



**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 (Department for Education 2015)

Birgit Larsson, Gillian Schofield, Elsbeth Neil, Julie Young,
Marcello Morciano and Yiu-Shing Lau

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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 (Department for Education 2015)

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Project team: Dr Birgit Larsson, Professor Gillian Schofield, Professor Elsbeth Neil, Julie Young, (University of East Anglia) Dr Marcello Morciano and Dr Yiu-Shing Lau (University of Manchester)

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

- Although long-term foster care had been recognized as an important and 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 (Department for Education 2015).
- However, there had been no monitoring of the implementation of the regulations and guidance in the three years following 2015. In addition, the local authority data submitted using the new long-term foster care codes had not been published by the Department for Education, mainly because the range of recorded rates of long-term foster care cast doubt on how well implementation was working.

WHAT DID THE REGULATIONS AND GUIDANCE SAY?

- 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. All local authorities were required to: consult children, carers and birth families; 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 was also required to record these agreed long-term foster care

placements using two codes (for family 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.

- The second area of the regulations and guidance was designed to enhance a child's experience of a normal family life in the foster family. After a year in placement, local authorities could consider reducing the frequency of social work visiting from six weeks to a new statutory minimum of six months (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 12 months, with the other review at a six-monthly interval conducted without a formal meeting.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to investigate the implementation in England of the first government regulations and guidance for long-term foster care (DfE 2015) by addressing the following research questions:

- What are the numbers, characteristics and pathways of children in long-term foster care placements?
- Have local authorities introduced procedures and practices in long-term foster care that conform with the definitions, principles and requirements of the regulations and guidance?
- Which aspects of the regulations and guidance appear to be working well and which may be causing concern and need to be reviewed?

METHODS

- Analysis of the national data for England on pathways and profiles of children in long-term foster care using the children looked after SSDA903 data (2009-18)
- A national survey of local authorities (response rate 74%) regarding their procedures and practices. A separate survey of independent fostering agencies was also conducted.
- Research interviews with managers (N=46) from a sample of 30 local authorities who represented different profiles and procedural systems.
- Support from a stakeholder project advisory group, including representatives from local authorities, the voluntary sector and the Department for Education.
- Consultation with the Cafcass Family Justice Young People's Board

KEY FINDINGS

Profiles and pathways of children in long-term foster care

- A significant minority (39.7%) of children in foster care were coded as in long-term foster care in 2017/18. The data showed that there had been a gradual decline nationally in the numbers and proportion of foster children coded as in long-term foster care from 46% in 2016. There had, though, also been a decline in adoption orders and reunification in this period, alongside a rise in special guardianship orders.
- The analysis of profiles nationally highlighted the wide range of children in long-term foster care and some differences e.g. between placements with friends and family and non-friends and family. In both long-term and short-term foster care, friends and family carers cared for more girls, more White British children, younger children and children with lower SDQ scores.
- When the profile of children in long-term foster care was compared with other permanence pathways (reunification, adoption/special guardianship), it was most similar to adoption and special guardianship in terms of numbers, gender

and ethnicity. However, there were differences in terms of age, with the youngest children more likely to be adopted or under special guardianship and older children more likely to be in long-term foster care.

- 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%. The strongest predictor of whether a child was coded as in a long-term foster care placement was not related to their characteristics, but rather 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.

Impact of the long-term foster care regulations and guidance

- The majority of local authorities reported a positive impact of the regulations and guidance in giving a higher profile to long-term foster care as a positive permanence option. This had contributed both to a change in culture and to more robust procedures for assessment, matching and tracking children. As one manager put it: 'The regulations and guidance gave a clear route for legitimately accepting long-term foster care as an accepted route to permanence, but making sure that it is not taken lightly'.
- But there were still some concerns expressed about long-term foster care, as it was a 'statutory intervention' through childhood, there was a risk of stigma and instability and there was a shortage of long-term foster carers.
- There were also questions about a perceived hierarchy of permanence options that affected attitudes to long-term foster care. Birth family options through reunification, kinship care, special guardianship had to be considered first and, for the youngest children, adoption would often be preferred. Although this need not make long-term foster care seem of lesser value, there were concerns that it could be seen as a last resort rather than a positive choice.

- For some authorities, regulations and guidance had been helpful in confirming and reinforcing existing good practice in long-term foster care, which was both rigorous and child-centred. For others, changes were welcomed and implemented, but challenges could arise in ensuring that more robust procedures were also flexible and sensitive to the wishes and needs of each child. In a few authorities there appeared to be some general reluctance to engage with or implement long-term foster care as a permanence option.

