Young people's transitions from residential to foster care: an evaluation of Norfolk County Council's Enhanced Fostering Service

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We would also like to thank the staff at EFS, foster carers, Independent Reviewing Officers, social workers and residential workers who generously gave up their time to participate in this evaluation.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the young people for sharing their experiences with us. They shared moving and powerful accounts of growing up in care and the importance of relationships at each step of the journey. By sharing their views with us they will play an important role in shaping and improving services for future young people. We would especially like to thank the two young people who played a vital role in helping us to recruit the right researchers for this project.

Executive summary

The Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) is a specialist service within Norfolk County Council (NCC). The EFS was established in 2019 to support young people who require an enhanced level of support to manage the transition from residential to foster care. The EFS supports young people, foster carers and associated professionals from the initial planning, though the transition and for a year following the move to ensure stability and consistency throughout the process.

Aims

In late 2020, NCC commissioned an independent evaluation of the Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS). This evaluation, undertaken by the University of East Anglia, aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do young people experience the transition from residential to foster care? What helps or hinders this transition?
- What are young people's views and experiences of the EFS in supporting their transition from residential care to a foster home?
- What are professionals' views and experiences of the 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?

Research Team

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Methods

The UEA research team spoke to young people and professionals receiving support from the EFS. Young people shared their experiences of the transition from residential to foster care. Professionals were asked about their experiences of supporting young people's transitions and their views on the support provided by EFS. The project was granted ethical approval from the UEA School of Social Work Ethics Committee and NCC Research Governance. Data collection consisted of:

- Interviews with 6 young people who had made the transition from residential to foster care while supported by the EFS
- Interviews with 9 foster carers who had a young person placed with them while receiving support from the EFS
- Interviews with 4 Independent Reviewing Officers who had overseen the care planning for a young person supported by the EFS
- Interviews with 6 Children's Social Workers with case responsibility for a young person who had moved from residential to foster care
- 2 focus groups with residential workers who had supported a young person to make the transition from residential care foster care as part of the EFS process
- A focus group with the EFS team to identify learning from the first 18 months of service operation

During the later stages of the evaluation NCC undertook a transformation of fostering services within the local authority. This included the dissolution of the EFS as a standalone service and the distribution of support across the fostering service as a whole. In view of this, the research team have generated recommendations from the evaluation that would benefit and inform the service transformation, rather than a narrow focus on specific recommendations for the EFS.

Key findings

The evaluation provided a timely opportunity to review the work of the EFS. More broadly, the research explored the experiences of young people who have made the transition from residential to foster care. This was a gap in the literature, both in terms of young people's experiences and the evidence-base for practice. Four key stages were identified within young people's transition from residential care to foster placement:

1. Assessing readiness
2. Matching
3. Making the transition
4. Settling into placement

The research captures the views of young people and professionals in relation to each of these four stages and identifies implications for practice.

Conclusion and recommendations for practice

Moving from residential to foster care enabled some young people to experience a secure base which had been difficult for them to achieve previously. However, this transition required careful scaffolding and support for both foster carers and young people. Within this transition there was a distinctive route to permanence for some young people, which involved them being fostered by an adult they already knew, such as their residential support worker or teacher. For the foster carer this was also often their first experience of fostering. These matches had strengths as well as challenges and were not always straightforward. There remained layers of complexity on both sides which require careful consideration and support in order for the placement to be successful. The research identified key implications for practice for each of the four stages:

Assessing readiness

Each young person will have individual needs in relation to the move from residential to foster care. To understand this fully professionals around the child must work together to both assess the young person and support them to take an active role in the process.

Matching

Individuals that step forward to foster a child who is known to them, such as a residential worker or a teacher, have an existing relationship and understanding of the young person. This existing relationship can strengthen the placement. However, careful consideration must be given to their motivation for offering this placement, their expectations and readiness to manage any shifts or challenges in the relationship.

Transition

Young people and foster carers appreciate a *planned* transition which allows them to adjust to their new life within the foster home gradually and have a meaningful ending to their residential placement. The pace of the transition will be specific to each match, however regular review is required to ensure that existing relationships are not lost.

Settling into placement

Placements with connected carers hold increased psychological risks for young people as they feel they have been personally chosen (and therefore are at greater risk of personal rejection). As such it is crucial that foster carers are offered flexible, therapeutically informed support to enable them to hold the young person while they explore their new identity, relationships and boundaries within the foster placement. Residential staff are well placed to form part of the golden thread of connected adults who stay in touch with the young person through each stage of the transition process, during their placement and into adulthood offering support and continuity.

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Structure of the report

The structure of the research report is as follows:

Introduction: This outlines the role and remit of the EFS, the policy and research background to residential and foster care and the methods used in this evaluation.

Part One: The young people, provides a picture of the young people supported by the EFS and introduces the young people who participated in the study. This is followed by their voices on their experiences in residential care, their current placement and their views of the EFS.

Part Two: The journey from residential to foster care, is divided into four stages which reflect the journey from residential to foster care: **assessing readiness, matching, making the transition and settling into placement.** Within each of these stages we capture the views of young people and professionals, identifying areas of similarity and difference between their perspectives and areas for practice development.

Conclusion: summarises the findings of the evaluation and identifies recommendations for practice.

Introduction

In late 2020, Norfolk County Council commissioned the University of East Anglia to carry out an independent evaluation of their Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS). This introduction outlines the role and remit of the EFS, the policy and research context of residential and foster care and the methods used to carry out the evaluation.

The role of the Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS)

The Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) was established in 2019 by Norfolk County Council's (NCC) Fostering Service. The first members of the team joined in October 2019 and the service developed until March 2022 when the Norfolk Fostering Service was restructured and EFS no longer remained a stand-alone service.

The service was developed by a steering group in NCC after they established the needs of the Looked After Children population in Norfolk. Local authority data in 2018 found that there were higher than the national average numbers of Looked After Children in Norfolk living in residential care. The national figures regarding Looked After Children state that 12% are accommodated within residential care, this rises to 14.6% in Norfolk with a quarter of these placements being in residential settings outside of the county (Norfolk County Council, 2019). Further findings from the local authority data also showed that young people living in residential homes often had several step-downs (a move of home from a residential home to a fostering home) and that many of the young people living in residential homes had permanency plans to live in a foster home. The data from NCC in 2018 identified that 66% of transitions for young people from residential to foster homes resulted in subsequent moves for the young person (80% of these were supported directly via NCC Fostering Service). The original aim of the service was therefore to recruit and train specialist foster carers and to 'step-down' young people from living in residential homes to foster homes, and to provide additional support beyond what would be expected from a standard foster placement. The hope was that this would result in fewer subsequent moves for young people.

The creation of the EFS was based on Birmingham City Council's Step-Down Programme (Plumridge & Sebba, 2018). The Birmingham model provided enhanced support and planning for young people's transitions from a residential to a foster home. It consisted of a phased transition period from a residential home to foster home with an enhanced level of support, including support from a therapist (Plumridge & Sebba, 2018). The pilot of the Birmingham model identified positive outcomes for the young people including increased stability within the fostering home, higher engagement with activities, less missing from home episodes and higher school attendance.

The EFS team and roles

The first members of the team to join the EFS in October 2019 were the team manager and a clinical psychologist. The team was fully recruited by summer 2020 and consisted of the following: team manager; clinical psychologist; senior supervising social worker (SSW); two SSWs; and an assistant practitioner.

The team manager's role was to provide the management for the team and service, including managing the referrals and workflow. In addition, they chaired the three, six, nine and 12-month review meetings with the professional network. The SSW's roles were to support the matching stage by co-producing pen pictures of the young people with their professional network to aid in identifying potential matches with foster carers. The main role of the SW's was to support the foster carers with the statutory support requirements in addition to the enhanced level of support from the team. This involved regular contact with the carer and chairing fortnightly progress review meetings within the first three months of the young person moving into the fostering home. The progress review meetings were attended by the foster carer, SSW, clinical psychologist, practitioner and the child's social worker and other agencies when appropriate. The foster carers were also able to access the standard support offer from Norfolk Fostering that included: access to a 24/7 duty line, training and buddy support.

The practitioner role was focused on working directly with the young person. When possible, the practitioner would meet with the young person whilst they were still living in the residential home to support them to provide creative ways of helping them share the

information that they thought was important for a potential foster family. In addition, the practitioner supported some young people to identify previous patterns of caregiving and experiences of foster care that could be informing their expectations of their planned transition. The practitioner was able to work with the young person for approximately a year after they moved to a foster home and in some cases, this was extended further. The 1:1 work supported the young person to explore their experiences of living in foster care and when appropriate it could include life story work, and educational work on various topics (e.g. sexual health, drugs and alcohol). The practitioner received individual clinical supervision from the clinical psychologist to support their direct work with young people. The role of the clinical psychologist was to provide a psychological framework from which to inform the core tasks of the EFS through consultations, team meetings, EFS referral meetings, EFS progress review meetings. This clinical lens was further embedded through the clinical psychologist providing training to the team and foster carers, in addition to facilitating monthly group clinical supervision for the foster carers and EFS team. The predominant clinical model was mentalization based practice in addition to other attachment and trauma based clinical theories and models.

Mentalisation is the capacity to reflect on your own and others' internal mental experiences and how they impact behaviours (Asen & Fonagy, 2012). A developing body of research suggests that mentalization based practice is an effective model of supporting foster carers through psychoeducation (Adkins, Luyten & Fonagy, 2018), reflective practice (Midgley et al., 2019; Redfern et al., 2018) and as an intervention for children in foster carer (Midgley et al., 2017). Higher parental reflective functioning and mentalizing is associated with caregiving and attachment security (Camoirano, 2017).

The clinical psychologist used clinical assessment measures to inform the psychological formulation of the young person's needs which in turn informed matching with potential foster carers and the on-going support of the fostering family. When it was clinically appropriate and there was capacity, the clinical psychologist provided direct therapeutic work to some young people and their caregivers.

There were complicating factors that impacted the implementation of the service model between 2020-2022. The most significant factor was COVID-19 that impacted all the stakeholders of the service, the way that the service operated and staffing capacity. Furthermore, due to external challenges of service need and capacity, some of the capacity of the SSWs was utilised to support other areas of the system.

The EFS service process

The EFS supported step-down placements through initial referral, matching, transition and provided ongoing support and review. This process is summarised below.

Referral

A young person's social worker would refer to the EFS if they were exploring a care plan for the young person that involved a transition from a residential home to a foster home. The EFS would then facilitate a referral meeting with the professional network including: the child's SW, child's Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and the residential home. The aim of this meeting was to explore the young person's previous and current caregiving experiences, their wishes and feelings, and to review as a network if there was evidence to explore whether the young person could be ready to transition to a foster home.
If there was an agreement at the meeting to explore foster care options for the young person, and it was agreed that the young person would need additional support for this transition than typically available, the EFS would co-ordinate next steps. An alternative outcome was that further exploration of the voice or needs of the young person needed to be completed before the decision to consider fostering. On occasion, the practitioner would work with the young person for a bespoke piece of work to further explore their readiness and views of moving to foster care.

Matching

The matching process involved gathering more information about the young person's experiences and their wishes and feelings towards their residential home and about finding a foster family. This information was collated from the young person and professional network. Clinical assessment measures from the residential home and young person were collated to inform the psychological formulation of the young person. Potential matches

with foster carers were explored, and on some occasions an adult within the young person's existing network expressed a wish to foster the young person. In some instances, this involved EFS working alongside prospective foster carers through the assessment stage if they were not already registered as a foster carer. On occasion, the best proposed match for the young person was with a foster carer working with an Independent Fostering Agency. Learning from the implementation of the model led to the agreement that when young people were matched with a carer from an Independent Fostering Agency, the Local Authority would ensure that the appropriate level of support was offered from the agency to avoid duplication of resources/support.

A later development in the team and service need involved the team supporting a cohort of young people and foster carers without being involved in the matching and transition. This was often due to an emergency move for the young person and the EFS was subsequently involved to provide an enhanced level of support to the young person and foster family.

Transition

Transition planning typically involved a collaboration with the young person and the network around them. The transition plan varied depending on the situation and needs of the young person. Key components of the transition included sharing information with the young person and foster family about each other (often by videos), steps towards relationship building such as building up time and contact together. When appropriate, a young person's birth or adoptive family would be involved directly or indirectly in the transition stage. A transition review meeting provided the opportunity to review the speed and content of the transition and amend as required.

Ongoing support

Progress review meetings were facilitated by the EFS on a fortnightly basis for the first three months. The frequency of these meetings was then reviewed and reduced if appropriate. The team manager chaired reviews at the three, six and nine month points to review progress and agree the direction of support from the team.

The level of support to the foster family remained intensive throughout the first year so that if challenges presented, there were already established relationships with the foster family and EFS. A later development of the EFS was to provide additional support to the adult birth children of the foster family. The foster carers could access the support outlined in previous sections of this summary e.g., foster carer group supervision and bespoke training.

12 month mark review

At the 12 month time point from the transition of the young person moving to the fostering home, there was a review decision to either transition the foster carer to the 'mainstream' fostering team or to remain with the EFS. If there was still a need for ongoing enhanced support to the foster family, then EFS continued to support the foster family with regular review opportunities.

Policy and research background

There has been a steady decline in the use of residential care for children since the 1980s, with residential care providing for only 12% of looked after children (Department for Education 2021). It is commonly seen as a 'last resort' (Hart, La Valle & Holmes. 2015) due to the strong preference for children being placed in foster family care where possible.

It is widely acknowledged that looked after children come from backgrounds of family adversity and face challenges and risks that negatively impact on their outcomes compared to the general population (Courtney et al. 2010). For some, the impact of these challenges can be ameliorated, but this is viewed as less likely for young people in residential settings (Bates, English & Kouidou-Giles, 1997. Dmitrivea, Monahan, Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012). Societal perceptions of residential care (or children's homes) can also be stigmatising and some young people present with increased levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviour following long-term placements in residential care (Li, Chng & Chu, 2017).

Studies suggest that moving to family-based placements such as foster care can offer children and young people a more normative environment which allows greater opportunity to develop important social and emotional skills and abilities (Narendorf, Fedoravicius, McMillen & Robinson, 2012. Services have for some decades favoured family-based settings

and this has been reflected in the continually developing and evolving policy framework in the UK, pushed further forward by responses to lessons from the past (Cocker et al 2019), the cost implications of residential care and the concept of permanence since the 1980s which has been linked to attachment and family care. However, the discourse of residential care as a 'last resort' has been strongly challenged in recent years, and it has been emphasised that for some young people 'residential group care can offer the best chance of positive outcomes, transition, and in some cases a route to permanence' (Holmes, Connolly, Mortimer and Hevesi, 2018: 209). Research on a cohort of children in Break, a Norfolk based residential care provider, also suggested the potential for residential care to be linked to positive outcomes and permanence for some young people (Thoburn 2016), especially with special support for young people leaving residential care (Schofield et al 2015, 2017).

