

Walking the walk

The Relationships Matter story

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the Relationships Matter project which ran from April 2014 to April 2016. It was facilitated by Iriss and led by the Relationships Matter Collective, a group of inspirational practitioners and young people who were brave enough to challenge, and confident enough to promote, continued relationships between practitioners and young people as they leave care.

This story provides an overview of the rationale, activity and learning from those who piloted new ideas as part of the project. It complements the Relationships Matter website and includes signposts to the site for more in-depth detail.



Improving lives through
knowledge, evidence and innovation

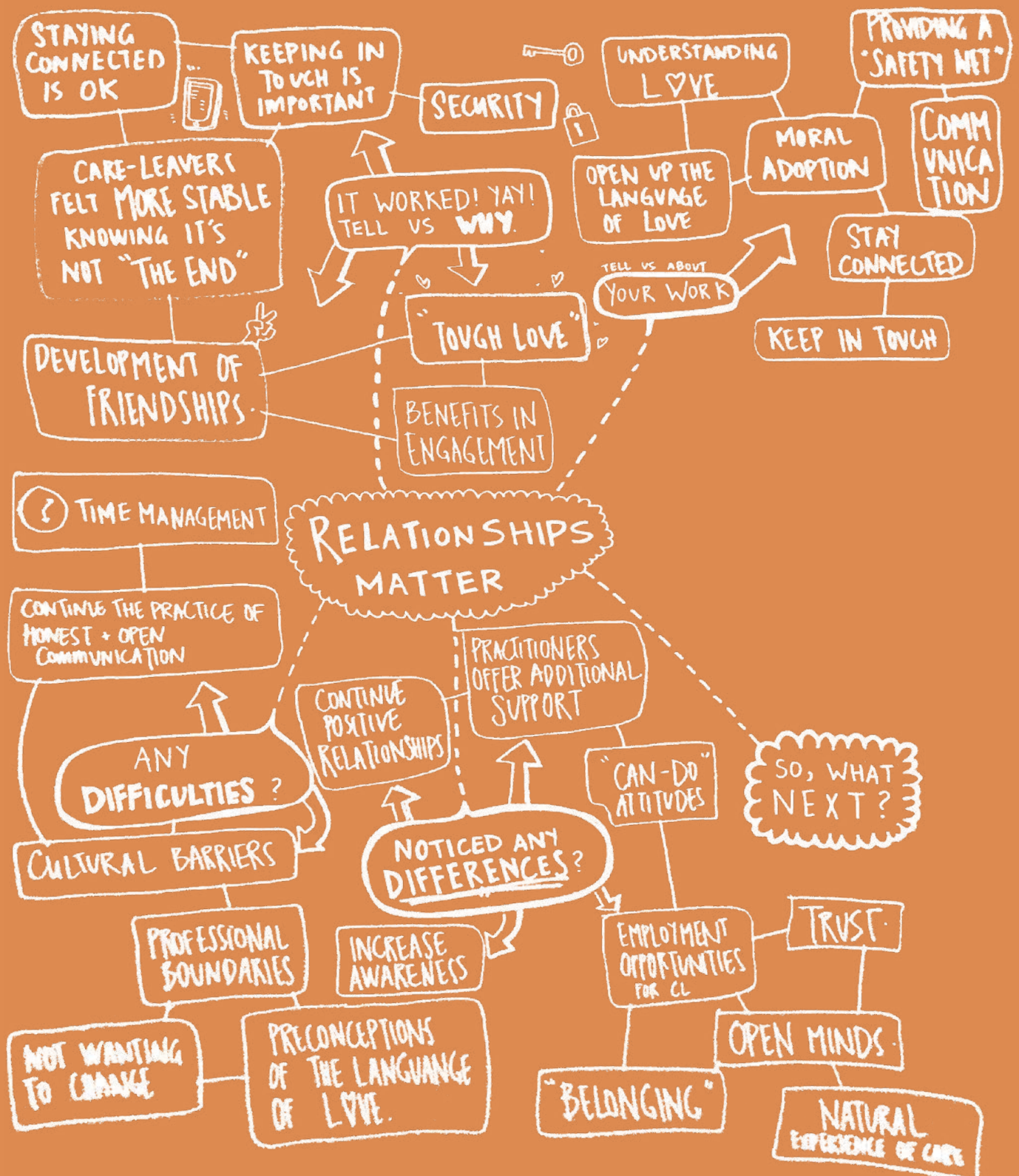


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RELATIONSHIPS MATTER 2014-2015



THE RATIONALE

Transitions in life can be complex. When young people leave care and start to become [interdependent](#)¹ the transition can be fraught with difficulties that can continue well into [adulthood](#), and be life long. Young people leaving care have reported that these difficulties can contribute to a feeling of isolation, loneliness and depression. Furthermore, [research](#) indicates that young people are at risk of becoming socially excluded and vulnerable members of society. This needs to change. We need to find innovative ways to better support young people who are leaving care to lead the lives they aspire to live.

[Relationships](#) are considered to be a core aspect of the efforts of practitioners when supporting and caring for the people they work with. [Relational-based practice](#) recognises the important influence of [relationships](#) on the effectiveness of interventions.

The [continuity of consistent relationships](#) throughout a young person's care experience is important and young people say they would benefit from positive, nurturing relationships. However, there can be many [barriers](#) to developing and maintaining these nurturing, meaningful relationships. This also needs to change.

The Relationships Matter project was developed to help inform how these changes could be realised, how to challenge the barriers, and to support and champion the importance of continuing relationships for young people leaving care. In order to do this meaningfully, we wanted to work with the experts by experience – young people and the people that support them throughout their care journey.

