

Planning and supporting permanence in long-term foster care

An investigation of the implementation in England of the first regulations and guidance for long-term foster care as a permanence option (Department for Education 2015)

Executive Summary

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Introduction and background

- The goal of permanence from the 1980s in England has been to offer children in care security, a loving family life and a sense of belonging through to adulthood. This goal continues to be central to family justice and care systems.
- Although long-term foster care had been recognized as a legitimate permanence option in policy and care planning guidance since the 1980s, it was only in 2015 that the Government introduced the first regulations and guidance for long-term foster care in England. This followed wide consultation and detailed development with an expert working group of stakeholders (2013-15), including one of the authors of this report, Professor Gillian Schofield.
- The new regulations and guidance drew on a range of research suggesting that long-term foster care could be a successful permanence option for children. However, success depended on a number of factors: timely care planning; knowledgeable and skilled assessment of children's developmental needs; ascertaining children's wishes and feelings; availability of committed and well supported foster carers; rigorous systems and practice for matching children with current or new foster carers assessed as able to meet the child's needs in the longer term; sensitive work in partnership with birth families; and multi-agency support plans. It was also necessary to develop the role of long-term foster care alongside legal options for permanence outside the birth family through adoption or a special guardianship order (SGO).

The regulations and guidance for long-term foster care (2015)

- The regulations and guidance for long-term foster care focused on two main areas. The first was a set of mandatory requirements that were designed to clarify the definition of long-term foster care, establish a framework for good practice, and promote stable, successful placements. Since 2015, all local authorities must put in place procedures to assess children for long-term foster care, agree this as the care plan for permanence, match children with carers who have been assessed as able to meet their needs and generate plans to support children, long-term foster families and birth families through to adulthood. The local authority must also record these formally agreed placements using two new long-term foster care codes (for relatives and friends carers and for 'other' non-kinship carers) and report them to the Department for Education as part of the SSDA903 annual return on placements of looked after children in their care.
- The second area of the regulations and guidance was permissive and designed to enhance a child's experience of an ordinary family life in the foster family and reduce the possible sense of state intrusion by introducing some flexibility in the local authority care arrangements. After a year in placement, local authorities were permitted to reduce the frequency of social work visiting to a new statutory minimum of six monthly (where the 'child, being of sufficient age and understanding, agrees') and the frequency of looked after children review *meetings* to a new statutory minimum of annually, with the other review at a six-monthly interval conducted without a formal meeting.

Early issues around implementation

- It is important to note in terms of implementation by local authorities of these regulations and guidance on long-term foster care that they were not published in a separate and specific volume. The new regulations on long-term foster care were with other new regulations on children ceasing to be looked after and the new guidance on long-term foster care was threaded through the 2015 revision of the 2010 guidance linked to the Children Act 1989 on care planning, placement and case review.
- Also significant in the context of this current research was the fact that the local authority data submitted using the long-term foster care codes had not been published by the Department for Education in the three years following the 2015 implementation. The range of rates of long-term foster care in local authorities was so wide as to have cast doubt on its validity and reliability.
- In 2018, the Department for Education published *Fostering Better Outcomes*. This was a response to two reviews of fostering – one by the Parliamentary Education Sub-Committee (2017) and the other led by Narey and Owers (2018). It referred to the government's commitment to long-term foster care as reflected in the 2015 regulations and guidance, but also indicated that it would hope to benefit from research into their implementation.

This research project

- *Planning and supporting permanence in long-term foster care: An investigation of the implementation in England of the first Regulations and Guidance for long-term foster care as a permanence option* was funded by the Nuffield Foundation (2018- 2020, with an extension to 2021, following delays associated with the pandemic).
- The aim of this research project was to provide policy makers, courts and social work agencies with information on whether and how these 2015 regulations and guidance had been implemented.
- The project was conducted by a research team in the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) at the University of East Anglia (UEA): Dr Birgit Larsson, Professor Gillian Schofield, Professor Beth Neil and Julie Young, with Dr Marcello Morciano and Dr Yiu-Shing Lau, from the University of Manchester, working on the analysis of the SSDA903 administrative data on looked after children.
- A Project Advisory Group of leading stakeholders, chaired by Dr John Simmonds, Head of Policy, Research and Development at CoramBAAF, met at intervals during the project.
- The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) Family Justice Young People's Board provided consultation based on their experiences of foster care.
- The project was approved by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and by the University of East Anglia Research Ethics Committee.

The research questions

- What are the profiles and pathways of children in long-term foster care placements?
 - What are the numbers and characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ) scores,) and pathways (e.g., age at entry to care, legal status, reasons for care, placement stability) of children in long-term foster care placements?
 - How does the use of the long-term foster care codes vary across local authorities by numbers, rates and child characteristics?
 - How does the use of permanency in long-term foster care compare to the use of other types of permanency?
 - What factors predict a child in care becoming a long-term fostered child?
- Have local authorities introduced procedures and practices that conform with the definitions, principles and requirements of the 2015 regulations and guidance on long-term foster care?
- Which aspects of the 2015 regulations and guidance appear to be working well and which may be causing concern and need to be reviewed?