Policy

Section 23 of the Children Act 1989 states that every local authority has a duty to provide accommodation and to maintain looked after children. This accommodation can encompass a range of placement settings including adoption, foster, kinship and residential care. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 signified a strong political drive to focus on adoption as a route to permanence. However, subsequent policy documents such as Every Child Matters (2003) and Care Matters: Time to change (2007) widened this focus, stating that different permanence options (such a long-term foster care) are equally valid. This was reinforced by the Care Inquiry (2013) which gave a clear endorsement for practitioners to consider a range of permanence options, with permanence defined as security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging. As such permanence is not connected to legal status and one route to permanence is not inherently preferable to any other, rather it is dependent on the specific needs of the child or young person. The key message of the Inquiry was that positive relationships for children through into adulthood are 'the golden thread' that should drive policy and practice.

Residential care

The role of residential care has become predominantly to provide placements for children with special needs, for older children and for children whose needs have not been able to be met in foster care. Some, but not all, of the previously fostered children will have had

multiple foster placements and children may also have moved between a number of residential homes. According to a Department for Education report (2014:7), approximately 29% of those in residential care have experienced six or more placements. The majority (78%) of residential care placements are now provided by the private or voluntary sector, with placements commissioned by local authorities for the children in their care. Unlike the rest of Europe (Thoburn and Ainsworth, 2014) residential care represents a small percentage (less than 12%) of placements for looked after children in the UK, however according to the Department of Education (2014) the costs of residential placements accounts for approximately a third of the national spend on looked after children (Schofield et al 2015).

A number of concerns have been raised about the needs of children in care, particularly those in residential care. For example, there are high levels of diagnosable mental health disorders (46%) among looked after children, but particularly high levels (68%) in residential care (Meltzer et al, 2000). It seems most likely that troubled lives and emotional and behavioural problems experienced by young people before entering residential care have contributed to this finding, but it has significant implications for services provided in and after care.

However residential care can play an important role in permanence options for some older children, especially when they are supported after leaving residential care into early adult life (Schofield et al 2015, Thoburn 2016). This approach has been reflected in an important new policy development, Staying Close, a programme for providing support for young people leaving residential care into early adulthood. Local authorities who apply can be funded by the DfE for implementation of Staying Close 2022-25, which will be evaluated. This roll out is the result of the success of a number of pilot programmes funded and evaluated under the DfE Innovations programme - which in turn followed the introduction of Staying Put in 2014 as a policy for children in foster care.

Foster care

Foster care provides a wide range of short-term and long-term families and has to meet the varied needs of diverse children and young people. The recruitment and support of foster carers, especially carers for adolescents, is acknowledged to require significant skills and resources (Narey and Owers 2017, Department for Education 2018), an issue that is highly relevant for planning moves for children from residential to foster care.

Supporting permanence in long-term foster care placements has been high on the agenda for older children who are not able to return to their birth families and for whom adoption or kinship care are not an option. In the study completed by Larsson et al (2021), examining the implementation of the first regulations and guidance on long-term foster care (DfE 2015), 40% of fostered children (more than 20,000 children and young people in the UK) were placed in long term foster care, with a permanence plan for their foster family to provide a secure family life from childhood through to adulthood. The study also found that many of these long-term foster care plans and placements will be made in adolescence, suggesting that the building of new relationships and a secure base in a foster family (Schofield and Beek, 2014) is deemed possible and valuable at this age in order to build security and resilience that will support vulnerable young people into adulthood - including enabling them to retain relationships and life-long links (Holmes et al, 2020) with birth families, friends and communities. These principles lie also at the heart of considering the potential benefits of foster family placements for children currently in residential care, when this is assessed as being in their best interests.

It is clear from the literature and policy framework that there are a range of care options for looked after children and that the key elements to be considered in these placements are the individual needs of each child or young person, the best way to achieve a sense of permanence and security for that young person and the importance of supportive relationships that run through their childhood and into adulthood.

While there is a strong body of research considering the strengths and limitations of both residential care and foster care, more is needed to inform the process of managing and making the transition from one to the other.

The needs of looked after children

Looked after children and care leavers are some of the most vulnerable and marginalised young people in society (Brown et al 2019). They have significantly poorer educational outcomes, higher rates of mental health problems and risk-taking behaviour. There are key debates within the literature which suggest that this vulnerability will include the trauma that was experienced before being taken into care, the challenges inherent within the care system and the interaction between these and with other factors in the child and in the social context. Regardless of the sources of risk for a child or young person a key mitigating and strengthening factor is that of positive relationships and security.

As the Care Inquiry (2013) suggested, the core principle for the care system should be the 'golden thread' of relationships that run through the child's life. These can be relationships with the birth family, residential workers, and foster carers; individuals within the looked after childcare system such as social workers; and a range of other people in their community with whom the child might feel connections, especially friends. The 'ethic of care' (Holland, 2009) stresses that care is relational and contextual, that care receivers and care givers are interrelated and interdependent, not autonomous and distinct. As such, care is not a product but rather a process which requires compassion, sensitivity and a commitment to relationship and trust (Brown et al. 2019). Where these are present the placement can provide a secure base for young people, helping them to build trust, manage feelings, experience greater self-esteem, feel effective and develop a sense of belonging (Beek & Schofield 2014) - which in turn will enable them to make the most of opportunities and relationships in the community and in adulthood.

However, despite this clear direction within the literature, the Care Inquiry (2013) highlighted that children in care too often lost relationships with important people during their journey through the care system. The importance of relationship continuity raised by the Care inquiry has subsequently been reinforced by the success of the Lifelong Links project, led by the Family Rights Group. This project found that supporting the continuity of a young person's network of relationships, including, for example, rebuilding relationships with estranged family members or former foster carers improved outcomes in terms of the child's well-being and placement stability (Holmes et al, 2020). This model extends the idea

of permanence and a secure base in a family to include wider relationship networks that offer security and identity through into adulthood. This is an especially relevant model of practice for young people moving from residential care to foster care, who can benefit from ongoing relationships with a network that may include previous carers and residential staff, as well as building new relationships in a foster family network.

Methods

The main aim of the research was to evaluate the work of EFS by capturing the views of young people and a range of professionals in contact with the service. A second, broader aim was to understand the experience and process of making the transition from residential to foster care. The evaluation therefore focused on the following research questions:

- How do young people experience the transition from residential to foster care? What helps or hinders this transition?
- What are young peoples' views and experiences of EFS in supporting their transition from residential care to a foster home?
- What are professionals' views and experiences of the 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?

The research was approved by the Social Work Ethics Committee at University of East Anglia and the Research Governance panel at Norfolk County Council. As part of this process, the ethical issues around consent, participation, confidentiality and disclosure were carefully considered, particularly in relation to the young people and their support network. As part of the project, two interns were appointed to work on the evaluation. Two young people from Norfolk County Council's In Care Council participated in the interviews and candidate screening.

Recruitment and sampling

The EFS identified the sample of young people and professionals to be approached by the research team. Nine expressed an interest in participating in the study and were subsequently contacted by the research team. Of that nine, six agreed to participate.
Due to the small numbers of young people who had been supported from the point of referral by EFS and that were willing to participate, we agreed that the sample could include some young people supported by EFS post-transition only. We provided information to participants about the study which was tailored to their specific roles. For the young people this was presented in an accessible format and included an infographic about research. Informed consent was obtained for all participants before their interview or focus group. Young people aged 16 years or older were assumed to have capacity to give informed consent unless advised otherwise by the EFS team. For participants under 16 years old, we obtained consent from an individual with parental responsibility; in this case it was the local authority as corporate parent. In these cases, the young person was asked for their assent and this took precedence (e.g. if the young person did not agree, the interview would not take place regardless of consent from the local authority).

Data collection

The research team spoke to young people who had made the transition from residential to foster care alongside five different professional groups: foster carers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), children's social workers, residential workers and the EFS team.

Online interviews with young people

Six young people were interviewed for this evaluation. Young people's voices and experiences were key to understanding how the EFS service had supported their transition from residential to foster care. The research team produced 'funky profiles' for each of the researchers. These were single page summaries about the researchers, their hobbies interests and their role in project. These profiles were used by members of the EFS team and mirrored the profiles that young people are asked to produce for potential foster carers. The researcher funky profiles were an effective to introduce ourselves to the young people and begin to address the power differential. An initial meeting was held before

interviews to build a relationship with the young person, ensure informed consent and to offer alternative modes of participation (including the use of arts and music). For instance, after meeting with the researchers, one young person subsequently selected a series of songs to depict life in residential and foster care during the subsequent interview. Accessible research materials were also produced to ensure that young people fully understood the purpose of the research and how their experiences would be used. During the six interviews, young people were invited to share their experiences of residential and foster care and their transition. Young people provided vivid and powerful accounts of their relationships with residential and foster carers and what it meant to settle and belong in each of these spaces. They also described the differences between life in residential and foster care Further details about the experiences and background of young people supported by the EFS can be found in part one.

Online interviews with foster carers

Nine foster carers were interviewed as part of this evaluation. For the young people supported by EFS, a foster placement had been identified as beneficial. However, it was also recognised that additional support may be needed to ensure an effective transition and stable placement. The semi-structured interviews focused on foster carers' experiences of having a young person placed with them through the enhanced (EFS) service. They spoke of developing strong bonds to the young people in their care and the process of becoming a family, alongside the challenges of supporting young people who had experienced multiple moves, trauma as well as the difficulties in navigating the professional network.

Online interviews with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

Four IROs were interviewed as part of this evaluation. IROs are key to the decision-making process around young people's moves and have an important role in reviewing the young person's care plan throughout and beyond the transition process. IROs were asked about their experiences of supporting young people with the transition from residential to foster care. IROs spoke about getting to know young people and described how they often acted as a point of continuity for young people who had been through many moves. They described the challenges of finding suitable placements and the national the scarcity of foster carers.

Online interviews with the child's social worker

Six child and family social workers were interviewed as part of this evaluation. They were recruited on the basis that they had supported a young person who had made the transition from residential to foster care supported by EFS. The child's social worker plays a pivotal role in coordinating the young person's care. They were asked to share their perspectives on working with the EFS in the context of their work supporting the young person. They spoke about developing close relationships with young people and the challenges in involving young people in the decision-making process around their moves.

Online focus groups with residential workers

Two focus groups were carried out with residential workers. The focus groups consisted of eight and five workers respectively who had worked with young people who had made the transition from residential to foster care. Residential care workers (including managers, support staff and key workers) provide support to young people in the residential unit. This often included helping the young people to prepare for the transition. During the focus groups, workers were asked to a share their perspectives on the transition process and their views of the service provided by the EFS. Residential workers spoke powerfully about their close relationships with the young people in their care. Workers tended to see young people every day and had a unique insight into the young people prior to their placement. However, some felt this knowledge was not always recognised in the wider network.

Online focus group with the EFS team

In the later stages of the evaluation, NCC announced a transformation of their fostering services. This included the EFS support being distributed across the fostering service as a whole rather than as a separate team. During the 18 months of operation, the EFS team had implemented a new service model so it was felt that the learning from this would be important to inform the transformation of services. We therefore conducted a focus group with the EFS team to capture this learning before the team was dispersed in April 2022.

Analysis

The overarching methodology for the evaluation was Malterud's (2012) Systematic Text Condensation approach. This phenomenological methodology aims to present objects and processes as they are experienced by the observer – in this case, the process of moving from residential to foster care as experienced through the eyes of young people and the professionals who support them. Phenomenological approaches emphasise the need for reflexivity and the need to consciously bracket off, or temporarily suspend, judgements based on our preconceptions, in order to capture phenomena as they appear to participants. Consistent with this, the research team began with a reflective exercise (Malterud, 2012) to identify our preconceptions about residential, foster care, young people and professionals. This was particularly important given the ideological debates surrounding institutional and foster care. Compiling these assumptions allowed us to maintain a focus on our biases throughout the analysis and maintain rigour through reflexivity.

A thematic approach was taken to analysing the data using Malterud's (2012) four stages model of analysis. After reviewing the dataset as a whole the research team met to identify initial areas of enquiry (stage one). A case summary proforma was used to collect codes for each of the interviews and focus groups (stage two). To ensure rigour each interview transcript was read by at least two members of the research team and the case summaries were also created in collaboration between two team members. The research team met regularly to discuss and refine themes (stage three). During this stage, the themes were continuously checked against the assumptions identified in the reflexive exercise. The core findings were then written up as part of this report (stage four).

Part One: The young people

This part of the report provides a picture of the young people. First, demographic information is provided based on service data from the Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS). This includes referral information, ages and background of young people and their outcomes. This is followed by a description of the young people who participated in the evaluation and their perspectives on residential, foster care and the EFS.

The young people supported by the EFS

The Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) received a total of 48 referrals over the course of its operation, with the average age of referred young people being 12.67 years and an age range between 8 and 17 years. The overall referral sample included 30 males and 18 females.

Referral Outcome	**Total**
Referral not accepted to EFS (no referral meeting)	4
Referral meeting held and not accepted to EFS	4
Referral and then change of care plan for young person	13
Referral accepted, review until ready to transition	1
Referral accepted, support from EFS and change of care plan	3
Referral accepted, ongoing search for carers	3
Referral accepted, EFS develop profile and match to non-EFS carers	3
Referral accepted, moved to EFS carers	10
Referral accepted, in transition to EFS carers	2
EFS support after transition	5
Total	**48**

Table 1: Referral outcomes for the 48 young people referred to the EFS

Young people who moved to EFS foster carers

A total of 15 young people (73 % males) were supported by EFS to live in their foster home (5 of whom were supported after their move from residential care). Eight of the young people moved to live with people that they knew, e.g. from their residential home or an educational setting who were approved a foster carers in order to care for them. From the total cohort of young people who moved to EFS foster carers, 87% had been living in residential homes within Norfolk, with 67% of the young people living in independent residential homes (compared to those managed by Norfolk County Council). A total of 73% of the young people were able to remain at their same educational provision after their move to fostering.

Background information	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**	**Range**
Age	12.87	2.03	9-16 years old
Months living in the residential home before moving to fostering.	17.13	20.54	0-62
Number of moves since becoming a Looked After Child	6.6	2.61	1-13

Table 2: Additional information about the young people who moved to live with EFS carers

Out of the 15 young people who EFS supported within their foster homes, 53% had a move from the first EFS foster home they were moved to. Out of this cohort of 53% young people, 38% had not been supported by EFS prior to their transition to EFS carers.

The average number of months living with the original EFS carers before a further move was 6 months (*SD* = 3.11) with a range from 1 to 11 months. For the cohort of young people who had a move from their original EFS carers the average number of moves (including the move from EFS carers) they had was 1.5 with a range of 1-3 moves. The destinations for the cohort of young people who moved from their first EFS carers included moves to a range of

different homes: residential, semi-independent accommodation, reunification with birth family, alternative EFS carers.

For the 47% of the young people who were still living with their original EFS foster carers, the average number of months they had been living with them was 19 (*SD* = 10.31) and a range of 5 to 30 months.