In September 2014, the Relationships Matter website was launched. Its purpose was to provide a platform for people to share evidence and personal stories about how relationships can be positively supported during times of transition, and to identify related barriers. As part of the website launch, Iriss put out a national call seeking people who wanted to challenge barriers that prevent the continuation of positive relationships with young people as they leave care. The idea was to bring these people together for a Jam².

1 'Interdependent' is used in the place of 'independent' because, in reality, none of us are independent, we all rely upon other people.

2 Inspired by the [Global Service Jam](#) model. A Jam is an event that invites people with open, enquiring minds to work together using their knowledge and experience to constructively challenge particular issues in a safe, creative space

THE JAM

Five teams comprising practitioners and young people were selected to attend the first Relationships Matter Jam, which took place on the 15 January 2015. Participants came from across the sector and included [Care Visions](#), [Hot Chocolate Trust](#), [Kibble](#), [Tremanna Children's Home](#) (Falkirk Council), [Includem](#), [Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland](#) (CELCIS), [Who Cares? Scotland](#) and [Young Scot](#).

The purpose of this event was to support workers and young people to improve daily practice by responding to (generally bureaucratic) obstacles workers experience that do not preserve and promote positive relationships.

We produced a [video](#) to give an overview of the Jam.



The barriers the teams worked on together during the event included:

- 1 Where is the 'L' in SHANARRI? – what do professionals and young people need, and what do they need to do differently, to show and feel love?
- 2 Judgement from others – how can support staff remain in contact with young people when they leave our service?
- 3 Needing permission – how can we give staff and young people clear guidance that both supports ongoing relationships and ensures these

relationships are safe and manageable?

- 4 Personal and professional boundaries – what guidance do practitioners need from their organisations to continue to support young people after leaving care?
- 5 Everyone's life has ups and downs – how do we ensure young people feel that getting back in touch is a normal thing to do?

We filmed each of the five teams presenting their ideas that responded to one of these questions in their context.



1 [Care Visions](#)



2 [Hot Chocolate Trust](#)



3 [Includem](#)

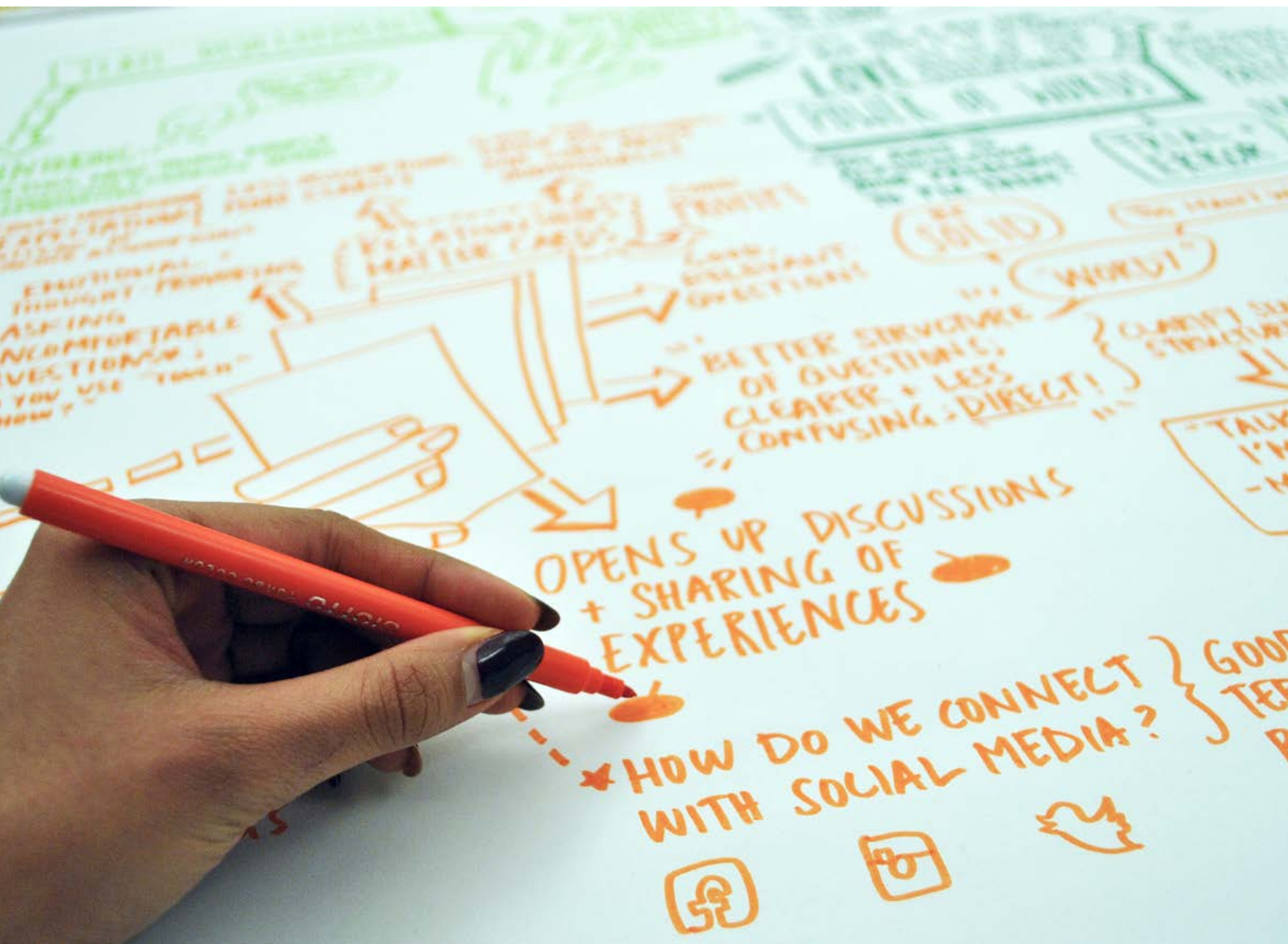


4 [Kibble](#)



5 [Tremmana Children's Home](#)

A [summary of what the project achieved in 2014-2015](#) is available on the Relationships Matter website.