The research questions were addressed in the wider context of gaining as full as possible an understanding of how long-term foster care was currently managed in terms of care planning in order to see where the regulations and guidance might have had an impact and to identify good practice. Good practice was also understood in the context of previous research on long-term foster care.

Methods

- The research design for the study combined quantitative and qualitative methods and had three main approaches to answering these research questions.
 - An analysis of the Department for Education national SSDA903 data on children in long-term foster care and their profiles and pathways in local authorities in England compared to other children in care.
 - A national survey of procedures and practice in local authorities (n=109, 74%) and independent fostering providers (n=18) in England.
 - Interviews with 43 service managers from a sample of 30 local authorities who represented different profiles and procedural systems.

Profiles and pathways of children in long-term foster care: findings from the analysis of the Department for Education SSDA903 data

- A significant minority (39.7%) of children in foster care were coded as in long-term foster care in March 2018. This is likely to be an underestimate of children in placements understood to be long-term foster care as it was reported in some local authority interviews and surveys that there were uncoded foster placements still considered in practice to be 'long-term', but not formally acknowledged or recorded.
- The data shows, however, that there has been a gradual decline nationally in the numbers and proportion of foster children coded as in long-term foster care from 48.5% in March 2015. This decline may have arisen from an initial push to formally match and record pre-existing long-term foster care placements in the early years of the regulations and guidance or other factors, such as changes in recording practice. There has, though, also been a decline in adoption orders and reunification in this period, alongside a rise in special guardianship orders (Department for Education, 2020), with connections between these permanence trajectories unclear.
- The profiles of the children nationally highlighted the wide range of children in long-term foster care and some differences in terms of type of long-term placement. For example, there were differences between placements with friends and relatives and non-friends and relatives, in both long-term and short-term foster care. Friends and relatives carers cared for more girls, more White British children, younger children, and children with lower/less problematic SDQ scores.
- Long-term foster care was compared with other permanence pathways, specifically reunification and special guardianship or adoption. The child's age and ethnicity both made a difference. Most children on the adoption or special guardianship pathway were very young, whereas few children in long-term foster care were in this age group—mostly they were in middle childhood or early adolescence. Reunification was a pathway for children of all ages including the very young, but overall this pathway had the highest mean age of children, and there was also a higher proportion of ethnic minority children who were reunified compared to the other pathways.
- The data at local authority level revealed a wide range in the percentage of foster children who were coded as in long-term foster care – from less than 10% to more than 80%. Local authorities were placed in tertiles based on these rates i.e. top third/high, middle third/medium and bottom third/low. A key finding from a regression analysis was that the strongest predictor of whether a child was placed in long-term foster care was not their individual characteristics, but whether a local authority was a low, medium or high user of long-term foster care. Children in local authorities that were high users of long-term foster care were 38.5% more likely to be in long-term foster care.
- The regression analysis also showed that child characteristics increased the chances of a child being coded in long term foster care, including being older, entering care because of the child's disability, and white ethnicity. The size of the effects of these child characteristics, however, was much smaller than the effect of the local authority's use of long-term foster care.

Local authority policy, procedures and practice: findings from the analysis of the survey and interviews

The analysis of this data is set out under five themes:

1. The choice of long-term foster care as a permanence option
2. Care planning procedures and practice in long-term foster care
3. Matching procedures and practice – and plans for support
4. Social work visits and statutory reviews in long-term foster care
5. Data management in long-term foster care

1. The choice of long-term foster care as a permanence option

Definition of permanence

- The aim of permanence for children was re-defined in the 2015 care planning guidance as 'a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging'. This new definition omitted the reference which was in the definition of permanence in the 2010 guidance to 'legal permanence (the carer has parental responsibility for the child)', in order to include long-term foster care.

Terminology

- The majority of local authorities (75%) used the term 'long-term foster care'. Just 9% used the term 'permanent foster care'; for some this was about emphasising the link to permanence, while for others, the term 'permanent foster care' was an explicit rejection of the words 'long-term'.
- 16% of local authorities used the two terms 'long-term' and 'permanent' interchangeably. Unlike in the survey conducted by Schofield et al (2008), however, there was no evidence of official twin track and separate long-term and permanent foster care systems in the survey.
- There was, though, some suggestion in at least one local authority where the term 'permanent foster care' had been adopted that in practice the term 'long-term foster care' was still used for those cases which did not go through the formal matching procedures. Having both 'permanent' and 'long-term foster care' as separate types of placement was previously found to create uncertainty about a further hierarchy of placements (Schofield et al 2008) and is now not consistent with the regulations.

