

Permanently Progressing?

Building secure futures for children in Scotland

Children looked after away from home aged five and under in Scotland: experiences, pathways and outcomes

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Key messages

- Before becoming looked after away from home in 2012-13 most children in the sample had experienced abuse and neglect. From this data there is no evidence that the threshold to accommodate children aged five and under was low.
- Parenting capacity was compromised by alcohol and substance misuse, mental health difficulties, and domestic violence. This was within the context of multiple family difficulties, poor housing conditions and limited financial circumstances.
- Reunification was influenced by parental motivation to resume care, a reduction in risks, and tangible improvements. In terms of a return home being sustained, the latter two were significant.
- Where kinship care was the route to permanence, the capacity of the adult(s) to provide long-term stability and their commitment to the child influenced decision making.
- Kinship carers and adoptive parents were generally satisfied with the level of information they were initially given about children's experiences and needs. Foster carers were more likely to report having insufficient information, particularly in relation to actual or potential special needs.
- Disability, experience of maltreatment, age when children became looked after, initial placement, and the childhood experiences of parents were key predictors of children's later permanence status.
- Three to four years after becoming looked after away from home, children were reported to have rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties two to three times greater than their peers.
- Children's age when they entered their current placement, longevity of placement, and whether children had a disability or health problems were associated with the presence of emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Children who were accommodated and placed with carers and adoptive parents earlier, and who remained there were generally doing better at school and had more friends. Their attachment relationship with at least one adult was more likely to be described as secure.
- Although children in kinship care, foster care, and with adoptive parents had similar levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties the level of support they received varied. Kinship carers received less support than other caregivers.

Introduction

This briefing has been completed as one strand of the study *Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland*. It is the first in Scotland to investigate decision making, permanence, progress, outcomes and belonging for children who became 'looked after' at home, or were placed away from their birth parents in 2012-13 when they were aged five and under. Phase One ran from 2014-18, and was designed to be the first phase of a longitudinal study following children into adolescence and beyond. Phase One involved a team from the universities of Stirling, York, and Lancaster, in collaboration with Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland. This briefing is on the *Outcomes* strand. The full report on this, and the four other strands of the study are available on the website.¹

Why is the issue important?

In 2012-13, 1,836 children aged five and under became looked after in Scotland. Of these children 1,355 were looked after away from home, and 481 were looked after at home. The *Pathways* strand of the study used the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) to track the pathways and timescales to permanence for all 1,836 children between 2012-16.²

Many children who become looked after away from home will return to their parents, but for some the decision is taken to permanently place them with kinship carers, long-term foster carers or adoptive parents. The *Outcomes* strand provides new evidence on the histories, progress and outcomes for 433 of the 1,355 children three to four years after they became looked after away from home. It is only the second UK study to use a standardised measure of child maltreatment to assess the nature and severity of abuse and neglect experienced by children before they were placed away from home and investigate the association between patterns of maltreatment, placement status, and children's subsequent wellbeing.

The aim of the *Outcomes* strand of the study was to investigate:

- The characteristics and family histories of children in Scotland who become looked after away from home when they were aged five years or under;
- Children's experience of abuse and neglect;
- Decision making and pathways to permanence, including factors associated with different routes;
- Children's integration within this family and patterns of contact with their birth families;
- Progress and outcomes for children three to four years after they became looked after away from home, including their health and development and educational progress.

What did we do?

The sampling frame for the *Outcomes* strand consisted of 643 children, around one third (35%) of the full cohort of 1,836 children in the *Pathways* strand. Only children who had: a) become looked after away from home during 2012-13 when they were aged five years or under, b) were looked after away from home or had been adopted/placed for adoption on 31 July 2014, and c) were within the 19 local authorities who agreed to take part in this strand were included. There were three sources of information: a social worker survey, a caregiver survey, and the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS).

¹ Website details are provided on the final page.

² The report and summary for that strand of the study is accessible along with all other reports on the website.

Social worker survey

An online survey (using Qualtrics software, www.qualtrics.com) of children's current (or most recent) social workers in the 19 participating local authorities was conducted between January and March 2016, three to four years after children became looked after away from home. This gathered information on children's histories, past and current circumstances, reasons for becoming looked after, permanence planning and decision making. It included a standardised measure of the nature, severity and timing of the maltreatment children had experienced (the Modified Maltreatment Classification System, or MMCS) (English et al, 1997³). Questionnaires were received from 433 social workers.