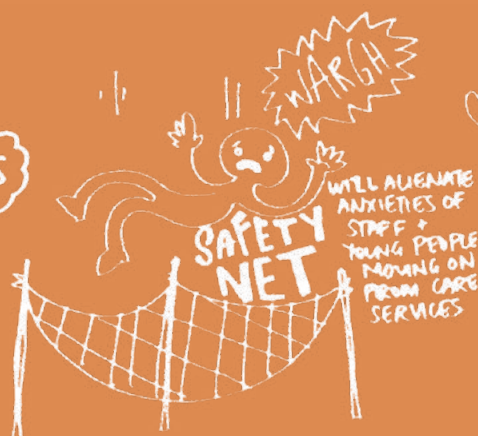


3 A prototype is an early sample, model, or release of a product built to test a concept or process or to act as a thing to be replicated or learned from. (source: [Wikipedia](#))

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER 2015-2016

ICEBREAKER

WHAT DO RELATIONSHIPS MEAN TO YOU??



WE EXPLORED THE TEAMS UNDERSTANDING OF LOVE

HOW DO WE EXPRESS LOVE? FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO FEEL LOVED?

THE WORD LOVE IS USED MORE OFTEN NOW!!

OPEN UP THE LANGUAGE OF

Loovooove

TO SEE HOW THE RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE.

MORAL ADOPTION

BE CAREFUL!!

DON'T WORRY! OKAY

I'LL CALL YOU EVERY DAY OK!!

A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WE HAVE LOOKED AFTER!

YOUR WORK!

WHAT DID YOU PILOT?

WRITE DOWN ALL YOUR STORIES



STAY CONNECTED WITH THE PEOPLE WE BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH!

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH WHO IS IMPORTANT



WHAT DO RELATIONSHIPS MEAN TO YOU??

WE'RE GONNA LEARN ABOUT WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE LAST YEAR!

HOW TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER!

PROMOTING CO-LEARNING + COMMUNICATION WITH MORE PEOPLE!

GAYLE



YEAR TWO

In this second year, the project aimed to:

- Support the Relationships Matter Collective in line with [each member's specific aims and needs](#)
- Raise the profile of relationships and their importance to young people who are leaving care
- Raise awareness of the obstacles the workforce faces when trying to support care experienced young people to develop and continue relationships with significant people in their lives
- Engage with the workforce to support them to challenge relationally based issues
- Engage with the workforce to support them to create evidence that inspires and enables workers to engage in relationally based practice

These aims have been realised in the following ways:

- Four of the five organisations that attended the Jam have embedded their ideas in practice
- Each member of the Relationships Matter Collective has [blogged about the process of embedding their idea](#)
- Iriss has provided the Collective with support to gather evidence about the changes they are making to their practice and its impact on young people and practitioners. Details and the [project process](#) can be found on the website
- Inspired by [The School of Life's 100 Questions: Love Edition](#) and [Phil Coady's research](#), Iriss [co-designed a tool](#) with the Collective to support conversations about the enactment of relational-based practice
- Iriss hosted a workshop in January 2016, to bring the Collective back together one year after the Jam, to discuss the practice learning when embedding the ideas they developed at the Jam

CHANGES THE COLLECTIVE MADE TO ENABLE CONTINUING CARE

The key point of interest for each member of the Collective was the experiences of other members while making changes to: the culture they work in, service processes they work through, and things they do with young people to ensure they feel cared for as they leave care. The following summary provides an overview of:

- What people have done since the Jam
- What worked well and why
- What the challenges were
- How people responded to the challenges
- What difference this has made to young people
- What difference this has made to practitioners

The pages that follow provide a summary in the member's own words...