The meanings of long-term foster care as explained to children and carers

- Explanations to children about long-term foster care were often said to be in the context of managing or avoiding the term 'permanence' while trying to capture its meaning, in terms of the security of the child's place as part of the foster family through to adulthood, but with ongoing connections with the birth family.
- Explanations to carers included the same emphasis on the importance of the child becoming part of the foster family, while maintaining positive relationships with birth relatives wherever possible. There was an emphasis on the expectation of a

commitment by foster carers to offering foster family membership and support for the young person post 18.

- Foster carers were often said to prefer the term 'long-term foster care' to 'permanent foster care', to differentiate it from adoption and to recognise their role as foster carers, their need for support from the local authority and the ongoing role of the birth family.

The impact of the regulations and guidance on long-term foster care

- The majority of local authorities spoke of a range of ways in which there had been benefits from the introduction of the regulations and guidance, primarily as leading to a cultural change which helped staff to be more positive about long-term foster care as a permanence option, but also as leading to more robust procedures for care planning and matching.
- There were still some concerns that long-term foster care could be seen as drift, especially when children were matched in a current placement, even when new procedures had been introduced. Concerns were also expressed about the stigma for children growing up in care, leading to a preference for legal permanence through adoption or SGO.
- Practice challenges were also raised, such as the availability of long-term foster carers, the risks of instability and children choosing to return home in adolescence.
- There seemed to be a spectrum of patterns of impact. For some local authorities, good practice in long-term foster care had been confirmed by the regulations and guidance, but they had also enhanced a positive culture. For others, new practice and procedures had been introduced that were rigorous but flexible and child centred. While in some local authorities with new procedures their commitment to rigour seemed at times rather rigid in practice; for example, finding it difficult to adapt procedures to the wishes and needs of older children. There were then a small number of local authorities where there seemed to be some resistance to long-term foster care as a permanence option and to moving forward on implementation of the regulations and guidance.

Factors in choosing long-term foster care as a permanence option

- There was in certain respects a hierarchy of permanence options linked to legislation, with reunification if it was in the interests of the child as first choice, followed by relatives and friends care, often supported by a special guardianship order, but this could be in long-term foster care. For children placed outside their family, there was then said to be a preference for legal permanence through adoption or special guardianship, also driven by national policy. But this meant that there were concerns among staff that long-term foster care could be seen negatively as a last resort.
- Because reunification with the birth family was the placement of choice, all efforts had to have been made to work with parents to achieve change and also to assess birth relatives as potential permanent caregivers before considering long-term foster care. There were concerns that this consideration of birth family members could become rushed because of court timetables, so good quality assessments before care proceedings were essential - and could also help clarify whether a long-term foster care might be appropriate.

- Overall, it was clear that operating both formal and informal hierarchies of permanence options could make it challenging for local authorities to choose and value long-term foster care. But it was accepted in most local authorities that long-term foster care could work well for children and had to be seen as a positive permanence choice, as it was the option for many of their children who would not be returning home or leaving care under a legal order such as adoption or SGO. Decision making and support therefore had to be founded on the best possible assessments and resources at all stages.

Age

- For children needing to be placed outside their birth family, age was the key factor that would reduce the likelihood of adoption and lead to a long-term foster care plan, with adoption primarily being used for under-fives.
- For children aged around the boundary ages of 5-8 there might be parallel plans and tensions around the wait for an adoption match which could lead to a delay in making the long-term foster care decision.
- Age would also affect how long-term foster care decisions were made, the practice and processes, given the range of children up to adolescence for whom this was the chosen care plan for permanence.

Sibling groups

- The choice of permanence option for children in sibling groups led to significant practice dilemmas over the decision whether, for example, to recommend placing a younger sibling for adoption and older siblings in long-term foster care. There may also be other siblings still at home or already placed for long-term foster care or adoption, so the assessment was complex.
- There was a perception among managers that courts had recently put a stronger emphasis on maintaining sibling relationships and there were concerns that the raised profile of long-term foster care due to the regulations and guidance might mean that sibling groups including infants would be placed together in long-term foster care when this might not be beneficial in the longer term.
- However, well-evidenced arguments for either keeping siblings together or placing siblings separately could be accepted by courts. The emphasis on sibling relationships being maintained when children were to be in separate placements, however, meant that local authorities were having to focus on plans for maintaining relationships between siblings, especially where one sibling was adopted.

Ethnicity

- Ethnicity was not perceived by managers to be a major factor in itself in selecting a long-term foster care plan for permanence, but there were cases in which culture and ethnicity might make a difference, in particular attitudes to adoption or availability of adopters, where long-term foster care or special guardianship may be recommended.
- However, the analysis of the Department for Education data showed that a child's ethnicity was an important predictor of being coded as being in long-term (as opposed to short-term) foster care, with all minority ethnic groups being less

likely to be in coded long-term foster care compared to white children. Reasons for this were not clear, but it may be that children from ethnic minority groups could be overlooked for this permanency route or local authorities may experience challenges in matching ethnic minority children with long-term carers.