Caregiver survey

Questionnaires were sent to children's foster and kinship carers and adoptive parents/prospective adoptive parents.⁴ These asked about children's current health and wellbeing, schooling and social activities, emotional and behavioural problems, relationship and attachment problems, contact with birth families, integration in their current families, and support to both children and their caregivers. Caregivers completed the survey between November 2016 and June 2017. Questionnaires were received from 166 caregivers from 15 local authorities. We had information from both social workers and caregivers on 130 children. As social workers and carers completed surveys at different times, children were aged between two to nine years when the social worker survey was completed; and between three and nine when the caregiver survey was completed.

Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS)

Every year the Scottish Government collects data on all looked after children from local authorities. Information from the CLAS was used, including details of all episodes of care, placements, and legal status.

What does the research tell us?

The first sections of this summary on children's backgrounds, experiences and pathways are drawn from social worker questionnaires and CLAS data on 433 children. The later sections on child's current wellbeing comes from information provided by caregivers on 166 children.

Children's characteristics and circumstances

Information was gathered from social workers on children's characteristics, disability and additional support needs, and their experiences of maltreatment.

Ethnicity and gender

Ninety-three per cent of children were White, with only small numbers of children of mixed ethnic heritage or from Black Caribbean or African, or South Asian backgrounds. There was a relatively even gender split.

Disability and additional support needs

According to the CLAS, between 7-8% of children had additional support needs. However, social workers reported that 22% of the children had a disability or long-term health condition (including those currently undergoing an assessment), while 31% of caregivers reported this to be the case. This disparity indicates that CLAS underestimates the numbers of children who have a disability. Local authorities may wish to investigate how they record this data.

³ English, D. J. and the LONGSCAN Investigators (1997) *Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS)*. <https://www.unc.edu/depts/sph/longscan/pages/maltx/mmcs/LONGSCAN%20MMCS%20Coding.pdf>

⁴ Birth parents of children who had been reunified were not surveyed.

Experience of abuse and neglect

A standardised measure of maltreatment type and severity was included in the social worker questionnaire to investigate the maltreatment children had experienced (Modified Maltreatment Classification System, MMCS). Social workers reported that 384 (89%) of the children had directly experienced abuse or neglect. For 17 (4%) children, the maltreatment of another child in the household led to their accommodation. The remaining 32 children (7%) became looked after away from home due to high levels of risk.

The most commonly experienced types of maltreatment were neglect and emotional abuse affecting four fifths and two thirds of the children respectively. There were significant and overlapping concerns about neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Two thirds of the 433 children had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment, and 71% of the children experienced high severity maltreatment of at least one type.⁵

Becoming looked after

This section describes children's circumstances prior to becoming looked after, family difficulties surrounding their accommodation, and details of their initial legal reason and placement.

Age of children

Half of the children (210, 51%) were under one year old when they first became looked after away from home, including one third (139, 32%) under six weeks old. One in five (89, 21%) were less than seven days old. These proportions are similar to those for children in England subject to care proceedings (Broadhurst et al 2018⁶).

Who children were living with before being looked after away from home

Around one fifth of children had been living with both parents and two fifths had been living with a lone mother (or mother and partner). Of the children who became looked after at or soon after birth (up to seven days old), information on half of the fathers was missing.

Family difficulties

Abuse and neglect were the most common factors precipitating accommodation, but this was in the context of long-standing and complex family difficulties and for 29% of children an older sibling had previously been accommodated. The three factors which commonly compromised parenting capacity were substance misuse, mental health problems and domestic violence (see Stafford and Vincent, 2008⁷; Sidebotham et al, 2016⁸). Around three quarters (73%) of families were affected by at least two of these. For 39% of children there were concerns about all three.

⁵ For neglect, the MMCS manual gives the following descriptors of each level of severity: 1 - misses child's medical appointments; home very dirty; child's clothing usually dirty; child doesn't have regular meals; 2 - no bed; urine-soaked mattress; does not ensure food is available to child; inappropriate clothing in cold weather; child present when caregiver selling drugs; 3 - child frequently misses meals; insanitary living conditions; child left in care of poor supervisor; does not seek medical attention for moderately severe medical condition; 4 - does not seek medical attention for serious illness; extremely unhealthy living conditions; unsupervised for extended period of time; 5 - child born with foetal alcohol or neo-natal abstinence syndrome; does not prevent child being in a life threatening situation, very severe physical neglect or lack of supervision (English, D. J. and the LONGSCAN Investigators (1997) *Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS)*. <https://www.unc.edu/depts/sph/longscan/pages/maltx/mmcs/LONGSCAN%20MMCS%20Coding.pdf>).

