of children in care, get access to private school. Now, it won't be right for everybody in care. But my view is that we should have at least the same level of access to those opportunities for those in care, as those not in care. The same, the same trend is there in university access. We see it in the uptake of apprenticeships. And so what we need in education is for teachers and educators to be incredibly ambitious for those in care to instil that sense of belief, to provide really great quality instruction and teaching, extra support and care and attention for those in care so that they have access to education that helps them achieve incredible things in life, and, and those in care need adults around them, who've got that expectation of them got that belief in them that any other child has. And it's possible. If you know, if you're an educator with a young person in care in front of you, they may not have that, and it's going to come down to you providing that for them.

**Joe Mcloughlin 11:53**

Picking up on that point about ambition and kind of aspiration being something that's lacking and the kind of the assumptions that that staff might make, or the decisions that staff might make on behalf of care experienced learners that they wouldn't if you know, parents were involved in the process. How would you like to see those kinds of ambitions being developed in in real life?

**Josh MacAlister 12:14**

Well, one of the specific areas that the review, sets out a mission on and made a recommendation to government that they should clearly commit to is doubling the percentage of care experienced people going to university. And I think the reason that I've made that recommendation and singled out university education

as the second mission was that it allows you to work all the way back through the education system so that young people, children, young people are getting the qualifications and the grades they need in order to have that opportunity, if it's right for them, and to double university uptake is, I think some people think well, that is that even achievable, in my view, it absolutely is because so few at the moment, are getting access to go to university, compared to the rest of the population. It's about 13% of young people who've left school get to university. And actually, when we compare that to young people who've been on free school meals, it's significantly lower for those that have been in care. And it's dramatically shockingly lower than for the general population of young people. So there are these focal points of access to university access to apprenticeships, that should be driving a level of ambition for care experienced people in an area. And there are these roles called virtual school heads, each area, each local authority in England has got a virtual school head that's responsible for the education of those in care in an area, you know, I think they're a really important role. I'd like to see them be really focused on raising the percentage of those that have been in care, getting to university and getting the qualifications that they need. So they've got those options.

**Joe Mcloughlin 13:57**

Just zooming in now and kind of focusing on individual, you know, teaching staff, college staff in the classroom with care experienced learners, we might have people who are very, very keen to help very, very kind of encouraging and supportive of their learners, but they might not feel the most confident or the best placed to help. Where would you advise them to go for kind of good resources or effective guidance?

**Josh MacAlister 14:19**

There's a few organisations that work in this space really well. So there's a charity called Become which is focused on care experienced young people. They've got some great resources on their website, so well worth having a look at them. I think the Education Endowment Fund have done some studies and work on support for care experienced people as well so well worth having a look at that. There's also an organisation that's doing some fantastic work called the Royal Springboard Foundation. They help secure scholarships for care experienced people to access fee paying schools with the costs fully covered. So if you're working with a young care experienced person who's got great potential and could benefit from that, you should definitely look them up. And then the virtual school head in your area who works for the local authority is someone who should be supporting you as well. And it's worth saying that there is a Pupil Premium Plus, a certain amount of money that follows that young person through education, which is administered by that virtual school head so they will be a good resource to speak to. And then there are a couple of really promising mentoring schemes and scholarship programmes. One is called First Star worth having a look at them. And then the other is called MCR Pathways, which is a tutoring programme that's focused on young people that are in care, and providing really intensive mentoring for them. So there's, there's quite a lot



going on that's out there. And as an educator, I think, if you've got time to sort of pause and think, and go and look at some of those resources, and of course, the starting point is figuring out who in your school or college is care experienced, and asking those questions and making sure you and your staff team have got a really clear idea on who that group is. And whether you're doing enough as an institution to meet their needs.

**Joe Mcloughlin 16:11**

Kind of almost going at it from the other side now, so that if we have a staff team who have identified their learners, they know who they're dealing with, they're kind of supporting them regularly. How would you recommend kind of, or what advice would you give to those staff members who are kind of passionate about this work committed to this work? How do they manage the kind of emotional or kind of intellectual toll that this kind of work might take? Because obviously, they might be working with individuals with sort of quite harrowing kind of personal experiences?

**Josh MacAlister 16:37**

Yeah, I mean, I would recommend that educators don't kind of go to this with too heavy a heart, they are still children, they're still young people who need exactly the same things from their teachers, that everyone else who's in their classroom needs, they need a bit more understanding, they could benefit from teachers who've tried to put themselves in the shoes of those young people and understand some of what life has been like for them so that they make better choices in what they say how they teach how they respond to difficulties that might come up for those young people. That's not to say that their ambitions and standards shouldn't be just as high - they should be. And those young people should know that they're just as important and just as valuable and have just as much potential. But it I think gives a really strong signal to those kids or young people, that they've got someone in front of them as an adult who understands and appreciates their experience. And that's something that often doesn't happen. So sometimes these can be quite simple things. But if you want to understand what their world's like, ask them be interested in their lives, be respectful and appropriate about it. But ask them what life's like and try and engage with their social worker, their foster carer, and the children's home, and visit them in the children's home and speak to the children's home manager about how they're getting on with homework after school or after college show a level of interest and commitment to them, which is probably higher than you might have for other children in the classroom, given the circumstances that they're in.

**Joe Mcloughlin 18:15**

So that's a really helpful conversation, Josh around the kind of the sort of setting the scene and then kind of thinking through some of the kind of practice of what's kind of in the classroom and the resources that are available now. Moving forward and thinking on a slightly grander scale, the review states that, quote,

"The disadvantage faced by the care experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time." And that struck me as a really kind of evocative and kind of powerful line. I just wondered if you could explain why that is in a little more detail.

