

Gillian MacFarlane:

Good morning everyone, and thank you very much for joining us. Welcome to Community Care Inform's webinar, *Who Are You Writing For? A Care Experience Perspective of Reading Case Notes*. I'm Gillian MacFarlane, I'm assistant content editor for CC Inform Children's. So before we get started today I'm going to hand over to Rebekah Pierre. I'm just going to go through a few housekeeping bits to help you get the most out of the session today and the platform.

So in your current view you will see the presentation screen, and just below that you will see that you can submit questions. So you can do that at any point during the session just by typing in your question and clicking 'submit'. So I'll be asking Rebekah the questions at the end. If you don't want me to mention your name or organisation when reading out your question, just please prefix it with 'anon'.

The session is being recorded and it will be available on the CC Inform site for you or any of your colleagues with access to Inform to view on demand. We won't be sharing Rebekah's Powerpoint today. However, she will be sharing some useful links to other material that you can access online.

If you encounter any technical issues, just a reminder to please close down all other applications you have open or extra tabs. If you're connected to a VPN, please switch that off and make sure your volume is turned up to a comfortable level.

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If you want to maximise the size of this presentation window you can hover over it in the bottom left-hand corner. You will see the volume control as well as a small square. Click on the square to make the presentation window go to full-screen mode. And you can click it again or press 'escape' to revert back to the current view with the smaller presentation window.

So that's everything with housekeeping. So without further ado, I would like to welcome Rebekah Pierre, care-experienced social worker and author. Rebekah has written extensively about the care system, featuring in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, Radio 4 and other publications. Rebekah is currently editing [unclear – 0:02:18.7] on Fridays, which is an anthology of the care system which amplifies the voices of care-experienced individuals. So over to you, Rebekah.

Rebekah Pierre:

Thank you so much. And thank you for everyone who has taken the time to come and listen. I think as someone who is care-experienced and for a long time felt like I had so much to share with professionals, it really means a lot that people are showing up today.

I remember that when I started to train as a social worker there was this strange kind of mentality that, 'Okay, you don't learn about case notes in university. It's just something that you'll pick up on the job.' And that message was repeated. And so when I then went into social work I remember just seeing such a variation in the quality of case notes. And today I'm going to be sharing with you my experience of retrieving my own case files and how to kind of go about improving case notes.

But before we do that I just want to kind of set the scene and talk about why, for me, language is so important.

So I remember when I was about five or six I was walking home from school with my nana. I don't know where anyone's from in the country, but up north we say 'nana', not 'grandma'. So I was walking home with my nana and, just for context, she was, you know, absolute matriarch. What she said went. She was known locally in the community as 'Joan Joan Megaphone', so you don't mess with her!

Anyway, there was only one time in my whole life that I can remember thinking, 'Actually, you're wrong,' and that was when I was walking home from school. I was telling Nana about some bully and she looked at me and she said, 'Sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you.' And even as a five- or six-year-old in that moment I just looked at her and I thought, 'That's a load of nonsense.' I knew, I think, as a very young child that actually it's words and language that hurts us the most, or has the potential to hurt us the most. And that theory was proved to me when, years later as a teenager in care, I came home from school one day to my foster placement and I found a note on the kitchen table. And I remember looking at it and just seeing it in my mind's eye. And I knew it was my foster carer 'cause she just had the most beautiful cursive handwriting. So I picked it up and there were ten words on there that changed my life forever, and they were these: *You have four days to find somewhere else to live.*

So just for context, that was on 20th December, which meant that I was sixteen years old and four days away from being homeless. And I did find myself homeless on Christmas Eve.

Now, those ten words really had so much dominion and power over my life for years. I would say for at least the next years I woke up every single morning thinking of those words, and those words really defined my self-worth, defined who I was. You know, you can imagine the kind of rejection that I felt.

But what I want to say to you here now is that it's not just the words that we see or we are aware of that hurt us, like the words of my foster carer, but it's also the words that are written about us that we maybe don't see for years down the line. So I didn't actually access my case files until last year. And I'm going to take you through that process today, and those words really were just as hurtful. So it's very strange to me that somebody was writing unkind notes to me on the kitchen table telling me to kick me out, but around that same period someone was also writing about me behind closed doors.

So my message today is if there's anything that you can take from this to improve case note recording, it will have made all of those experiences worth something and not for nothing.

So I thought the best way to share this really would be to actually show you some of the extracts that I found in my case files. I've done, I think, a lot of challenging things in my adult life but probably the most challenging thing was actually reading those files. And after I received them last June or July I sat with them for a while and I thought, 'You know what? This makes me feel so unheard. I want to write back.' So I wrote a letter to the social worker who wrote those case files, and I'm going to read out that letter for you today. So whilst I read the letter, there will be kind of corresponding extracts on the screen, just so you're aware.