⁶ Broadhurst, K., Alrouh, B., Mason, C., Ward, H., Holmes, L., Ryan, M. and Bowyer, S. (2018) *Born into care: Newborns in care proceedings in England*. Summary Report. London: Nuffield Foundation.

⁷ Stafford, A. and Vincent, S. (2008) *Safeguarding and Protecting Children and Young People*. Edinburgh: Dunedin Press.

⁸ Sidebotham, P., Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Dodsworth, J., Garstang, J., Harrison, E., Retzer, A. and Sorensen, P. (2016) *Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews, 2011 to 2014*. London: Department for Education.

Maternal substance misuse was reported for nearly two thirds of children (63%) and paternal substance misuse for half (50%).⁹ The most common scenario for both parents was poly drug use combined with alcohol use. Frequent use of prescription drugs was recorded, especially for the children's mothers. Conditions resulting from pre-birth substance misuse were reported for just 12 children including Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)¹⁰, Neo-natal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), and Alcohol-Related Neurological Disorder (ARND). In some cases there were concerns that developmental delay might be due to undiagnosed FAS.

Over half of the children's mothers and one quarter of fathers were reported to have mental health problems when the children became looked after away from home, although this information was missing for 17% of mothers and nearly half of fathers. Domestic violence was reported as being present in over 60% of families.

Research across the UK has demonstrated that children who come from backgrounds characterised by social and economic disadvantage are more likely to become looked after (Bywaters et al, 2018¹¹). Poverty and housing problems were reported as being common in the sample, and were equally present for children who subsequently returned home, and those who did not.

First legal status and placement

For 56% of the 433 children their initial legal status was Section 25 Children (Scotland) Act 1995¹², while one in five (19%) were accommodated using emergency child protection measures, such as a Child Protection Order (CPO). Fifteen per cent became looked after away from home on a Supervision Requirement/Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) following a Children's Hearing. A Warrant/Interim Compulsory Supervision Order (ICSO) was used for eight per cent of children. There were differences by age with more very young children becoming looked after using emergency child protection measures (30% of those aged under six weeks). More older children had a Supervision Requirement or Compulsory Supervision Order as their first legal status when they became looked after (23% of those aged three or over compared with four per cent of those under six weeks old).

The majority of children were initially placed in foster care, either with kinship foster carers (36%) or unrelated foster carers (59%). Children looked after away from home before they were one year old, and especially those under six weeks old, were generally placed with unrelated foster carers. There was greater use of kinship foster carers with children aged one year or over.

⁹ Less information was known about fathers than mothers.

¹⁰ The BMA (2016) proposed the use of the term foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) to cover the full spectrum of developmental disabilities associated with in-utero exposure to alcohol, however this was after our questionnaires had been finalised

¹¹ Bywaters, P., Scourfield, J., Jones, C., Sparks, T., Elliot, M., Hooper, J., McCartan, C., Shapiro, M., Bunting, L. and Daniel, B. (2018) Child Welfare Inequalities in the four nations of the UK. *Journal of Social Work*. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017318793479>

¹² Section 25 allows local authorities to provide accommodation to safeguard and promote a child's welfare either where s/he had been abandoned, has no-one to care for him /her, or where the parent is prevented for whatever reason from providing suitable care, and does not object (although it is known as 'voluntary' accommodation). Unlike other measures, Section 25 does not involve oversight from the Children's Hearings system or the court.

Parents' experiences during childhood

In common with other research, more was known about children's mothers than fathers (Clapton and Hoggan, 2016¹³; Brandon et al, 2017¹⁴). However, it is evident that significant numbers of parents brought their own histories of childhood neglect and abuse. Overall, high proportions of mothers had experienced adverse childhood experiences. Around two fifths had experienced abuse (40%) or neglect (45%), and one quarter had been looked after away from home. Almost one fifth (17%) of fathers had experienced abuse, almost one quarter (24%) neglect, and 14% had been looked after away from home.

