

# Centre for Research on Children and Families Online Annual Conference 2023

## **SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLES' JOURNEYS THROUGH ADOPTION, FOSTERING AND RESIDENTIAL CARE: MESSAGES FROM NEW RESEARCH**

# Conference schedule

<b>10:00 - 10:10</b>	<b>Welcome and Introduction</b> Dr Laura Cook (Acting Director of the CRCF)
<b>10:10 - 10:45</b>	<b>Modernising birth family contact in adoption – a theory of change</b> Professor Beth Neil (UEA)
<b>10:45 - 11:20</b>	<b>Seeking Connection – the lifelong need of adults affected by adoption</b> Anne Murphy (UEA) & Gilli Bruce (Integrative Counsellor, Coach & adopted adult)
<b>11:20 - 11:35</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>11:35 - 12:10</b>	<b>Supporting young people’s journeys from residential to foster care</b> Dr Kate Blake-Holmes (UEA)
<b>12:10 - 12:45</b>	<b>LIMITLESS: making low-intensity life story work more accessible for young people with care experience</b> Dr Simon Hammond (UEA), Katie Martinez-Thompson (a care-leave representative) & Dr Ella Mickleburgh (Norfolk & Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust)
<b>12:45 - 13:00</b>	<b>Q&amp;A</b>

# Modernising birth family contact in adoption - a theory of change

Beth Neil

UEA

# Who & what has informed the theory of change?

- Led by team from UEA in collaboration with PAC-UK, RAA leaders and (ASGLB) 'maintaining relationships' sub group
- Learning from existing research
- Rapid consultation: adopted teenagers, adopted adults, birth & adoptive parents, social workers & RAA leaders, ASGLB sub-group members
- Survey of 231 adopted adults (PAC-UK/UEA)



Why is  
maintaining  
relationships  
important to  
adopted  
people?

Knowing who you are and your roots are vital, and family ties can confirm this. I have never met my birth brothers, as we were adopted separately and we only found out about each other in our late 50s..... Always thinking about how life might have been if we had known each other....***it's a raw wound that never heals.***

Why is maintaining relationships important to birth relatives?

It's always on your mind. "What they look like? Would I know them if I bumped into them?" It's part of your life-it is "do they know we love them?" Everything goes through your mind. Christmas time, "oh she would have liked that, she's at the age for make-up". ***It's on your mind, always.***



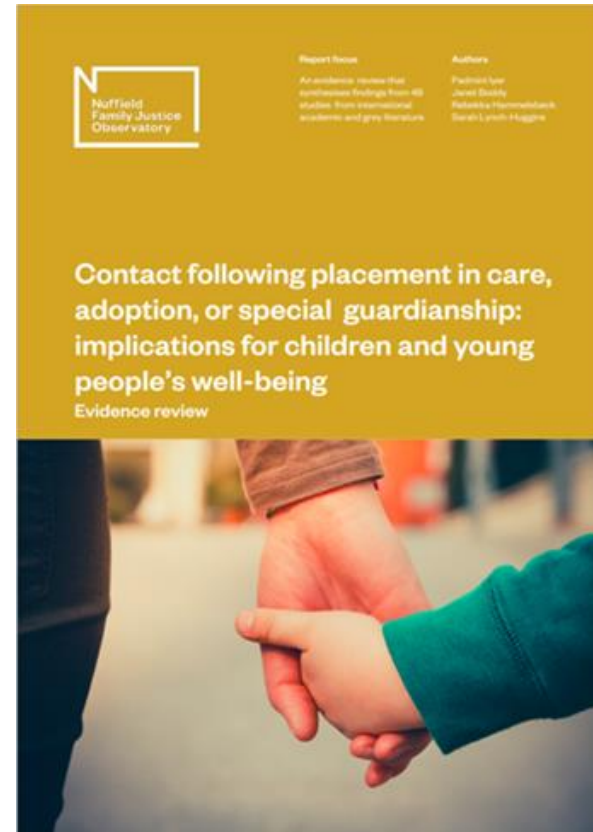
Why is  
maintaining  
relationships  
important  
for adoptive  
parents?

*I should think after every contact we do have a little bit of a conversation about something to do with adoption or contact or birth families, and how she's feeling about that and how I'm feeling about that...so that's a good thing - to be able to open up.*

## Findings from a review of 49 studies exploring contact & children's wellbeing (Iyer et al, 2020)

"The key question is ...*how best to facilitate* positive experiences and the meaningful involvement of the people who matter to the child."

- Focus on the quality of contact.
- Listen to the views of children and young people.
- Recognise the significance of siblings, grandparents, wider family and friends.
- Ensure that all involved are clear about the purpose of contact.
- Ensure that contact plans are tailored to each child and regularly reviewed.
- Ensure skilled professional support is available.





# The problem with letters...

- **Format:** outdated, infrequent, no feedback, delays

- **Content** - what you can (and can't) say

*"It feels more of a business letter to parents, than it is to me" (teen 2)*

*"[It] made me feel disconnected ..."* (Birth mother)

- **Lack of support** (practical & emotional)

- **Child not involved**

*"You love [your adoptive parents] to bits, but you don't want them being concerned or making decisions for you." (teen 3)*

- **Goals:** rewarding, informative and sustained exchanges with greater involvement of children



Majority of letterbox plans do not work as intended

# Can digital solutions help?

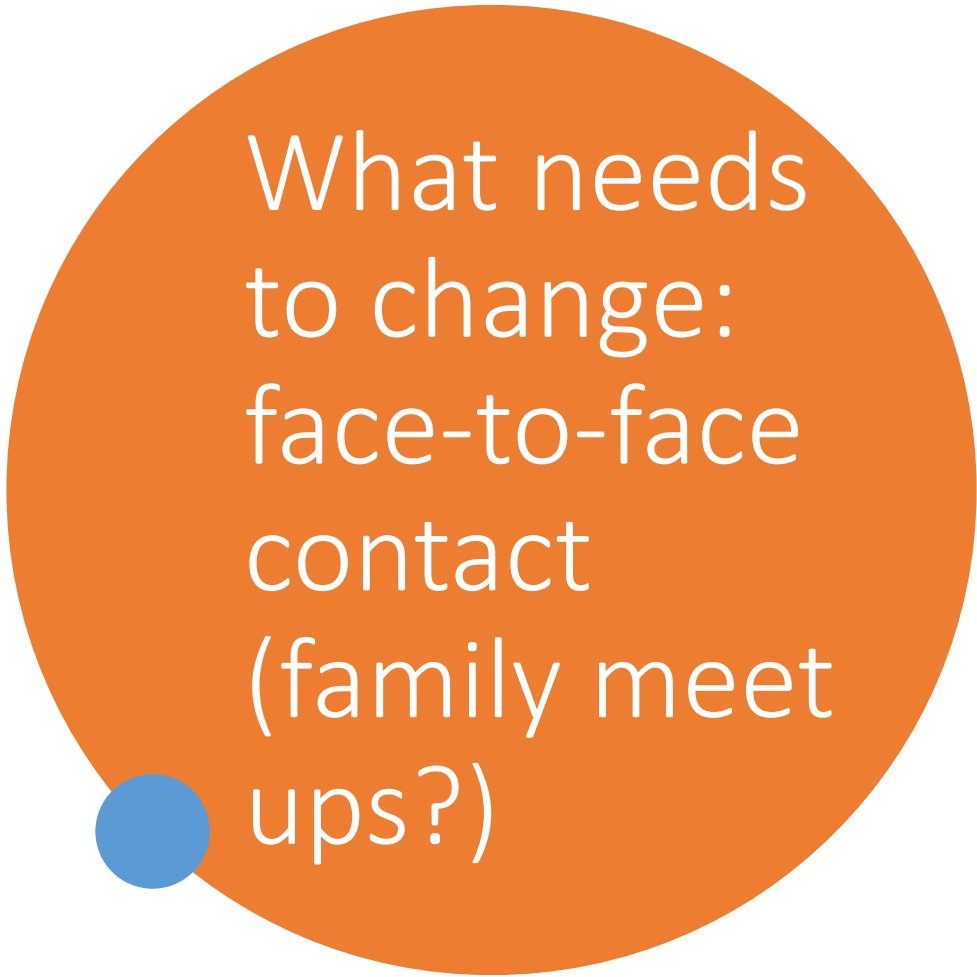
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Adopter: 'For me, it just removes barriers makes it a bit more informal [...] [daughter] now just wants to write when she wants to write, when she does a picture she says can we send it to [BM] and everything. Then BM sent something back and I just handed my phone back to AD and said this has been sent, it just seems more personal'

Birth parent: 'I love getting to know [my daughter] through these more informal messages [with adopters] ...I think its important for [daughter] as well going forward to see that both sets of parents do have that trust and communication and it might make it less awkward and confusing for her when she gets older if she wanted to get to know me'

BUT:

- Digital poverty/competence must be addressed
- Aims/goals of birth and adoptive families must align
- Professional practice around the 'contact' must change
- Thinking about how to change/adapt plans in important



What needs  
to change:  
face-to-face  
contact  
(family meet  
ups?)