Young people who participated in the evaluation

Six young people who were currently being supported by EFS participated in the evaluation. These consisted of three males and three females aged between 11 and 16 years old. The majority of the young people had had a long history in the care system, with one young person explaining they had been a looked after child since the age of two and in that time had experienced 13 placements including both residential and foster care. This pattern of frequent placement changes was discussed by five of the six participants, with them struggling to recall the details of when the moves happened and why. For three of the participants, residential care had appeared to provide a period of stability with placements lasting for 2 years, 4 years and 6 years respectively. All the young people were currently in foster placements as supported by EFS. The duration of these placements ranged between seemingly established placements of 3 years and a relatively new placement of 2 months. However, it was significant to note that all six of the participants spoke about their current foster placement with a sense of permanence, envisaging themselves living there into adulthood with no expectation of future moves.

Throughout the interviews, the young people were not always able to clearly define the process of their transition from residential care to foster care, yet all spoke in detail of their experience of both environments.

Young people's voices: the experiences of residential care

Often the young people began the interview by describing the negative aspects of the residential homes they had lived in and their desire to leave them. A consistent theme across the interviews was that the young people found the residential homes to be chaotic and noisy. For instance, one young person reflected on a typical day:

> Erm, get woken up, erm, at half five in the morning by little people shouting and screaming. Come downstairs, eat my breakfast, get shouted at some more [by the other kids]. Have a shower, watch some tv and get shouted at some more, basically. (Young Person)

Four of the young people spoke about the negative behaviours of the other young people living in the residential home, and the impact this had on their wellbeing:

> The home that I was in, the kids there were just a nightmare; they'd set fire to anything every night. Got like no sleep. Just wanted to get out of there really... Even school could tell that weren't a good place…I've got to say the best thing about it was leaving it. (Young Person)

There was a consensus that the quality of their day would be dependent on the behaviour of others, both in terms of the atmosphere within the house and the availability of the staff:

> If one of the kids kick off that obviously gives that person all the staff's attention, so none of the other kids would really get the attention or like, you know, be able to really do anything if one kid was kicking off. (Young Person)

This could impact on each aspect of the young person's day, as staff were needed to support them with everyday tasks such as entering a code on the television, or unlocking the cupboard so they could access their cables and equipment when it was their turn to use a gaming system:

> Like, at the residential home, I'm pretty sure every single door is locked. Like, if you want to get a banana, you have to go through three locked doors to get a banana. And you're hardly allowed to do anything without being supervised. You had to wait until eight o'clock to come downstairs. (Young Person)

This level of supervision also led the young people to feel that everything they did was reported and recorded in case notes which they felt was disproportionate at times. Relationships with the other young people within the residential home could also be difficult. At times personalities would clash or the young person would recall feeling frustrated by the behaviour of the other residents:

> The worse bit is like personality clashes I find. Where like some of the kids would like disagree with something and then you'd get annoyed, and then someone else would stick their nose in and then all would just go wrong. (Young Person)

It was also difficult to develop friendships due to the transient nature of some of the placements:

> You don't really want to be friends with them because you know eventually, they're all going to move and they're never going to talk to you again. It's just one of those things. So, get along with them as well as you can, I guess. (Young Person)

One young person spoke of how he thought the behaviour of the other young people would reflect negatively on him, that he would be labelled as a 'bad kid' even though he knew he was 'an alright kid' and that this would lead to him remaining in residential care. 'I didn't want like, people to think I was like them, and like, I would just be a nightmare'. The thought that he wasn't good enough to be chosen by someone to be fostered is also reflected in his later comments telling us about when he found out he was to be fostered, he didn't believe it and asked every day 'why'?

However, as the interviews progressed the young people also had good things to say about the residential home. They generally framed this around the activities they had done with the residential care staff, such as cinema trips. One of the young people who had been in residential care for over five years recalled making close relationships with fellow residents:

> Having a house full of kids can, you know, you get quite close with them and they're almost like a brother or sister to you because you're spending every single day with

> them and you build relationships with the staff and, you know, it's just it feels like kind of a happy family sometimes. (Young Person)

While no other participant spoke about the other children in residential care in such familial terms, three of the participants spoke about missing friendships that they had made within the home and two participants said that they had managed to stay in touch through school.

Four participants also spoke about the importance of the relationships they had made with the staff at the residential care home, with three of them stating they had kept in touch with staff and appreciated the occasional contact 'checking in'. This ongoing relationship with key members of staff was also highlighted by one young person who reflected in retrospect about the support they had received within residential care:

> 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)

Young people's views of their current foster placement

All of the young people that were interviewed for this study were positive about their current foster care placements. The overwhelming message was that their foster home was quieter, calmer and more relaxed:

> I'm so calm, there's literally no drama, there's, you know, no constant shouting, you know, it's actually really nice, you know. I've got my home, well, I had my own room there but, you know, got my own room. I can basically like, you know, within reason, do my own thing and it's nice to not have someone constantly writing everything single thing you do down. (Young Person)

Two of the young people noted an improvement in their sleep and a feeling that they could exercise a greater level of freedom and independence. They were able to make small day to

day decisions for themselves without negotiating with other children or waiting for staff approval:

> Here I have my stuff in my room. If I want to go on it, I can just go on it, obviously in the daytime. So it's not, I don't have to unplug anything or wait for someone else to finish. (Young Person)

> But I don't have to go through like three people to see if I could just walk, and it's really nice and, as well, being in a smaller house and not having to worry about so many things, and, you know, really nice. (Young Person)

The majority of the young people were the only children living within the foster home and noted this as a positive point for them. However, they also spoke about making good relationships with their foster carers' wider families, such as older children or grandchildren.

One young person spoke positively about their foster placement, but did not draw such distinct contrasts between residential and foster care as the other participants had. They said 'It's a little better but I don't know… I don't think it is that different. It's not' (Young Person). Throughout this interview there was a strong sense that they had felt uncomfortable with the move, that they missed the residential staff and were at an age where they were wanting to be more independent, focusing more on work and friendships than relationships within the home. Indeed, this participant found the closer (potentially more parental) relationship in foster care more intrusive than they had experienced in residential care:

> I'm in full time work so I don't need to do an apprenticeship or go to college this year… They've [residential] all left it alone but [foster carer] and that keep going on and on about it and it does my head in. (Young Person)

This sense of a more parental relationship, however, was highly valued by other participants. Three spoke of their close bond with their foster carers and their reflections on the positive aspects of their placement focused on smaller family type experiences as opposed to the activities and day trips in residential care. They spoke about valuing walks

with their foster carers, being able to make their own lunches and 'the amount of roast dinners we have'.

Interestingly, for one participant who was also in late adolescence the sense of family held a great deal of importance:

> It's great … here, there's… four other people. They all live, well, like a family, it's – there's actually a plaque on the wall in our kitchen that says, "As far as anyone knows, we're a nice, normal family." [Laughs] And it's great, it's perfect. It's been there since before I moved, and it just fits perfectly. (Young Person)

Despite their seemingly long and unstable history within the care system, all the participants appeared settled in their foster care placements with three speaking of a clear sense of permanence in their current placement. When talking about their expectations for the future one young person said that they envisaged themselves within the foster placement:

> 'till I'm about twenty five. Depends how much I annoy her and she annoys me (Young Person).

Their experiences of matching, transition, settling and looking to the future will be discussed in further detail in part two of the report.

Young people's views of the EFS

In general, the young people were not clear about the role of EFS, although they did speak positively about meeting with the EFS Assistant Practitioner on a weekly basis.

One young person felt that the support they received from their weekly meeting with the assistant practitioner was a chance to discuss concerns informally and to resolve them before they became a problem:

> And that's actually like really nice to have, just being able to talk to someone and, you know, and know that if things do go tits up living here then we can always try and work that out with (with the EFS AP) ….because in all the other foster

> placements I've been in, you know, you don't really get that help, and if things go wrong it's just kind of left to be kind of talked about between the carers and obviously me, or if it really gets that bad then maybe I'll talk to the social worker and then the social worker talk to my carers or something like that, but never really like what (the EFS AP) does. (Young Person)

One participant also spoke about the benefit of the therapy they have received through the EFS team. They reflected that it made them feel heard, understood and able to 'work through things' (Young Person). This support is key in enabling the young people to begin to piece a coherent narrative of themselves together.

Young People's advice to others

The reluctance to reflect on their experiences of moving between placements was illustrated by many of the young people at the end of the interviews when they were asked if they had any advice for other young people. Three of the young people felt that they could not give any advice as each person's situation is different, while two advised other young people to not worry about moving between placements:

> I guess just don't make it out to be much of a big deal because it really isn't. In the end, it's normally going to work out and if it doesn't, there's always opportunities in the future. That's basically what it is. (Young Person)

In terms of advice for the professionals the key messages were to be patient with the young people, involve them in the decisions regarding the transition between placements and be mindful of their emotional needs.

Part Two: The journey from residential to foster care

This part of the report describes young people's journey from residential to foster care. It explores the process from the perspective of young people and the professionals who support them. Four stages are identified in the young people's journey:

1. Assessing readiness
2. Matching
3. Making the transition
4. Settling into the placement

These stages form the structure of the following four chapters. Each chapter describes the key features, the views of professionals, the role of the Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) and the experiences of the young people in relation to each stage of the journey. Areas of similarity and difference between young people's and professionals' perspectives are explored, as well as between the professional groups involved in the young person's care. These different perspectives are used to identify opportunities to increase professionals' understanding of young people's experiences and improve inter-professional working around young people's transitions. Each stage concludes with implications for practice around supporting young people's transitions.

Stage 1: Assessing readiness

The first stage in the process for most young people was assessing whether they were ready to leave residential care. Professionals needed to carefully consider how to involve young people in discussions about potential moves to foster care, while minimising the anxiety and destabilising effect that such discussions could have. This chapter outlines how professionals, including the EFS assessed readiness. This is contrasted with the views of young people on this stage of their journey. The chapter concludes with the implications for practice in relation to the assessment of readiness.

Professionals' assessment of young people's readiness for transition

Discussions about moving a young person from residential care were initiated as a response to NCC's aim to move young people from residential to foster placement (where it was in the young person's best interests to do so). Conversations about potential moves were also prompted by professionals observing what they described as period of 'settled behaviour' on the part of the young person. Professionals in the study were strongly motivated to involve young people in decisions about their care. However, there was a recognition that ascertaining young people's views about moving from residential care was a sensitive area. Whether and how to involve young people in assessments of readiness was a key dilemma for professionals.

Involving young people in assessments of readiness

Professionals spoke about the need to ascertain the young person's views on leaving residential care. Professionals regarded young people's wishes as key:

> I put a lot of trust in the young people. They're the ones who have got to be ready for me. (Independent Reviewing Officer)

Where professionals had a long-standing relationship with the young person, discussions about moving to foster care could arise naturally in the context of general conversations about the future and the young person's aspirations. Some IROs, for instance, had supported young people through a number of moves. Within these

established relationships, professionals said it was the young people themselves who often raised the issue of moving. In other cases, the potential for moving was raised with young people by professionals. The timing of these conversations was highly significant in terms of young people's wellbeing. As described in Part One, many young people expressed a strong desire to leave residential care so conversations about hypothetical moves were often welcome. However, many had also experienced a number of crisis moves and prior placement breakdowns. So, even where the young person wanted to move to foster care, discussions about potential moves could be unsettling. In some cases, the anxiety about the prospect of a future move could be so destabilising that it could cause the current residential placement to break down. For instance, one social worker described how raising the possibility of a move with a young person had caused great distress and

> … caused some really high-end behaviours around their anxiety and the uncertainty about what was going to happen. So then there ended up being this huge incident in placement, then they had to move to another residential placement (Child's Social Worker)

Residential staff described several occasions where they felt that conversations about moving to foster care happened 'too early' or in an unplanned way. In some instances, the child's social worker had visited to talk to the young person about the possibility of a move which had appeared to go well. However, after the visit residential staff noticed changes in the young person's behaviour; they could become unsettled or in some cases quite distressed requiring residential support staff to 'pick up the pieces'. Residential staff spoke favourably of occasions where the child's social worker liaised with them in advance of the visit. This enabled them to anticipate any questions and support the young person might need after the conversation. Discussion between the residential unit and the child's social worker prior to initiating discussions about moves was also helpful in getting the timing of the conversation right for the young person; the residential unit could provide helpful information about how the young person was doing and whether it was a good time to initiate a discussion about moving. Dialogue between the social worker and residential unit after a visit was also useful. Residential workers could provide helpful information to assist

the assessment of readiness – the young person's behaviour in the unit following the discussion with their social worker was an important source of information about how the young person was feeling about the possibility of a move, which in some cases could differ from the views shared with their social worker.

For some young people, discussions about readiness to move were not explicitly initiated until a match had been found (see stage two - 'matching') as it was viewed that this would be detrimental to the young person's wellbeing. Here, professionals' knowledge of the young person was key. Understanding their prior history of moves, current experiences and daily life could help professionals to gauge how the young person might respond to the possibility of moving being raised. In some cases, initiating the discussion too early could create uncertainty for young people. It was often difficult to find a placement which would meet the young person's needs, so there was a risk that initiating conversations could lead to 'false hope' and for the young person. For this reason, some social workers did not raise the possibility until they were able to present the options available:

> for one of my young people it was once we found the match because we didn't want to upset things too early without giving her concrete answers. (Child's Social Worker)

In many cases, professionals wanted to avoid disrupting a child who was settled in residential care after a long period of instability. For this reason, assessing readiness was often a process that happened behind the scenes, between professionals. In such cases, professionals avoided asking directly and instead gauge young people's readiness to leave residential care in other ways – particularly by drawing on the young person's behaviour.

Professionals' assessments of readiness

A key question for professionals was how to determine whether a young person was ready to leave residential care for a foster placement and whether this would be a sustainable option. In the absence of a clear evidence-base, professionals used their working knowledge of attachment, expertise of working with young people and other psychological and behavioural indicators to assess readiness:

> *Currently, there's not an exact science around it. It's... looking at a period of time of behaviour... whether they have been able to access therapy and... move through those things, whether they're happy to engage in a bit of life story work and what are their risk-taking behaviours that would affect a foster placement... is there any CSE? is there any missing from care?... using a relationship instead of behavioural disruption for signalling need...* (Residential Worker, focus group)

In practice, professionals regarded the young people's behaviour as an important indicator of readiness to move:

> show us through either what he says or how he's behaving that actually, you know 'yes I'm ready' or 'no, I'm not ready' (Independent Reviewing Officer)

Professionals identified the following as indicators that young people were ready to move:

- A period of 'settled behaviour' and stability within the residential unit
- Ability to sustain relationships with key workers over time
- Ability to seek out and accept support from others
- Tendency to talk through difficulties with others, rather than enacting difficult feelings through challenging (e.g. violent) behaviour
- Ability to cope with some self-directed or unstructured time during the day, especially during the evenings
- Willingness to think about the impact of past experience on the present (i.e. engaging in life story work

The ability to manage unstructured time was regarded as a key indicator that the young person would be able to adapt to a foster placement. Foster carers' homes typically had a less 'structured' routine compared to the residential unit which offered a number of structured activities and typically had a greater number of people present to support the young person at any given time. Young people needed to be able to manage short periods of self-directed activity since in foster placement they would typically have one or two carers available at any given time who might also be engaged in other tasks, such as cooking an evening meal for instance.