**Josh MacAlister 18:46**

Yeah, when you look at the outcomes, for those that have grown up in care, they are some of the most shocking of any single group in society, you know, 26% of the homeless population have been in care at some point in their lives. 24% of the prison population in England has spent time in care, you know, I think probably most shockingly, you're 70% more likely to die prematurely, having grown up in care. And so the experience of care at the moment today is life altering, and the disadvantage that comes with all the things that have led up to the point of being in care and sometimes the experience of being in care itself mean that it gives you an experience of life, which is which is very different, and disadvantages you from accessing the opportunities that everybody would expect. Now, because of that, when I when I looked at this with the review, there are a range of different specific measures that we could take and the review sets out some of those that even if we took a lot of those, there are still systemic and deep issues that disadvantage the care experienced community and some of those relate to stigma and the way in which policy and decisions are made around those that have grown up in care. So to give you an example, I spoke to a number of young parents who grew up in care who when children's services found out that they were pregnant they - or soon to be a dad - that they found that a social worker was doing an assessment on their suitability to be a parent because of their experience of growing up in care. Now, I think some of that, in that example comes from a position of wanting to provide support and help to those young people. But the way in which it's done, it doesn't come across like that, and actually is highly stigmatising. I've spoken to other care experienced people who find that they get a boyfriend or a girlfriend and they go to meet their new boyfriend or girlfriend's parents go around for dinner, or pop around the house and find themselves in a really uncomfortable conversation where their boyfriend or girlfriend's parents is asking what their parents does. And then they say they've grown up in care or foster care. And then there's a whole bunch of ideas that kind of flow into people's heads about well, is that because they were badly behaved? Is it something that they did? What does it mean about them? Are they broken? And some of these really kind of outdated ideas that just show a complete misunderstanding of the care experience? So for the specific issues of poor outcomes for the general issues of stigma, and for the huge social injustice, that this is the group most disadvantaged of all in society, those reasons taken together mean that we should absolutely recognise the care experience as a protected characteristic?



**Joe Mcloughlin 21:34**

And just following up on that, then what are you what are you hoping that that kind of legal protection similar to you know, sex or gender or race or sexuality? What will that legal protection offer? Why is it important?

**Josh MacAlister 21:47**

Well, for a few reasons, really. One is it forces, public services, businesses, employers to proactively think about and plan for how they are meeting the Equality Act as an organisation. So they need to have good data, they need to monitor these things, they need to have conversations as organisations about how they're working with customers, or clients or service users or employees who may be care experienced. So a whole kind of wave of questions across organisations that are just not being asked at the moment at all. And secondly, making it a protected characteristic emboldens those same organisations to then take proactive measures to rectify some of the disadvantage that community faces, whether in hiring decisions, or in focusing resources for support on that group. And then I think there are wider social benefits that come from recognising care experience inequalities legislation, which would start to shift the public discourse, the public debate about these issues in a way that we've really not seen. I think it would start to make people ask, well, what is care experience? I've not heard about that before. Why is it a protected characteristic, and I think then start to get into some of the conversations that we're having here on the podcast today, which I think would be beneficial for that small but precious community of people that have grown up in care.

**Joe Mcloughlin 23:10**

Finally then and just to kind of reflect on some of the things that you've mentioned there in terms of care experienced learners experiencing stigma and judgement around when they come to have their own families or when they come to meet partners or, you know, friends of partners, family members of partners, those kinds of things. But what do you what are we losing as a society through that disenfranchisement? And what I suppose the question is, what would you hope to gain? Or what can we gain as a society, if we make the sort of switches that you're arguing for?

**Josh MacAlister 23:40**

Lemn Sissay, a poet, who's care experienced talks about this in the most beautiful way I've heard in that family is the universal story, right? Everybody, every single person has an experience of family for good or bad, and the messiness of families trying to figure out how they grow up and grow old together, through the generations is something everybody is trying to figure out how to do. And the care experience comes from the state stepping in to provide some of that family. And so I think all of us find it quite uncomfortable and difficult to accept that maybe together when we've done this raising of children through the care system together as a society, when we've not done it as well as



we should. That's quite an awkward, uncomfortable truth to sit with. And so there is something that is that speaks volumes about what it says about us as a society if we have a care system that we can be really, really proud of that when a child needs to enter care they have around them a community of adults who love them are going to be there for them no matter what, no matter how old they are, and that the experience is one that is healing and opens up doors of opportunities rather than closes them down. And we're not talking about huge numbers of people here. But as a society, it would speak volumes about us about the health of our society if and the care system consistently provided that level of love and care and support and opportunity, and, you know, in sort of brass tacks numbers, we're missing out on some just remarkable people, you know, care experienced people, they are artists, they get PhDs and become doctors, they are, in some cases, government ministers. So there are remarkable people who've grown up in care and we're missing out on just some fantastic talent as a country and it's and it's there to be developed and treasured really. So, we need to do just much more through education and health and housing and everything to guarantee that these young people have got every opportunity to live a good life that anyone else has experienced.

**Joe Mcloughlin 25:52**

Thank you to my guest, Josh Macalister, and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about the connections between social care, education and wider society. You can keep up to date with the podcast on social media. Follow us on Twitter @SkillsEduGroup or search Skills and Education Group on LinkedIn and Facebook. Do remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts. And let's go further together.