Reunification with birth parents

The expectation set out in legislation and guidance in Scotland (and the rest of the UK) is that children should return home unless it is unsafe for them to do so. Subsequent to their child's accommodation, a range of services were provided to parents. These included support from a social worker (97%); help or advice with housing problems (80%); advice about relationship with partner (74%); help or advice with financial problems (70%), parenting programmes (65%); help to mobilise support from family or friends (63%); drug and alcohol services (61%) and mental health service (59%). There were some gaps in the provision of specific services for some families.

Overall, 119 children had been reunified with parent(s) at some stage, but not all had remained at home. The factors influencing reunification were parental motivation to resume care, a reduction in risks, and tangible improvements. In terms of reunification being sustained, the latter two were significant. At the point of the social worker survey, one in five children (17%) were back living with parents. This proportion is lower than in the *Pathways* strand where one third of the 1,355 children were reunified by the end of the study. This is to be expected, as the sampling for this strand excluded children who returned home shortly after becoming looked after, whereas the *Pathways* strand included all reunified children.

Levels and severity of maltreatment were lower for children who were reunified to parents, although 72% of children who returned home had experienced maltreatment. It is likely therefore that these children and their families will need to be appropriately supported and monitored to ensure children's wellbeing, and sustain them safely with parents (see also Farmer, 2018¹⁵; Harwin et al, 2019¹⁶).

Where decisions were made that children could not return home, this was due to continuing concerns about poor parenting, an unacceptable level of risk of abuse or neglect, and parents not making or sustaining the changes needed.

Decisions to pursue permanence away from birth parents

The time from children becoming accommodated to the decision being made to pursue permanence away from parents ranged from less than a month to over five years. Overall, 43% of decisions were made within six months and three quarters (74%) within one year. For nearly half (48%) of those who became looked after away from home as newborns (less than seven

¹³ Clapton, G. and Hoggan, J. (2016) The Birth Fathers of adopted children: differences and continuities over a 30-year period. *Adoption & Fostering*, 4 (2), pp. 153-166.

¹⁴ Brandon, M., Philip, G. and Clifton, J. (2017) *'Counting Fathers In': Understanding Men's Experiences of the Child Protection System*. Norwich: University of East Anglia.

¹⁵ Farmer, E. (2018) *Reunification from Out-of-Home Care: A Research Overview of Good Practice in Returning Children Home from Care*. Bristol: University of Bristol.

¹⁶ Harwin, J., Alrouh, B., Golding, L., McQuarrie, T., Broadhurst, K. and Cusworth, L. (2019) *The contribution of supervision orders and special guardianship to children's lives and family justice: Summary report*. Lancaster: Centre for Child and Family Justice Research. Lancaster University.

days old) the decision to pursue permanence away from parents was made within three months, compared with just 13% of those not looked after at or soon after birth. This suggests that the period pre-birth is important in terms of assessment and decision making. Research has highlighted that the guidance in relation to pre-birth assessment is limited, and practice varies (Critchley, 2018¹⁷; Broadhurst et al, 2018).

Children's permanence status

Three-to-four years after being looked after, almost 72% of the 433 children were in placements intended to be permanent, either outside, or in a small number of cases within the looked after system.

Seventy-four (17%) children had been reunified with parents, including 3% who were looked after at home. For children who cannot return to parents, kinship care enables them to remain within their wider family. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced the term 'Kinship Care orders' and provided support (including financial). At the time of the surveys, if children were living with kinship carers outside the looked after system this was under Section 11 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Seventy-three children (15%) were living with family members under Section 11.

One hundred and fifty-four (36%) children were on an adoption pathway: 25% had been adopted, 5% were placed with prospective adoptive parents under a Permanence Order with Authority to Adopt (POA) and 6% were living with prospective adoptive parents on a CSO.

Although the use of Permanence Orders (PO) is increasing overall (Scottish Government, 2018¹⁸) these were only used for seventeen (4%) of the 433 children. This suggests that POs are more likely to be used for older children.

Three to four years after becoming looked after away from home in 2012-13 there were 123 children (28%) who were looked after away from home without a legal order specifically designed to provide them with stability and permanence. These children were either on Compulsory Supervision Orders through the Children's Hearing System, or remained on Section 25. Over half of children (54%) looked away from home had already had two placement moves, including 19 children who had three or more.