The young person's 'ability to use relationships' in times of stress rather than using 'behavioural disruption for signalling need' (Residential Worker) was regarded by professionals as particularly important. Where young people were able to accept and seek support to talk through difficulties rather than 'acting out' their feelings this was viewed as a positive indicator that the young person would be able to manage within a foster placement. For some professionals, progress towards readiness was measured by the frequency of challenging behaviour: 'how big are the gaps, are they getting bigger between each incident? A prolonged period of settled behaviour was generally viewed a good indicator that the young person would be able to manage in a foster placement.
While professionals also recognised that a period of settled behaviour was an indicator of readiness, they also acknowledged that it could be difficult to show settled behaviour in residential care:

> [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)

As described in Part One, the residential unit could be a volatile environment. This could place young people at a disadvantage in terms of demonstrating that they were ready to move to foster care. Indicators that might suggest the young person wasn't ready to leave residential care (such as acting out, challenging behaviours) could instead be a direct response to the sometimes-chaotic environment of the residential unit. Waiting for a period of stability could place young people in a double-bind - therefore delay what might be a positive move for the young person:

> And then it was saying... we can't progress this because they need a period of stability. But what we were saying is, actually, we'd like to move them on because we think it's the anxiety that's making them feel this way, and, actually, that's just going to continue in this placement (Child's Social Worker)

Many professionals identified that residential care was simply not the right environment for some young people who needed foster care to be settled:

> not a residential child, some children are. They adapt to residential, but he couldn't live in residential, he found it too stressful (Foster Carer)

When assessing readiness to move, an in-depth knowledge of the young person's life, daily experience and key relationships was therefore important. A key message from the residential worker focus groups was that often the indicators of progress - such as improved school attendance, improved relationships with birth parents etc. - might mask the fact that the young person might be struggling behind closed doors. Managing challenges in one area of life could have a cost – the young person might cope at school and yet need intensive support from multiple residential workers in the unit. It is therefore important for that information from those involved in the young person's everyday life, such as residential workers, to be considered in the assessment of readiness.

Ideological factors affecting the assessment of readiness

In practice, ideological factors about residential care and family life coloured the assessment of readiness. Many residential workers, IROs and foster carers expressed the view that for young people, being in a foster placement was inherently preferable to being in a residential unit. This was treated as a self-evident fact by many professionals:

> the benefits are obvious, that they will live in a family house and... it's a better environment... There is different dynamic, different kind of support (Independent Reviewing Officer)

Foster care was often viewed by professionals as the opportunity for the young person to be part of a family. Ideas around young people as being 'deserving' of a family were frequently expressed by professionals working with young people:

> we feel really strongly that our children deserve that family unit where they can be **claimed** and be loved by one or two people and you know and really start to thrive within a family environment. (Residential worker, Focus Group)

While this view was shared by many young people, this was not the case for all. For instance, some young people felt they already had a family, whether through relationships

in the residential home or with their birth family. For instance, one social worker described how a young person was 'probably ready' for a foster placement about 2.5. years into a four-year period spent in residential care. However, the young person did not want to move because they were settled and had a very close and important relationship with their residential key worker. In such cases, the assumption that the young person would 'progress' to foster care could be unhelpful. In fact, residential care provided a responsive, positive home for many young people:

> I have another child who has just now moved into a residential placement from foster care... It's absolutely amazing for her, it's exactly what she needs, that turnaround from staff in terms of they can go home and rest and recuperate and come back, is what she needs in a carer... that kind of constant one-to-one attention... can be much more manageable in a residential placement at times than a foster. (Child's Social Worker)

Workers emphasised the additional support residential staff could provide to young people who came in 'refreshed from a night off, rather than foster carers who can't take a break' (Children's Social Worker). The idea that foster care is the best care option for all children may be related to ideological ideas and monetary considerations around residential and foster care – reflective of wider discourses around deinstitutionalisation and the risks of institutional care. Some professionals in the study challenged the fundamental assumption that moving from residential to foster care *should* be a goal for all young people since this fails to take into account the needs of individual young people. For instance, one residential worker stated '...not all children are 'foster shaped' (Residential Worker, Focus Group) Some professionals were concerned that the idea of residential care as a 'second best' option could create pressure to move young people to foster care when this might not be in their best interests. For instance, one social worker described:

> we had the push of getting young people out of residential... we had the panel meetings I used to get summoned to all the time because I had quite a lot in residential at one point. And yeah, the push – I just worry that that push gets

> some social workers in a panic, and decisions are made that aren't right. (Children's Social Worker)

The role of the EFS in assessing readiness

The EFS played a key role in assessing whether young people were ready to make the transition from residential to foster care. On referral, the EFS held meetings with the professional network, typically including Independent Reviewing Officer, the child's social worker and residential unit to consider the young person's circumstances and the suitability of foster care. These meetings played an important role in gaining a picture of the young person's prior and current situation. Professionals involved in these meetings identified them as an important and useful opportunity to reflect as a network on the young person's experiences and needs from a range of perspectives. They particularly valued the role of EFS in facilitating a reflective discussion among the network:

> We would put in a request for a consultation with the Enhanced Fostering Team, and they would help us - usually it's with the team manager - they would help us to think about whether or not the child, or young person, is ready for that transition. And if we all agree that they are, that's when the decision would be made that the Enhanced Fostering Team would come onboard (Child's Social Worker)

These meetings could also highlight a need to collect further information about readiness, or to ascertain the young people's wishes and feelings about the future. In many cases, young people had ambivalent feelings about moving or felt a longing to be part of a foster family. These moves were high-stakes for young people with psychological risks if they broke down. It was therefore important to get the assessment of readiness right to avoid causing further disruption to young people. Residential workers in particular highlighted that the general drive to move young people out of residential care could risk overlooking the needs of some young people. Thorough and detailed assessment of readiness could therefore prevent young people being 'rushed' into foster placement inappropriately, preventing future breakdown. EFS undertook detailed and bespoke pieces of work with several young people as part of the assessment of readiness. In some cases, this helped to

press pause on some transitions that might have otherwise been carried out in an unplanned way. As one EFS team member described:

> I can think of a couple of mine where we thought they were ready and they weren't, they really weren't. And it was the significant amount of work... the six to eight months work with them... in the end, it wasn't the right thing for them to do and so they didn't move on. If I wouldn't have been able to have done that, we may have had another breakdown if I hadn't have built those relationships up with those young people. (Enhanced Fostering Team member)

In some instances, however, EFS were not involved in early planning discussions and joined the professional network after decisions about young people's transitions had been made, or where a carer had put themselves forward. In these cases, it could be more difficult for the assessment of readiness to include a psychological formulation of the young person and their needs.

1.3 Young people's views on readiness

Despite the commitment discussed by professionals across the board with regards to holding the young person's wishes as key, few of the young people involved in this study were able to recall being involved in conversations about the prospect of moving from residential to foster care or a point in time where they felt 'ready'. This could be indicative of the care that professionals take to have these explorative conversations in a gentle manner and the additional markers that they used to assess a young person's readiness such as behavioural clues and the observations of residential staff. For young people with experience of multiple moves and placement breakdowns there is the possibility that they have generally lacked a sense of agency in decision-making and as such find it difficult to psychologically engage with the process of planning for the future specifically with regards to their living arrangements.

There is also potential for a differing of perspectives between professionals and young people. This was demonstrated by one young person who had a different view of why they were being moved to the reason that professionals gave them:

> 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)

When asked how they felt about being moved, they answered:

> I was a bit half and half, like obviously I thought it was a good thing, but obviously I still had that worry about where they were going to move me, like it could have been out of county, it could have been anywhere, but I guess I'm just happy they've moved me with (Foster carer) really. (Young Person)

This response echoed the sense of ambivalence and lack of agency that many of the young people expressed about their placements and moves. They presented a passive acceptance that the decisions that were made were beyond their control, which had been their previous experience.

Only one young person within the cohort spoke of taking an active role in working towards the move from residential to foster care. They recalled 'doing a deal' (Young Person) in that their social worker would look for a foster placement for them if they agreed to go to therapy. This young person had spent less than a year in residential care and was clear from the beginning that it was not an environment they enjoyed. Similarly, another young person, while not so active in driving the process to move forward, recalled feeling like the professionals around them did not want them to be in residential care 'I think they just wanted to get me out of the cos they thought it was not right for me' (Young Person) and that they felt that being seen as a 'residential kid' held negative connotations. 'I didn't want like, people to think I was like them, and like, I would just be a nightmare' (Young Person). This sense of some young people fitting with one placement type over another is echoed in the professionals' data, along with the implicit value messages that underpin the understanding of these differences.

Two young people described the decision to move them from relatively lengthy and apparently stable residential placements as being precipitated by service needs. Either by other children moving into the residential home and 'changing the dynamic', returning to a placement closer to the sponsoring local authority or by the young person reaching an age where it was no longer considered appropriate for them to remain in the residential home with younger children.

In one case the young person felt that because of the lack of service flexibility around their age they were pressured into a move they did not feel prepared for:

> I was supposed to be doing semi-independent living … but obviously being a 16 years old I am not ready for that… so after repeatedly saying I don't want to do this … I'm just not ready, everyone just kept pushing and pushing after I just kept saying no … then they all started getting really arsey with me. So, then they were just like we can't keep you here anymore if you're not going to try and I did try but apparently my trying wasn't good enough. (Young Person)

Through the support of EFS a foster placement was found that could offer the level of support that the young person required. The young person expressed how appreciative they were of this but wished that the professionals had believed them from the start about not feeling ready rather than them feeling 'pushed out' of residential care and having a further placement fail before the foster placement was secured.

It is clear that there is a delicate balance to be maintained between allowing a young person to feel settled in their placement and focus on the present, while at the same time considering the future and assessing their potential readiness for a move to foster care. With multiple placements the young people appeared to psychologically protect themselves by quickly forgetting about past placements and not looking too far ahead in the future. While considerations and conversations about readiness to move need to be managed carefully to avoid negative consequences such as raised hopes or behavioural disruption, it also needs to be discussed with the young person in a manner which enables them reflect

on and clearly express their feelings. As noted by the EFS, team this is a piece of work that could take many months but carried with it significant benefits in terms of building the young person's confidence and sense of agency in the process which may subsequently reduce the potential of future placement breakdown.

1.4 Implications for assessing readiness

The timing of discussion about the potential of moving from residential care to foster care is key. This assessment of readiness and the subsequent conversations are enhanced when the whole professional team around the young person work together, involving residential care workers particularly provided a valuable opportunity to contextualise a young person's readiness and to support the young person following the conversation.

Professionals draw on a range of behavioural indicators to gauge readiness. These include both emotional factors such as the young person's ability to engage in self-reflection, emotional regulation and use relationships appropriately and practical skills such as being able to manage their time and daily living skills without additional staff support. Professionals were also mindful that a young person's behaviour may be attributable to other factors. A detailed knowledge and understanding of each young person is key for interpreting their behaviour in an accurate manner.

The ideological preference for a 'family life' was shared by the majority of professional participants, however this could falsely suggest that foster care was always preferable to residential care and therefore should be the goal for all young people. While young people were aware of this preference for foster care, they questioned this more than the professionals. Some young people spoke about the stability their residential placements had offered them and how much they valued their relationships with other young people and staff.

The involvement of EFS at the assessing readiness stage kept the focus on the individual needs and aspirations of the young person and in some cases slowed the process down

which improved the professional collaborative working and increased participation with the young people.

The young people gave less indication in their accounts of being involved, or even aware that their readiness was being assessed. This could be indicative of the manner in which the conversations were being held with the young people, or the lack of agency they attribute to themselves in this process. Having all faced several moves in the past that they had not anticipated, they appeared to take a passive role in the process.

- It is important to challenge assumptions that foster care is preferable to residential care for all young people. For some young people residential care is a desirable option that should not be seen as second best.
- Young people's behavioural indicators of readiness, such as the ability to use relationships with others, a period of settled behaviour and the ability to manage unscheduled time may be important for considering how they will manage in foster care. However, it is equally important not to place young people in a double-bind of waiting for a period of settled behaviour before moving, when it is the residential environment itself which may be contributing to the behavioural disturbance.
- Many young people in residential care have experienced numerous moves, uncertainty and instability through the course of their lives. It is therefore important for professionals to consider the impact, timing and way of introducing the possibility of another move
- Conversations about potential moves are more likely to be successful in the context of good relationships between young people and professionals that are developed over time. Liaison between the residential unit and the child's social worker is important in determining the timing about discussions around moves as well as supporting young people to think through and manage these discussions

Stage two: Matching

After assessing readiness, the next step was finding a suitable foster placement for the young person. This chapter describes the matching process from the perspective of both professionals and young people. While some foster carers were previously unknown to the young person, other foster carers supported by the EFS had a prior professional connection with the young person. This route is unusual in foster care and had both strengths and challenges in terms of the match. The chapter will conclude with recommendations to support effective foster care matches for young people leaving residential care.

2.1 Professionals' perspectives on the matching process

Nine foster carers were interviewed as part of this evaluation. Of these, six had a prior connection with the young person while three did not know the young person prior to the match. Of the six foster carers with a prior connection with the young person, four were residential workers who had supported the young person in the unit and two worked in an educational setting where they had a relationship with the young person. It was interesting to note while three of the foster carers were unknown to the young person, two of the three had prior experience working with other young people in residential settings. While there were some similarities, the matching process was different depending on whether the foster carer had a prior relationship with the young person. These two routes are therefore explored separately.

Matching where the carer was unknown to the young person prior to placement

During the interviews, foster carers vividly recalled the moment where they saw the young person's profile:

> when I read B's profile, I just [pause] you know! I'd turned a few down before that, but when I read (YP) she just, I don't know, her profile just shone through! (Foster Carer)

Identifying the young person involved a process we have termed 'psychological matching' - foster carers talked about 'seeing something' in the young person's profile and feeling a

sense of connection to them. For instance, one foster carer described strongly identifying with a young person when she read about her career aspirations which matched her own professional background. However, finding a match for young people leaving residential care was identified by several Independent Reviewing Officers and social workers as a real challenge. Firstly, there was a lack of foster carers at a local and national level which influenced decision-making around matching. As one social worker identified, there was a subtle change in emphasis from *is this the right match?* to *can we make this work?*

> One of the biggest things has been just the simple sufficiency issues that we've had with foster placements... And I think that means really is a lot of the time the focus is on what support does any given foster carer need in order to make this work, as opposed to matching a child with a foster carer skillset. (Child's Social Worker)

A second challenge related specifically to finding placements for young people leaving residential care. Young people in residential care are more likely to have experienced multiple placement moves and breakdowns. These young people often required an enhanced level of support from their foster carer, but it could be difficult to recruit foster carers with the suitable skills and experience to provide this support. Several children's social workers gave examples of a young person assessed as ready to leave residential care, but there were no suitable matches for them. Potential foster carers could also be deterred by a history of placement breakdowns.