So without further ado, it goes like this:

An open letter to the social worker who wrote my case notes:

Dear Tara,

Before I wrote this letter I double-checked the spelling of your name, just to make sure it was correct. I know how jarring it can be when the basics are not quite right. You misspelled my name almost 100 times in the case files you wrote about me whilst I was under your care. I received these last weeks after submitting an SAR request to the local authority.

Speaking of names, let me remind you of mine. My name is Rebekah. It is the Hebrew spelling and I'm quite fond of it. It may sound like a small detail to some, but to me it matters. It is the name I was given when I was born.

I once corrected the spelling, as you can see in Case Note 1. But it was never changed on the system. Instead, a rather blunt note was written to say, "This is the name of her spelling according to her." For the records, I wasn't lying. This was one of just many examples where I was not believed.

I don't know if my name rings a bell. But even if it does, you probably wouldn't recognise me now. You were involved in my life at a time I was extremely vulnerable and on the verge of being homeless, a sixteen-year-old girl with everything to live for, who didn't have much interest in living at all.

Since that time much has changed. Despite being a "young person who is a little mixed-up about the direction of her life," – your words, see Case Note 2 – I ended up following in your footsteps. I wanted to be like the residential social worker I had after you, who practised with care, kindness and compassion. I have since had the privilege of practising alongside many such practitioners, who transform lives every day. On reflection, perhaps I wasn't so mixed-up about the direction of my life after all.

During my career I have read case notes of varying quality. Most have been child-centred and thorough. Others have not. But for all I

have read, nothing could have prepared me for reading my own records, particularly the entries written by you.

To give you the benefit of the doubt, I imagine you've changed since writing these records. Your approach may well be unrecognisable now. It is why I took the time to write this letter. I have some small faith that this time you will hear me. I hope in earnest that you will.

I cannot pretend my recording is perfect. I know how hard it is to write good case notes whilst balancing competing deadlines and crises. But I have always done my best to be respectful, to write with the child in mind. In your defence, I don't think I was the audience you had in mind when you wrote them, was I? Perhaps you saw the screen in front of you as a final destination. It was not. Your words, written about but without me, would not remain hidden forever. One day I would understand my rights.

Speaking of rights, do you remember taking me to an achieving best evidence interview after school, where I had to disclose the most traumatic events of my life to yourself and a police officer? It was my right to have an advocate, something I only learned years later. It took all the strength I had to get through those four hours, with no emotional support or break. I have never felt so small, so humiliated. Looking back, it was like an inquisition, like somehow I was the one on trial. Now it is my turn to ask the questions.

The first is this. How dare you? It took more courage than you will ever know to disclose that a child known to my extended family, who became an adult whilst I was still a minor, abused me throughout childhood. If you believed I was "experimenting" or "in a relationship" with the perpetrator, as you suggest in Case Note 3, then your thinking isn't only flawed but dangerous. I was a child. I could not consent. I refer you to the independent enquiry into CSE in Rotherham, something you would have been aware of, given it was then ongoing. Its messages are clear. Do not blame victims. Show empathy. Believe them.

Which begs the question, where did you draw the conclusions that my allegations were complex with consent issues? What observable evidence did you base this on? Were you there when the perpetrator threatened me into silence, forbidding me to tell anyone? Did you feel the weight of this threat, a terrible yoke about my neck? Were you there when I used to crawl under the bed to hide from them? Did you hear as I made my breathing imperceptible so I wouldn't be found, when I played dead to survive? Were you there in the room when it happened? Did you watch as my soul left my body, a pattern of dissociation which continued long after it stopped? Were you there when my OCD spiralled out of control, when I couldn't pay attention at school because, in my helplessness, I used to repeat the same five words incessantly in my mind for hours on end? "Please God, make this stop." Were you there?

This was not the only time I was not believed. When disclosing domestic abuse, the marks still fresh on my body, you minimised this too. Is an attack on a child at the hands of an adult ever an "altercation", as you describe in Case Note 4, or is it abuse? And why

were you so concerned that bruises were “only” seen on my arms? Does the absence of one – and by the way, bruises fade – negate the other?

On a similar note why, after I presented at A&E dangerously unwell, was no further action recommended with no explanation? Do you know how it feels to read that such a traumatic event was met with a tick box?

“No further action” seems to be the common response, as is seen in Case Note 6. After I called you in distress 200 miles away from my unregulated placement, you advised I could return alone due to my age and independence. No follow-up was ever given to see if I was okay.