CARE VISIONS

Describe the work you've done since the Jam

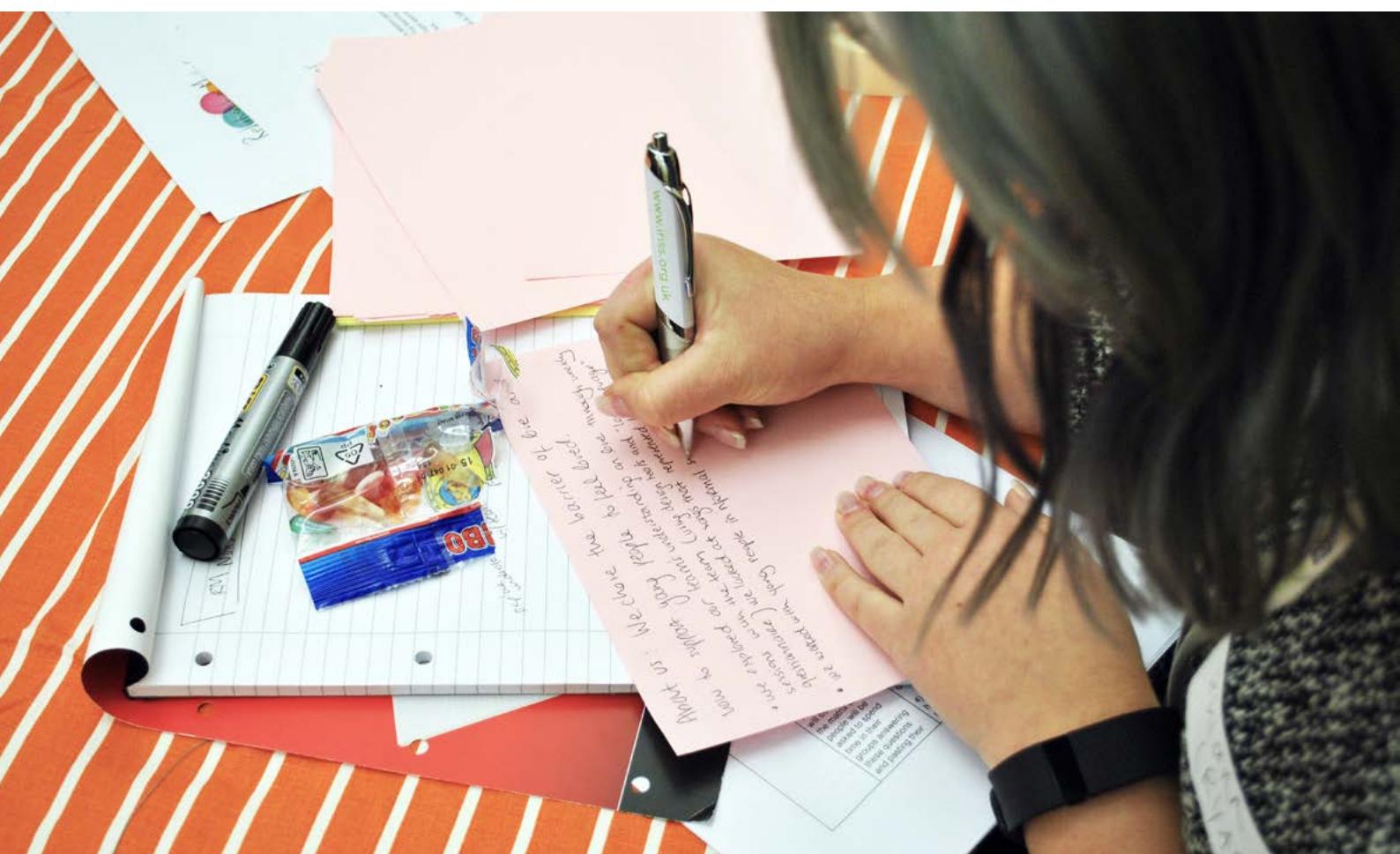
Our model, embodied in the Why Not? service, is one of moral adoption and lifelong connections for young people. Moral adoption relates to 'feeling a sense of responsibility to continue to care for the young people we have looked after beyond their care experience'. Developed for a Scottish context from the ['You Gotta Believe'](#) service originally set up in New York City, Why Not? is based on the fundamental human need for lifelong meaningful connections that exist beyond the traditional care experience. To date, 33 young people have been referred to Why Not? Of these, 31 are currently using the service.

[Read more from Nicki McLaughlin, service manager for Why Not?](#)

Read Jenn Clark's story, a care-experienced young person writing about the [importance of relationships](#) and of [leaving home](#).

'Why do you want to do that? ...These things never work... you'll get calls at two in the morning... It's not our place to stay involved with young people...'

[Lisa and Sara's story](#)



What worked well and why?

Young people's engagement – it was what they wanted to happen.

What were the challenges?

We experienced cultural barriers and difficulties navigating professional boundaries.

How did you respond to the challenges?

Talk, give permission, discuss things at team meetings. Create a safe space to allow people to change their views and to share examples and stories of what's ok. Give them time to process new ways of thinking. Training can help change people's attitudes.

What difference has this activity made to young people?

Someone to rely on and trust no matter what happens, remaining connected to Care Visions.

What difference has this activity made to practitioners?

We're beginning to open minds, allowing a more natural experience of care, and creating safety.



TREMANNA

Describe the work you've done since the Jam

We developed a [model of care](#) where all young people moving on from Tremanna can expect, and will receive ongoing, time-unlimited support from those they have relationships with. This approach was part of an honest, open culture where this practice was embedded in the staff team. Underpinning this culture is the agreement that when relationships develop 'it's ok to stay in touch'.

What worked well and why?

Formal support decreased and natural friendships developed. Young people felt secure moving on, knowing it's not the end of care but a positive beginning and they will be helped by important people in their lives.

What were the challenges?