The young person's profile was important as it was the first impression that their potential foster carer had of them. Providing a vivid pen picture of the young person, including their interests, hopes and personality was important to allow foster carers to begin to develop a sense of connection. However, social workers identified that young people leaving residential care could be disadvantaged 'on paper' as they had often had many placement breakdowns and moves which could discourage some prospective foster carers. This, combined with the general shortage of foster carers, could raise significant ethical dilemmas for social workers who identified an uncomfortable element of competition for foster placements:

> You're limited with the amount of carers you've got... I find – which is awful because it sounds like you're trying to sell them. How I present the children on paper, that is the most important thing. I think you have to be honest... behaviours haven't been acknowledged and that's caused a lot of problems and another breakdown placement for a child, another rejection... If you don't get the right picture of that child, you're not going to get the right carers. (Child's Social Worker)

The challenge therefore was to generate profiles which conveyed the young people's unique personalities, skills and attributes, yet also provided sufficient information about the young person's prior experiences and current support needs. This balance was difficult to get right, and several foster carers in this research felt that important information (such as the reasons for previous placements breaking down) were not disclosed to them at the matching stage. Of the three carers who put themselves forward as a result of reading the profiles, two had prior professional experience of working in a residential unit. As a result of their background, these foster carers were able to recognise that some of the 'challenging' behaviours described on the profile were a result of the environment the young person was in. They already had experience of supporting young people with similar backgrounds which meant they were more able to 'read between the lines' of the profile and see the young person, not just a list of 'behaviours'.

A recurrent theme from residential workers was the fact that they were not sufficiently engaged by the wider professional network as part of this process. As stated in the previous chapter, residential workers supported young people in their everyday lives and therefore were uniquely positioned to understand their everyday needs, routines and areas where the young person might need additional support. For instance, residential workers cautioned that some proxies for readiness (such as improved school attendance) might not accurately reflect the young person's daily support needs. One residential worker gave an example of a young person who needed significant emotional support in the unit. The young person was able to access the support they needed through relationships with several different workers within the residential unit. As a result of this round the clock support the young person was able to stay calm, focused and navigate daily challenges that would previously have led to violent behaviour. In view of the young person's progress the wider professional network

took the decision that they would be matched with a single foster carer – a decision which greatly concerned residential staff who were aware of the level of team support the young person needed. Residential workers were keen that they were involved in the discussions about matching, identifying a need for all professionals to share their knowledge in relation to matching decisions. Where there were concerns during the matching process, dialogue between foster carer and residential units could be very helpful in resolving these. As one foster carer described:

> I don't think the residential unit... did think he was ready initially... They felt he wasn't ready, the social work team around him did. I have subsequently been told by the manager of the residential unit... that she was really concerned but when she met us as a couple she thought we'd be able to work with him. So, I know there was a bit of dynamics going on behind the scenes (Foster Carer)

Opportunities for foster carers and residential workers to meet, such as in this case, could give foster carers a clear sense of the young person's daily life, helping to get all professionals on board to support the match, sharing support strategies with foster carers. This is a similar process to the relationship building between current and future caregivers, as well as information exchange, recommended in the UEA Moving to Adoption Model (Beek et al, 2021; https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk/)

Matches where the carer and child had an existing relationship

Six out of nine foster carers interviewed already knew the young person as a result of supporting them in a different setting, which included education and residential care. This group had not previously been foster carers and had typically not intended to put themselves forward as a foster carer for the young person, but this happened organically as part of their other role:

> Basically, I work in residential care. The plan wasn't to become a foster carer, but through my job in residential I met C and, yes, 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)

For foster carers working with the child there was a process of psychological matching or bonding; as the young person's teacher or support worker they got to know the young person well and as a result they developed an affection and identification with the young person who they began to consider as family:

> We've got such a good relationship, and she'd looked up to me at that point as a mother figure anyway… It's a shame you haven't got a spare room, oh I have. Oh, well there we go. And then it all just snowballed really quickly. (Foster Carer)

Previous experience of supporting the young person through a difficult time could create a strong bond, which led the carer to feel that they had a special insight into the young person's needs. In some cases, they felt that they were the only person who understood them:

> [Young Person] was going through this time of real difficulty. I spent a lot of time with him calming him down and keeping him calm, and that worked. I got commented on a couple of times, 'We don't know how you do it, what do you do to keep this boy calm?' and I didn't do nothing really, I just kept him close and we just bonded that way I think. (Foster Carer)

This bond led to a strong moral imperative to protect the young person from harm. Several foster carers described how a sudden change or crisis in the young person's circumstances catalysed their decision to put themselves forward as a match. For instance, one support worker described how they were motivated to care for a young person to prevent a planned move which they believed would be disastrous for them. Another described how the young person was asked to leave his existing residential home which led him to intervene:

> His notice was served because of something he did. I see in him something. This little boy will get lost in the system and I enquired about taking this little boy into our care and that all moved forward and he came into our care... I explained all that to my wife and other daughter and I said 'Look, if you're not happy doing this, then we won't do it but it's something I feel I *need* to do. (Foster Carer)

Foster carers began to see that the young person was being disadvantaged by being in the residential home and some felt a need to rescue the young person from what they perceived as a harmful situation:

> I've seen the YP develop over the years and it used to break my heart, sending him back to the children's home... it just wasn't the right place for him. Children's homes are meant to be for [the] short-term but he was there years and it literally broke my heart to send him back there... So I decided that I would foster him. It breaks my heart... I'd come home and be quite visibly upset knowing that I was sending him back to the children's home where everything was just awful for him. (Foster Carer)

This route could be considered matching with a connected person foster carer. As these matches happened organically, professionals needed to create new procedures and pathways to support these matches:

> I was like a connected carer. I worked with him so he knew me... so I said that I would like to foster that child and that was a case of, okay we've not had this before, what route do we go down? So, then the assessment began quite quickly... (Foster Carer)

In some cases, the prior relationship between the young person and their carer could strengthen the match. Professionals described how young people could have a sense of security and belonging from being placed with someone who knew them and what they needed in a way that might not be possible with a foster carer previously unknown to the child:

> That she's been telling us for all this time that she does now want to move and that she feels ready and that we almost made that happen for her with someone who she knows and who gives her a level of comfort... I'm going to someone who does know me and knows how I work... (Child Social Worker)

However, while this prior connection was a powerful motivator and facilitator of relationship between the young person and foster carer, it could also involve dynamics of projection or a need to rescue. For instance, in relation to a placement that broke down, one foster carer retrospectively recognised that she had projected a great deal onto the young person:

> I latched onto the fact that this [young person] said that [they] wanted to be a [professional]... [They] seemed to have high expectations. That was my failing... I latched onto that and I thought I could help [them]. Other people warned me against the match but I didn't listen to them. In hindsight the match was too complex for me […] I didn't want to look at any other profiles, I was fixated on this young person because I felt I could help [them]. My social worker was opposed... The home, [they were] in residential, they were opposed to the match, but I don't think I knew that until after the match was made. (Foster Carer)

In this case, the placement broke down when the young person did not respond in the way that the foster carer had envisaged. Similarly, in another case, the foster carer described how she had expected the young person to fit into her family because she knew her so well. However, the placement was shaken by the young person's ongoing difficulties and complete dependence on the foster carer which she found overwhelming.

2.2 Professionals' perspectives on involving the young person in the matching process

Telling the young person that a match had been found was an emotionally significant moment which required careful consideration. Young people were often told by their social workers that a match had been found. This was effective where the social worker had a close relationship with the young person. However, it was often felt that this news could be more effectively delivered by a residential worker or, where the carer was known to the young person or where the future foster carer already had a relationship, by the foster carer themselves. The timing was important. Professionals wished to involve young people in the discussion about potential matches but acknowledged that this could understandably create anxiety for young people. For instance, one Independent Reviewing Officer described a case

where the young person was told that a potential match had been found, but the wait for arrangements to be confirmed contributed to her sense of ambivalence:

> the length of time that that's taken... that feels very wobbly for her at times. Because she's thinking 'Yeah, I do want to have a foster placement', 'Mmm no, I don't, I'm going to stay here... The length of time... leaves her questioning whether it's the right thing for her. (Independent Reviewing Officer)

For this reason, professionals sometimes waited to tell young people about the match until the move was imminent:

> Because of the way he presents they didn't tell him he was moving until they really had to. Normally you would tell a child that they were moving at the end of the month [but] because this little boy was so preoccupied with causing trouble and being violent they told him in a shorter time... to stop him from getting dysregulated from all the emotional upheaval of leaving the home and he left the home on quite a nice footing. (Foster Carer)

Other professionals described how sometimes the desire to protect a child from the stress associated with a possible change or news of a potential match could actually get in the way of the young person being able to take a degree of ownership of the process:

> What we'd tended to do was... protect a child from what's happening, find a match, and then tell them this is what's happening... What I learnt was actually a lot of that is based on our fear as adults about how that child's going to react, whether they'll be able to manage the uncertainty, and equally, whether the residential home will still be able to hold them when we're increasing the risk of their behaviours and needs escalating... But actually, what we saw this time around was that we were really able to involve the young person in that process; she was able to contribute to her matching form, so we knew that her exact wishes were in that matching form... [we] were able to update her about what kind of steps we were taking... I think that probably played a really big role in her feeling able to then have a transition, to meet

> the foster carer for the first time, so it was almost as if – and she also had an opportunity to psychologically prepare for the goodbyes in a way that children haven't done otherwise.... (Child's Social Worker)

2.2. The role of the EFS in the matching process

The EFS played an important role in the matching process, addressing a gap in current service provision. Several professionals observed that ordinarily, young people who had been assessed as ready to move to foster care could be 'left in limbo' waiting for a match to be found. However, EFS were able to support the young person during this time as well as draw on the knowledge of the professional network to identify a suitable match. For instance, one Independent Reviewing Officer spoke positively of EFS meeting with the young person to update them about the progress with the search. This enabled the young person to feel that they were being kept in mind even where the matching process was lengthy. Other professionals, such as the young person's social worker, identified that the reflective discussions with EFS around matching were particularly helpful for teasing out their needs in a prospective foster placement and considering how to broach discussions around matching with the young person:

> I had the initial discussion with the manager of the enhanced fostering team, and we discussed what the worries were and we came up with a plan... We were really open and honest and that's what the young person needed. (Child's Social Worker)

Where an adult within the young person's existing network expressed a wish to foster the young person, EFS also worked alongside the prospective carer to assist them in becoming registered to foster.

In response to service need, the EFS also supported a cohort of young people and foster carers without being involved in the assessment of readiness or the matching process. In these cases, it could be difficult to retrospectively support a match where the strengths and potential difficulties had not been fully considered during the planning stages. As described in this chapter, these matches tended to occur organically within the residential or educational setting and had often gathered momentum before they were identified as

benefitting from enhanced support. In a minority of cases, foster carers felt they as they knew the child best, they did not understand the need for additional support and it could therefore be difficult for them to receive advice on supporting the young person. While many connected matches were highly successful, some broke down or were at risk of breaking down at the time of interview. In such cases, greater time to unpick the motivations and suitability of the match would have been helpful. For instance, one foster carer retrospectively acknowledged that greater discussion of the young person's history and their ability to meet the young person's needs would have been helpful during the matching process. In these cases, it would have been beneficial for EFS to be involved at an earlier stage before discussion with the young person, to inform the matching process.

2.3 Young people's perspectives on being matched with a foster carer

Three of the young people interviewed were matched with a foster carer who had previously been unknown to them; for the other three young people interviewed this was a carer with whom they already had a connection.

When speaking about the matching process there were distinct differences between the three young people who previously knew their prospective foster care and the three that did not. For those who did not know their foster carer, they did not go into detail about the initial matching process. Instead, they portrayed their experience of discussing a potential match with a sense of ambivalence and caution. This seemed to mirror the way they felt it had been presented to them by the social worker, as an add on at the end of a routine meeting:

> And then she was like, "Oh, I need to show you this snap profile," and I was like, "Oh, OK." And then I just saw (foster carer) and I was like, OK... so it wasn't anything special. (Young Person)

As discussed by the professionals this could be a protective measure of not wanting to raise the young person's hopes and/or destabilise their behaviour. From the young person's perspective it was also related to the distance they felt from the decision; whilst they have the option to say no, they are not the ones doing the choosing but are instead the ones in a selection to be chosen from.

In contrast, one participant recalled taking an active role in the matching process and felt like they had been empowered by the professionals around them to take an active role in the decision making:

> It was one of those things, you're going to meet them, see if you like them, if you want to move in, yes, you can. If you don't, then just tell us, we can try and make it somewhere different. And, yeah, I feel like they definitely were lenient with letting me make the decisions, which considering I was young was pretty good, to be honest. It felt like I was the king. (Young Person)

The young person's sense of agency in this situation was possibly greater because the transition from residential care to foster care was a planned move to bring the young person back into the local authority, rather than because of a placement breakdown or any behavioural issues. The young person had spent over five years in a settled residential placement and was older, which might have helped them psychologically and cognitively engage with the process in a meaningful way. However, even with this positive approach to engagement they were still mindful that their choices were limited and that in the end there was no way to be certain that a match would be successful.

For the young people who knew their potential foster carers before they were matched, there was much more emotional significance and an increased sense of certainty about the prospective placement. One young person described their foster carer as 'waiting in the wings' for them. Another young person recalled the moment they were told about their match to a residential worker that was known to them, with the clarity that was suggestive of a life changing moment:

> 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)

Their foster carer (FC) was present in the interview with the young person (YP) and they had a further conversation about feeling chosen:

FC – You asked me for weeks, why me?
YP – Yeah
FC -And you can't recall my answer, that I answered you a million times! (laughter)
'cos I felt that you deserved the opportunity
YP – (grins and touches FC arm) OK, I'll ask you again tomorrow
FC – (laughs) You probably will (Young Person)

This sense of being chosen was key to the young person and they took pleasure from repeating the question. With each time that they asked the question it seemed that they strengthened the bond between the foster carer and themselves, centring it on their relationship and being chosen as opposed to service level decisions or resource management.

2.4 Implications for matching

When there is an existing relationship between the young person and the foster carer there is a process of psychological matching that occurs which needs to be identified and explored. Reflection on this psychological process for prospective foster carers is key in establishing a relationship that is founded in realistic understanding and expectations. Residential workers were keen to take a more active part in the matching process and felt that they were uniquely placed to articulate and contextualise the child's needs.
One of the key differences for the young people who had an existing relationship with their prospective foster care is that for some they were able to take a more active role in the matching process. Two foster carers recalled being asked by the young people (in a

tentative way) if they had a spare room. Connections with known individuals were also prompted by points of crisis and/or transition for the young person, this pathway into foster care had commonalities with that of kinship care. This central tenet of the relationship strengthens the bond for the majority of foster cares and the young people, however there was also a sense of heightened risk if that bond falters. This heightened risk was evident in the young person's narratives with a sense of being chosen or claimed, rather than placed. By nature of the way that they understood the relationship, if the match failed it could be attributed to a fault in themselves as opposed to a fault in the placement.

- During the matching process it is important to explore foster carers motivations for offering a placement for the young person, particularly in the context of an existing relationship.
- Sometimes a desire to 'protect' young people can prevent meaningful participation in the matching process, professionals must maintain a focus on young people's participation where possible.
- Residential staff have a unique understanding of young people's everyday lives and needs, it is therefore important for them to involved in the matching process and attend care planning meetings
- How, when and by whom the young person is told about a potential match requires careful consideration. For many young people, the moment they were told about their match was an important part of their story and a significant moment in their life

Stage 3: Making the transition

Once matched with a foster carer, there was typically a period of transition between the young person leaving residential care and moving into the foster placement. Getting this transition period right provided a foundation for the later stability of the placement. This chapter describes the transitional period from the perspective of both professionals and the young people and provides recommendations for effective transition planning.