My records, just like your involvement with me, end rather abruptly. The very last sentence in Case Note 7, “Rebekah would like to talk to her social worker,” stands unanswered across the passage of time. I never did hear from you again.

It is too late to go back in time but it is not too late to make a meaningful change for other children. May your words be worthy of each of them. Who knows, one day you may find yourself reading what they grow up to write about you.

Yours,

Rebekah with a K.

So I just wanted to take a minute to say that I understand that may have been a lot to hear for some people. And if anyone just needs to take a break or come back in five minutes or do whatever you need to, then that is absolutely fine, and that goes for the rest of this webinar as well, if at any point...I know that you're all qualified professionals but if at any point it brings up any memories for you or is triggering, then just absolutely take your time.

But I just want to say thank you for listening to that. It's not easy to share such personal things with a room of strangers but for me, I don't ever want any other young person to access their files and experience such a lack of respect and for them to be spoken about with such little dignity.

And I think, on reflection, I don't entirely...I don't blame the social worker entirely because I understand...and I know as a social worker myself what it is to be in a system where the cards are stacked against you and where you are just under so much pressure to perform and get things recorded that sometimes you do lose sight of really the purpose of these records.

I was speaking to a group of social workers recently and they said, 'Look, I agree with everything that you're saying but, you know, I don't agree with you when you say these records are for the child.' Because that's what I said. I said, 'You know, we need to remember that these records are for the child.' But I would argue, okay, if it is for professionals as you claim then why can it not be both? We don't have to have blinkered thinking. It doesn't just have to be for the child.

It doesn't just have to be for the purpose of professionals to keep track of what's going on. We can do well equally.

So I think we need to have a both approach where we're writing with the child in mind, whilst also recognising that we are in a system that requires, you know, thorough case notes. So my message to you would be, write with both the child and the profession in mind.

But before I go on, I really don't want today to be, you know, doom and gloom, here's this really sad experience. My hope is that in this webinar, if anything, you can go away as practitioners who are better informed and really skilled and equipped.

So what I'm going to do is just go through a couple of top tips about how, from today, you can go on and improve that practice. So the first thing – and it sounds so obvious but really is genuinely just the basics...so I'll just be real with you. I think I'm one of those types of people who if someone, you know, spells my name wrong or they say, 'I'm Bekah...', if people call me Becky or something by accident I think...studies show that your name is kind of one of the...I think it's a kind of human tendency but your name is the thing that kind of literally lights up your brain straight away, quicker than anything else. It's the thing that we respond to. It's so intrinsic to who we are in our identity. So the second that I saw my name so poorly misspelled, I just switched off mentally. I just thought, 'Well you've not even taken five seconds to actually check.' So I know that it might sound kind of boring about the bread and butter, but it's so, so important. Make sure that you're checking two, three, four times. Get the name right. Make sure the date of birth is right.

The other thing that I would say is, you know, you're not writing an opinion piece. Make sure that where there are allegations just to state the facts clearly and simply as you heard them. I think for me, when I saw inverted commas talking about what I'd experienced I found it...it seemed...you know, we use inverted commas sarcastically a lot of the time. So I would say if you're not directly quoting what someone has said then just state the facts clearly and simply.

The other thing to say is to ditch jargon and acronyms. Now, I remember, like many people, when I first joined as a social worker. I could not believe the language that I was hearing around me. So I even remember the first time someone used the word 'corporate parent', I honestly thought it was a joke. I could not believe, you know, that such jarring language would be used. But then I started to use that myself. I remember the first time I was in a kind of child-in-need meeting sat there, and watching professionals and thinking, 'Isn't it strange that this person is called Barbara but they're just referring to her as 'Mum'?' And at first I was really shocked by that. But then, six months later, as we all do – we're like sponges and words and language are contagious – and I started doing the exact same thing.

So I would say almost every time you write a case note just stop and do a jargon scan, really. Because jargon helps nobody. Well-worn phrases help nobody. I remember reading my case files and thinking, 'Okay, so it says all my basic needs are met. That tells me absolutely

nothing.' It would have been so much more helpful if the social worker would have spelled that out clearly, if they'd have spoken...instead of just saying "emotional needs met", which tells me literally zero information, could they have given a little bit of flavour to that? Could they have said that, you know, not just that I'm accessing therapy at school but that I have interests and passions and I talk about my best friends a lot, and the thing that I really love to do or lights me up is, I don't know, going skateboarding or whatever it is?

And the other thing is to write directly to the child where possible. I know that in some local authorities and some organisations this is becoming increasingly more common. But I think that, just as I did in my letter, when you are writing directly to somebody it really just focuses you and it makes you remember actually who you are writing for, and it makes you just stop and really reframe things in a more compassionate way. So there's some tips.