- **Key problems:**
  - rarely considered leading to “**unnecessary loss**”, especially of brothers and sisters;
  - meetings can feel unsafe (especially unmediated, unsupported contact in teenage years, led by unmet needs)
  - and/or they can feel unfriendly/unrewarding/not ‘family like’
- **Goals:** full range of contact (across child’s important relationships) should be considered on an individual basis; focus on safety, quality & support of planned contact; reduce need to make unmediated, unsupported contact and help all prepare for this possibility

Overarching  
themes  
across the  
WHOLE  
system



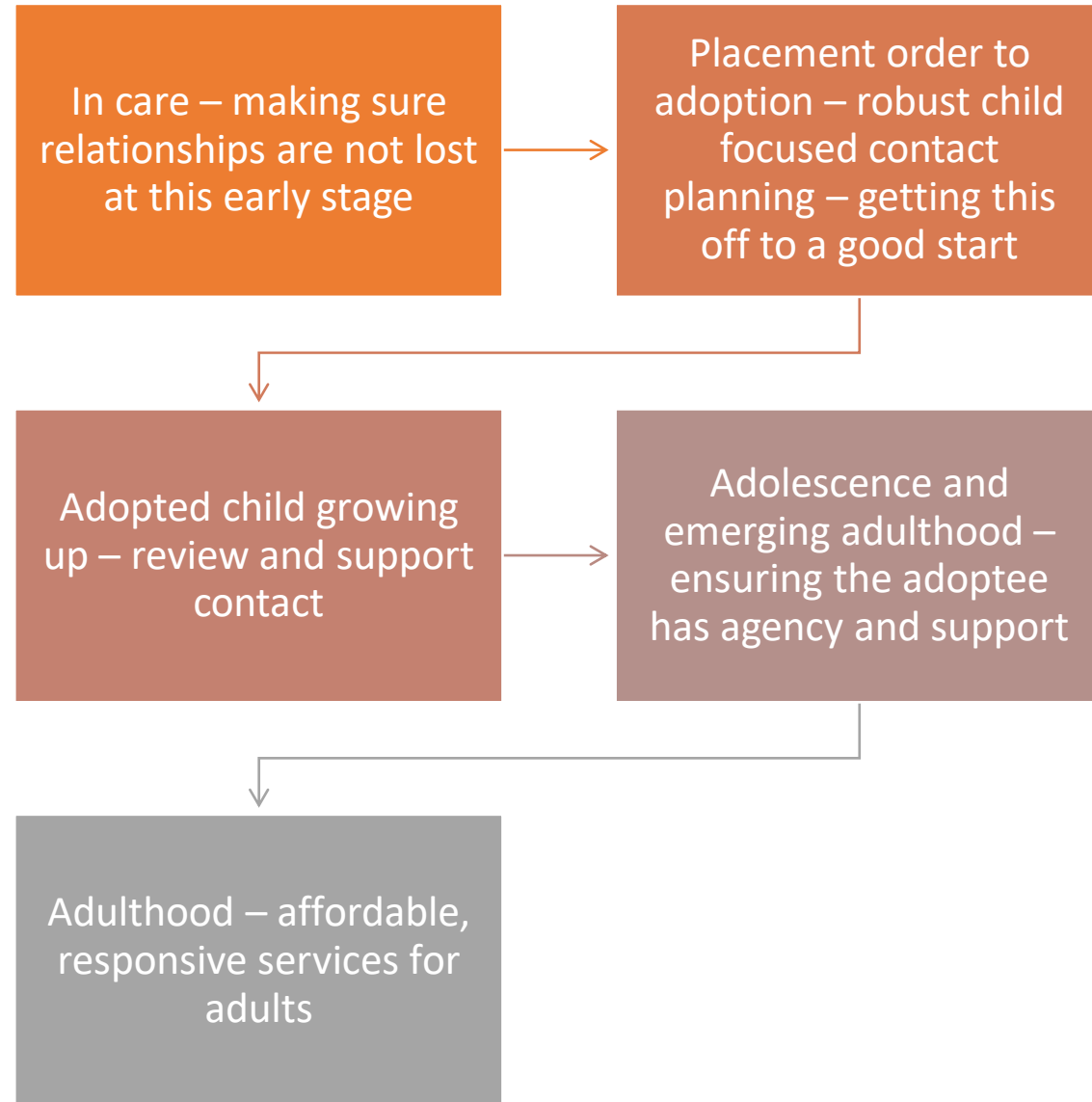
Key actors  
(with lived  
experience)  
— for all  
positions are  
*dynamic* and  
*transactional*

- **Adopted children & young people** (often too young to exercise agency at point of adoption, excluded after adoption, may fear upsetting others esp. adopters, agency vs support key issue in adolescence)
- **Birth parents/relatives** (affected by issues that pre-date adoption and issues exacerbated/caused by adoption, legally disempowered by adoption, expectations are low but most wish for more contact)
- **Prospective adopters** (working in the hypothetical, can feel anxious and powerless)
- **Adoptive parents** (perceived as having power, but often feel powerless; may rely on child initiating talk/contact; lack of help with communicating difficult stories; continuance of contact heavily dependent on their commitment)

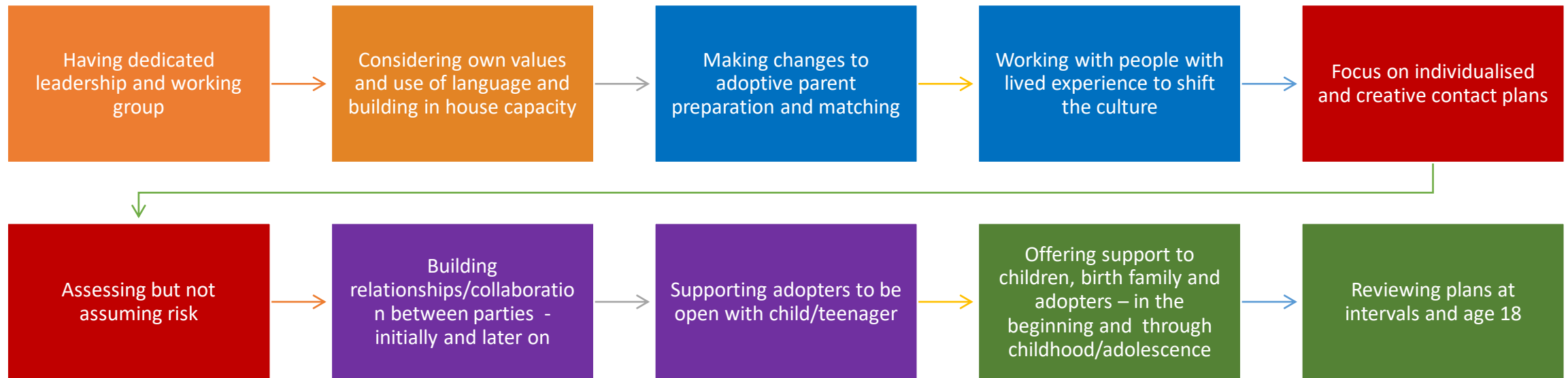
# Key professionals involved

- **LA social workers** (child's SW) – maintaining links before adoption, planning contact, involving parents going through adoption (turnover often high, knowledge of adoption limited, relationships with birth family can deteriorate)
- **Adoption social workers & managers**– recruiting, preparing and matching adopters, input into contact plans, supporting contact after placement (crucial in driving culture change but can feel limited by LA SW and adopter views, plus challenges in working with birth parents)
- **IROs** – questioning contact plans; may have links with siblings and be seen as more independent by birth parents, involved up until adoption order (but may focus more on 'here & now' issues)
- **Legal professionals** – questioning contact plans, interpreting/supporting child's best interests (can feel hampered by AA views esp. re adopter matching; case law does not support imposing contact on reluctant adopters)
- **CAFCASS** – may not be involved at adoption order stage – contact plans may change from PO stage
- **Independent birth parent support workers** – have key role in supporting parents inc. with contact (but parents are not always referred and take-up is a challenge)

# *The lifelong adoption journey*



# Changing the culture: learning from innovators





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# Future 'culture change' work

- Online workshops for RAA/VAA 'champions' to help build their capacity
- Offer learning events across other relevant groups to achieve their buy in.
- Help adoption teams lead on contact plans (e.g. regional groups of 'champions' who can offer advice)
- Feed in to the working groups looking at adopter preparation, support, and early permanency
- Run in-person national events (London/North) to share practice solutions.
- Develop practice standards around 'maintaining relationships'
- Collate a range of web-based practice resources

# Resources

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[Survey of adopted adults:](#)

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/documents/96135/2234204/Maintaining+Relationships+with+Birth+Families+Research+Briefing.pdf/abd98696-87c1-0e44-eec3-d3451a90f045?t=1665759546138>

**UEA/RIP practice resources:**

<http://contact.rip.org.uk/>

<https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/our-work/contact>

[\(Adoption Counts talk to the Adoption & Fostering podcast\)](#)

<https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-6xqqd-13738d2>

The UEA longitudinal 'Contact after Adoption' study

<https://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families/contact-after-adoption>

Neil, E., Beek, M., and Ward, E. (2015) *Contact After Adoption: A longitudinal study of post-adoption contact arrangements*. CoramBAAF.