Care planning and matching procedures and practice

- Key factors in the choice of permanence option included age, sibling groups and emotional and behaviour difficulties arising from experiences of trauma. Often these factors interacted, for example when making decisions about sibling groups where one child was under five and could be placed separately for adoption or where children's difficulties made placement together seem too challenging. But continuity of sibling relationships was a key focus of plans.
- There was a range of procedures and panels in different local authorities for planning, matching and recording long-term foster care. It was important for local authorities to ensure that these formed a coherent pathway for children. One challenge was to ensure rigour in assessment and matching but also child-centred sensitivity in procedures, especially for children of different ages. Older children, in particular, often had to manage their feelings and loyalties towards both foster and birth families when permanence decisions were being made, so flexibility and choice were needed when matching decisions were expected to be accompanied by celebrations.

Reducing the frequency of social work visits and looked after children review meetings

- The majority of local authorities (73%) reduced the frequency of social work visits for some, though generally few, children in long-term foster care. Many, however, mentioned reducing visiting frequency from six weeks to three months rather than the six months allowed from 2015.

- There were said to be some potential benefits of reducing the frequency of visits in normalising a child's family life. But there were also concerns, mainly in relation to the local authority's responsibility for children's welfare and the importance of social work relationships with children in long-term foster care.
- Less than half (45%) of local authorities had implemented a reduction in the frequency of review meetings, and often for a very limited number of children. However, the new guidance had focused attention on ensuring that the wishes and needs of each child in long-term foster care were met in all reviews, both with meetings and without.

Data management in long-term foster care

- Recording long-term foster care placements was undertaken by different staff members following a range of procedures.
- There were varying levels of confidence in the data and some data systems did not enable service managers to monitor accurately how many and which children were in long-term foster care.
- Key to effective working and more accurate data was said to be shared ownership of the data between data managers, social work managers and practitioners.

Were there links between long-term foster care rates, procedure and practice?

- There were no clear links between rates of recorded long-term foster care placements and any one aspect of procedure e.g. the use of fostering panels to approve matches was found in high, medium and low rate authorities. However, a combination of factors may make a difference e.g. negative attitudes and culture towards long-term foster care, lack of trust in matching and uncertain recording practices seemed to be associated in some authorities with very low rates.
- There were concerns that authorities with very high rates may in some cases be recording foster placements as long-term after a year without the required assessment and matching.

- There could be a variety in the quality of practice and outcomes with the same rates of recorded long-term foster care at any level, with variation in both decision-making and recording practices likely to be contributing to these differences.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure there is policy and practice support at national and local level for long-term foster care as a positive permanence option for children, alongside reunification, kinship care, adoption and special guardianship.
- Develop data software and management systems that facilitate recording and can track and monitor children in planned long-term foster care, to avoid drift and plan services.
- Achieve care planning and matching procedures that are rigorous, but also sensitive to individual children's needs, views and experiences into adulthood – and involve foster carers and birth families.
- Make appropriate resources available e.g. for undertaking direct work with children; recruiting and supporting foster carers; giving social workers skills, time and supervision; providing mental health and education support for children; supporting birth families.
- Value continuity of positive relationships of all kinds through childhood and into adulthood.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

- A major strength of this study was the use of mixed methods to investigate the implementation of the long-term foster care regulations and guidance. National data on profiles and pathways, procedures and practice were explored in more depth through interviews with a purposive sample of local authorities.

- A limitation of the study was that the focus was on the implementation of regulations and guidance at the level of local authority policy and procedures. Evidence of the detail of decision making and practice at case level would need a follow up study including case file searches. Interviews with children, foster and birth families and practitioners, as in previous UEA studies of planned long-term foster care, would also provide further insights into the approaches local authorities were taking to long-term foster care.

IMPACT

The research report and executive summary were launched at a Nuffield Foundation/UEA webinar in December 2021, followed by a roundtable for selected experts and stakeholders. There was a subsequent seminar for Department for Education staff in February 2022 as part of an ongoing engagement with policy and practice development. There will be academic articles published and follow up for the range of recommendations set out in the report and executive summary.

FIND OUT MORE

Links to research project report / executive summary
<https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/en/publications/planning-and-supporting-permanence-in-long-term-foster-care-an-in>

Dr Birgit Larsson b.larsson@uea.ac.uk

HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH BRIEFING

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