

# Research evidence

## The right decisions for children in long-term foster care

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### STUDY 1

#### Planning and supporting permanence in long-term foster care

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The essential role of long-term foster carers in helping to transform the lives of vulnerable children in care is highlighted in a recent study by the UEA's CRCF funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The analysis of government data showed that 40 per cent of fostered children – more than 20,000 in 2019 – are in long-term foster care. These children are placed with a plan for their foster family to provide a secure, loving family life through childhood to adulthood.

Although long-term fostering has existed for many years as an important part of the foster care service, it was only in 2015 that the government issued the first regulations and guidance on long-term foster care. The introduction of these Department for Education regulations and guidance was a welcome move to support long-term foster care with both kinship and non-kinship carers as a positive permanence option. The aim of this study was to investigate their implementation.

The new framework required all local authorities to undertake a full assessment of a child's wishes and future needs and the foster carers' capacity to meet those needs through to adulthood; to formally agree the match; and to provide a package of support, including

maintaining links to the birth family. These processes were already established as good practice in some local authorities, but the aim of the regulations and guidance was to bring all areas up to the same high standard. It was also now expected that local authorities would identify all children in agreed long-term foster care placements and report that information to the DfE in their annual return.

#### Key findings from the study

Analysis of the DfE data found that long-term foster care was recorded for the full range of ages, but most commonly for primary age children and those in early adolescence. Family members are also playing a key role, with one in five children in long-term foster care placed with relatives or friends. The research also identified that there was a wide range in the rates of recorded long-term foster care placements across local authorities.

From a national survey in England and follow-up interviews, it was found that overall local authorities experienced a positive impact of the regulations and guidance in both raising the profile

of long-term foster care as a permanence option and promoting more robust procedures for care planning, matching and support. One local authority manager explained: "The regulations and guidance gave a clear route for legitimately accepting long-term foster care as a route to permanence but making sure that it is not taken lightly."

Most local authority staff in the study considered long-term foster care to be a positive permanence option that could provide a secure family for the many children in care who had experienced trauma, separation and loss. However, there were concerns relating to the availability of long-term carers, the stability of placements (especially in adolescence) and the potential stigma for children growing up in state care. There were also very varied decision-making systems, practices in matching and approaches to recording, which help to explain the wide range of numbers of recorded long-term placements.

#### Factors that make a difference for children

Key to caring for children who will grow up in foster care is

understanding the range of their needs and the central role of relationships. The research found that the majority of long-term fostered children entered care for reasons of abuse or neglect and almost half had significant emotional and behavioural difficulties as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Each child will bring a different history and varied challenges, but there will also be opportunities for foster carers to experience the rewards of promoting the child's recovery and happiness. Positive outcomes are all about the quality of the secure base relationships that are established by foster carers for even the most troubled children and young people.

As the study shows, once children are of school age the chances of finding permanence through adoption or special guardianship are quite low, so long-term foster care is a very important option for older children. They need a secure, nurturing family through to and including support in early adulthood. Some young people will have come into care as adolescents, others may have been in multiple placements or had a previous long-term foster placement or adoption that did not work out. For adolescents there has sometimes been a focus on preparing for independence and "leaving care", but the study emphasises that what most young people need from foster carers is to build secure foster family relationships and other networks that can continue to support them in adult life. In addition to professional support, these networks may include a combination of birth relatives and friends, but also activity leaders and previous foster carers.

There are thus important implications for recruiting and



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training foster carers, matching them with children whose needs they can meet, and supporting them to take on this longer-term and important role. In this recent research, as in previous UEA studies, most decisions to match a child with a plan for long-term foster care and a foster carer happen where a child is already settled in a foster family. However, assessment of the foster family's capacity and commitment to meet that particular child's longer-term needs is still very important. The matching process in these cases was sometimes described in surveys and interviews as 'light touch' or 'fast track', but it still needs to be rigorous as it lays the foundations for the child's future happiness and wellbeing.

The matching decision also marks the commitment of the local authority to the placement as a permanence plan, which the new guidance suggested may include increasing delegated authority to the foster carers and making adjustments to social work visits. It should also mean that if difficulties do emerge, maximum help is available to sustain a "placement" that is the child's family and home.

## Listening to children's and foster carers' views

The study found that although assessment and matching needs to be underpinned by formal decision-making systems, sensitive social work practice is essential and needs to be tailored to each child and foster family. Having a conversation with a child or young person about whether this foster family will be the right family to live with into adulthood is rarely easy, especially where children may have strong birth family ties, but also where the child may still be struggling to trust any relationship. For both younger and older children, imagining their future family life is not easy to do, especially if their previous experience is of discontinuity. Some children were



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Previous research has shown that successful long-term foster carers can provide a secure base for young people into adulthood

said to feel a great sense of relief that they were settled, safe, and able to look forward with hope, so they wanted to celebrate the formal matching decision with their foster family, perhaps with a special family meal, as happens when an adoption order is made.

For other young people, there could be a range of mixed feelings as relationships developed and decisions on care plans were needed. These feelings could include hope and anxiety, sadness and anger, and often loyalty to both foster and birth families. How the match will be marked, therefore, needs to be carefully discussed with each child. As one manager put it: "Not every young person wants a fanfare." This consultation is a key part of child centred practice.

For foster carers, the long-term commitment is a major decision, with complex issues and feelings attached. Carers will have a certain amount of knowledge of the child's previous experiences and current strengths and difficulties, though they would often like to know more. It is impossible to accurately predict how any child from a difficult background will develop as they move through adolescence and into adulthood. Foster carers may also have to consider the future

impact of a new family member on their birth or adopted children or other foster children placed with them, but also anticipate the impact of their own future life stages, perhaps needing to look after elderly parents.

## The future of long-term foster care

Although the 2015 regulations and guidance have raised the profile of long-term foster care and promoted new procedures and recording requirements, practitioners were clear that all planned long-term placements will require sensitive and active support for foster children, who have such a wide range of strengths and vulnerabilities, and for foster carers, who will need to be committed parents as well as professional members of the team around the child. Birth family members, too, will need support to enable them to provide a positive identity and relationships for the child, alongside those developing in the foster family.

As previous UEA research has shown, successful long-term foster carers can provide a secure base into adulthood, and these regulations and guidance have provided a valuable framework for developing successful practice. This new study has highlighted the

important role of local authorities as corporate parents in making good decisions, promoting positive relationships and supporting the lifelong wellbeing of children who grow up in long-term foster care.

● *The research team in the CRCF at UEA was Dr Birgit Larsson, Prof Gillian Schofield, Prof Elsbeth Neil and Julie Young, with Dr Marcello Morciano and Dr Yiu-Shing Lau from the University of Manchester. They were supported by an advisory group of leading stakeholders, and also consulted with the Cafcass Family Justice Young People's Board*

## FURTHER READING

**Research report**  
[www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Long-term-Foster-Care-Report.pdf](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Long-term-Foster-Care-Report.pdf)

**Executive summary**  
[www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Long-term-Foster-Care-Summary.pdf](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Long-term-Foster-Care-Summary.pdf)

**Secure Base caregiving model for children in foster care**  
[www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/secure-base-model](http://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/secure-base-model)