'Helping Birth Families' and 'Supporting Direct Contact after Adoption' studies

<http://www.adoptionresearchinitiative.org.uk/study5.html>

Neil, E., Cossar, J., Jones, C., Lorgelly, P., & Young, J. (2011). *Supporting direct contact after adoption*. BAAF.

# Questions?

# Seeking Connections- the lifelong needs of adults affected by adoption

Presenters: Anne Murphy & Gilli Bruce

crcf

2023-05-11 13:19 UTC

Recorded by

Anne Murphy (SWK -  
Postgraduate  
Researcher)

Organized by

Anne Murphy (SWK -  
Postgraduate  
Researcher)

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# Maintaining Relationships with birth family: What are adopted adults views?

# Study details

**Online survey: sent to 1600 people via PAC-UK**



**392 respondents**



**90% of respondents were over 35 years old**

**This year, the theme for  
National Adoption Week is  
about maintaining relationships  
with birth family after adoption.**

**What are your most important  
priorities around this?**



# Wide Support to prioritise birth-family relationships

*Adoptees do not arrive as a blank slate. We have our own history and family tree no matter the circumstances of how we came to be adopted.*

*Separation from birth family is trauma and this growing up without biological family is an extremely difficult and abnormal experience for adoptees which is why birth family links are so important*

# Putting the adopted persons' needs at the centre

*It is imperative that help is on hand in the form of counsellors or experienced mentors who can provide support and advice for all those involved in the reunion process regardless of their relationship. eg siblings, cousins, parents etc on all sides of the adoption triangle*

Making and maintaining relationships

Therapeutic support

Use of legislation and policy

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Seeking Connections:  
how adoption agencies  
respond to requests  
from intermediary  
agencies.

# Context for study

Intermediary Services are defined as one that facilitates contact between adopted people over 18 years old, adopted before 30 December 2005, and their relatives.

**When the intermediary service is not the agency that placed the child, they are required to contact the agency that did, and find out if there is any veto, the views on contact, and other relevant information.  
(ISR 12.3)**

Guidance recommends the importance of a timely response, and suggests that it may be helpful for agencies to have a central record of any vetos.



# Findings:

One third of agencies have a ring fenced budget for services to adopted adults

Only 13% of agencies have locally developed guidance on how to respond to requests.

Most agencies (74%) could not provide timescales.

Those timescales reported ranged from 1 to 279 days

# Timescales- explanations given

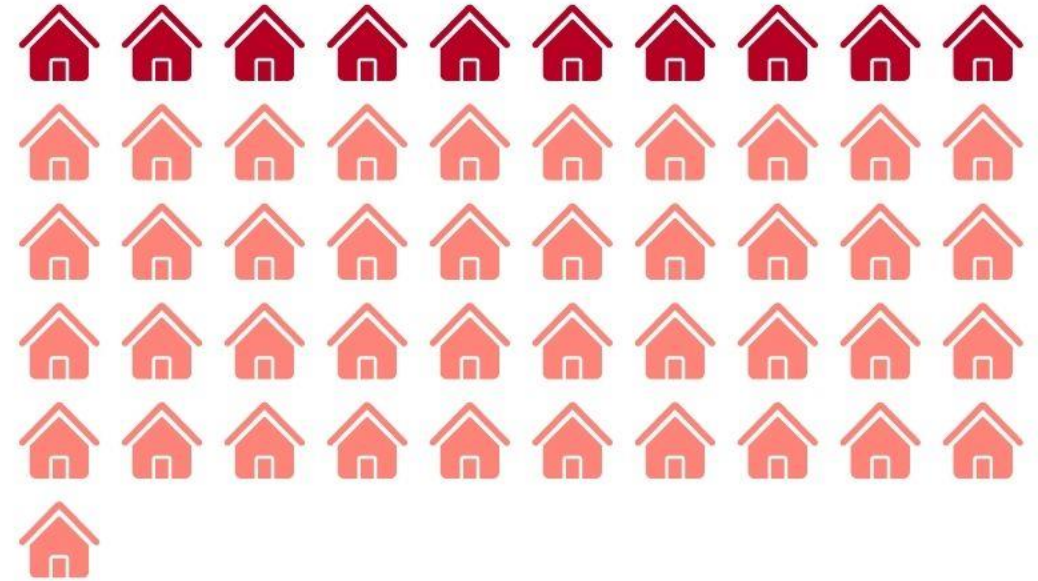
Covid-19

Staff  
shortages/  
resource  
issues

Out of date  
indexing  
systems

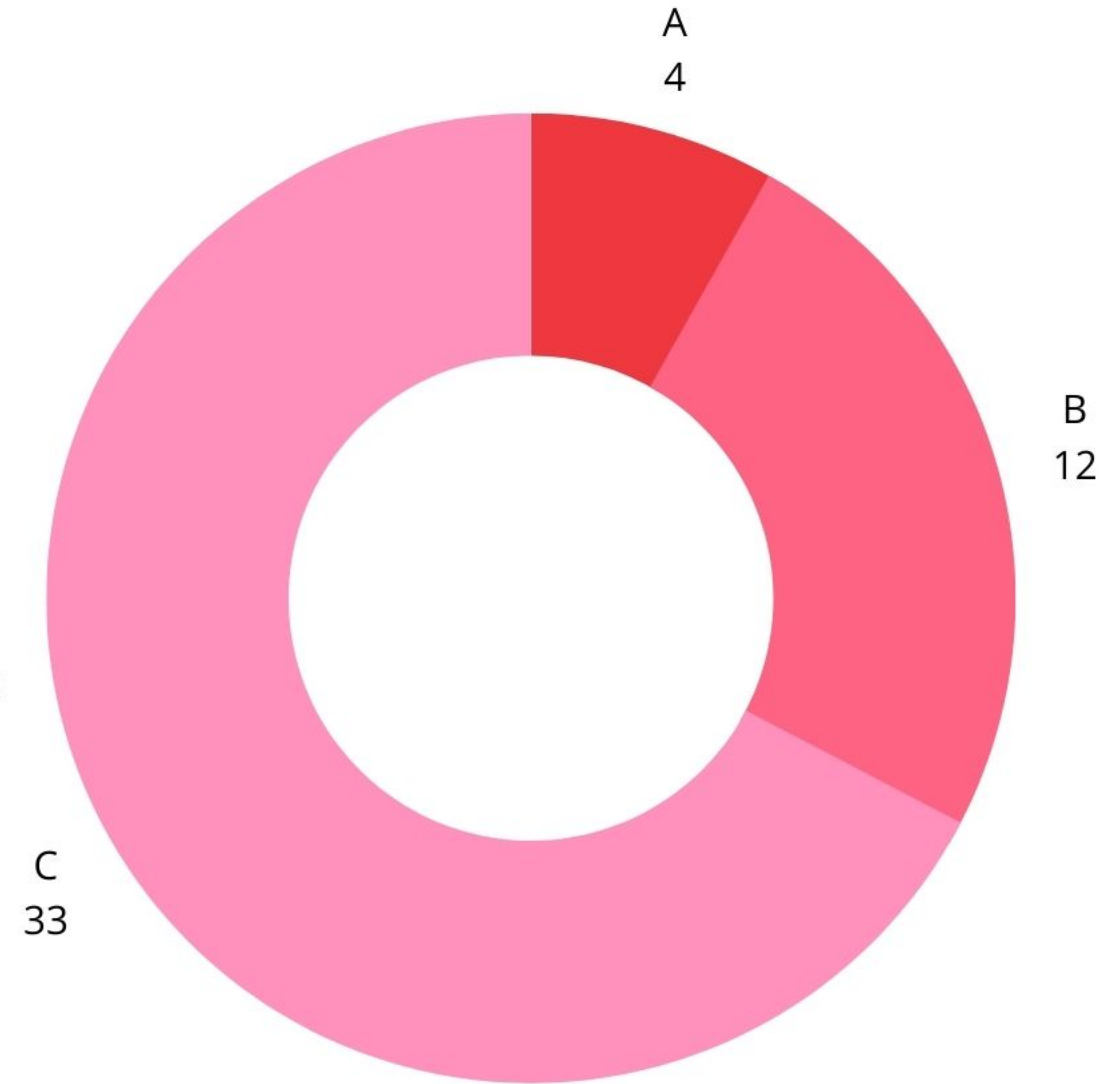
Local  
Authority  
variations in  
accessing  
records.