Special guardianship

- The option of special guardianship was reported to have had a significant impact on planning for permanence with both extended family members and non-family member foster carers, impacting on both adoption and long-term foster care decisions.
- There was an expectation that most relatives would choose special guardianship over long-term foster care, especially where children were young, but it was said to be important to ensure that careful assessments were done and that all relatives/potential special guardians understood the child's needs and the long-term commitment.
- There were children with additional support needs for whom long-term foster care might be more appropriate and might be the carer's preferred route, but the local authority would hope to make the same support available under an SGO.
- It was recognised that for all carers the question of financial support, which was usually means tested under an SGO, and the availability of other support, including psychological and post-18 support for the child, could be factors in the SGO decision.
- It was also said to be important to make clear that becoming a special guardian for a child would mean not only a change in role and identity for both relatives and non-kinship foster carers, but also a change in their relationship with this child, with other foster or biological children in the family and with members of their wider families.

2. Care planning procedures and practice in long-term foster care

- Core principles of good practice in care planning are clearly set out in the long-term foster care guidance and need to be threaded through all care planning work with children and families, but it was not always clear that staff accessed the original documents.
- Care planning for long-term foster care was described as having to take account of the range of children and the fact that many children would already be in the placement that would be assessed to become a long-term match and other children would move to a new placement. This difference would affect the work at the care planning stage with the child, the foster family and the birth family.
- There was said to be a focus in some authorities on considering permanence options, including long-term foster care, at an early stage, both as a possible care plan and in terms of early consideration of foster carers who might be a good match for a child.
- Care planning procedures were very diverse across different local authorities, with a range of meetings, panels and decision makers interacting with each other and with the court to arrive at a long-term foster care plan. Some were informal

meetings between staff, others were statutory (e.g. looked after children reviews) and others were developed locally (e.g. permanence planning meetings). There were then standing panels such as fostering or permanence panels where the child's case would be on the agenda for specific meetings. Finally, agency decision makers also sometimes played a role in the care plan as well as later approving the match.

- The role of the IRO was said to be significant in terms of care planning for permanence, especially in long-term foster care where they are named in the regulations and would also have a role in supporting the plan over time.
- Tracking meetings and panels appeared to be more common than in previous research. According to managers they were playing a key part in ensuring that care plans had been made and also that in long-term foster care there was progress towards a match.
- However, there were concerns expressed by some managers that even with tracking systems in place, permanence care plans could not always be put into effect in a timely way, often because of other factors such as court delays or a shortage of foster carers. It was agreed though, that the combination of a central overview of all children in their care and attention to each child's progress towards permanence would be a key part of a local authority's long-term foster care planning. This would also be in line with the regulations and guidance.

3. Matching procedures and practice – and plans for support

- The process and the point in time of matching a child and a foster family were said to be crucial elements in long-term foster care practice in both existing and new placements. Building up to this point there was often a period of uncertainty, of assessments of other options as well as long-term foster care and of careful work with all parties, especially the child. After the match and the status of the placement were agreed, there was recognised to be a need for a commitment to a plan to support this child through to adulthood in this foster family, including support for foster carers and birth relatives.
- Key to understanding the variety and differences in local authority matching processes were, as in care planning, the varied meetings and panels involved. Key elements of difference included: the level of the decision-making forum in terms of the seniority and independence of staff participants; the composition of the forum in terms of whether it was a standing panel or a meeting assembled from professionals and caregivers involved with the child; the participation and attendance of the child, parents or other relatives; the documentation, including support plan; the role of an agency decision maker; the marking of this decision for the child in terms of certificates or celebrations; the degree of flexibility for the child on a case-by-case basis; the link between the matching and recording process and the data submitted to the Department for Education on long-term foster care placements.
- Central to the issue of matching across these varied local authority processes was the common goal of achieving a robust system that provided high-quality assessment and decision making but was also sensitive to the support needs,

circumstances and wishes and feelings of the individual child. Confidence in whether they were able to provide this combination in all cases varied.