Factors which influenced where children were living

Where children were living, who was caring for them, and their permanence status was associated with whether or not they had a disability, their experience of maltreatment whilst at home, the age at which they became looked after, their first placement, and the childhood experiences of their parents:

- Children who returned to their parents had experienced less severe maltreatment.
- Rates of disability were lower amongst children who had returned home.
- Children with a disability or long-term health condition were less likely to be reunified to parents than their non-disabled peers (13% compared to 19%), or to be placed permanently with kinship carers (8% compared to 17%). They had similar rates of adoption (34% compared to 35%). Consequently, children with a disability or long-term health condition were more likely to be still looked after away

¹⁷ Critchley, A. (2018) *Pre-birth Child Protection. Insight 42*. Glasgow: Iriss. Available: <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/pre-birth-child-protection>.

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2018) *Children's social work statistics 2016/17. Additional tables*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.

from home (45% compared to 29%) three-to-four years after being accommodated.

- The median age at which children on an adoption pathway became looked after away from home was less than one month. This compares to 16 months for children living with kinship carers (Section 11), 18 months for children who had been reunified, and 23.5 months for those who were looked after away from home.
- Children's first placement influenced their later pathway. Children who were with kinship carers (Section 11) were most likely to have initially been placed with kinship carers. The majority (85%) of children who went on to be adopted had initially been placed with unrelated foster carers.
- The childhood experiences of parents were associated with their children's routes to permanence. Sixty-two per cent of mothers whose children were on an adoption pathway had experienced neglect as a child compared to 41% where children had been reunified, and 31% whose children were living with kinship carers (Section 11). A greater proportion of the fathers of children on an adoption pathway (33%) had experienced neglect in their own childhood, compared to fathers of children in kinship care (23%) or looked after away from home (15%).¹⁹

Delays and difficulties

Social workers reported a number of difficulties and delays in achieving permanence for children. These included difficulties in finding suitable placements for a sibling group, children's disability or health needs, and the level of contact with birth family required by the Children's Hearing or sheriff. Other difficulties related to staff changes or workloads; court and Children's Hearings processes; birth parents contesting proceedings or contact arrangements; assessments of potential kinship carers; and breakdowns in children's previous placements.

Children's wellbeing three to four years after becoming looked after

The next sections are based on data from 166 questionnaires completed by children's current caregivers: foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents/prospective adoptive parents.

Although the CLAS data indicated that 7% of children had a disability, just under one third of caregivers reported that children had long-standing illness, disabilities or health conditions, although this varied according to where children were living. Children who had disabilities were more likely to be looked after away from home than living with kinship carers under Section 11. The proportion of children who had additional support needs (ASN) or were being assessed was low (22%), particularly as legislation and guidance identifies that looked after children are assumed to have ASN.

Most children were reported to be doing well in nursery and school, although children with a disability or health problem were less likely to be described as doing well than their non-disabled peers. Behaviour problems at school were more likely if children had been aged three years or older at the start of their current placement: 35% compared to 13% of children who had been under one year old when they entered their current placement.

Just over half of children (53%) were described as having several close friendships. This varied according to the age they came to their current placement: 40% of those who came after three years, and 61% of children who came before they were one year old.

¹⁹ As less was known about fathers this is likely to be an underestimate.

Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997²⁰), children had scores indicating likely emotional and behavioural problems at a rate two to three times that in the general population of children. Overall, 28% of children had scores indicating likely difficulties. This was similar regardless of children's permanence status, aside from problems with peers, which were more likely for children looked after away from home. However, other aspects of children's care pathway did have a bearing. Children who entered their current placement when they were over three years old were more likely to have higher SDQ scores than children who were under one when they came to their current caregiver. Children who had three or more placement changes appeared vulnerable to conduct problems, with half (51%) having SDQ scores indicating likely difficulties, compared to 21% of those with one placement. Children with a long-standing illness or health problem were more likely to have high SDQ scores.

A standardised measure of relationship and attachment problems was used (the Relationship Problems Questionnaire). Children with scores of seven or more are likely to have relationship or attachment problems (Minnis et al, 2013²¹). Overall, one quarter (25%) of children had RPQ scores indicating likely relationship and attachment problems. This was higher for children who were looked after away from home (37%), and lower for those with kinship carers (Section 11) (21%), or on an adoption pathway (18%). Children who were younger when they became looked after away from home were less likely to have scores indicating possible problems.