The next thing is quite simply, 'Does what I'm saying add value?' Are you just saying it to fill a page? Are you just saying it because it's an observation, you know, saying again that the kind of basic needs are met. I don't think that adds value. I think it would add more value if you just, even in a sentence, spelled out what those needs were and how.

I think the other thing to ask is, 'Who are you writing for?' because I do know as a social worker that when you've got an Ofsted inspection coming up in two weeks, or when you're being audited, or when you're about to go to court you've got all of these different pressures coming at you, and it can actually feel easier to appease all of those pressures, but make sure you really are centering the child in the discussions.

The next thing is justify all actions, and I would say NFA – no further action – is absolutely unacceptable without context because, as you saw in my letter, I remember the incident of going to A&E and being seriously unwell. I remember it very, very clearly. But when I read this awful thing happened but no further action, I just think, well somebody clearly didn't do their job properly here. But perhaps there was a justifiable reason about no further action. Fair enough. If there's a reason for no further action then it needs to be justified and given context.

The next thing I would say is to be mindful of adultification of teenagers. Now, I want to start by saying the term 'adultification' originally comes from anti-racist efforts and anti-racist movements which say that children from black and minoritized communities are treated and they are much more punitively compared to their peers. So I just want to really respect where this term has come from. That's the community it's come from. And I think we need to maybe find a different word in this context, but we need to be mindful not to write teenagers off, as if to say, 'Oh, they're really mature. They don't need our support.' Because, as you say up here in Case Note 6, I think it is, I was 200 miles away from my home town, I was in a very terrifying situation. At that time I was living in an unregulated hostel, which I've written about quite a lot, about why that is unacceptable (and if you're interested more you can look up the *Keep Caring to Eighteen*

campaign). But here you can just see that, because of my age, the social worker really just wrote me off and I had to travel over 200 miles home by myself. Now, you know, as social workers if your child was in danger 200 miles away would you expect them to do that? And I think that the answer is no.

So anyway, I promised that I would keep this strength-based and send you away hopefully with something useful that you can do. So here are just a few more suggested actions.

Now I know that I'm probably...I don't know who I'm speaking to today, but I can't see all of your lovely names. But I imagine that there's a spread here of people from all different professions, all different stages of their career. But if I'm talking to any managers or directors and so on, I would really ask that case note recording is really embedded into social work training. And if I'm speaking to any university lecturers as well. Because I think there's an issue here where universities assume that, 'Oh, this will be covered in placement or in the job,' and then, you know, managers in placement or the job assume that it will have been covered. So please just make sure that this is the absolute bread and butter for all ASYEs, newly qualifieds or whatever the equivalent is in your profession. I know that there's likely lots of different professionals here.

The next thing to say is I know it's a scary thing but I think the only way that we can really improve and elevate practice is to let children and young people know about their rights to access their files, because it shouldn't have taken me years and years to figure that out, you know. I think if social workers are writing with the knowledge that this person in front of me may very well request this file in three, five, ten, fifteen years, practice is going to improve. So make sure that everybody who has contact with social care is aware. Because you know, when children come into care a lot of the time all they have is their rights. They come, as I did, empty-handed. So it's really important to make sure that those are protected. But even for children who aren't in care or aren't yet in care, letting them know, it's just a way to empower them.

The other thing to say is when I was in care, honestly my saving grace was writing. And all these years later I'm so grateful to the little girl that I was for keeping my own diaries. And I've published some diary extracts I wrote when I was in care, and I should have added them to the list of links to share, but I will find them and send them to you later on. So yes, make sure that children are encouraged to record their own records. Because if I didn't have my diaries I'd only just have this social worker's inaccurate and, quite frankly, unkind words to go from. So make sure, even if the children isn't necessarily a writer – they might want to do vlogs or Tik-Toks or they might want to record their life through art or stories – make sure that life story work is really meaningful. And there's lots of great research emerging around life story work, especially around how children can be an active part of that process.

The other thing to say if you're a manager or kind of in a position where you can change policies is, make sure there's an option to challenge records because it's...I don't know how else to describe

this but it's almost like, you know, it's a bit of a strange comparison but in cases of divorce where one person has initiated the divorce and then that individual then gets, you know, what can be quite overwhelming and sometimes inaccurate information written about them and there's no actual chance to change what is on that record.

I think for me it really feels like, I can't believe that 150 miles away somewhere in this local authority there's these records that might actually outlive me and that are written about me and they're not fair. So have the option to challenge and give a kind of right to reply. And give the young person an opportunity to write their own version or add some notes.