- Only ten agencies had a register of vetos.



# Digital records

- 8% of agencies had fully digital records
- 65% had no digital records





# Recommendations

Robust contact  
planning

Change the  
narrative

Practical and  
emotional  
support.



# Improving Adoption Services for Adults

# I A S A

**CRCF  
RESEARCH  
BRIEFING**



**MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH  
BIRTH FAMILIES AFTER ADOPTION:  
WHAT ARE ADOPTED ADULTS' VIEWS?**

Cassien Rawcliffe, Professor Elsbeth Neil (University of East Anglia),  
Mike Hancock and Leon Elias (PAC-UK)

October 2022



**PAC-UK**  
Adopting International Adults



Centre for Research  
on Children & Families

**CRCF  
RESEARCH  
BRIEFING**



**SEEKING CONNECTIONS:  
HOW ADOPTION AGENCIES RESPOND TO REQUESTS  
FROM INTERMEDIARY AGENCIES TO SUPPORT  
REUNIONS BETWEEN ADOPTED ADULTS AND THEIR  
BIRTH FAMILIES**

Anne Murphy, Professor Elsbeth Neil (University of East Anglia),  
Dr Joanna North and David Oates (Joanna North Associates)

October 2022



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# Questions?



# Supporting young people's journeys from residential to foster care.

Dr Kate Blake-Holmes

Dr Laura L. Cook

# Background to the project

**Project team** – developed through UEA Health and Social Care Partnership

Laura Cook, Kate Blake-Holmes, Ruth Payne, Jen Coleman, Mike Bushell

## **An Evaluation of the Enhanced Fostering service as commissioned by Norfolk County Council**

The Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) – established in 2019 by Norfolk County Council (NCC) to support young people who require an enhanced level of support to manage the transition from residential to foster care.

### **Research questions**

- How do young people experience the transition from residential to foster care and what helps or hinders this transition?
- What are young people's views and experience of the EFS in supporting their transition from residential care to a foster home?
- What are professionals' views and experiences of EFS in relation to the young people they support?
- What can we learn from these experiences to enhance support provided to young people and inform future service provision?

# Introduction

- The experiences of looked after children place them at increased risk of negative outcomes both throughout childhood and in to their adult lives. (1,2,3)  
Placing a child in the care of the local authority may take them away from harm, however their journey in the care system can also be extremely challenging with placement insecurity, breakdown and multiple moves (3,4).
- Children's journey through the care system can include both foster care and residential placements, however there has been a steady decline in the use of residential care for children since the 1980s, with residential care accommodating only 12% of looked after children (5). It is commonly seen as a 'last resort' (6) due to a strong ideological preference for children being placed in 'family' care settings where possible.
- Regardless of the type of placement that is offered to a looked after child the key mitigating and strengthening factor is that of positive relationships and security. As the Care Inquiry (7) suggested, the core principle for the care system should be the 'golden thread' of relationships that run through the child's life.
- While there is a clear understanding of the impact of placement insecurity and breakdown within the literature and a small amount of studies that have sought to identify the key factors in placement breakdown(8) , little is known about how the children experience the transition from one placement to another. These transitions are often seen as distinct events rather than a process which involves multiple stages of decision making and understanding.
- Further more little is known about the child's experience of making a transition from residential care to a foster care placement, or to a placement when the foster carer is a adult who has previously known them in another professional capacity



# Methodology

**Research design** – to interview young people who have moved from residential to foster care with the support of EFS and the team of professionals around them to gain understanding of the process, experience and impact of EFS support

**Ethics** – UEA ethics committee & NCC research governance

**Recruitment** – Ruth Payne (EFS)

**Data Collection** Professionals - Laura Cook & Mike Bushell  
Young People -Kate Blake-Holmes & Jen Coleman

**Analysis** Phenomenological Thematic analysis using a systematic text condensation approach (9)

- Reflexive exercise to identify preconceptions and bias
- Stage 1 – review dataset as a whole, identify initial areas of enquiry
- Stage 2 – case summaries for each interview and focus groups
- Stage 3 – team review and refine themes
- Stage 4 – core findings identified and presented





# YOUNG PEOPLE'S JOURNEY FROM RESIDENTIAL TO FOSTER CARE:



**1. Assessing readiness**



**2. Matching**



**3. Making the transition**



**4. Settling into placement**

# STAGE ONE: Assessing readiness

## Professionals

- Identified a drive to move young people out of residential care
- Strong belief about what constitutes an ideal (family) placement

[the] indicators are obviously... settled behaviour. Having said that, it's hard to have settled behaviour in the environment of a residential [unit]... (Independent Reviewing Officer)

## Young people

- not always aware of the discussions about their readiness to move, nor did they see themselves as having agency in the process.
- Many saw a move as either a reward or a punishment.

I was moved because, well, I was told that they just didn't think I was happy... But I think the real reason was because I caused too much damage to the house... And I had quite a few incidents where I'd like go and break a bunch of stuff or, you know, do something and then, yes, one day the manager sat me down with my sister and basically just said, you know, we don't think you're happy here so we've made the decision to move you on. (Young person)



# STAGE TWO: Matching

## Professionals

- Young people were often fostered by a professional known to them
- Professionals often wanted to foster young people due to their prior relationship, with a range of motivations.

Basically, I work in residential care. The plan wasn't to become a foster carer, but through my job in residential... I somehow ended up bringing her home ... They were like 'I wish you just had a spare room' and I was like 'I do!', and that's how it started basically, and then we ended up with her. (Foster Carer)

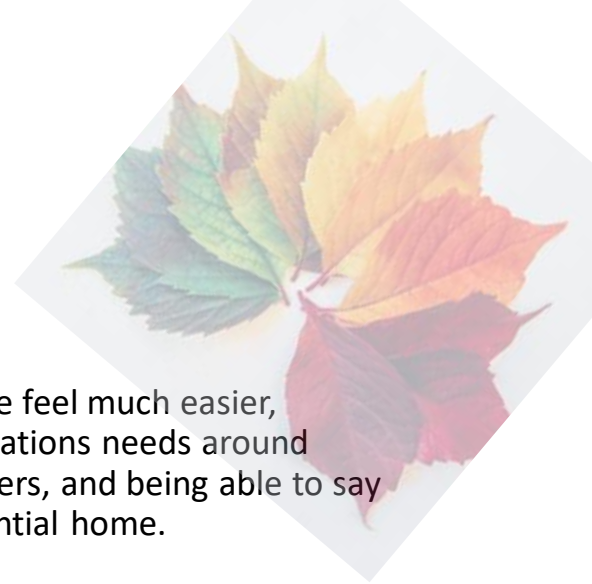
## Young people

- Significance of 'being chosen'

I can remember getting told that [Residential Worker] was fostering me like it was just yesterday. (Face lights up) Me and my social worker was sitting in McDonalds (specifies exact location), I can remember having chocolate milkshake, she had tea, she was like, 'oh, we've found a foster place for you'. I was like, 'ok, cool', I was too busy on the milkshake. She was like 'it's one of the staff at (Residential home)' so ok, I went through all the staffs, [Residential Worker was right at the bottom. (Laughter) And, erm, when the social worker told me it was [Residential Worker], [Residential Worker] was working that day... and I went in and I was literally like 'why me?' and you guys was like 'what?', 'why are you fostering me? Why me?'. (Young Person)



# STAGE THREE: Making the transition



## Professionals

- Flexibility and communication between the residential unit and the foster placement was important

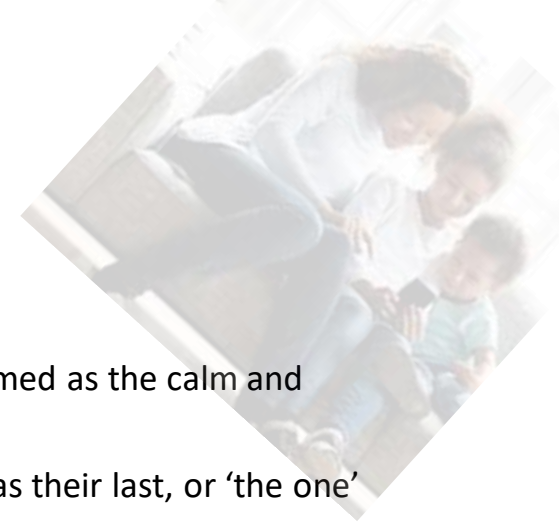
Initially there was a transition plan, but the young person wanted it to be on his terms, which we completely understood... We were quite flexible - the home, they were flexible. Sometimes the young person would get the wobbles and say that he didn't want to go and sometimes on the days he wasn't supposed to come over he'd say 'Can I go?'... (Foster Carer)

## Young People

- Knowing the foster carer made the move feel much easier, however there were important considerations needs around introducing them to other family members, and being able to say goodbye to key individuals in the residential home.