- Some older children were keen to participate in the matching process and may have attended planning meetings or panels that confirmed the match. But other children were said to be less keen to make this public statement of commitment to the foster family, especially when they were going through a difficult patch or feeling loyalties to the birth family that made this process more difficult.
- Some local authorities were flexible about how this would be managed so that the matching decision could still be made after appropriate assessment and the child's placement status would change. But other local authorities appeared rather rigid about the need for children to participate in certain procedures and it seemed that children could be excluded from having an agreed long-term foster care placement but had no alternative permanence plan.
- A key issue was the language applied to matching children in their current placement. References to 'fast-tracking' were common and even where this included appropriate assessment and matching the language seemed to be unhelpful, as it appeared to minimise the significance of a long-term foster care matching decision. That decision in most cases in all local authorities was taken once a child was settled in a placement. But this decision could not be seen as a less important step than moving to a new placement and would still need to be subject to an appropriate process of assessment and matching to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes for the child, to offer the right support and to comply with the regulations and guidance.
- In a wide range of local authorities, the decision to confirm the long-term foster care match was often marked with certificates and celebrations for the child and the foster family. The notion of celebration was seen as a way of emphasising the importance of this permanence option and was linked to practice in adoption. It could be experienced positively by some children in giving them a feeling of extra security, but it could highlight tensions for some older children. Where birth family ties meant children had mixed feelings, it was suggested that they could experience a sense of loss from confirming the long-term plan in the foster home as well as gains. Some local authorities recognised these potential tensions and ensured that the question of how the match would be marked was addressed on an individual child basis as part of the care and matching plan.
- The birth family's current and future role in the life of the child also needed to be taken into account in the matching decision and in support plans. Although the regulations and guidance emphasised the role for the birth family, it remained an area of work that could become marginalised by the pressure of meeting other support needs for a placement.

4. Social work visits and statutory reviews in long-term foster care foster care

- Two new elements in the 2015 regulations and guidance for long-term foster care were the reduction in the statutory minimum frequency of social work visits to the child and the potential reduction in the frequency of looked after children review meetings. These changes in the approach to be taken to long-term foster care placements had the same goal - achieving a less intrusive more flexible role for the local authority and therefore normalising family life for the child and the foster family.

Frequency of social work visits

- The 2015 regulations stated that the statutory minimum frequency of social work visiting after a year in an agreed long-term foster care placement would be every six months, where 'the child, being of sufficient age and understanding, agrees'. Unfortunately, the 2015 guidance (repeated in the 2021 guidance) also separately described a 'permanent placement planned to last till 18' for which the statutory minimum visiting was every three months. As being planned to be a permanent placement was also the defining feature of a long-term foster care placement this may have contributed to the uncertainty about the statutory minimum for long-term foster care.
- According to the national survey of local authority looked after children managers, 72.6% (n=77) had reduced social work visits to at least some children in long-term foster care placements.
- Positive comments about having the option of reducing the frequency of social work visits mentioned the value of supporting children in long-term foster care to feel normal and reducing intrusion.
- However, in both the survey and the interviews most participants talked of reducing the frequency of visits to three monthly rather than six monthly, as in the 2015 regulations. There appeared to be very limited use of the six-monthly frequency and it was widely seen as inappropriate. Specific concerns were expressed regarding reduced visiting in the context of a local authority's responsibility for the child's welfare as corporate parent, but also the importance of the child building a positive relationship with the social worker.
- Solutions to this tension regarding the frequency of visits included a focus on appropriate decision making with each child, but also ensuring that social workers used creativity, flexible availability and different kinds of contacts to maintain a connection and relationship with the child. These child-centred models of practice around social work visits would be valuable in all placements, but were said to be especially relevant in long-term foster care as they could allay the concerns about intrusion, but also create a positive role for the social worker as supporting the child and the family.

Frequency of looked after children review meetings

- The option of reducing review meetings to one annual meeting with the second review occurring without a meeting was seen as an important statement about the distinct difference expected in practice when supporting and monitoring a child in a long-term foster care placement that met the goals of permanence. However, as with social work visiting, these decisions needed care and had wider implications that had to be considered.
- According to the survey of IROs, a minority (44.6%, n=41) of local authorities had reduced the frequency of looked after children review meetings in some, but often very few, cases.
- Although there were examples of local authorities who had thought through their policy and practice on reviewing long-term foster care placements following the introduction of the regulations and guidance, it was unclear for some how much they had been taken into account and this may be reflected in the considerable variation between local authorities in their views, policy and practice on this issue.
- Some local authorities could see the benefit of using the flexibility to be sensitive to the child's situation and undertake reviews that did not require meetings but could still be rigorous.
- Even in these cases, there were some concerns from IROs that a review without a meeting may actually be more time consuming, perhaps needing direct contact with the child and with the birth parents. Although this should be defended as being in the interests of the child when six monthly review meetings were deemed not necessary or appropriate.
- Overall there appeared to be some reluctance to take up the possible reduction in the frequency of looked after children review meetings. There was some uncertainty about what was allowed and questions about whether the benefits in normalising a child's life were outweighed by the potential loss of monitoring and the cost in time for IROs.
- As with social work visits, in some local authorities the debate about the question of reduced frequency of meetings had focussed on the need to be more creative in practice, improving review meetings in long-term foster care to reflect each child's needs and wishes.
- The key message here was that in long-term foster care, both review meetings and reviews that did not include meetings needed to be carefully thought through to ensure that reviews work not only to exercise corporate parenting responsibility, but also to engage with the child's views and promote a positive experience of long-term foster care as a permanence option.