Maintaining connections

Maintaining connections with parents, siblings and other important people brings benefits as well as risks (Neil et al, 2014²²). Some caregivers did not complete all sections of the questionnaire on contact, but from those who did, the level of ongoing contact children had with key people was low.

Contact with birth parents

Over half (55%) of caregivers reported children had at least one form of contact with birth parents over the last year including letterbox²³, telephone or face to face. The type and level of contact children had with birth parents varied according to their legal status. Letterbox contact was used for about one quarter of children on an adoption pathway and one fifth of those looked after away from home. Two fifths of children in kinship care and one fifth of children looked after away from home had telephone contact with parents. Sixty-four per cent of children in kinship and 67% of children looked after away from home had face-to-face contact with parents. This was less common for children who were currently on an adoption pathway (17%).

Most adoptive parents where there was letterbox contact stated that this was as a consequence of decisions made by social workers or the Sheriff Court. Some felt that their own wishes or the needs of their child were not taken into account.

Foster carers who reported no contact between children and their parents indicated this was because contact had been terminated by a court or Children's Hearing, parents had died, parents had not maintained contact, or because children did not want to see their parents.

²⁰ Goodman, R. (1997) The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A Research Note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38 (5), pp. 581-586.

²¹ Minnis, H., Macmillan, S., Pritchett, R., Young, D., Wallace, B., Butcher, J. and Gillberg, C. (2013) Prevalence of reactive attachment disorder in a deprived population. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 202 (5), pp. 342-346.

²² Neil, E., Beek, M. and Ward, M. (2014) *Contact After Adoption: a longitudinal study of adopted young people and their adoptive parents and birth relatives*. London: BAAF.

²³ Letterbox contact is where written information is passed between adults, to be shared with children. This may be done through an intermediary.

Contact with brothers and sisters

There is an awareness of the importance of sibling relationships for children who are looked after away from home, and of the implications where they are separated. The Looked After Children Regulations (Scottish Government, 2009²⁴) stipulate that where appropriate and practical, brothers and sisters should be placed with the same carer or as near together as is possible. However, existing research has found that seven out of ten children looked after away from home are separated from at least one sibling (Jones and Henderson, 2017²⁵). One way of maintaining connections where children do not live together is through contact.

The level of face-to-face contact with siblings was associated with children's permanence status. Twenty-three per cent of children on an adoption pathway, 62% living with kinship carers (Section 11), and 82% of children who were looked after away from home had seen their brothers and sisters in the last year. Caregivers indicated that there had been telephone contact with sibling(s) for just one child on an adoption pathway, but this had occurred for 24% of children looked after away from home and 31% of those living with kinship carers (Section 11). Ten per cent of children on an adoption pathway and 16% of children who were looked after away from home had letterbox contact with a sibling or siblings in the previous year.

Contact with other adults from children's lives

Around one third of the children were reported to have had at least one face-to-face contact with grandparents, other relatives, and former foster carers over the last year. Over three quarters (78%) of children living with kinship carers (Section 11) had face-to-face contact with their grandparents, compared with just under half (46%) of those who were looked after away from home, and 9% of those on an adoption pathway. Similarly, the majority (86%) of children living with kinship carers were reported to have had contact with relatives during the last year, compared with 43% of children looked after away from home, and 8% of those on an adoptive pathway. It is not surprising that children in kinship care had relatively high levels of contact with grandparents and other family members as the carers may also be related to these individuals.

Children may have an important attachment to previous foster carers, who may also hold important information about children. Almost half (47%) of children on an adoption pathway had contact with former foster carers, but this was true for only 9% of children looked after away from home.

Information, advice and support to caregivers and children

The level of information received by carers when children were first placed with them varied, as did the support provided to children and their caregivers.

Information provided to carers when child first placed with them

Carers of children looked after away from home were more likely to report insufficient information at the point children were placed with them, particularly in relation to actual or potential special needs. This could be because at that point social workers had limited information about children to offer. In contrast, kinship carers and adoptive parents were generally happy with the information provided. Kinship carers may have had first-hand knowledge, and by the time children were placed with adoptive families, a detailed assessment would have been completed. The importance of information being explained clearly and in detail

²⁴ Scottish Government (2009) *The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

²⁵ Jones, C. and Henderson, G. (2017) *Supporting Sibling Relationships of Children in Permanent Fostering and Adoptive Families*. School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Briefing, No 1. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde. Available: <https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/id/eprint/60547>

was highlighted, so that caregivers could understand how children's early experiences might affect their behaviour and development.