The way they transitioned was all wrong. Like it shouldn't have happened like that. That was not how it should have gone because it was on the Wednesday and I was kicked out on the Friday, and so I had no time to pack. No time to emotionally prepare myself to leave my friends that I'd made in the hub. And my stuff was in black bags... I got to say goodbye, but I was supposed to go back to collect the rest of my stuff which I had strategically left there, but they just didn't let me.... (young person)

# STAGE FOUR: Settling into placement



## Professionals

- Maintaining existing relationships (with residential workers, friends and birth parents) was key to the success of the placement and for the young person's sense of identity
- Young people's relationship with the foster carers shifted – changing dynamics

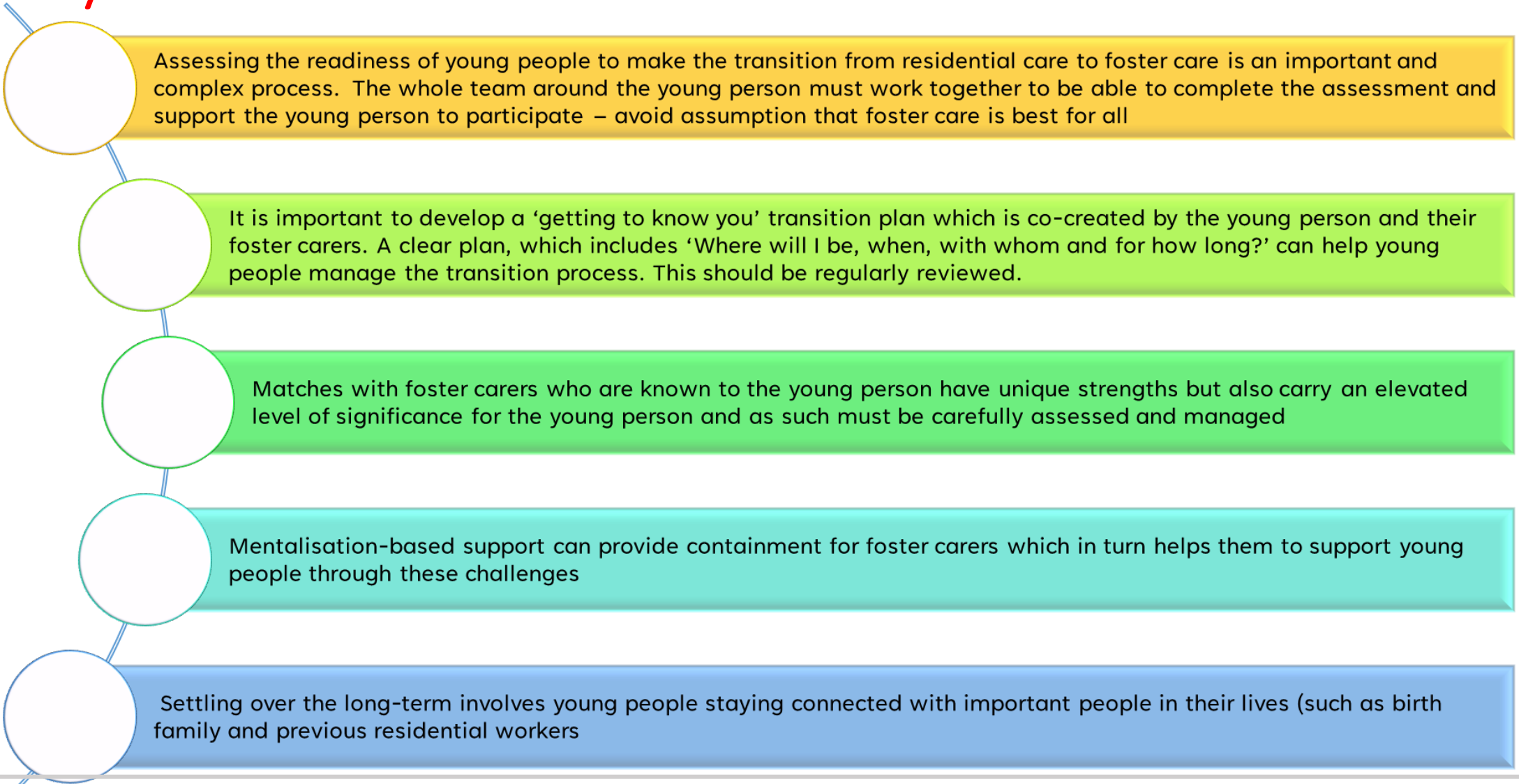
She's... regressed to a little girl that needs looking after... She loves that nurture and... bringing her tea up - sometimes she'll have tea in bed which is all cosy... She likes her hair being washed and things like that. So yes, we do have a really good relationship... She's just lovely. As I said she feels really happy here. (Foster Carer)

## Young people

- Young people highly valued what they termed as the calm and freedom of living in a family home.
- Many of them referred to this placement as their last, or 'the one'
- Young people also spoke about their desire to keep contact with residential workers as part of their history.

It's one of those things you don't really see the full potential of until you've actually lived like the whole thing. When you're living there, it's more of a like, "Ugh, this is, well, rubbish and I don't want to be here." But once you leave, you do realise how much the people there helped you, it's kind of surprising. (Young Person)

# Key recommendations



Assessing the readiness of young people to make the transition from residential care to foster care is an important and complex process. The whole team around the young person must work together to be able to complete the assessment and support the young person to participate – avoid assumption that foster care is best for all

It is important to develop a 'getting to know you' transition plan which is co-created by the young person and their foster carers. A clear plan, which includes 'Where will I be, when, with whom and for how long?' can help young people manage the transition process. This should be regularly reviewed.

Matches with foster carers who are known to the young person have unique strengths but also carry an elevated level of significance for the young person and as such must be carefully assessed and managed

Mentalisation-based support can provide containment for foster carers which in turn helps them to support young people through these challenges

Settling over the long-term involves young people staying connected with important people in their lives (such as birth family and previous residential workers)



# Any questions?

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[l.cook@uea.ac.uk](mailto:l.cook@uea.ac.uk)