5. Data management in long-term foster care

- One of the main priorities for local authorities is to prevent drift for children in care and to help children and young people achieve permanence in a timely way, including in long-term foster care. Data managers, therefore, can have a key role in identifying placements where drift might be happening and ensuring the accuracy of long-term foster care figures.
- However at times in this study they had to rely on software systems that were not always fit for purpose and did not allow service managers to identify the groups of children with long-term foster care plans and those in approved matched placements.
- Data and service managers described a range of different long-term foster care recording practices and processes that affected data accuracy. One concern was that long-term foster care was sometimes recorded when this was the plan for the child rather than after a child had been matched in a long-term foster care placement. Recording of long-term foster care cases could also be undertaken by a range of staff including social work or fostering teams, finance teams, administrative or business support.
- The move to the new SSDA903 codes was said by managers to have been initially difficult, particularly, they suggested, as long-term foster care had not yet been defined when the codes were created. Data managers described uncertainty among social workers and service managers around using the long-term foster care codes.
- Lack of confidence in their local authority's databases led some service managers to devise their own data or permanency tracking systems, which could lead to the use of multiple data systems within local authorities.
- In local authorities with good tracking systems or active data management, recording errors generally could be identified and corrected on the system, but this was time consuming. In some authorities, long-term foster care placement codes could be more challenging to correct, because the placement status change was classed as a placement change in recording systems and linked to financial packages.
- Managers reported on a range of practices that provided some degree of joint working between service and data managers, from regular face to face meetings to an expectation that all managers would access online reports. It was suggested that all ways of working could be successful, with the most important element being that both data and service managers took shared ownership of the data and understood the significance for the service and for children and families of getting the data right.
- Local authorities reported varying experiences of working with the Department for Education. Some described a positive working relationship, but others found getting a response from the Department for Education more difficult.
- Data managers described an SSDA903 long-term foster care 'validation check' which had been requested by the Department for Education. The validation check flagged the local authorities whose long-term foster care figures as a percentage of care cases were outside the 40-60% range and they were asked to check their data and send an explanation to the Department for Education. This process had caused some concerns about where the figure had come from and whether it was a performance indicator, although the Department had said it was not.

Putting the findings together

- The analysis of the looked after children data raised important questions regarding the pathways and profiles of long-term foster children and in particular the range of local authority rates of recorded long-term foster care, which the surveys and interviews enabled us to explore in more depth.
- Local authorities with different rates of long-term foster care often had similar procedures e.g. using the fostering panel to confirm a match, suggesting that how procedures were used was as important as the procedures themselves.
- Differences between local authorities with particularly high and particularly low rates of recorded long-term foster care appeared to reflect the impact of a combination of factors in attitudes, care planning and matching practice rather than any single factor. So, for example, in some of the authorities with the lowest rates (below 20%) of long-term foster care, there was an explicit rejection of long-term foster care as a permanence option, said to be linked to prioritising adoption, special guardianship and reunification. There was then also, in some authorities, a possible combination of negativity about long-term foster care as a permanence option alongside, but probably linked to, a lack of confidence in the process or value of formal matching, which was therefore not pursued in many cases.
- In the authorities with the highest rates (above 70%) in our sample of 30, there appeared to be generally more confidence in long-term foster care as permanence and in their procedures for achieving it. However, very different practice can lead to similar rates. A high proportion of children in long-term foster care could result from effective long-term foster care planning, matching and support, with other foster children leaving care through equally effective and timely use of adoption, special guardianship and reunification. On the other hand, a high rate of recorded placements could be due to an almost automatic labelling of placements as long-term foster care after 12 months, without necessarily having undertaken the appropriate assessment and matching. In that situation or where managers felt that more effort should be put into achieving adoption, managers could be concerned about over-use of long-term foster care.
- It is important to remember that in high, medium and low-rate authorities there were likely to be nurturing and committed foster carers providing loving care to children who were thriving, but where the placement may not have been formally agreed or recorded as long-term foster care. There were also likely to be placements of children with foster carers which had been formally matched but where the placement did not work out as planned. But effective systems linked to high quality professional practice could help a local authority to increase the likelihood that children will find long-term foster families that can meet their needs and love them and that those children and families will get the right support.
- Local authorities can use these findings to reflect on their own foster care and long-term foster care population profiles, use of care plans, matching and practice in coding foster care placements – as well as the more detailed, and subtle professional practice clearly needed to accommodate the needs and wishes of the range of children, long-term foster families and birth families.