3.1 Professionals' perspectives on the transition process

Foster carers identified the transition period as key for the young person getting to know the family and beginning to feel 'at home' in the foster placement. Typically, a range of transition activities and events were organised to enable the young person to get to know their foster carer before the permanent move was made. For young people without a prior relationship with their foster carer, this was typically a gradual process which included a series of short face-to-face interactions which increased over time, progressing to overnight stays in the foster home. For young people who had a prior relationship with their foster carer, the transition tended to be shorter and progress more quickly.

In these cases, the transition process focused on the young person meeting other members of the foster family, including other young people in the foster home, relatives, friends and family pets. 'Transition dinners', shopping trips and beach outings helped foster carers to get to know the young person in different settings. While outings and specific activities were important, it was also acknowledged that it was important for the transition period to be 'realistic' and to involve the young person in the everyday, routine rhythms of family life. As one foster carer described:

> I didn't want to make it special in the sense of being false and doing all these things you wouldn't normally... We did nice things, but did normal things... like go for a haircut with him you know… (Foster Carer)

While foster carers described these activities as enjoyable, they also recognised the transition could be emotionally demanding for the young person. The transition process

could involve a sense of ambivalence, on one hand they wanted to move in with their foster carer. On the other, they worried about losing the close relationships they had formed in residential care. For some young people, becoming part of a foster family could also evoke a sense of divided loyalties in relation to their birth family:

> This young person, while she was transitioning her family were really keen on that transition because she felt comfortable and safe and happy with them [the foster carers]... So keeping them [birth family] involved was really pivotal, but equally, I think she kind of felt why can I not go back to [birth] family? That really upset her... and it caused a little rift in that bond that she'd created with the foster carer. (Child's Social Worker)

It was generally recognised among professionals that transitioning from residential care to a foster placement was therefore a period of significant psychological adjustment and challenge for many young people as well as their foster carers:

> He had safe and trusting relationships and then all of a sudden he's going to move house, he's got to fit in with another family. (Independent Reviewing Officer)

For these reasons, professionals needed to carefully consider the pace and duration of the transition period as well as how to give young people a sense of control and stability during this time.

Pace and duration of the transition period

All professionals identified the transition period – particularly its pace and duration – as an important factor in the later success and sustainability of the placement. Even when young people were excited about moving to their foster placement, the period of transition could be an anxious one. Young people's behaviour could deteriorate within the unit during this stage as they became unsettled by the prospect of such a major change. Once young people knew about the planned move, there could be an escalation of challenging behaviour, particularly if the transition was delayed:

> If you delay it, it can either create more problems for the young person at the home because their behaviours can escalate even more; 'I don't care because I'm leaving anyway!' (Foster Carer)

When planning the transition, professionals needed to allow sufficient time for the young person and foster carer to get to know each other before the move. However, there was also a need to move quickly to avoid prolonging the young person's anxiety. As one social worker reflected:

> I think we would have had a longer 'getting to know you' period... because then I think she would feel a lot more contained and she would feel a lot more stable in that placement. Equally, I don't know if that would suit the young person, she's very much 'I've got an idea in my head, I need to get going and do it' just pull the plaster off kind of person, she jumped in feet first, bless her. So, it is hard to tell which one is better, I suppose. (Child's Social Worker)

The pace and duration of the transition period was also dependent on whether the young person had a prior relationship with the foster carer. Where foster carers had a prior relationship, this could ease the transition. For instance, speaking of the transition period one foster carer said:

> … that was easy for him because he knew me... I'd spent 24 hour shifts with him for like the past year so, yeah, I think that was easy for him. (Foster Carer)

In some cases, foster carers were in the unusual position of working with the young person in their other role e.g. as a residential worker. In these instances, they used this dual role to facilitate the transition:

> I was transition working with him in my shifts... I would plant seeds on how we were going to work it at home and how things are. So, it was quite easy for me to set the boundaries... I think a long transition is important because you need to set those boundaries before they come to you so they understand, so they're not overwhelmed by what's going on... (Foster Carer)

The transition period was important for establishing boundaries and expectations. This was particularly important where the young person did not know the foster carer, but also in cases where the young person's relationship with their foster carer had to be established on a new footing (as their foster carer rather than residential support worker or teacher, for instance):

> We showed him his room, he asked us to tweak the room to how he wanted it, to move the bed and all that sort of thing.... I told him how we work as a family, what we do, what we do in the evenings, what we do on Saturdays and Sundays and all that sort of thing. We let him do it at his pace... we did lots of talking. (Foster Carer)

Where the young person already knew the foster carer, this could ease the transition from residential to foster care. However, in some cases this meant that the transition was rushed and insufficiently planned. For instance, one foster carer described how the young person moved in with them a week after the match was confirmed. Despite having a close prior relationship, the lack of a transition period created difficulties. There were no opportunities for the young person to meet the foster carer's children or to establish boundaries prior to moving in. As a result, the foster carer described how:

> It was hard to start with. The walls go straight up. She's a very resilient girl but the walls did go up... it definitely made it harder for all of us. One minute you're not there, the next minute you're there. And you're having to live by these different rules, and we suddenly had this child... A lot of things initially in the early days we kind of let go because it's like we don't need to make a point of that because we're very aware that (Young Person's Name) was settling... (Foster Carer)

Later on, the foster carer described needing to retrospectively establish boundaries which created inconsistency and confusion for the young person. For the foster carer quoted above, the absence of a transition period also meant that there was no opportunity to establish a supportive network, leading to an initial sense of isolation and anxiety:

> we didn't know who these people were who I was turning to. They were just names. (Foster Carer)

Professionals emphasised that the pace and duration of the transition period should primarily be led by the young person and their needs. They cautioned against the temptation to rush moves where the foster carer and young person knew each other well.

Involving young people in the transition planning process

Taking account of young people's views, needs and regularly reviewing progress were identified as key factors in ensuring an effective and smooth transition. However, there was a need to balance the wishes of the young person with a careful consideration of their needs and those of their foster carers:

> I think in terms of transitions... there's never a kind of a standard way of doing it... it needs to be child-led and we need to not only listen to what the young person says, because I mean if I said to (Young Person), 'When do you want to move?' It would have been next week... So whilst it's bearing in mind what they want, it's always thinking about what's going to work for everybody and how can we make this successful. (Child's Social Worker)

Where young people were motivated by a desire to leave residential care (as described in Part One) or where they were excited following the confirmation of the match (stage two) they sometimes wished to move without a transition period at all. However, given their understanding of the young person's history and needs, professionals emphasised the need to take a balanced view. This meant facilitating the young person's need for control while also considering their need for a period of adjustment for them and their foster carers:

> The children that... have moved... want a large bit of control over their transition... they want to know what is going on, and what is happening, when it will happen and that they are going to be cared for and looked after in that situation. (Children's Social Worker)

A key part of allowing young people to have control over the transition process was keeping the pace under regular review and adjusting the plan in response to how the young person was finding the process:

> I think they decided to do a slow transition over a month and he decided to speed that up quite quickly - he just felt really comfortable and it developed from there... (Foster Carer)

A feature of successful transition period was the willingness on the part of professionals to be flexible in relation to the transition plan and the views of both the young person and their foster carers. As one foster carer described:

> 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?' So, it was all quite natural and we let him lead and take a bit of control … so I think it's about being really flexible. (Foster Carer)

It was therefore important for professionals around the child to share information about the young person's progress and to review the transition plan if necessary:

> it varies child to child... the length of the transition plan... It had to be amended halfway through because the child was just ready for it to speed up a little bit, and that was fine... we all just got together and increased that or made those changes. (Child's Social Worker)

Alongside formal review meetings, regular informal discussions between residential workers and foster carers were key to managing the transition period. There were several descriptions of young people feeling unsettled during this stage of the process. It was therefore important for foster carers and residential workers to feed back to each other after transition sessions. As one residential worker described:

> I made sure that I let the home know how the day had been... they let us know too if he was wobbly... (Foster Carer)

As the transition period progressed, professionals looked for signs that the young person might be ready to move into the foster placement on a full-time basis. Where the young person was spending more time at the foster carer's home and had stayed overnight, this was typically viewed as the final stage of the transition process. For some young people, the end of the transition process was marked or celebrated in some way. For instance, an Independent Reviewing Officer described how the transition period concluded with a celebratory BBQ hosted by the residential home:

> they came back to say goodbye and so it was a big celebration. And even though he's been in his foster placement now for two years, he does still see that member of staff who's really important to him. (Independent Reviewing Officer)

Professionals emphasised the importance of continuing key relationships beyond the transition period, including significant relationships with other young people and key workers within the residential unit. In fact, maintaining these relationships was key to young people being able to settle into placement in the long term (see next section settling into placement)

3.2 The role of the EFS in the transition period

The transition period from residential to foster placement was regarded as a challenging process for both the young person who professionals described as moving to a 'different life' and professionals, particularly foster carers. During this period the relationship between the foster carer and young person could be particularly vulnerable. A recurrent theme among professionals was the pivotal role of the EFS in providing support to both the young person and foster carer as well as ensuring the transition went smoothly. The provision of simultaneous, coordinated mentalization based support to both foster carer and young person was regarded by professionals as a unique strength of the EFS which enabled young people's transitions to be managed in an effective, coordinated way.

Professionals highlighted the need to support the foster carers during this period, who were themselves providing intensive support to the young person. The EFS was widely regarded

by foster carers and other professionals as playing a pivotal role in 'containing the container'. As one social worker stated:

> I think carers... are well supported by the supervising social workers and psychologists and the team manager in the enhanced team, and I think that that's probably something that then is reflected onto the young person, because if the foster carer is feeling well supported then they'll be able to be available to the young person. (Children's Social Worker)

During the transition period, young people could display unsettled and challenging behaviour both in the residential home and with their new foster carer. Here, the role of the clinical psychologist was identified as particularly important. Foster carers valued the opportunity to think through the meaning of challenging behaviour with the psychologist. This reflective support could enable foster carers to hold the child's emotional needs in mind during the often-stressful transition stage. As one foster carer identified:

> She's able to give lots of examples and make us see things from two perspectives, and very curious and inquisitive, I think that really helps. So, she's very grounding and I find that really, really helpful. (Foster Carer)

As previously identified, this transition period was a period of mobility and flux with the young person moving back and forth between the residential unit and foster carer's home. Foster carers also needed to begin to establish boundaries and expectations. The ability of the EFS to respond flexibly and responsively during this critical period was key. The ability to 'check in' with the EFS team for ad hoc advice was greatly valued by foster carers during the transitional stage. This was recognised by all professionals as going over and above the support that would normally be provided. Another key component of EFS support during this time was the support they provided for the young person. EFS were able to offer intense support which included an assistant practitioner to visit and work with the young person between once and twice a week. This intensive support was identified by several professionals as key to the success of the transition:

> I don't know how she would have managed without [assistant practitioner]. She [the young person] was able to build a relationship with someone and have someone who really understood and had the time for her. Because that's one thing that [assistant practitioner] certainly did - make her feel that she had all the time for her, and that's what she has always needed. (Child's Social Worker)

This one-to-one support was important because young people in residential care have often experienced a lack of continuity in their relationships. While some young people did have enduring relationships with residential workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and their social worker, others had experienced abrupt endings in previous relationships. At the time of transition, the young person's relationship with the foster carer was also in flux and becoming established. The EFS assistant practitioner could therefore provide a stable relationship acting as a lynchpin between the two environments of foster and residential care. In this way, the role of the EFS assistant practitioner paralleled Plumridge, Meakins and Sebba's (2017) mentor role from the original step-down model, which was devised to serve a similar purpose.

Where the EFS were involved with the transition planning at an early stage, they were able to provide coordinated support during the transition period for both the foster carer and the young person. However, in some cases the EFS was brought in to support a transition that had already been initiated or was part of a 'crisis move' where the young person had been served notice in a prior placement. For instance, one foster carer described how a young person was abruptly placed with them from residential care without a package of support. EFS subsequently stepped in to provide this support. The foster carer identified that they were able to manage solely because of the enhanced support available to them, and that the placement would otherwise have broken down. However, support for crisis moves was not the original remit of the EFS. Several professionals noted that, in climate of reduced resources, the EFS was often used to 'plug the gaps' in existing support and this in turn could hamper their capacity to support managed moves. While, as seen in the quote above, EFS were able to provide much-needed support to foster carers to prevent placement breakdown, it could be more difficult for the service to provide effective support where they were

not involved early in the planning process. In such cases, there could be issues around role clarity in the professional network. For instance, a minority of foster carers and some social workers expressed confusion around the distinction between care planning and providing support to the young person and foster carer.