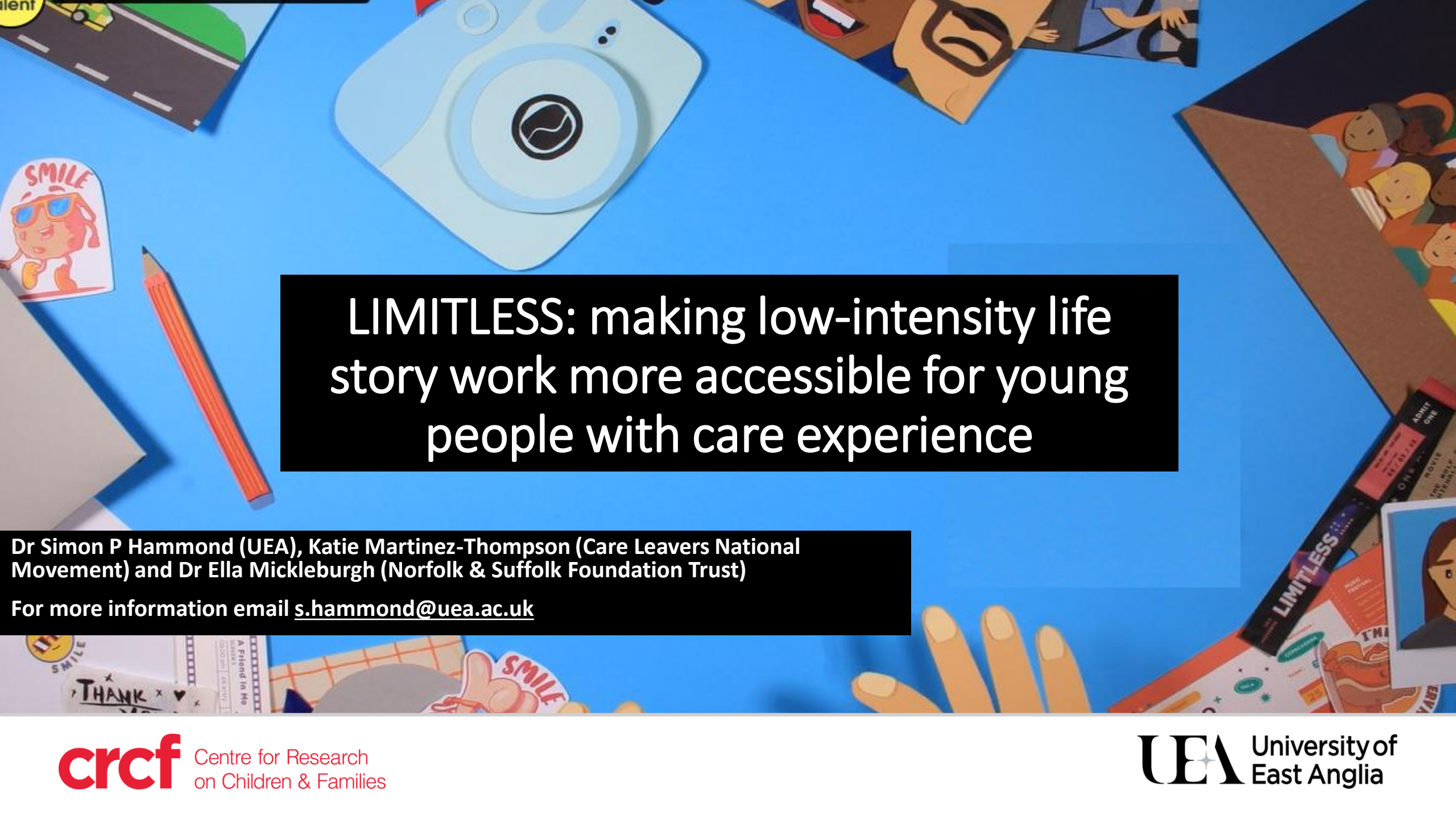
The full research report, briefing and young people's accessible summary is available at the following link:

[Young People's Transitions from Residential to Foster Care - Groups and Centres \(uea.ac.uk\)](https://uea.ac.uk/research/young-people-transitions)



# References

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# LIMITLESS: making low-intensity life story work more accessible for young people with care experience

**Dr Simon P Hammond (UEA), Katie Martinez-Thompson (Care Leavers National Movement) and Dr Ella Mickleburgh (Norfolk & Suffolk Foundation Trust)**

**For more information email [s.hammond@uea.ac.uk](mailto:s.hammond@uea.ac.uk)**

# What is Life Story Work?

- Why life story work?
  - Identity as fluid, situated and dynamic (McAdams, 1989; Gergen, 2015)
  - Therapeutic alliances and positive future expectations (Askelund et al 2019; Prince et al, 2019; Orlowski et al 2023)
- Why life story work with teenagers?
  - Adolescence is a time that matters (UNICEF, 2022)
  - Curators of their memory museums
- Recording, processing and reflecting
  - Holding everyday magic (Hammond & Cooper, 2013; Hammond et al 2021)



WE DIDN'T REALISE WE WERE  
MAKING MEMORIES. WE JUST KNEW  
WE WERE HAVING FUN



# Why LIMITLESS?

- What is the current practice picture?
  - Why am I in care?
  - Challenging limiting narratives
- What does research tell us?
  - Therapeutic potentials not fully realised
  - Implementation details unspecified
  - Not statistically significant (Taylor et al 2022)
- How can we “raise the bar”?
  - Moving beyond good intentions to good evidence (Hammond et al, 2021)
  - Intuitively, we know Life Story Work ‘works’, but for who, when and how is unclear.





# How did we do the research? (i)

- 16 month 'Realist Review' funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)
- What works, for whom, under what circumstances?' (Pawson et al, 2005; Wong et al, 2016)
- Initial Programming Theory (iPrT) developed with stakeholders
- Searching and appraisal of evidence is theory driven, aiming to refine iPrT – stakeholder consultation key throughout
- Focus on explaining why (or not) the intervention works and in what ways, to enable informed choices about further use and/or research.

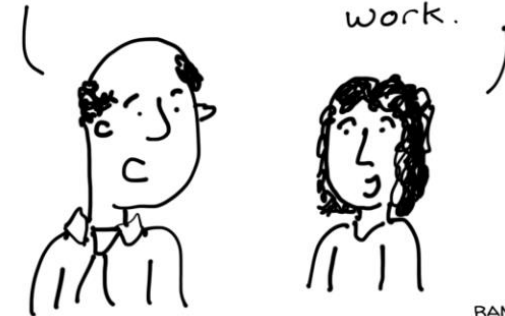
Mum. How come when you ask Henry to do something he does it? But when I ask, he gets mad?



RAMESESPROJECT.ORG

So, what is a programme theory?

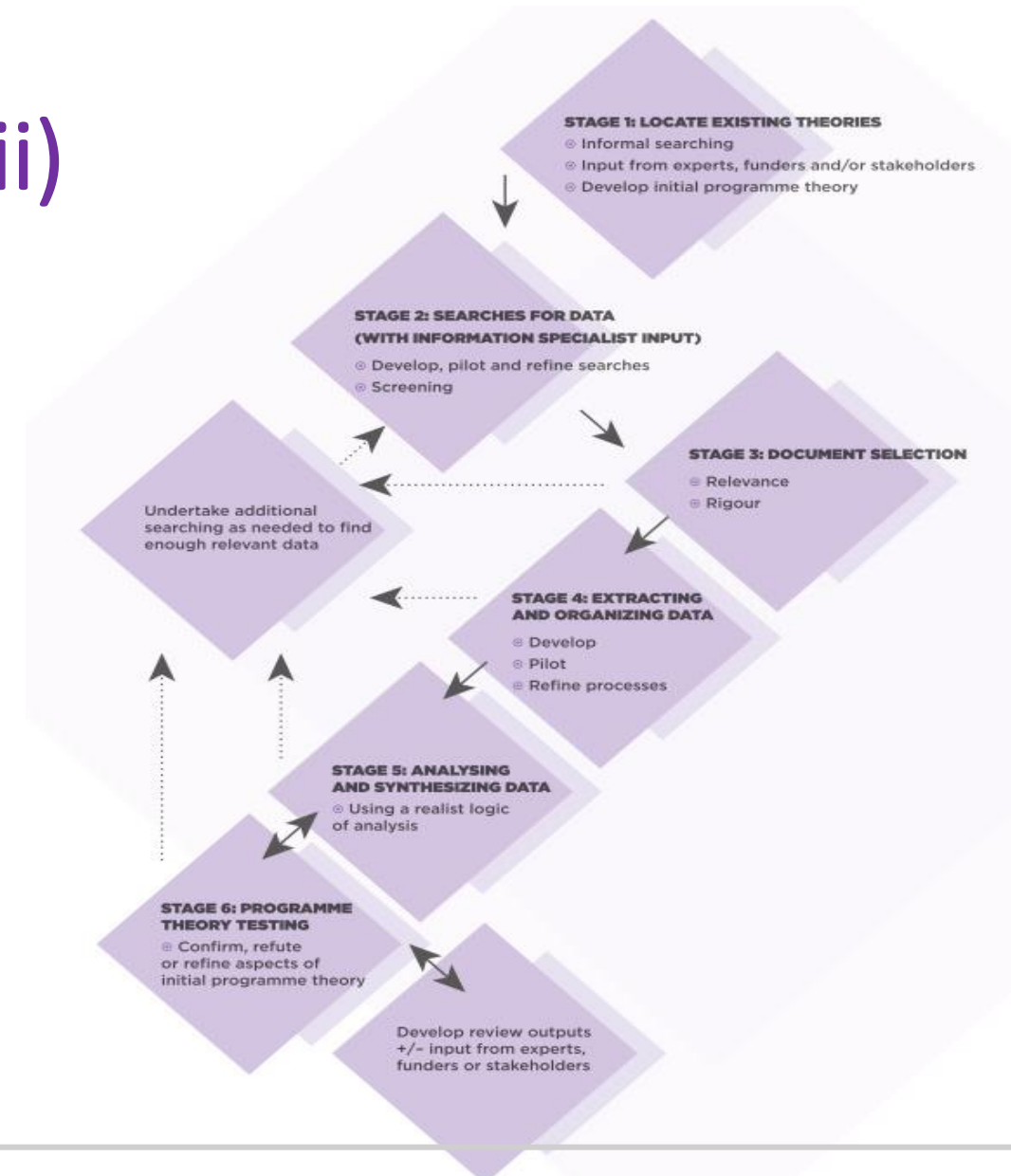
It's just how and why you think the intervention will work.