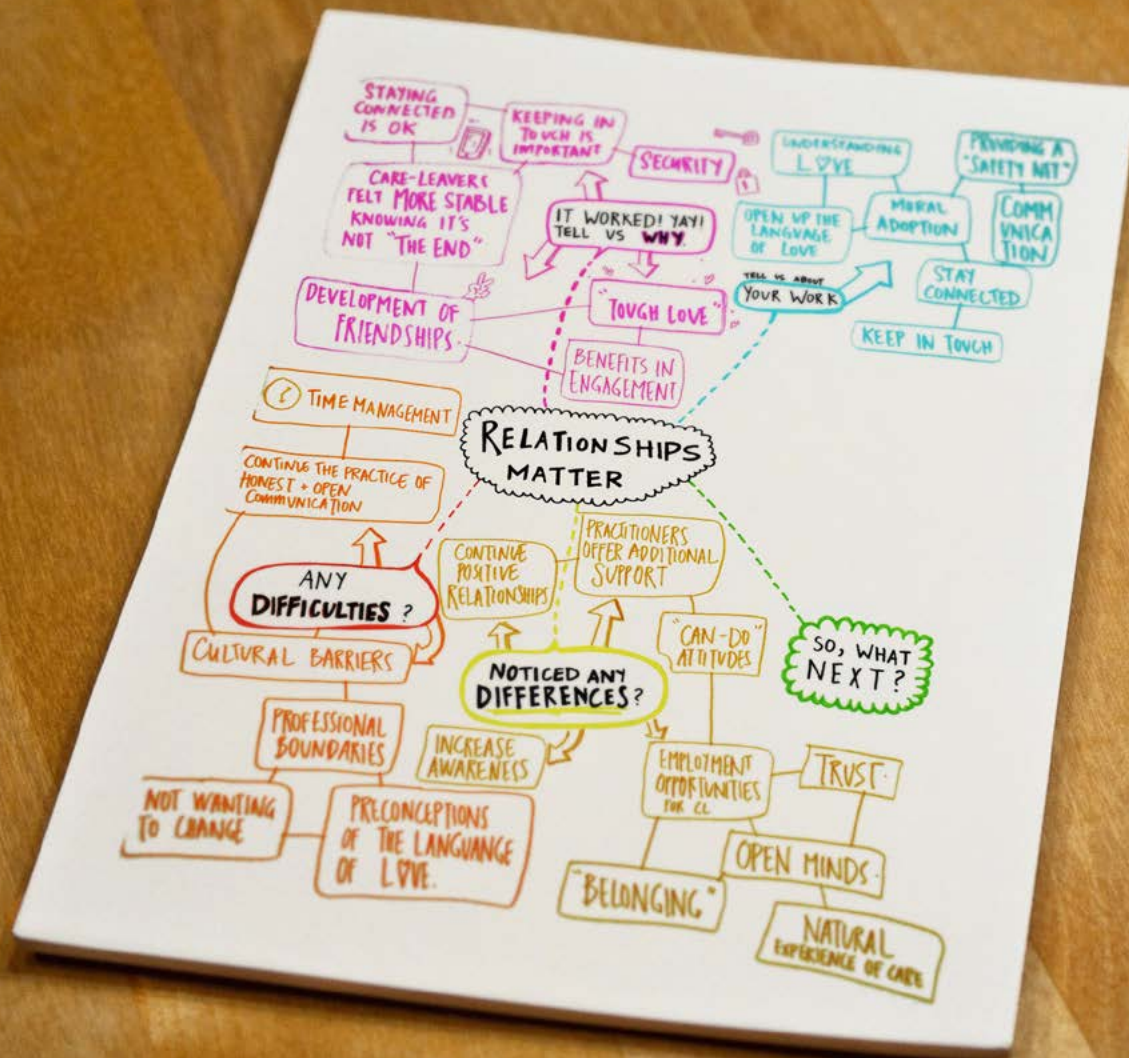
Increased capacity, we needed to look at specific remits for staff.

Needed to look at expanding our model if bringing all young people back into support.

Responding to crisis in a 'friendship' capacity.

Some staff not committed to this way of practicing, although they're still accepting of the culture.





How did you respond to the challenges?

Permission to change culture, transparency, being honest in your own relationships (between those in the team and with young people).

What difference has this activity made to young people?

Feeling belonging, increasing confidence that someone is there for you, being part of a family, not being isolated, getting back in touch with young people who've moved on.

What difference has this activity made to practitioners?

We have a 'can do' attitude and an expectation that it's ok to keep in touch. We have an expectation that all young people will be welcome and be part of Tremanna and openly communicate any issues.

[Read more about Tremanna's model](#)

KATHLEEN QUINN, INDEPENDENT PRACTITIONER

Describe the work you've done since the Jam

My pilot idea was for both young people who attended the Jam to continue relationships with chosen staff as they were moving from the organisation's residential units to the organisation's community based service. I hoped that as the services were part of the same organisation that this would alleviate any anxieties; the organisation's current policy does not permit continuing relationships with young people post service.

Initially, the pilot was well received, however, within two months senior management did not feel it was appropriate to pilot at that time and enthusiasm waned. I was advised to withdraw from the project on the organisation's behalf.

After discussions with Iriss I was invited to be involved as an independent practitioner and to blog about my Masters research which involved interviewing young people and practitioners about the importance of relationships and the impact of relational-based practice.

What worked well and why?

My interviews highlighted the importance of relationships between staff and young people leading to better placements / outcomes, and the exceptional relational-based practice of staff within the organisation. My research also highlighted both parties' desire to continue their relationships after they had left the service.

What were the challenges?

It was disappointing that the organisation no longer wanted to support my idea for the pilot or implement the required policy changes for continuing care and connections with young people post service. The difficulties encountered when trying to gain support from senior management to implement my idea were hindered by organisational culture, the size of the organisation, management structure and my own position as a basic grade worker with little power to influence changes. There was a discussion with senior management in August 2015 that there may be an opportunity for my initial pilot to be rolled out in the organisation's residential child care services in the future. I am still awaiting confirmation at this time.

How did you respond to the challenges?

Although I was no longer permitted to represent the organisation or my idea, I gained a platform to advocate and give young people and staff a voice through my research and disseminate my findings through my blog posts for Iriss on the Relationships Matter website.

What difference has this activity made to young people?

Throughout my research each of the ten young people I interviewed described their increased self-worth developing through their relationships with staff. They identified that this relationship was a catalyst for positive change within themselves and in their lives. Young people spoke about how their relationship with staff helped them in times of crisis, helped them to feel better about themselves, and changed their understanding and perception of how relationships work. Young people were actively discussing the qualities and factors that are important about relationships in practice. I shared young people's advice on building relationships in residential child care in one of my [blog posts](#). Young people shared with me their hopes that changes can be made in social care organisations for young people to continue important relationships they have built with staff into adulthood in the future.

I moved to my organisation's fostering service and relational-based practice is supported and valued. Young people in this service were aware of my research and were eager to share their positive experiences of relationships with their carers' and staff. They asked to be part of my blog and I [shared their views](#) on the Relationships Matter website.

What difference has this activity made to practitioners?