Key recommendations for policy, procedure and practice in long-term foster care

Department for Education

- Maintain a policy focus on long-term fostering as a key part of fostering services and as a legitimate permanence option.
- Consider issuing the long-term foster care regulations and guidance as a single and separate volume or commissioning another agency to do so. This would support local authorities, courts and other agencies in understanding as well as implementing the legal and practice framework.
- Review the regulations and guidance on social work visiting in the *Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review (2021)* and remove the provision (para 3.233) for 'a permanent placement which is intended to last until the child is 18', where the statutory minimum visiting is three months. Then amend paragraph 3.234 so that it states that after a year in an agreed long-term foster care placement, the statutory minimum frequency of visiting can be reduced from six weeks to three months, with a further reduction to six months, if this is in the child's best interests and has the agreement of the child.
- Review the guidance for completing the SSDA903 submission to ensure that the examples provided for the long-term foster care codes are consistent with the requirements of the regulations and guidance i.e. long-term foster care as a child's plan for permanence; appropriate procedures and practice in assessment and matching in both new and existing placements; appropriate consultation with the child, the foster carers and the birth family.

Ofsted

- Specifically inspect and name long-term foster care in their inspection of local authority permanence planning and judge how well it is being implemented. This would include the good practice elements of the regulations and guidance in relation to assessment, matching, support planning and recording placements for submission in the SSDA903.

Local authorities

Long-term foster care policy

- Set out their local authority's permanence policy, incorporating national regulations and guidance and their own procedural pathways for assessment and decision-making for each option, including long-term foster care.
- Build a positive culture around long-term foster care alongside other permanence options, which is reflected in all documents and communicated to all current and new staff, and to other agencies, including the family courts.
- Support this positive policy on long-term foster care by resourcing other relevant policies within children's services, in particular long-term foster care recruitment and support for long-term placements in terms of education, mental health and the involvement of birth families.

- Ensure that policies on leaving care, Staying Put and support for care leavers are tailored to promote supportive networks, relationship continuity and family membership in foster and birth families during and after the transition to adulthood.

Care planning systems and practice in long-term foster care

- Clarify the procedure for deciding on a long-term foster care plan by defining the role of different meetings, panels and decision makers, to ensure the system is effective, efficient and transparent.
- Focus at each stage of care planning from prior to coming into care to a confirmed permanence plan on how participation by children can best be achieved in different panels and procedures and across the range of ages, developmental stages and circumstances.
- Build relationships with both foster and birth families that facilitate gathering information, promote understanding of long-term foster care as well as other options and encourage participation in care planning.
- Ensure the IRO service is supported to play an active role in care planning in individual cases and in promoting good practice in care planning for permanence, including long-term foster care, across the authority.
- Develop good practice in preparing and presenting permanence care plans to court, especially for sibling groups, including, where appropriate, arguing the case for long-term foster care using developmental and research evidence to underpin the assessment and recommendations.
- Use tracking panels and processes to increase the local authority's knowledge of the needs and care plans of all looked after children, to avoid drift and achieve timely permanence, including in long-term foster care.

Matching and support systems and practice in long-term foster care

- Provide clear frameworks and systems for the decision-making procedures and practice involved in assessing and matching the child and the long-term foster carer in both existing and new placements, and in both local authority placements and placements in the independent sector.
- Make sure these systems are rigorous, but also flexible and child centred to suit the needs of all children and sibling groups from early childhood to adolescence.
- Ensure high quality social work assessment and documentation of the child's current and long-term needs and caregivers' capacity to meet those needs through training and reflective supervision.
- Promote sensitive practice in facilitating children's participation in assessment, matching decisions and marking the matching decision; for example, developing an individualised approach to whether certificates and celebrations may be appropriate.
- Facilitate creative approaches to life-story work with children of all ages as part of the matching process, including ensuring that foster carers are enabled to build on this work over time. Also use life-story work when young people are leaving care to ensure they have the best possible understanding of their history as they enter adulthood and can explore their feelings about it.
- Linked to life story work but essential for the future care of the child, ensure

file records are complete and accurate at the point of the match in relation to a child's history in the birth family and in care, written in a child sensitive way and appropriate for when the child may wish to read their files.

- Ensure placement plans are updated at the point of the match, for example to reflect any changes in delegated authority, and to clarify the role of the foster carers and the approach the local authority will take to supporting the aim of security and stability in this family and normalising the child's experience of family life.
- Build multi-agency support plans into the matching process for all long-term foster care placements, including those with friends and relatives. Ensure that friends and relatives are offered support tailored to their needs, as they will often be managing complex family dynamics.
- Provide supportive interventions for placements in difficulties and develop a procedure for reviewing and learning from placement disruptions in long-term foster care.