RAMESESPROJECT.ORG

## How did we do the research? (ii)

- We undertook a multiple step process
- Consulting with two expert groups at three differing timepoints
- Groups brought their own experiences to bear on iPrT, helped critique and refine developing PrT
- Discussions helped clarify important areas that needed explanation and where existing literature was lacking





# How did we do the research? (iii)

- In conversations with Katie Martinez-Thompson (Care Leavers National Movement)
- Why did you become involved?
- What did you do?
- What was this like?
- Lessons learned?



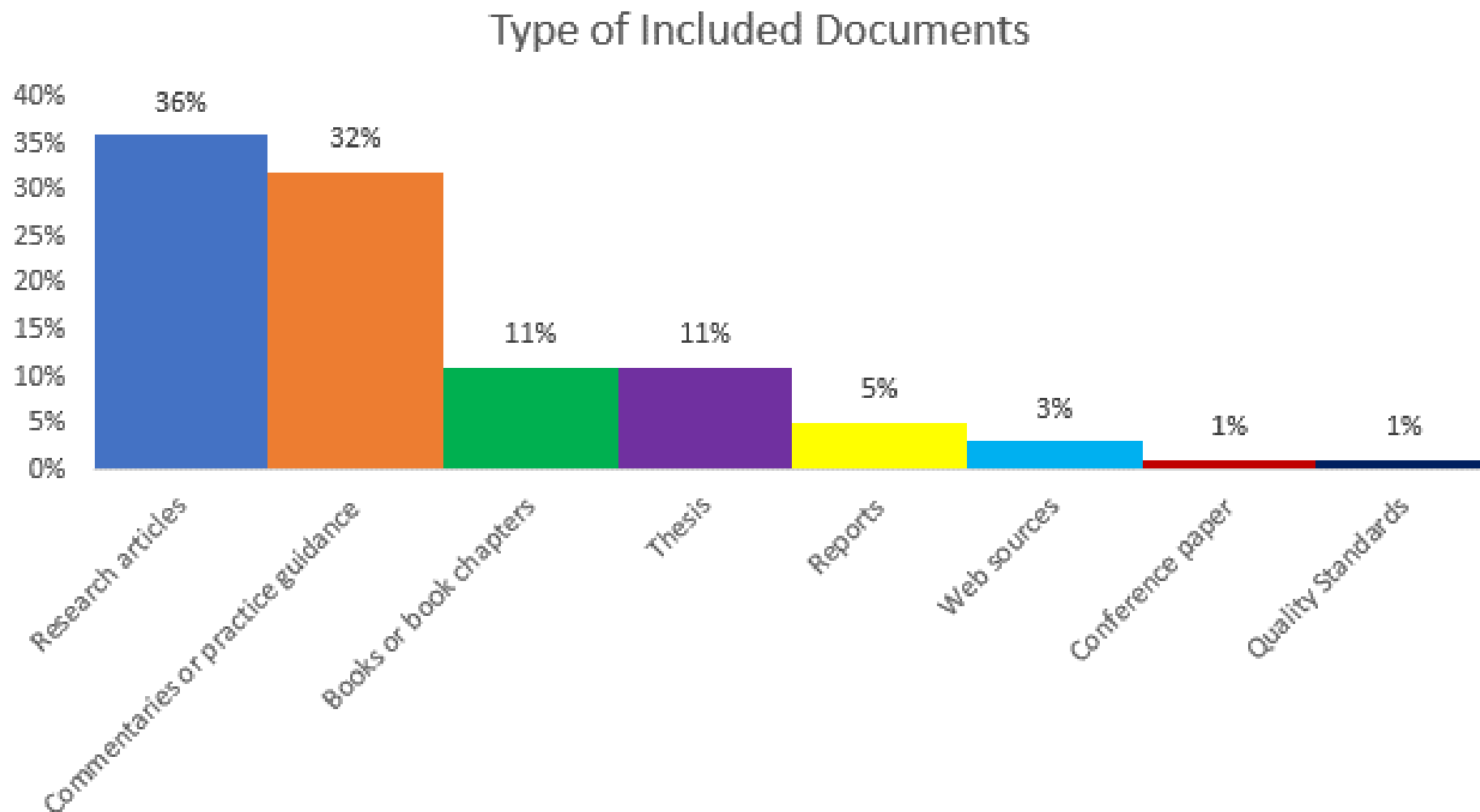


## So what did we find? (i)

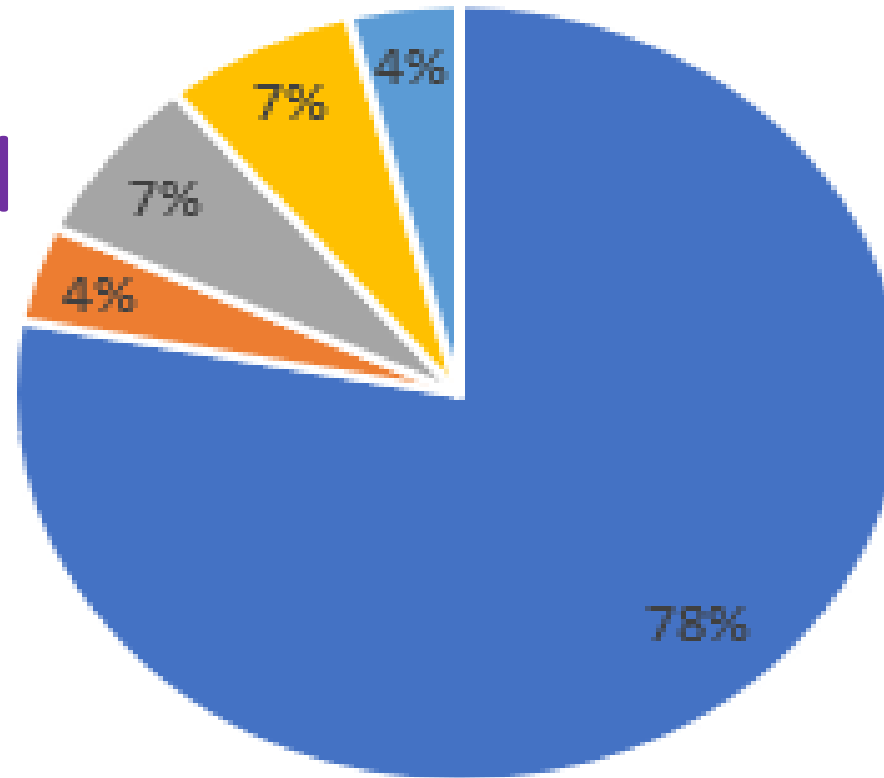
- We screened over 3,000 documents
- 75 were included, all published between 1981-2022 and were from 8 countries (56 from the UK).
- Generally, studies were small-scale and lacked in-depth description of methods and evaluation processes utilised.