And the final suggested action, really, is to make sure that there are standards for all settings. So I haven't actually shared this here with you, but as well as making an SAR request to my local authority I also made one to the unregulated placement that I lived in. And I think what I probably expected was something of maybe poor quality or...I don't know. Because I remember in that setting sitting down with my social worker and, you know, she kept a kind of big blue file about me with all my wellbeing notes. So I know that it existed. But when I made this SAR request to my unregulated setting I was shocked beyond belief to receive a very short letter which referred to me as a tenant and just said, 'Sorry, basically under our policy we deleted all information about you after seven years. But the one thing we have managed to find is a whole spreadsheet of your rent history,' which detailed every single ingoing and outgoing. I could see how much in housing benefit I cost the local authority. I could see...they even, you know, took the liberty of highlighting that I was 50p in debt with my service charge that I left. And no child should be referred to as a 'tenant', no child should be diminished to a spreadsheet or figures. We're so much more than that. So also make sure that you check out whether, you know, placements in your local authority are appropriately handling the records. Because I would have loved to see those records of that time, at a time when my memory, because of trauma of that time, is a little bit hazy, and the fact that they're lost forever feels like a little bit of my life is lost as well.

So yes, that's enough on suggested actions. But I think I have been quite vulnerable with you today, and I'm going to ask you a favour. I'm going to ask if in return you can be a bit vulnerable with me as well. And it's not something...you're not going to be tested on this, you're not going to be asked to share unless you really want to. But just in your own time, can you quickly find either pen or paper – or if you can't find pen or paper if you could just make some notes on your phone or on your laptop – that would be really brilliant. But I just want us to think a little bit more about language and the unconscious bias that all of us have when it comes to children and young people who use our services.

So what I'm going to do is I'm going to give you one minute. I'm going to time it on my watch. And the question that I'm going to ask you is, 'When you think of a child who has a social worker or a child in care, anyone who is need of support, what are the first words that come to your head?' Yep, you've got one minute to do that now. Off you go. So just in case you missed the instruction, the minute's started now,

but I just want you to write down top words that come to your mind if I say, 'a child in care or a child in need of support'. What are the top words that come up for you?

Okay. You've got about 30 seconds left now. And just to say there's no right or wrong to this, there's no judgement. It's just an exercise to see what words come up for you, and then we will come back. You've got ten more seconds.

Okay. Now the next thing I'm going to ask you to do is for every positive word that came up I'd like you to draw a little circle next to that word. Or for every negative word that came up I would like you to add a square next to that word. So positive circles, negative squares. Positive circles, negative squares. I'm going to give you just another ten seconds to do that.

Okay. So usually, the last time I did this exercise and I asked people in the room, 'Did you get more circles or did you get more squares?' the majority of people said that they got more squares. And it's a real shame that I can't see the chat at the moment, but if you did feel willing to share what words came up for you, please do, just so that we can all share in this experience together. But the last time I did this exercise, you know, the typical words that came up were 'troubled', 'challenged', 'vulnerable', 'naughty'. All of those things. And actually, it just shows how much unconscious bias we have and that no matter how much we try to go into any situation with an open mind, we do have kind of internalised beliefs about a person we meet before we ever get to meet them.

And so what I'm going to do now is I'm going to talk about supervision and how language in supervision is just as important as language that we record in case notes.

Now you might think, 'Well how is that a link?' But I truly and strongly believe that to actually be able to get to the point of writing well about children and young people we need to be speaking well of them as well. And to be speaking well of them we need to be thinking well. So you can see that link there, because actually I think all of us, if we are really honest, can admit to being in a meeting setting with lots of different professionals, and if we did the circle and squares exercise, if we wrote down every single word that came up as an adjective about that young person, we would probably end up with more squares than circles. So I think that it isn't just about...writing well isn't enough. It needs to be a whole...you know, in the culture of how we speak, and it needs to be internal change as well.

So a couple of things that I would recommend in supervision to make sure that we are thinking and speaking well of the child to then write about them well, is that if you are in a supervision setting it sounds really simply but for anybody like me, I think I'm quite a visual learner. One thing that you can do is bring in with you an object that reminds you of that child, just to keep you really grounded. So it could be anything. It could be a teddy. It could be, you know, if the child's really into something like animé it could be an animé kind of...something that you print out in your printer in the office that's barely working. Whatever it is. Or even if it's just a sentence. Something that just

keeps you grounded and reminds you, 'Okay, this supervision, yes it is about me in part. But actually it's about the child who isn't here.'