Frequency of social work visits

- Ensure there are criteria and systems in place for making the decision regarding the frequency of visits by a child's social worker in long-term foster care, in the context of an assessment of the child's wishes, needs and situation. Include in the plan the process/criteria for reinstating more frequent visits, for example if the child needs extra support or there is a new social worker.
- Develop a model of good practice that includes assessment of the child's overall well-being, consultation with the child about the frequency of visiting and obtaining the child's agreement for visits to be less frequent than every three months and up to the statutory minimum of six months.
- Ensure that whatever the frequency of visits by the child's social worker, the placement plan needs to include relationship building, safeguarding and enable the child to experience and enjoy secure family life in the foster family while maintaining positive links with the birth family and with their communities.
- Support through supervision the high degree of sensitivity and creativity needed, with face-to-face visits being only one of a range of contact and communication points that the social worker needs to devise in partnership with the child.
- Whatever the frequency of visits, promote a positive working relationship and regular communication between the child's social worker and the fostering social worker to support the child's and the foster carer's long-term well-being.

Frequency of looked after children review meetings

- As with the frequency of social work visits, provide clarity from the local authority about how the decision will be made to have one looked after children review meeting a year for a particular child and the other review conducted to the same guidelines and standards but without a meeting. Include in the plan the process/criteria for reinstating a review meeting when necessary or requested by the child.
- Build consultation by the child's social worker and the IRO with the child and the foster carers into this decision-making process, with a careful assessment of other factors in the child's overall development and situation also taken into account.
- Tailor both review meetings and reviews without meetings in long-term foster

care to the particular child and to achieving the goals of permanence in terms of stability and security for the child as a full part of the foster family, while maintaining the child's key relationships and identities with the child's network of friends, birth family members and the wider community.

Recording and data management

- Provide a recording protocol to ensure that there is a point in the matching process when the long-term foster care placement is formally agreed and can be recorded in the local authority's database. Specify who is responsible for undertaking this recording.
- Ensure that software systems enable both service managers and data managers to access, track and ensure the accuracy of the separate data for children with care plans for permanence in long-term foster care and children in agreed /recorded long-term foster care placements.
- Facilitate joint working between data managers and service managers, teams and social workers to achieve joint ownership of the data, support data accuracy and avoid drift.
- Review numbers and rates of long-term foster care in comparison with other local authorities, check own data, learn from good practice and work towards matching those children in unrecorded and informal long-term foster care.

Strengths and limitations of the study and need for further research

- This study has shown the value of using a mixed methods approach that combined a national data set and survey with in-depth interviews to help make sense of the policies, procedures and practices behind the figures. This has highlighted the significant, but complex role that long-term foster care plays as a permanence plan and placement for children.
- The study's limitations arise from the focus on implementation of regulations and guidance rather than outcomes, inevitable at this stage in implementation and given that this is a study of long-term placements.
- However, the findings have identified directions for further research that would follow up child outcomes, both through the Department for Education data and through more in-depth case study research in selected local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

Conclusion

The important role of long-term foster care as a placement and as a permanence option for children has been acknowledged for many years in research, policy and practice. But the issuing of government regulations and guidance in 2015 was a very important step in both confirming the status of long-term foster care as a legitimate permanence option and providing a legal and good practice framework.

Local authorities had varied greatly in their approach, procedures and practice in long-term foster care prior to the introduction of the regulations and guidance and, as this study has shown, there continues to be variation. However, the culture around long-term foster care and the focus on care planning, assessment, matching and support appears to have benefitted from both the official recognition of its status and the guidance on how care planning in long-term foster care can and should work.

But it is clear that some aspects of planning, matching and recording of long-term foster care placements still need to be addressed in some local authorities to ensure the systems are both rigorous and child-centred. There also remains widespread concern and uncertainty about the benefits of reducing the frequency of social work visits to six monthly and review meetings to annually, and in these areas the associated practice and decision-making seemed less clear and less confident.

The context of this study at national and local authority level needs to be kept in mind. Although there has always been an important debate about the meaning and goal of permanence and the role of different options, there is no doubt that the period from 2015, when the regulations and guidance were issued, and 2019, when the data for this study was collected was one where the debate about permanence was brought into sharp focus. The increasing numbers of children in care during a period of austerity left local authorities with significant challenges around resources for family support, managing the thresholds of care and being able to provide both effective reunification and placements of all kinds for children who could not return home. Judgements in adoption cases led to concerns about how adoption would now be seen in courts, while at the same time the legal and practice implications of special guardianship were still emerging. In the meantime, the longstanding and daily practice dilemmas for local authorities and social workers continued: for example, recruiting foster carers; making decisions about sibling placements; managing the positive involvement of birth families; supporting care leavers; and defining the role of the independent sector.

The future of long-term foster care, therefore, does not rely only on the quality of care planning and social work practice in these placements but is affected by a range of political, cultural and resource questions. However, the core principles of valuing long-term foster care as a permanence option and establishing rigorous systems for assessment, decision-making and support which are also sensitive to the needs of all children, foster and birth family members need to be maintained. Having the 2015 regulations and guidance on long-term foster care in place has been a very good starting point. Further quantitative and qualitative research on the outcomes for long-term foster children and their families, building on this project, now that the regulations and guidance are established and longer-term data is available, would be a valuable next step.