The research I carried out has given young people and practitioners a voice about the importance of relational-based practice. Young people are actively discussing the qualities and factors that are important about relationships in practice.

[Read more about Kathleen's research](#)

HOT CHOCOLATE TRUST

Describe the work you've done since the Jam

We explored the understanding of love through weekly sessions, using design tools and a 'love language' questionnaire. We looked at songs that represented love and worked with young people through informal sessions to explore their understanding of love. We also recorded interviews of Hot Chocolate Trust leavers discussing love and recorded these to share through a series of short films. The aim of capturing this evidence was to 'let these conversations and stories filter into practice and open up our language around love to see how relationships change'.

[Icky about love](#)

What worked well and why?

Using evidence from stories of people who had left the service helped to justify the approach.

Having open conversations (staff and young people) – specific tools like love songs opened people up.

'Tough love' – that love can be shown through firmness – which is often part of the role of the practitioner. This seemed to put people at ease – helps practitioners to embrace love in all parts of their role.

What were the challenges?

Preconceptions about love and the language of love from other professionals... Does love always need to be 'tough love' because that is bound up in control? Is it harder to accept love which is unconditional acceptance? Is the softer stuff more challenging?

Our organisation was in flux – we grew and shrank and then grew again. There were times where the project would drop off the radar. Time was our challenge – we didn't lack enthusiasm.

How did you respond to the challenges?

We challenged the preconceptions! We talk about the challenges now eg issues around tough love and unconditional acceptance. In terms of the challenge of lack of time, we did what we could in the timeframe.

What difference has this activity made to young people?

The word 'love' is used a lot more by young people in the organisation because we have become more open in our language.

Changing how we record things allows staff to reflect on what goes on behind behaviour – and young people pick up on that and respond differently.

We acknowledged that our group of young people changed... We had a high proportion of LGBT people using the service so we made changes (e.g. gender neutral toilet) to demonstrate love and acceptance.

Piloting films in partnership with the Good Shepherd Centre, to use as a youth work tool.

Young people knew when we are being genuine and when we aren't. When we give staff the permission to connect in a genuine way and express love it can change things for young people and the way that they related to staff. They may have never heard that before. Young people knew 'we challenge you because we care about you'.

What difference has this activity made to practitioners?

We met up with a manager from a Throughcare and Aftercare team who also explored love through the films – the project had reach beyond Hot Chocolate Trust.

We have a database which is bespoke to our young people's journeys. This is open to young people to access. But the team felt that the database was clinical and not in keeping with ethos. Now we do all of our recordings as letters to the young people – because it's for them. This changed the way everything was recorded.

We changed how we process things as a team – I have noticed a change in how team members speak about their work (especially challenges) more compassionately by asking questions about why a young person may have been struggling in a session.

INLUDEM

Describe the work you've done since the Jam

Our code of conduct wording was changed to allow workers to telephone young people after they have exited from our service.

What worked well and why?

Workers reported feeling better about being able to telephone young people, and that the young people appreciated and benefitted from it.

What were the challenges?

Time management / caseload, staff changes.

How did you respond to the challenges?

Time management / caseload:

Staff have access to 24 hours management support.

We are looking at a way to record information for those young people who have exited from our service, but who get back in touch so managers can identify if a staff member is undertaking work over and above their existing allocated case load. It is also to assess any ongoing need / resilience / achievements.

Each young person has on average three workers allocated to them. This offers a scaffolding of support for the young person but also for workers.

We have a Big Lottery Funded Transitions Team where all current and previous young people have a direct route to support ongoing development. This supports core staff in relation to those young people exited from intensive support but who wish to still engage in low level supports (16-25yr old). This supports in both scenarios; when the young person calls us or when the worker pro-actively calls them.

Staff Changes:

The relationship built between the young person and the individual workers is used to broker a general sense of trust and relationship with other adults within their lives and also Includem as an organisation. If a young person calls when no worker is available or if all workers have left the organisation, it is our

experience that young people are happy to share the reasons why they have called with other workers.

What difference has this activity made to young people?

Additional support, employment opportunities and continued positive relationships.

What difference has this activity made to practitioners?

We can call, we can offer additional support.



REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

The workshop in January 2016 gave us an opportunity ask the Collective if they felt they had achieved what they set out to do at the Jam, what supported them, and what could have been done differently.