3.3 Implications for supporting young people's transitions to foster care

All the young people who participated in this study experienced multiple moves and had previously been placed in foster placements before moving into residential care. Across the board the young people reflected on the fact that the transition they had experienced when supported by EFS was different to placement moves they had experienced in the past. Some of the participants spoke about the speed and abruptness of previous moves which they experienced as overwhelming:

> No, didn't know I was going to [Residential home] until that day. (Young Person)

> Well, then moves were just pretty like quick, like I'd visit my carers like one day, like my new ones, and then I'd move in the next day, it was very much like that. Which I don't think is going to, like in my personal opinion, you're just setting the child up to fail. (Young Person)

Young people also explained that many of these abrupt moves would also include a change in schools and removal from existing friendship groups and support systems. By contrast, they all felt positively about the transition process this time around and were able to tell us in detail about the activities and timings involved. Young people appreciated the opportunity to be introduced to the rest of the family:

> Like getting to know the family. Because like at one point, it was just like me and [foster carer] and then it just builds up to like [foster carer's partner] and then [foster carer's daughter] and then at the one visit there was all of us. (Young Person)

The transition activities helped young people to get to know their foster carers and to begin to think of the placement as their new home. These included walking the dog, being included in family meals, sleeping over and buying new bedding. The transition could prove less daunting when the young person knew their foster carer previously:

> I'm going to someone that I know and not a complete stranger. So, I think that like made you more like chilled out a bit… Yeah. I think I had a feeling like, this is going to be **the one**. That I'll be here for a very long time (Young Person)

For one young person, their move to the foster placement was delayed due to organisational issues. However, while they wished it could have occurred sooner, they felt that they had been kept informed and were understanding of the process. They appreciated being able to see their prospective foster carer regularly, and the fact that they were asked about their views throughout. However, the pacing and duration of the transition process was not ideal for all the young people. For instance, another young person talked about a difficult transition as their residential placement came to an abrupt end. They spoke of decisions being made based on organisational concerns rather than their needs. They felt that the timing of the move and the impact on their friendships was not recognised by professionals. For instance, one young person described how professionals had planned their move to take place during a particularly significant week in their schooling. However, they recalled that their prospective foster carer, who worked within the residential home, advocated on their behalf to delay the move. Despite this, the transition still felt rushed, and there were no opportunities for the young person to make a good ending to their time in residential care or to psychologically prepare for the move:

> 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)

This experience left them feeling rejected and de-valued. It reminded them of other previous moves when their possessions had been 'packed' for them in black bags with many items missing. Despite their transition being extremely difficult for them, this was in part ameliorated by their close prior relationship with their prospective foster carers:

> They just picked me. I didn't actually pick them. And it's a different connection between us, like them and a normal foster carer because I just didn't get dumped on them, on their doorstep and shown a room. [Foster carers] actually picked me and I'm grateful they did otherwise I don't think I'd be doing very well in (semi-independent house); I'm not going to lie. (Young Person)

3.4 Implications for practice

The transition from residential to foster care was identified as a significant period in young people's lives. For young people, the opportunity to make a good ending to their time in residential care was important. They valued opportunities to gradually adjust to life with their new foster carers as well as to say goodbye to friends and staff at the residential unit. They particularly valued opportunities to get to know other family members in the foster home in a gradual way. The young people commented on how different the transition was compared to previous moves they had experienced. The EFS played a key role in this experience, supporting the professional network to approach the move in a measured and gradual way. Professionals emphasised the need to give young people time to get to know their foster home in a planned and gradual way, with opportunities for regular review. In summary, both the young people's and professionals' data emphasised the importance of careful transition planning with a focus on the young person's needs. Recommendations for effective transition planning include:

- It is important to develop a 'getting to know you' transition plan which is co-created by the young person and their foster carer(s). A clear plan, which includes *where will I be, when, with whom and for how long?* can help young people manage the

transition process. The 'getting to know you' plan should be regularly reviewed and adjusted depending on how the young person is finding the transition

- The plan should identify how professionals will support the foster carer and young person during the transition. Where there are several professionals involved it is important to clarify their role during the transition period. The plan should also identify a range of transition activities to help the young person to get a sense of family life within the foster placement. Consideration should be given to how young people meet other family members, and it may be helpful for them to be introduced one at a time
- The speed and pacing of the transition period is important to prevent the young person feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. Professionals must take into account the expressed views of the young person about the transition *alongside* the needs expressed in the young person's behaviour. Generally young people were cognisant of the organisational and resource difficulties that may impact on a transition and preferred professionals to be open with them rather than try to protect them from these issues
- The transition period is key for establishing the relationship between the foster carer and young person. Starting the transition process to foster care can bring up difficult issues for young people. Flexible therapeutic support during this stage can therefore be helpful for both foster carers and young people. During the transition period it is important for the residential unit and the foster carers to work closely together and communicate regularly so that the young person can be supported in both settings

Stage four: Settling into placement

In this stage young people began to settle into their foster placement over the longer-term, establishing a sense of 'home', a secure base emotionally and a clearer sense of their future. This chapter will outline what the settling in stage looked like from the perspective of both professionals and young people. Key issues included adapting to new daily rhythms and the continuity of key relationships outside of the placement. The chapter concludes with the implications for practice in relation to supporting young people who have left residential care in long-term foster placements.

4.1 Professionals' perspectives on settling

Once settled into the foster placement professionals described how most young people began to flourish. The support of their foster carer in the context of a close relationship helped many young people to feel safe and secure. This enabled them to manage other challenges within their life such as difficulties around education and relationships with their birth family. The foster placement provided a secure base for the young person, often the first that they had experienced in a long history of moves:

> My young person... has flourished and that's all about the consistency, the secure base he has, he is an absolute diamond... It's having that consistency every day and there's firm structure and boundaries. (Foster Carer)

Professionals described how, for some young people, settling into the foster placement provided a period of relative calm after residential care. In the residential context it could be difficult for some of the young people to obtain the support they needed due to the competing needs of other residents. The one-to-one support provided by their foster carer meant that young people no longer needed to resort to behavioural strategies to signal need:

> She says she feels really calm. She said... it's just so much calmer, there's not all this drama going on and I think it's that escalating behaviours to get attention as well, isn't it? (Foster Carer)

As vividly described in part one, many young people found the residential environment unpredictable and needed to remain vigilant at all times. However, once they had settled into the rhythms and routines of their foster placement young people could begin to feel safe to let their guard down and allow themselves to begin to trust their carer. Several foster carers described how this could result in a period of regression where the young person allowed themselves to be nurtured, often for the first time:

> 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)

After the transition period, many young people began to feel more settled. For others, the point at which the placement became permanent could be more challenging. For instance, professionals frequently described the transition phase (described in the previous chapter) as a 'honeymoon period' where the young person and foster carer enjoyed outings, trips and time spent together. Once this period ended, young people did not necessarily begin to settle in the way that professionals had expected. In some cases being settled and having a secure base could lead to an increase in challenging behaviours as young people began to work through emotional difficulties and trauma that they had not felt safe enough to address before. Since many young people had experienced a series of moves prior to the foster placement, feeling settled could trigger fears they would be rejected as they had been in the past. These fears could manifest as challenging behaviour towards their foster carer to 'test' their commitment. This could come as an upsetting surprise to foster carers who had a strong bond with the young person following a smooth transition period:

> I thought it would all be lovely during the summer... She is still hard, constantly testing 'you'll give up on me, everyone else gives up on me'. (Foster Carer)

Foster carers described receiving support during matching and transition, however, it was often several months after the transition during a period of 'testing' that the most intensive support was needed:

> I think that [the transition period] was the September and then in the December I kind of had a massive wobble because that's when we all got... more embedded and then you could start seeing the honeymoon period was over. You could see where the cracks were and where the support was needed. And I was then told... we've got seven weeks left of support and then we were on our own. I... had a bit meltdown... we were then told right you are going to panel, you are going to be enhanced for a year from panel. (Foster Carer)

In this case, the EFS were asked to provide therapeutic support to the young person and their foster carer who had originally been supported via a mainstream fostering route. As stated previously, it could be challenging for new professionals to enter the network in a time of crisis. It would therefore be helpful for post-transition support to be embedded in the long-term care planning for the young people.

Adapting to the rhythms and routines of the foster family

Professionals repeatedly emphasised the differences between residential unit and the rhythms, routines and relationships within the foster placement. For many young people this was a positive change, however this still required a significant period of adjustment. Several professionals cautioned that the transition period could not entirely prepare young people and foster carers for the realities of daily life in the placement, emphasising the need for continued assessment, review and support post-transition:

> Assessments during the honeymoon period when they're going for overnight stays just for tea or something... of course it's going to be nice, of course it's going to be lovely... but reality is 24 hours a day, seven days a week... so I think that is what they need to look at more. (Residential Worker, Focus Group)

After an initial period of settling, professionals described how some young people found it difficult to manage the differences between residential and foster care in the longer-term. In residential care, young people would often have frequent opportunities to go on trips, outings and could often choose which workers they wished to spend time with. In foster

placement however, there were not always weekly opportunities for trips and the young person typically only had access to their foster carer. While many young people managed to settle with the support of their foster carer, for others this was more difficult. As one foster carer described, the first six months of the foster placement could be a 'culture shock' for the young person.

Young people needed not only to develop a daily relationship with their foster carers but also other family members, such as foster carers' birth children, other young people in the placement, the foster carers' relatives, family friends and pets. This was understandably challenging for some young people who had to navigate the dynamics of existing family relationships formed over many years. While the young person's relationship with their foster carer was often very close, their relationship with the foster carer's partner or existing children could take time to establish. In some cases, these relationships could be difficult. For instance, one foster carer described how difficulties between the young person and her child was a key factor in the breakdown of the placement. Navigating family relationships within the foster placement could be very difficult and painful for some young people, many of whom had experienced trauma within their birth family. One Independent Reviewing Officer described how, for some young people:

> Their deep desire is to be in a family but they don't know how to *live* in a family. (Independent Reviewing Officer)

While most foster carers were very happy with the support they and the young person received, several identified that additional support for the foster carer's own children and other family relationships would have been very welcome.

In addition to new relationships and family dynamics, a particularly common facet of the culture shock for young people was around the rhythms of family life – especially during the evening and other periods of unstructured time. Within residential units there would often be planned activities or floating support staff to help scaffold young people's activities during the evening. During the transition to period, visits to the foster carers home would often include specific activities or days out. However, there

was typically less structure post-transition. For instance, foster carers often wanted to relax and unwind during the evening after a day at work. Learning the new rhythms and routines of family life was an ongoing process over the longer-term as one foster carer described:

> settling into a family environment...I think it's understanding that we're not staff, we don't go home at night and unwind and de-stress... Those things... have needed to be unpicked along the way... it was us having to explain to him that look, we don't go home at night and even that conversation... you could see the lightbulb moment for him... there's not a new member of staff coming with a fresh pair of legs... to take you out to play football for five hours, we're the same people as we were yesterday... everybody needs some peace... we all have to help each other... The things we would class as normal home things he is still having to learn. I think that's probably the biggest thing (Foster Carer)

Encouraging reciprocity and the ability to recognise each other's needs was key to negotiating this aspect of settling into the foster placement. Clear expectations as well as support for the young person to plan and scaffold less structured periods of family time was important. Recognising the capacity to manage unstructured time as a key element of settling into foster placement, staff at one residential unit had initiated preparatory work with young people to help prepare them for this aspect of foster care. For instance, one worker described working with a young person to develop a habit of creative journaling during the evening which could be undertaken semi-independently as part of their 'me time' in the evening. This in turn allowed the young person to occupy their time in an enjoyable and meaningful way, checking-in with their foster carers to show them their progress. For foster carers this allowed a period of downtime in the evenings where they were present for the young person and could enjoy their company without needing to devise an activity.

Continuity of relationships (staying connected)

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, professionals repeatedly identified ongoing relationships as key to long-term placement stability. In the transition period,

young people's relationships with residential workers, friends and birth family were recognised as important. However, there was a risk that post-transition, these relationships could fall away. This sense of disconnection had implications for young people's sense of identity and self-worth.

As described in Part One, young people often had strong bonds with residential workers forged over many years in the residential unit. However, in some cases these relationships were abruptly severed post-transition:

> when he got here though there was no outreach or anything like that so literally all those people that he had worked with... there was *nothing* after that. (Foster Carer)

Professionals tended to describe post-transition contact with residential workers as 'outreach' work. There was significant variation in foster carers' reports of this contact. As described above, some foster carers stated that the young people did not have contact with their residential workers post-transition, while others reported considerable ongoing contact through visits, cards and letters. Professionals identified that continuing these relationships was an important factor in the young person settling into their foster placement:

> We teach them what an attachment is and all of a sudden they go to foster care and that attachment is gone... I understand that you have to allow them to settle - but [in] my experience, the children who have still had that attachment and not lost it seem to be settled a lot more than the children who are just cut off from that attachment. (Residential Worker, Focus Group)

The importance of continuing relationships with their residential workers was echoed by foster carers, who saw first-hand the impact of abrupt severance of this contact on the young person they cared for:

> [there was a] lack of support from the connections he already had in residential. There was no outreach as such... he'd been there for 18 months, within a few weeks

> he was moved into mine because he knew me... just seemed as if 'oh, he's going to be absolutely fine, they know each other' …. they've had a connection for a year and we were just left to it... there's no one [else] he then sees... No cares about him, 'Oh they do not want to come and see me!' That's very much how he would be. (Foster Carer)

The loss of significant relationships with residential workers and young people from the unit could be experienced as another rejection by young people which in turn impacted their sense of self-esteem. In some cases, it also meant that the foster carer became the only point of continuity in the young person's life. This in turn placed a great deal of pressure on the relationship. To avoid these issues, foster carers emphasised the need for planning around how the young person's relationships would be maintained once they had transitioned into placement. Without a plan, young people could feel let down and abandoned:

> I think, especially if they have a good relationship with the staff, that [needs to] continue a bit... They promised all these things and even on her birthday - she moved just before her birthday - no one contacted her. And she had no family, it was just me. I thought, 'Oh, God!' she'd made all these little gifts as thank you for having her, none of them turned up, no one came. (Foster Carer)

By contrast, where post-transition contact was maintained, this helped the young person to feel connected to the important people in their lives:

> She picked and chose which people she liked to keep in contact with, and she's kept in contact with those workers... she calls her old residential home every week – so she'll call up the general house number and say, 'Hi, is such and such there, I want to talk to them, or how is everyone?' and she'll keep in touch with the other children there, she loves being all involved in the gossip that's going on there. Like she really does get involved, and she really loves going back and talking to them. (Children's social worker)

In this example, the young person had actively maintained the contact rather than wait to be contacted. Some young people would need support from the foster carer to make these contacts and all would need responsive residential care staff to maintain this connection. Many young people were close to their residential workers who they considered as family. Maintaining these connections was therefore important for both the young person and the residential workers themselves. As one foster carer described:

> [X's] key worker is like a mother to him. They are very, very close. They have an incredible bond... he was losing the familiarity of the residential home; she was losing somebody that she loved. And it was love, and it still is. It's just logistics that mean she couldn't be doing what we're doing. So, it was really important to us, to him and to her that they were allowed to keep that communication... That doesn't need to go just because he is in a different place (Foster Carer)

While important, young people's ongoing relationships could require careful scaffolding and planning. For instance, one foster carer described how contact with a friend from the residential unit had a destabilising effect on the placement as the friend was very upset about them leaving the unit. Professionals also identified that the pace and intensity of post-transition contact was challenging to get right. Too little and the child felt an abrupt loss, yet too much contact with residential staff could inhibit the young person's relationship with their foster carer. As one residential worker described:

> When I dropped the [young person] off [at the foster placement] he wanted to just come home... We have to understand that you need to let them settle in with their new family but still prove to them that we still care about them. I did withdraw a little bit because... he wanted me all the time and that then put barrier against him forming relationships with his new foster carers.... It [contact] worked really well and once he formed that relationship... we done it together so when he was talking about his feelings and struggling and what was wrong, the foster carers would use me in a three-way conversation to help them talk to the young boy about what might be wrong. Instead of me talking to the

> child I helped the foster carers, it was more about them learning to manage his feelings rather than me continuing to do it. (Residential Worker, Focus Group)

As the quote above illustrates, close communication between the significant people in the child's life, coordination and planning were important in making contact work and providing a sense of continuity. Post-transition contact needs may differ over time and need to be regularly reviewed and considered. It was unusual for there to be formal arrangements in place for residential workers to visit and maintain contact with young people who had moved to foster care. In some cases, there appeared to be an implicit assumption that residential workers would continue to see young people in their own time, outside of working hours. This 'unofficial' contact could place workers in a risky situation and was typically not recognised as part of their workload.

