



Standing on the Corner

Helen Costa is the founder of Cornerstone, a social enterprise focused on improving the lives of children and families touched by the care system. She talks to **Jenna Lomax** about challenging the consultancy industry and how virtual reality can improve vulnerable lives

How has your previous work experience and being the mother of two adopted children, helped you in your work at Cornerstone?

I have two adopted children and they were my motivation to set up Cornerstone in the first place. They are my inspiration for setting up the partnership which stemmed from my own experiences of adopting children and feeling daunted through the whole process.

Being on an NHS Trust gives you a keen understanding of the pressures the health system is under, its priorities and the challenges it faces. There's all sorts of things you learn from that. I have a lot of experience in pharmaceuticals too.

All these experiences helped me when I was setting up Cornerstone. I understood how to set out a business plan and how to take Cornerstone to market. At Cornerstone I learned how you can use innovation and technology-led innovation to transform health and social care.

My previous experience has given me a lot of insight and confidence about how we can really add value to children's services, as opposed to a lot of businesses who say that they offer value, without really having the understanding and the working knowledge.

If you take the big consultancy firms for example, they can charge a lot of money to consult and advise. But what I think is needed and is obvious at Cornerstone – and what we're all about– is trying to provide really tangible solutions that have a big technology element to them. We are not going to get to where we really need to be in health and social care without the help of technology.

Cornerstone is very much about authenticity – really understanding what's going to make a difference on the ground, so the public sector spends its money wisely, with people like us who can really present proper outcomes.

You have just begun working with Antser Group who are offering a “tech trio” of VR, human centred communication systems and predictive analytics that will provide a personalised service to local authorities. Can you explain how the tech trio works and what the company is expecting to achieve through utilising it?

When you think about the way in which the individual cases of children are managed, local authorities are often using old and out-of-date back-office systems that will provide a very basic functionality with little intelligence to them, and will certainly have no involvement or two-way communication with the end user.

We have technology that does have an artificial intelligence (AI) element to it, but it also has a really useful phone based application so the end user can effectively be part of their own case notes. They themselves can communicate back to the service, engaging in a much more 21st Century way. That in turn gives the service the intelligence that it needs to tweak and amend its offerings, solutions and advice to the user.

If you imagine an adolescent that is in social care, for example, we want to be able to help that adolescent and their carers via the app to send through pre-crisis advice or solutions, before a major crisis happens.

We want users, both a foster carer and the adolescent or child, to be able to use the app in pre-crisis. Depending on the issue, a foster carer can make use of the app to find training courses that could possibly help a carer before said issue crops up again. We have a very “live”, interactive way in which we manage each case and the people involved. ▶

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► In addition, local authorities might want to find out how many of its foster carers are struggling with the amount of social media their foster children are being exposed to. We can conduct a survey through the app and we can start to provide advice and guidance on that. We can do all of that very easily with the tools that we have created.

Just like people use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to consume information, advice, support and engage, this app provides advice, support and engagement for social care. Our app provides both a back-office system as well as a front office system that connects the whole thing together with the artificial intelligence embedded within it, so that we are learning from the app all the time. Social carers need more advice and support and that is exactly what we're offering.

This preemptive, supportive technology is something that we are constantly channelling and updating through our app. We are able to often preempt an issue because of the AI telling us exactly what is going on with the individual child.

For example, if you have a child that is struggling because they are constantly online looking at violent images or footage, we will know from our AI and analytics that they probably need help.

Also, children can often do really badly when they have to keep moving placements. If the Antser Group, alongside social services, can avoid that by providing consistent, quality care while the individual child is going through personal problems, the child is more likely to be able to stay in the same place.

If we can preempt and anticipate problems, the care home or parent has a much better chance of holding on to the child, which in turn gives the child a much better chance of a future as a result.

Another really exciting thing is that we have the technology to be able to connect a foster carer with a teacher, tutor and a youth worker so they can provide what is known as a "team around the child".

It doesn't matter who is engaging with that child – whether it's a health worker, the police, or a youth worker – they are all able to be connected to a central system which enables them to understand what has happened to that child at any point in time.