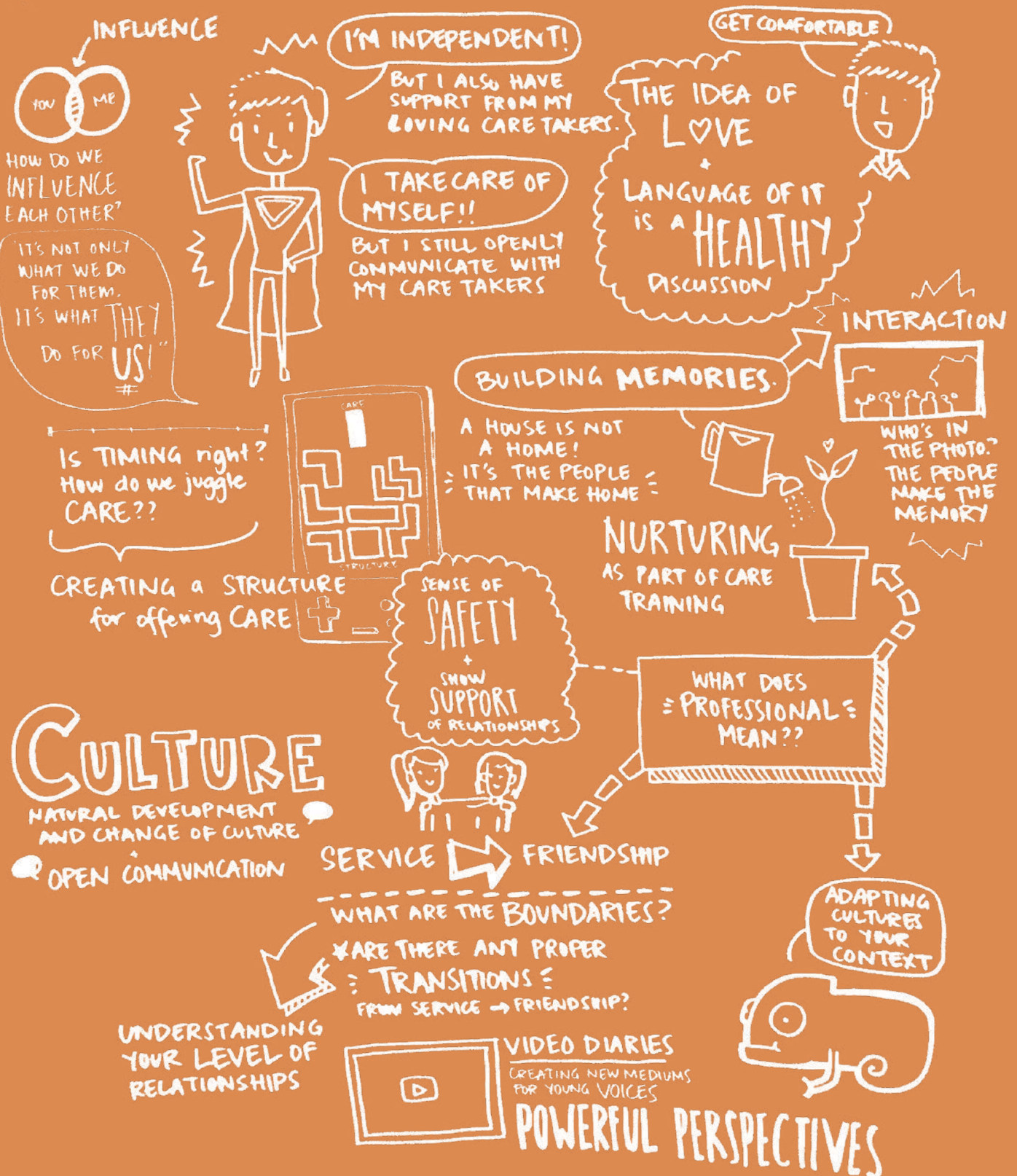
Overall, partners felt that they achieved their aims. In summary, there were several key mechanisms which supported their work including: feedback from young people; sharing common goals; support from management; networking with people from other agencies; teamwork; open communication; expressing, encouraging and sharing good practice; partnership working; and being creative. What was most striking was that they all felt they had already started to improve outcomes for young people they work with.

There were very few aspects of the project that could have been different but a common one was more time to blog about their work on the Relationships Matter website. One participant felt that more organisations could have been involved; another that a mid-year get together might have helped sustain their momentum.

The Collective reported that they valued the [support they received from Iriss](#) including guidance on [evidencing their work](#) and help to keep motivated. What was most valuable was activities which brought together ‘like-minded people’. Partners benefitted from the Jam and the workshop which provided safe spaces to ‘think, dream, plan, reflect, celebrate’. It was during these events that people gained a sense of validation and reassurance from others with a ‘shared passion’. The Relationships Matter website was also highlighted as a helpful feature of the project by providing a platform to share evidence, raise awareness and a place to signpost others to.

Comments on the potential impact of the conversation tool were also captured. One partner noted that ‘a tool can give confidence... Nothing wrong with having conversations to change things.’ Another felt that the tool ‘provides an opportunity to have healthy guided conversations to support and challenge ideas of relationships, boundaries, safe practice and a caring ‘loving’ ethos’.

WHAT NEXT... 2016 ONWARDS?



THE FUTURE

“This is not a project for us, we are developing our culture”

Through working with the Collective, it was clear that they see their work as developing a culture in which continuing relationships with young people leaving care is the accepted norm. Workshop discussions helped to uncover several key learnings to help underpin this culture change:

- 1 Continuing relationships can feel like ‘the right thing to do’ but also that it ‘takes a lot of courage’
- 2 It’s important to challenge and question ‘standard practice’ in terms of its impact on young people:

“Think how traumatic ‘standard practice’ may be for young people.”

“We are talking about our practice but we are also talking about young people’s lives”

- 3 Practitioners can benefit just as much as young people when relationships are built and sustained:

“It’s not a case of give... you get a lot back too”

“The reality is we touch young people’s lives and they touch ours”

- 4 Continuing relationships with young people leaving care can involve questioning what ‘being professional’ means:

“If you are not touched, moved and shaped by people you work with how professional are you?”

“She [the young person] shaped me into the worker I am today. It was emotionally draining but it made me question my own practice. We learned from one another.”