Advice and support received

There were clear differences in the sources of support received by children and their caregivers. Carers of children looked after away from home were more likely to have support from formal services, such as social workers and fostering agencies, whereas adoptive parents were more likely to be supported by family or friends. Kinship carers received lower levels of both formal and informal support.

Nursery and school provided advice and support to high proportions of carers of children in all placements: 77% of carers of children looked after away from home, 67% of adoptive parents and 59% of kinship carers. Similarly, nursery and school staff were an important source of support for children, although this was lower for children in kinship care (46% compared to 70% with adoptive parents and 82% looked after children).

Although 28% of all children had scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire indicating likely emotional and behavioural problems, and one quarter had scores indicating possible difficulties with attachments and relationships, children looked after away from home received more support from formal services, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Approximately one quarter of all children received support for speech and language difficulties.

Implications for policy and practice

- The children in this sample had experienced significant levels of maltreatment before becoming looked after away from home. From this data, there is no evidence that thresholds for accommodation of children aged five and under were low, or that they should be raised.
- Although there are national strategies in place to address issues of parental substance misuse, parental mental health and domestic abuse, the data suggests they are having an insufficient impact.
- Poverty and poor housing were common and there is a need to address both.
- Half of the children entered care using Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Further research on this would be valuable, including how it is experienced by parents.
- Children who became looked after away from home when they were under seven days old were more likely to remain away from parents, and to be adopted or on an adoption pathway than children who were older. Currently, the guidance in Scotland on pre-birth assessments is limited. Given the significance of decisions taken at this time there is a need to review the guidance provided, and the supports offered to birth parents before and after birth.
- The finding that neglect was a feature of the childhoods of over 60% of mothers and 33% of fathers of children on an adoption pathway is important. It emphasises the importance of services being proactive and suggests that a core aspect of effective early intervention is to provide sensitive reparative support for parents whose history includes neglect.
- Three to four years after being accommodated, children's levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties were around two to three times those expected in the general population. There were no significant differences in the level of difficulties seen amongst children living with kinship carers, those on an adoption pathway, and those looked after away from home. This has implications for the levels of support and services that may be required by looked after children and their caregivers, but also by those who have left care.
- Children's wellbeing and the extent of problems was associated with the age at which they were placed and the longevity of their current placement. Children who were accommodated and placed with their current caregivers earlier were generally doing better. Very significantly, their relationship with at least one adult was more likely to be described as secure. Higher levels of concern were seen for children who were with foster carers than for children who were in kinship care, or on an adoption pathway. This highlights the importance of timely intervention and of children feeling secure.
- School and nursery staff provided support to high proportions of all children and their caregivers, highlighting the significant role they play in the lives of looked after and adopted children.
- Clear differences emerged in the provision of services and supports to children and their caregivers. Looked after children and their caregivers were provided with greater levels of support than children living with kinship carers or adoptive parents. The lower levels of support accessed by children in kinship care, and their carers was stark. Local authorities will want to consider what strategies can be put in place to ensure that services and supports are made accessible to all carers and the children in their care.

- The value of maintaining children's connections with important people in their lives including birth parents, siblings, family members and previous carers is recognised in theory. However, in practice this seems to be more problematic. Maintaining these connections can help children's transition, give them an important message about the continuity of relationships, and over time can enable them to feel more secure. This is an area that warrants further attention to ensure contact is based on children's needs, and takes into account the potential long and short-term benefits of maintaining important connections.
- By the end of the study, two thirds of the 433 children were in placements intended to be permanent, either reunified with parents, with kinship carers, with foster carers on a Permanence Order, or with adoptive parents. However, three to four years after becoming accommodated one third of children were still (or again) looked after away from home. Future research is needed to establish whether permanence was achieved for this group of children, and revisit children and their caregivers to see how children's lives have developed.

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<https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties-and-services/social-sciences/our-research/research-areas/centre-for-child-wellbeing-and-protection/research/permanently-progressing/>

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