And I think if I said to any of you now, 'Oh, by the way, professionals are working with you in your life and they meet up about once every six weeks to talk about you,' I think that's quite a scary thing to consider, isn't it? I mean, none of us like to be gossiped about or spoken poorly about. And I think that applying that same attitude to supervision is absolutely crucial.

The other thing is, I really am a true, true believer that to do anything well it's best to begin well. And for me that came up in my case notes when I saw straight away my name was spelled wrong. I think that really kind of foreshadowed everything else that was to come. So before supervision, make sure we're asking, 'If the child was here what would they think or say?' and also could you maybe consider co-chairing supervision with a child or young person? It doesn't have to be in a really kind of clinical office setting. It can be absolutely anywhere. And I think that by doing that we can really start to reflect on power dynamics.

Also I think one thing that we can do is to challenge when we hear other professionals speaking poorly of a young person. So where it says that a young person is, you know, let's just say attention-seeking, we can reframe that as well. Can we say 'attention-deprived' instead? What does it mean to be attention-seeking? 'Cause that's quite a negative connotation. Actually, it's a really positive thing that child is wanting and seeking out connection. Don't we all do that as human beings? So I think that we really just need to reframe what those words mean for us as well.

And finally, as we're coming to a close and moving onto the question and answer, a few questions. And this applies to both supervision and recording. One person that I worked with once recommended, well if you're writing, can you kind of visualise that the child or young person is stood behind you? And that's quite a freaky thing to think, isn't it? But they may not be stood behind now but guess what? They may be stood behind a screen in five, ten, fifteen years reading your words. So in my mind it's the same thing. So would you use the same words or descriptions if the young person was stood behind you?

Next, how would you feel if the young person saw this in five to ten years? I think these are questions that we really need to think about.

This is the final slide before we move onto question and answers. I'm sure that many of you have heard of the social graces and you use it in your work, which is absolutely brilliant. I think it can be a tool that we can use both in case note recording and in supervision, and we can involve the child or young person. So I think that sometimes in social work and in other professions we don't always stop and think holistically about the child. We might be given an assessment which describes them in a few words but we never go beyond that. Or we do go beyond that but often we rely on the assessments that we're given to form a kind of picture in our mind.

But what I really love about the social graces is that it goes into the seen and unseen differences that all of us have. So for anyone who doesn't know what this is, it is a social theory by Burnham, and I will send you a kind of link to some more kind of academic writing about this. But it just breaks down all those different seen and unseen bubbles in our lives. So the graces stand for, you know, you can see G R A C E and S and it's all broken down. But if I were to apply this to my own life as a young person, and using the scaling tool where 10 means that this thing impacted me the maximum and 0 meant it didn't impact me at all, if I think about gender, for example, I think as a young person I'm going to think about, you know, being kind of sixteen, seventeen, I'm going to think about when I moved into the hostel setting after getting kicked out from my foster carer. For me, I think honestly, being a sixteen-year-old...

Sorry, this would happen, wouldn't it, in the middle of a presentation! So I will try not to faff! But I think for me gender was a 9 out of 10 in terms of how much it impacted me every day because being a vulnerable teenage girl living in a hostel in the red-light district was just a really scary experience, and it would be for me now as well. So that would be a 9.

I think geography as well, thinking about living in an unregulated hostel, as I said, in the red-light district in a really deprived town a stone's throw away from casinos, a load of pubs and bars. That was just a really scary place to exist as a young girl. So again, I would say on a normal day that would probably be about an 8. But I am from...I won't name the local authority but I'm from somewhere that's really known for its tourism and stag and hen dos, so probably that number fluctuated. At the weekend that number would probably rise to a 10.

I will say something about race as well. So I'm speaking to you as someone who has an enormous amount of white privilege. I am mixed-race but I'm very light skinned, and I know that, you know, that comes with an awful lot of privilege in this world. So I would say that that was not something that I really had to think about at all. I would give that a 2 because I think that there's still the legacy of kind of inter-generational trauma around what some of my family members experienced because of racism and how that impacted them and then how it then had a knock-on impact on me and so on. But I think I'd give that a 2 out of 10. But it's important to raise that point because even now as we speak, disproportionately we know that black and minoritized children have it far worse in care and they're much more likely to end up in placed like unregulated placements and be discriminated against.

The other thing I am going to maybe pick out here is the something else. So I feel like the social graces, it's a brilliant tool but it does miss some stuff. So the something else that I'm going to add in very, very messy handwriting is mental health. I think as a young person my mental health was very poor. I had to receive, you know, professional support. I was in and out of hospital. So I would probably give my mental health about a 10. It would probably be more than that if I could scale it.