- 5 It’s important that when promoting a change in culture to support lasting relationships and that it is not seen as ‘tick-box’:

“There is a myriad of ways to make relational-based practice the norm. There is a danger that concrete examples mean people think that is what they need to do. Changes need to be contex-

tually and relationally relevant and people need to be open to challenge their practice”

- 6 It’s important to question and challenge the impact of ‘protective measures’ on relational-based practice and continuing relationships with young people leaving care:

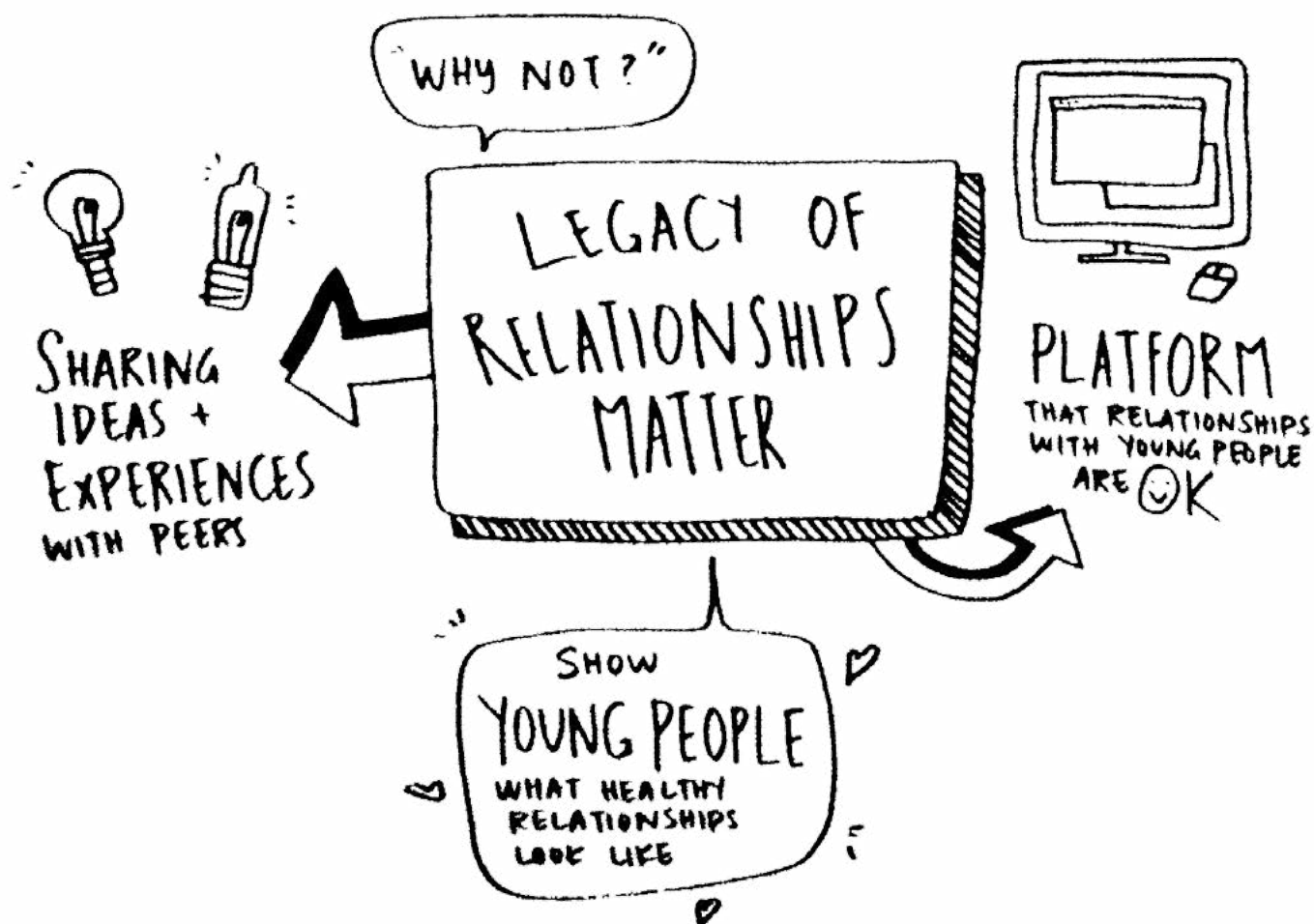
“We need to be careful that we don’t dress up protective measures for professionals so they are unable to form relationships with young people...the policies and structures we create, presented as ways to keep young people safe, are more about risk-averse practice and protecting agencies and staff... The culture of managerialism in social work and social care doesn’t do positive ‘emotional containment’ for staff (it’s messy, time-consuming and can’t be framed in terms of outcomes, but is essential in our work), therefore, it’s easier to discourage relationship-based practice and focus instead on procedures.”

Iriss has produced a resource to support [embedding ideas](#) and an evidence summary about [culture change](#) which you will find useful when considering how continuing relationships become the accepted norm in your service.

Each member of the Relationships Matter Collective is committed to continuing to develop their service provision, culture, and everyday practice to prioritise relational-based practice so that outcomes for young people improve due to a positive experience of love and healthy relationships. In particular:

- [Care Visions Why Not? service](#) and CELCIS will be working together over the next three years to evidence the outcomes of the [moral adoption](#) service model they provide.
- Tremanna residential home will continue to develop different learning and development opportunities for staff to explore and embed relational-based practice as young people leave care.
- Includem will broaden the practice of encouraging young people to keep in contact with practitioners after they have left, and embed the practice of staff proactively keeping in contact with young people.
- Kathleen Quinn will publish her research about the importance of relational-based practice, entitled, The positive potential of relationships in residential child care. Kathleen will explore the enactment of this practice in residential and fostering services at her organisation.

- Hot Chocolate Trust will continue to support conversations about the importance of love in young people's lives.
- The four organisations that have embedded their ideas in practice will be talking about their work at the [Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care Conference 2016](#).
- Iriss and CELCIS has offered to support the Relationships Matter Collective with ongoing advice and guidance. Read more about [why relationships matter to CELCIS](#) and to the [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#).
- The Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum are eager to take on the Relationships Matters website and are currently reviewing how this would be done.
- The Relationships Matter [conversation tool](#) which can be used to support discussions about how relational-based care is enacted and enabled, will be made available in the spring 2016. [Sign up to the Iriss mailing list to be kept up-to-date about the release date for this tool](#).



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To those involved in the Relationships Matter Collective – thank you for being beacons of inspiration and for walking the walk.





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