4.2 Role of the EFS in settling

The EFS played a key role in supporting and sustaining foster placements over time. The EFS assistant practitioner was key in helping the young person to settle, as they continued to work with the child post-transition:

> They've had a family practitioner to in, and she's been able to build a really lovely relationship with the child, the young person, and she's been really helpful there, and she's been a really key relationship there for that child and has really helped her settle into that foster placement. (Children's Social Worker)

Where difficulties were encountered in longer-term placements, professionals identified the work of EFS as an important factor in preventing placement breakdown. Although many of the longer placements were established prior to the inception of the EFS, it was recognised that the support from clinical psychologist was important for helping the foster carer to manage challenges. Foster carers could experience young people's 'testing' behaviours as upsetting and rejecting. Mentalisation-based support from the clinical psychiatrist and EFS team could help foster carers to manage challenging behaviour by thinking about its meaning and understanding what was happening from the young person's perspective. This

in turn helped challenging behaviours to feel less personal. Foster carers spoke positively about the responsiveness of EFS and the flexibility of support provided, especially the opportunities to check in with the EFS online. However, a small minority of foster carers highlighted that receiving supervision online could be difficult as young people were often at home:

> If I have a progress review or a supervision, my supervision's my time to say how I'm feeling. She's in the house. So I can't talk freely. (Foster Carer)

For other professionals, such as IROs and children's social workers, a key benefit of the EFS was the fact that it offered support to all parties including foster carers, the young person and the professional network around them. In addition, the team of EFS workers supporting the family meant that the foster carers could access support from more than one source:

> It seems like the team works really well together. It's not ever just until the child is placed and they're settled. It's not ever just me and one person, it's a whole team of people from the enhanced fostering service, which always feels really good for the child and the carers, like they've got a wraparound support, whereas perhaps in standard foster placement it is just me and the fostering social worker. (Children's Social Worker)

The Enhanced Fostering Service often acted as a lynchpin for the network of professionals around the young person. When led by the EFS placement reviews were described as 'joined up' and involving wider involvement of the professional network. This joined up approach was also extended to supporting contact post-transition which could otherwise be forgotten:

> The good thing about the enhanced fostering service, they really encourage maintaining relationships. So this young person still saw a couple of the residential workers, and the foster family really promoted and encouraged that, and I know they went to the home, the foster home, to see him. And I know from meetings we've had with the enhanced team, they really encourage and promote that, which

helps, so it's not just like you're picking them up and moving them, it's maintaining that relationship. (Children's Social Worker)

4.3 Young people's views on settling into the placement over the longer-term

As seen in part one of this report the young people spoke extremely positively about their current foster placements. Three of the young people envisaged themselves staying with the foster carers into adulthood, identifying their current placement as their 'last':

> …til I'm about twenty five. Depends how much I annoy her and she annoys me. (Young Person)

> Probably until I'm like eighteen, nineteen probably. (Young Person)

Young people valued their increasingly close relationship with their foster carer which often deepened as they began to settle. They also appreciated the calmer rhythm of a 'family' home. In contrast to professionals' concerns around difficulties in unstructured family time, the young people interviewed spoke positively about having to spend greater time alone and enjoyed the greater autonomy of preparing food for themselves or 'hanging out' in their bedroom.

Four of the young people talked about staying connected with staff from the residential home, and one described maintaining a friendship with another young person who had also been in the residential home. These relationships were important to them, they spoke about exchanging occasional text messages and having someone who was interested in what they were doing now. For one young person this was particularly poignant as they explained that they had been supported by the foster carer to keep contact with close members of their birth family, and for the first time, being able to invite their mother to see their bedroom. Staying connected with significant people in their lives was important for young people. However, there was often a sense that looking back was painful. Generally, the young people framed their answers in a manner that implied they predominately focused on the present, and they were often unable or reluctant to recall past placements or moves:

> That's a hard question. Especially as I've forgot all about that place. (Young Person)

> I kind of just pushed that bit to the side and moved on. (Young person)

Previous moves had often been traumatic, abrupt and had signalled the end of significant relationships in their lives. For instance, one young person recalled losing half of their possessions during a previous move between placements. Once they had left, there seemed to be no expectation that even returning to collect their things was possible:

> Then I was like "But half my stuff is missing and it's in black bags so what are you going to do about it?" and she was like "Well, nothing now because you're here". (Young Person)

Understandably, young people spoke of not wanting to develop relationships in care as they considered them to be transitory; whether that meant loss of friends through a change of school, or loss of a carer through placement breakdown. Settling into their current placement was therefore a significant achievement and required young people to take the emotional risk of investing in their foster carers, despite their previous losses. For the young people who had known their foster carer before they were matched, the sense of 'being chosen' or claimed was significant to them settling in the longer-term. They described how this gave them an extra feeling of security in the placement. They inferred that being chosen had meant that their foster carer had seen something good or worthy in them. This in turn helped them to feel positive about their future. During the project we became aware that despite the relationship with foster carers and the support of EFS, there was always the possibility of placement break down. In this sense, the placements felt very 'high stakes' for this cohort of young people - they had summoned the courage to invest in their foster carers, despite previous disappointments and their sense of self-worth was often strongly tied up with the idea that they had been chosen. This underscores the importance of ongoing support to sustain these placements in the longer-term, as outlined below.

4.4 Implications for settling and long-term support

Settling into a long-term foster placement could create a sense of stability, allowing young people to flourish. The young people viewed their current placement as permanent and had come to view the foster placement as home. The sense of calm and stability was often a contrast to their previous experiences in residential care. However, their relationships with friends and workers from the residential unit remained important to them. This was also recognised by their foster carers, who in many instances worked hard to support the young person's ongoing relationships. The EFS played a key role in supporting young people's ongoing contact with the residential unit post-transition. This in turn helped young people to feel settled and connected.

The secure base provided by foster carers could allow young people to reflect on their experiences prior to placement. For some foster carers, this meant supporting young people through a period of regression where the young revisited prior developmental stages. In some cases, young people appeared settled and then began to 'test' their relationship. It is therefore important that support for both young people and foster carers continues post-transition. This support should be informed by the following considerations:

- Once settled into placement, young people often feel safe enough to begin to process difficult past experiences and may appear to regress to an earlier stage of development. They may need additional nurturing and foster carers are likely to need additional support and advice. It is therefore important that therapeutic support is available beyond the assessment, matching and transition stages
- Once settled, young people may begin to 'test' their relationship with the foster carer and may additional reassurance during this stage. For foster carers, mentalization-based reflective support can help them to unpick the meaning of challenging behaviour, understand the young person's needs and avoid experiencing the behaviour as a rejection
- Young people need to feel connected to the important people in their life. Plans to maintain relationships with birth family, relatives and friends should be an integral part of long-term care planning

- For many young people, ongoing contact with significant people from the residential home is important for their identity and self-esteem. It is therefore important to consider how this contact should be managed post-transition. Without this, young people can feel rejected or abandoned
- Settling into placement in the longer-term can involve a culture shock for young people, particularly around the rhythms and routines of family life. While in the residential unit, young people may benefit from support to help them develop enjoyable self-directed activities and hobbies that they can pursue during downtime in the foster placement

Conclusion

Young people move from residential to foster care placements for a variety of reasons, this can include the direct wishes of the young person but also at times organisation needs, resource availability and financial considerations. Regardless of the motivation, impetus or route of the move the relational needs of the young person must take precedence. Professionals should resist the assumption that foster care is preferable for all young people and ensure that all decisions are made in the best interests of each individual young person.

Young people with long histories of residential care and foster care bring a deeply personal history of adversity and challenges, which can continue to affect them throughout childhood and into adult life. To help them process and manage these challenges they need secure relationships with trusted adults. A key finding of the study was the importance of the secure base relationships (Schofield and Beek 2014) that the young person was able to build and maintain with adults in their lives, be that birth families, professionals, residential care workers or foster carers.

Existing research in this area focuses on young people's moves between foster placements and entry and exit from care. There is also research and models of good practice on transitions for young children moving from foster care to adoption. However, little is known about the specific transition for older children and young people from residential care to foster care. This study addresses this gap by gathering the views of both young people and professionals about this transition. The inclusion of young people and the wider professional team around the child provides rich contextual data from a broad range of perspectives.

The findings of this study illustrate the unique but varied set of benefits and challenges that are faced both by young people and professionals during the move from residential care to foster care. Young people reflected on the foster placement as offering a secure base and a significantly calmer environment than they had experienced in residential care. This secure base provided by the foster carers enabled them to begin to envisage a future for

themselves. For some young people this also allowed them to psychologically revisit and, in some cases, resolve difficult issues from their past. However, moving between these two very different environments and engaging with such psychological processing was challenging, especially for young people who are also managing a range of normative developmental transitions in adolescence. It was therefore crucial that both the young people and their foster carers received sensitive relationship-based support to them to manage the process.

It is worth noting that while the majority of the young people in the study spoke about the residential care placement as being difficult, this was largely attributed to the challenges of the physical and social environment. They recalled residential homes to be noisy, unpredictable and frustrating. They felt that their needs were often competing with or overshadowed by those of other residents. They also showed a keen awareness of the potentially stigmatising views of residential care and by association themselves. These views are seen within the societal representation of looked after children in residential care. This is reinforced by the professional discourse of residential care as a 'last resort' (Hart, La Valle & Holmes 2015). However, despite these challenges within residential care, many young people spoke clearly about the strong relationships they had developed with individual residential care workers. They spoke about these relationships with warmth and gratitude likening them to family, as reported by Schofield et al (2015). Yet, for many young people these relationships were abruptly severed or not recognised following the transition.

This research has highlighted a gap in service provision and thinking around the needs of young people's ongoing contact and maintenance of relationships from residential care when they move to foster care. Many of these relationships within residential care have been formed over several years, and unlike previous fostering relationships that might have been damaged through the circumstances of the placement breakdown, the relationship between a young person and a connected residential worker has the potential to continue. Thus, giving a golden opportunity to model enduring relationships that follow the young person past the transition between placements and into the longer term. Such a trusted and interested adult could take an important place in the young person's childhood and

transition into adult life, drawing on the principles of circles of support they could engage with and advocate for the young person in a meaningful and transformative way. However, for this to happen appropriately and effectively for both the young person and the residential worker, this relationship must be acknowledged and supported. More broadly, the role of residential workers as key attachment figures for young people are not always recognised within the professional network, yet they often had the clearest insight into the young person's experiences and needs. This research emphasises the need for residential workers to be included in a young person's support system during and beyond their time in residential care.

A second and distinctive aspect of the findings was the matching route for placements where the foster carer was known to the young person prior to placement. Within these matches there was a sense of history and relationship between the foster carer and the young person which in most cases catalysed and strengthened the new foster care placement. This relationship often provided the only opportunity for a young person to transition out of residential care and the glue that held the foster care placement together. Young people expressed a sense of being valued, recognised and wanted as a result of feeling that they had been expressly chosen by their foster carer. This in turn strengthened the young person's sense of identity and self-esteem. However, this also made the stability of these placements particularly high stakes for the young person's sense of self and wellbeing. If the placement were to break down it could be experienced by the young person as a direct rejection of themselves as individuals. This felt different to previous placement break downs which the young people attributed to the fault of the system and/or a poor match. It was clear within placements in which the young people had been 'chosen' there was an expectation of permanence that they had not experienced before. This is a familiar issue in adoption and long-term foster care, where choosing and being chosen can convey a special sense of security and commitment but can also add pressure for both children and parents/carers when relationships are under pressure.

While these placements were often strengthened by the pre-existing relationship, these matches were sometimes motivated by the carer feeling compelled to rescue the young person from residential care or 'the system', even when this match may not have been in

the child's best interests. In some cases it was clear that the young person had not responded to being rescued in the way that the foster carer expected and the placement subsequently broke down. For many of these previously connected foster carers this was their first experience of fostering and they felt ill prepared to manage some of the complex needs of the young person within their home. Here the role of EFS was important in supporting these matches and, where necessary, managing placement endings.

The findings suggest that careful consideration should be given to these connected matches and that assessments of readiness and matching need to occur both for the young person and the potential foster carer. The EFS was able to offer mentalisation based support to explore motivation and manage the process, this sometimes included slowing the process down and considering possible challenges. Another key consideration for these connected matches was that foster carers and young people may require additional support to re-establish their relationship on a new footing (e.g. as the young person's foster carer rather than residential worker or teacher).

The recent review of children's social care services (MacAlister, 2022) proposes that school teachers and other key adults who are present in the lives of looked after children should be encouraged to step forward and foster the child. The report emphasises that if only 1% of teachers stepped forward in response to the children they teach 4,610 new foster placements would be created within the UK (MacAlister, 2022). This research has shown some of the benefits of connected caregivers from professional backgrounds, but also the many challenges. A further issue with connected foster care placements is the potential impact on young people who are not 'chosen'. Residential workers spoke about the impact this had on young people's sense of self-worth as they saw others being chosen ahead of them, often by a worker in the unit.

Finally, where young people had successfully made the transition from residential care to foster care, the findings emphasized the need for ongoing support post-transition. For many young people being settled and having a secure base allowed them to revisit difficult issues from their past. Sometimes this meant testing their relationship with their foster carer following a period of stability. This could be painful and upsetting for the foster carers

who required therapeutic mentalisation based support to enable them to safely and reliably support the young person through this difficult process and thus avoid placement breakdown.

Recommendations for service development and practice

While the EFS team has been dispersed as part of the restructure of fostering services, it is important that the new service structure addresses the needs of young people and their foster carers at each of the four stages identified in this evaluation.

A key benefit of the EFS was the provision of mentalisation based psychological support by a clinical psychologist. In many cases this support prevented placement breakdown and as such it is important that young people and their foster carer have access to ad hoc mentalisation-based support through their journey from residential to foster care and beyond. Detailed implications for each of the stages can be found in each of the corresponding chapters. These can be summarised as follows:

Assessing readiness

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. Each individual decision needs to be made with the specific interests of the young person in mind, rather than ideological preferences around care settings, service strategies or resource pressures. Careful consideration must be given to the emotional impact a prospective move could have upon a young person. These discussions should be managed collaboratively between the residential unit, the child's social worker and potential foster carer if already known to the child.

Matching

There are distinctive and important considerations to be made when formalising the match between a young person and a potential foster carer that is known to them. It is crucial to examine the motivations of potential foster carers in offering a home to a young person. Professionals must be able to support prospective foster carers to reflect on their current

relationship with the young person and how that might change within the foster placement. Matches with foster carers who are known to the young person carry an elevated level of significance for the young person and as such must be carefully managed.

Making the Transition

The additional support offered to both the young people and their foster carers by the EFS team was experienced positively by both parties. Young people particularly value the opportunity to get to know extended family members of their foster carers, gradually adjust to the foster placement and say goodbye to friends and staff in the residential unit. However, the transitional period can trigger difficult emotions and behaviours for young people, particularly if they have had unplanned and unsuccessful transitions in the past. Flexible therapeutic support is key in assisting them to manage these challenges. Foster carers value the availability of ad hoc support to manage challenges as they emerge during the transition process. There can be a number of organisational and administrative obstacles during the transition process which can cause delays. Young people are more understanding of these than they feel professionals give them credit for and as such prefer honest communication about any obstacles or delays faced.

Settling into placement

To successfully settle into a new placement the relationship between the young person and foster carer will inevitably shift and adjust. As the young person begins to feel secure within the placement, they often begin to process the difficulties they have experienced within their past. This can involve challenging behaviour and testing boundaries. 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). The importance of this golden thread of relationships should be recognised and promoted for young people within the foster placement. Professionals such as residential workers should be supported to remain in the young person's support network, through each stage of the process and beyond.

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