The other thing I think here is missing is care experience as well, and how that can really just make you feel ostracised and different. So I would probably give that about, on a good day, an 8 out of 10.

So already I think if my social worker had taken a moment to look at the social graces in this way, they would have seen that there was a lot going on for me under the surface, and perhaps as a result of that they would have been a little bit kinder and more forgiving in their case note recording.

Just to say about this tool, if you're working with, you know, adults, it's something that can be applied. It's something that you can do in supervision, in peer-to-peer support work. It's also something that you can do directly with children, to get them to say, 'Okay, where are you here? If you're an 8, how can we work with you to reduce that down to a 6?' and so on.

But if people, you know, aren't really a big fan of numbers of they have dyslexia or anything else, you could even just adapt it to be a traffic light model. So you could have green for something that maybe doesn't impact you. I think right now, as a northerner living down south, my accent comes up a lot, but back then I was living in the place I was from so that would not have mattered. I maybe would have given a yellow to something like education. I was the first person in my family to do GCSEs but actually education for me was a lifesaver and a positive, and I probably would have given red to something like gender. So you can imagine...we don't have time now but if I'd have done this traffic light for every single one it's just a really clear visual representation, and it helps us think about the people we work with at a time you can feel really stuck doing that.

So anyway, I'm going to stop sharing now and move onto any questions that you might have. So this is probably going to be beyond my technical expertise, but hopefully that has stopped sharing now. And I'm going to move onto any questions. So I should know this, shouldn't I, but Gillian, I think were you going to feed me some questions? Is that right?

Gillian MacFarlane: Yes, yeah. I'm just going through them now. So thank you, Rebekah. That was extremely informative and moving and thought-provoking. And there's been many, many comments thanking you for sharing your story and some suggestions as well. So I'm just going to go through some now. We've had a lot come in so I'll put as many as I can in the remaining time.

Rebekah Pierre: Thank you. I'm going to get a pen and paper because I'm going to be able to answer them a lot better if I make some notes. Thank you.

Gillian MacFarlane: Perfect. Let me just...

Rebekah Pierre: Okay, thanks. I probably just showed my pyjamas bottoms to hundreds of people, didn't I, but oh well! We'll delete that from the record, please!

Gillian MacFarlane: That's alright! Okay, so first...so do you think...so someone's asked, 'Do you think we should acknowledge past misspellings of name?' Yeah, so that comes up sort of in records and reports and

assessments, I would assume. I know you've touched on it a little bit, but what are your thoughts about that?

Rebekah Pierre: Absolutely. There was just a resounding yes in my head when I saw that. I think any time that we can show humility and acknowledge when we've got something wrong is actually only going to improve trust in the future and is going to spell out that practice needs to improve for any future social worker who gets this. So yes, please do that.

Gillian MacFarlane: Someone else asks, 'Looking back, at what age would you choose to have had access to your case records and who would have been the best person to have supported you in that?'

Rebekah Pierre: Ah, what a brilliant question. I'll be really honest with you. So I don't think I would have...I think that you should have the right to access them at any age, and that we should listen to children and young people. But I think for me personally, I had only begun to start therapy in my mid- to late-twenties and I don't think I was even in a place to emotionally process them until that age. I think it's different for everybody. So I think it should be any age. However, there needs to be a full package of support. My local authority just sent me, you know, what was pretty devastating-to-read information without any offer of support. So I think that...I know this is maybe not done in practice but it really should be up to the young person. Because I'll be honest with you, I think it would have helped me if I'd have been able to go back to, you know, the amazing pastoral worker I had a sixth-form called Debbie, who was just a legend and who helped me through every day. If I could have gone back to someone I had a pre-existing relationship with it would have really helped, whereas if I would have been speaking to, you know, a very nice, well-meaning professional who I'd never met, I think it would have been difficult. So I think it just needs to go back to the individual.

Gillian MacFarlane: Thank you. Someone else said, 'I remember being in another training and someone said that they hated the word "allegation" because it implies that it might not be the truth. The preference would be "stated" or something along those lines. I have since been cautious when writing "allegation" or "alleged". What are your thoughts on this word?'

Rebekah Pierre: Thank you. I agree with whoever it was that raised that point. I think it sounds very dubious and doubtful. You know, if I asked you – and I'm not going to get anyone to share this in the chat – but think about, you know, the worst thing that anyone's ever done to you. You know that that is true, and if someone described that as an allegation, I imagine it might be quite hurtful. So I think the more neutral language, you know, even "said" is probably the most neutral, isn't it?