Rather than one particular incident happening, perhaps at school, and the social worker knowing nothing about it, or the foster carer knowing nothing about it, instead, there's a mechanism available that can share the right information among the right people.

There is a security in this system, a lock down on who can have access which protects data in line with GDPR rulings. It's not a consumer model, it's very much case management through the model.

How are you using VR to accelerate positive behaviour change? What did you create at Cornerstone?

We have a tool that puts you into the shoes of a child through a virtual reality (VR) headset; you can be the child in that virtual reality. It puts you on the receiving end of an abusive, neglectful situation. It goes without saying that it

is very unpleasant, because it feels so real, VR allows you that experience in the first person.

But what people really get out of that is a deep and genuine understanding of the child. They have an emotional response to what they've experienced which is as close to childhood trauma as you can get. And it has a profound effect. That's the point – instead of just teaching somebody something, we've been able to shift beliefs and outlooks on child behaviour, to the point where it's been able to change a child's behaviour.

When you're dealing with behaviour training, it is about making sure that teachers and other professionals who are around a child are able to understand the child's experience and to be able to empathise and understand that what happens to them in their early years is what's driving their behaviour now.

If you're a child who has been neglected, left on your own and left to fend for yourself, perhaps from as early as nine months old, that could result in a child at aged six or seven stealing or hoarding food or appearing to be greedy. Without knowing the background, sometimes adult's responses to a situation like this can be punitive.

If you're the teacher who has that child in the classroom, or if you're the foster carer of that child, who doesn't really understand that child's background, and you don't understand it in a genuinely empathetic way at that moment, the punishment could be unnecessary and counterintuitive.

But if you can get them to that point of being genuinely empathetic toward that child, then you can really change a child's behaviour, as well as their relationship with their teacher or foster carer. Then that child has a better chance of thriving in later life. That's the goal. But that's really hard to do with traditional methods and training courses.

What led you to look at VR technology as the catalyst for change at Cornerstone?

When we first set up Cornerstone, we were effectively doing an analogue version of what we are now doing with the VR. Though we used to run a really good training course that helped participants to really understand what was going on in the adoption process, and help support them through it, I felt that we needed the introduction of technology to really provide a step change and a real leap ahead.

After research I found VR being used by Alzheimer's patients and that was a real light bulb moment; I thought about how that could translate to children's services and social care. Alzheimer's is a difficult disease; sometimes it can be difficult to care for people with it. Sometimes carers can lose the capacity to care because it can be so frustrating.

I saw this film which showed how to feel real empathy for a patient with Alzheimer's and it was brilliant. I thought that is what we're going to do at Cornerstone. I realised it could apply to children's behavioural issues. We reached out to the people who made the film and the guy who made the film happened to have two adopted children and he worked with us for free. That is the moment when it all came together for us.



What are the immediate plans for Antser Group, what is in the pipeline for 2020?

We are combining the VR tool with AI to look at issues such as youth crime. We're looking at using the AI capabilities to see the geographical link in terms of the hotspots of youth crime.

We will look at what types of families the children or teenagers committing the crimes come from and areas that would be considered high risk. Then the VR will be introduced here to create an intervention for those children or teenagers and their families living in these high risk areas – to try and prevent things from escalating.

We are already working with local authorities in East London, though Covid-19 may halt our mission for a while. But when things start getting back to normal, it will be great to bring all the technology together for a really difficult social issue.

We are also packaging all the tools that we have developed and putting them into one transformation offer to local authorities. We invite any local authority to work with us to

utilise technology to improve outcomes for children. We can use predictive analytics to work out where the issues are, as well as using VR and our other tools to address the problems.

We have a comprehensive and very practical offer to local authorities who have famously got to do more with less money.

It's not good enough that local authorities are often made to spend money on consultancies that deliver expensive IT products that are just "one size fits all" approaches for children's services.

Local authorities want an intelligent partner to work with. We very much hope that we are the ones that are able to create and provide a very different service, compared to what has been offered before.

We offer both the diagnostics and the practical implementations, not just leaving local authorities high and dry once they've spent all their money. We start with what the problem is, where the challenges are, question what the data tells us, and what can we then do to address it. ■

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