# So what did we find? (i)



## Methods used



■ Qualitative

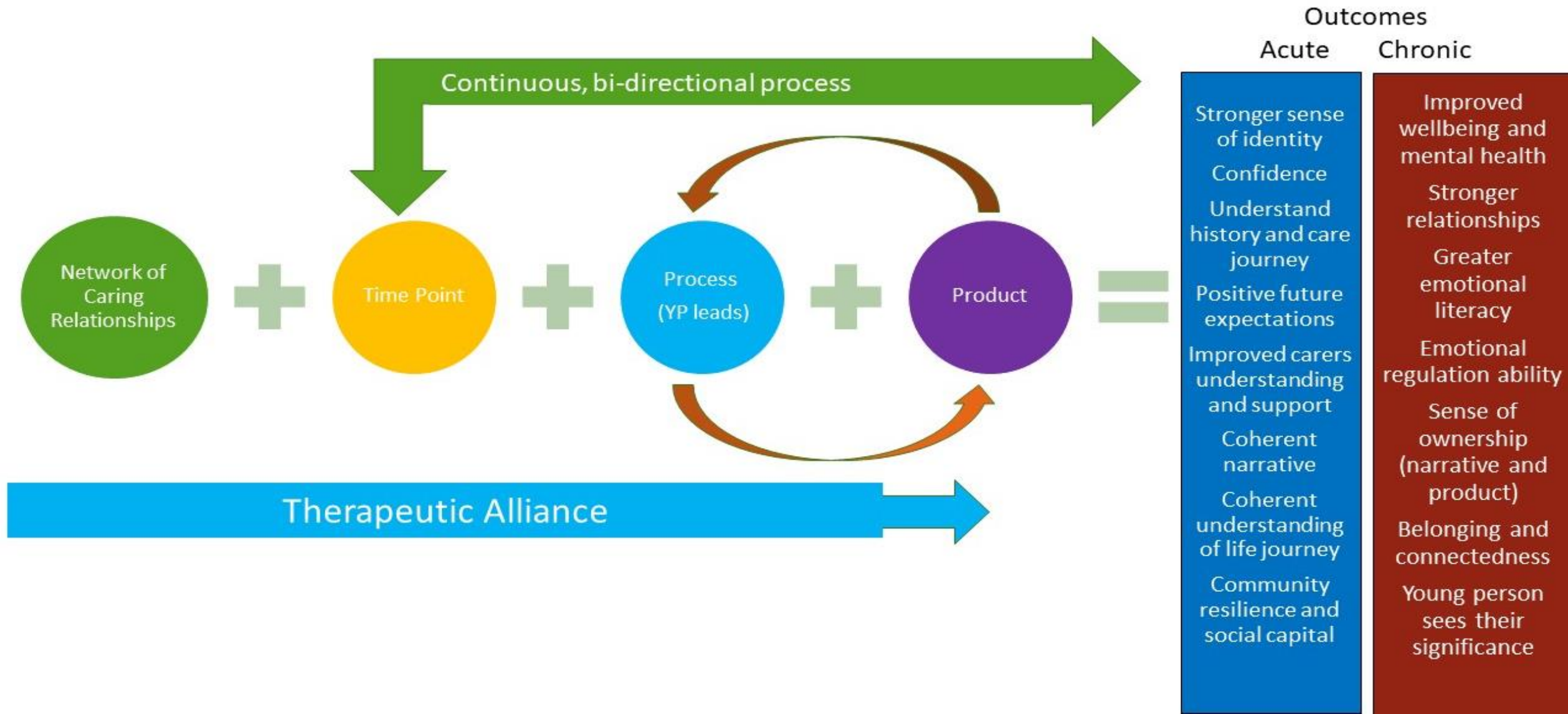
■ Mixed methods

■ Literature reviews

■ Matched pairs

■ Randomised trials

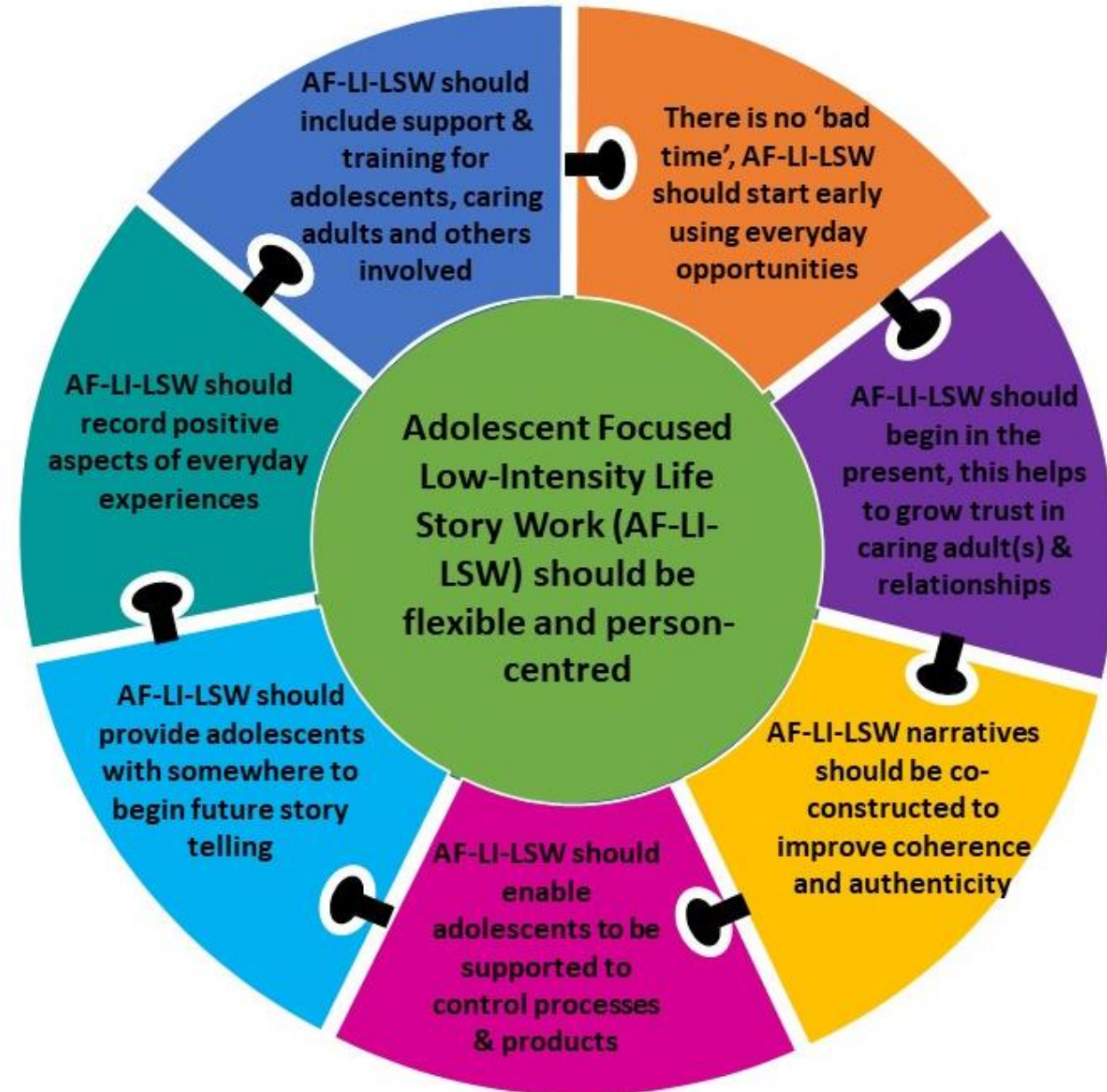
## So what did we find? (ii)



# So what did we find? (iii)

## So what did we find? (iv)

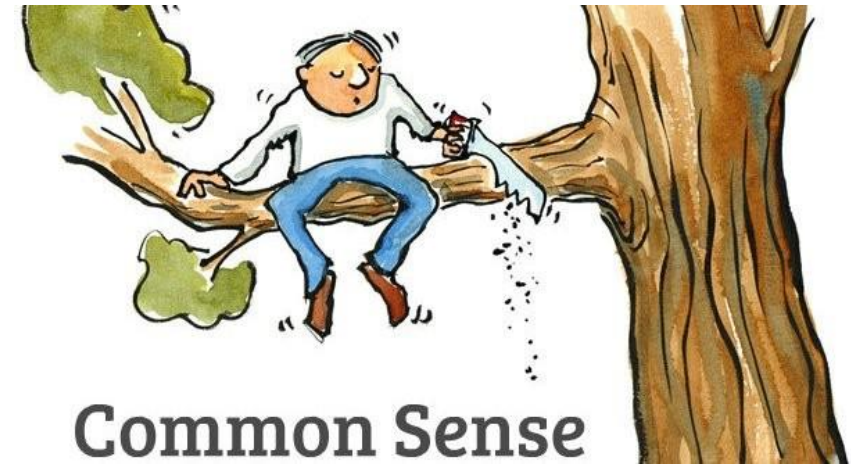
- Our synthesis resulted in a consolidated PrT from which a set of initial guidelines for optimising AF-LI-LSW
- Eight initial guidelines proposed
- Core finding is the importance of AF-LI-LSW being flexible and person-centred.
- Adapting to the needs, interests and wishes of the adolescent is the key initial guideline that underpins all that follow.





# So what next?

- Lack of robust implementation guidance, efficacy or cost-effectiveness studies
- “This guidance may be common sense, but its not common practice” (Foster carer, expert group member)
- This guidance improves understandings of how, why, what and whom should be involved to produce *potentially therapeutic* outcomes.
- But we must strengthen our understanding of how delivery is impacted by individual contexts (e.g., foster, residential, kinship etc)
- What therapeutic outcomes are important?
- Evaluation including health economic
- The bar has moved... but not enough, not by a long way







Thank you for listening

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