Gillian MacFarlane: Thank you. Someone else said that in older recordings and case notes assessments, in children's records, the language can be sort of unkind of blaming. So this person's saying obviously we can't go back and change that but, you know, in your opinion what...we can't go back and explain why it is wrong or why it is poorly written. But they're asking you what else do you think we can do when we have to share older...like that language to young people or to children?

- Rebekah Pierre: Yeah. I think that the first thing to do again is just to be genuine and just to apologise and just to say, 'Look, we know that this isn't right. It was wrong and it shouldn't happen and it's something that we're working on,' and then even maybe invite them to be part of the process with the local authority about changing that.
- And just to say I don't get language right all the time, 'cause I've just seen...I can't see lots but I can see kind of snippets of questions and I've seen someone said, 'We use attachment-seeking,' and if I'd have known that language twenty minutes ago I would have used 'attachment-seeking' rather than anything else. So we're all on a learning journey, and I think that as long as we're willing to add and change our vocabulary then that's good, isn't it? It starts with having a positive intention.
- Gillian MacFarlane: Someone asked, 'Writing to the child is something we really aspire to. However, it's quite a skill. Could you recommend any training? Have you seen any training to support staff to learn this skill?'
- Rebekah Pierre: I haven't, I'm afraid. But I think Research In Practice or [unclear – 0:52:31.5] Voice may be good places to look. I think I would just recommend if you are looking for any training to make sure that it's co-produced training that is written not just by researchers but in collaboration with care-experienced people as well.
- Gillian MacFarlane: Someone just asked if you did have a life story book and if that was written any differently.
- Rebekah Pierre: I didn't, unfortunately. No, I didn't have it so I can't comment on that. But I think that I'm very passionate about young people getting quality that they deserve because I remember, you know, training as a social worker, and let's be honest, a student social worker would be given five quid and said, 'Can you go to Poundland and get a scrapbook and some stickers?' And actually, that's not good enough. I think that we need to honour people's stories by investing in them and making them not just well-written but, you know, something really beautiful or well done, whether that is something digital or kind of hardback.
- Gillian MacFarlane: A few people have asked if you ever got a response from the social worker when you did send the letter.
- Rebekah Pierre: Yeah. So I did get a response and it wasn't an apology, it wasn't, 'I see why that was wrong.' But you know, it was a kind of very short response just to say, 'I understand that this is very personal to you and I can't give context or defend,' but kind of like, 'I'm glad to see you're in a better place.' So it wasn't quite what I wanted but I suppose at some level it was closure that at least I got the final say and at least I was heard in the end.
- Gillian MacFarlane: Yeah. Definitely. Someone did ask if they could use your letter and resources in training to children and families, practitioners.
- Rebekah Pierre: Yeah, that's fine. So I've sent the link to the letter. So if anyone wants to use the letter, please do use it. As I said, even for me, if there's one person who is saved from the heartache of reading poor case files when they grow up because of a webinar like this, then it wasn't all for nothing. So...

Gillian MacFarlane: I'll just do a couple more. Let me just see...if you see any as well, Rebekah, you let me know. But let me see. Do you have any advice regarding writing life letters or life stories for young people?

Rebekah Pierre: That's a really big question and it's almost like such a big question that I don't want to do it mis-justice. I think the first one is to give the young person the opportunity to collaborate because whilst we on the outside may see a very happy young person who has lots of friends or is doing really well at school, we can never really know the internal world of them. So make sure that they have an opportunity to contribute to, whether that is written or in any other means.

I think the other thing is to try and make it multimedia if you can. So not everyone's a reader, not everyone's a writer. Can you ask the young person, 'Okay, what are your top ten favourite Spotify songs at the moment?' or, 'What are the things that you're really into?' Can you make it a mixture of photo, music and holistic. But I also think there's some really brilliant research out there at the moment, especially being done with the University of East Anglia, around life story work. So make sure you make use of the brilliant research that's been done, and especially the research where care-experienced people have been involved.

Gillian MacFarlane: Thanks. Thank you. So that's all we have time for right now, so thank you all for joining us. We've had over 800 people attend today.

Rebekah Pierre: I didn't know that before!

Gillian MacFarlane: Yeah. There's so many, many interesting questions and such positive feedback as well. And thank you, Rebekah, for such a powerful, valuable session.

Just a reminder to everybody that a recording of the webinar will be available on the CC Inform site in the coming weeks, along with a further Q&A with Rebekah. We will answer more of the questions that have come in that we didn't get to today. So we will highlight this on the homepage and in the email newsletters. And if you have time to fill out our post-event survey – and you will be directed to this right after the webinar – that would be very much appreciated.

And thank you all again. I hope you have a good rest of your day. And thank you. Thanks, Rebekah.

Rebekah Pierre: Thanks everybody.