

the experiences of fostering and adoption processes

– the views of children and young
people: literature review and gap analysis

Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme

LGA research report



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Executive Summary

Background

The current financial climate and its impact on local authority service planning and delivery is at the forefront of local decision making. Lead members and officers will want to understand how decisions around service delivery may impact on the experiences of children and young people within the care system.

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to review the existing literature. The study sought to capture the views and experiences of children and young people around the processes of fostering and adoption. The scope of the review covered literature published between 2000 and 2011.

The literature review aimed to identify the existing evidence in relation to children and young people's views of the processes, and to identify any gaps. At the time of publication, the Government has released the Adoption Action Plan (DfE, 2012) with measures designed to reduce delays in the adoption process. The views and experiences of children already in the care system will be vital in helping to ensure that changes to current systems meet their individual needs and improve their life chances.

Key findings

What are fostered and adopted children and young people's views on decisions made about their care?

Whilst children had reported that the decisions to take them into care were the right ones, many reported there was little choice about where they would live. They wanted more choice in the final decisions made around where and with whom they should live. In relation to their care plans, children reported knowing about their existence but not always having any involvement in what was included within them.

For young people approaching adulthood, there was considerable variation in whether they felt they had a say in when and how they left the care system.

Children understood the role of independent reviewing officers (IROs) but many did not feel confident in giving their views at a review meeting. In addition, children reported that they felt big decisions were made outside of review meetings.

The impression from across a number of studies is that children and young people are desperate to be heard but that the process developed to ensure that they are is not working for many of them.

What do fostered and adopted children and young people feel about the help they receive during their time in care?

The importance of social workers in the lives of children and young people was evident throughout the literature reviewed. Children suggested that where their social worker supported them, they felt well looked after.

What children and young people appear to want from their social workers is reassurance at times of stress and anxiety, practical support and continuity. They want to be able to contact social workers when they need to and also for social workers to be more proactive in contacting them. Some reported social workers being too intrusive whilst others wanted a more emotional connection. Flexibility was key in meeting the varying and individual needs of children and young people.

There was certainly recognition that social workers had heavy case loads and that this impacts on what they can do for individual children and young people. Indeed, some children report this issue in relation to the budget cuts their local council was making.

What are the views of fostered and adopted children and young people on arrangements for keeping in contact with their birth families?

Throughout the literature reviewed, children and young people often express dissatisfaction with the level of contact they have with their families and the arrangements made for them to maintain contact.

Children considered they did not see enough of their birth families and that they were not sufficiently involved in decisions made about how much contact they should have. Of course, fostered and adopted children are dependent on adults to make sure that they keep in touch with family and friends, and instances are recorded where the actions of adults prevented them from doing so.

Adopted children said that decisions about how much contact they had with their birth families and the extent to which they received news about them should depend on what is best for the individual child and should be kept under review.

Do fostered and adopted children and young people think they receive the information and advice they need?

Throughout the review there was evidence that children and young people felt they lacked information at important times; particularly on moving into care, when moving from one placement to another and on leaving care.

Information for children entering the care system was crucial in helping them to understand why they were in care, what their foster family was like and what would happen next. There was evidence that information packs were used but this was inconsistent and was not helpful if it was presented after the child had arrived in the new foster home.

Adopted children stressed how critical it is for them to know about their adoptive families. Whilst many reported being told everything they needed to know, some still knew very little before moving in with their adopted families. They wanted to have similar information about their new homes as fostered children but they also needed to know why their family

had chosen to adopt them and about arrangements for contact with their birth families.

Across the literature reviewed, interesting summaries were made relating to children and young people's suggestions for ways to improve services. These can be found across the full report as follows:

- Adopted children's top ten ideas to improve the adoption process (p.4)
- Questions for adults to ask when deciding whether children understand something enough to make a decision about it (p.4)
- Some of the ideas to improve review meetings (p.7)
- Ideal ways to leave care (p.9)
- List for an 'Ideal' social worker (p.11)
- How social workers should check children are happy in new families (p.13)
- Top ten things social workers should look for in choosing a family to adopt a child (p.13)
- Top ten things children want to be told about their adoptive families (p.19)
- The top things adopted children wanted to know about their past (p.19)
- Suggestions for what leaving care plans for young people should include (p.19)
- What foster children want more advice or information about (p.20)

Concluding comments

The review established that fostered and adopted children are able to identify potential improvements in some aspects of the processes they encounter. They want to be more involved in decisions made about them and need better information and more real choices in order for this to happen. Above all, their message about services is that what is right for one child, or even for many children, is not necessarily right for every individual child and that this needs to be

carefully taken into account by the adults who care for them.

A number of the improvements that children and young people want to see have resource implications, particularly in the current financial climate, including improved access to support from their social workers; greater choice of placements, foster carers and adoptive parents; more time available to support contact visits; and better arrangements for review meetings.

Across the literature reviewed, a number of gaps were identified which could warrant further exploration, including:

- the views and experiences of children for whom adoption has broken down
- discriminatory behaviours within the decision making processes, for example, exploring whether dissatisfaction with care plans or review meetings varies for different groups of fostered children
- help and support needed by children in relation to care proceedings
- consultation with children about contact arrangements and how their care plans supported this
- how useful the existing wealth of information sources available is to fostered and adopted children and how they would prefer to receive such information.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Alongside legislative changes, action plans and best practice advice and recommendations made in the last ten years, the current financial climate and its impact on local authority service planning and delivery is at the forefront of local decision making in relation to the development of new and innovative practice across the children's services agenda. As local authorities seek to control spend across services, it will be important for officers and lead members to understand how service delivery may impact on the experiences of children and young people within the care system.

The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to review the existing literature, capturing the views and experiences of children and young people around the processes of fostering and adoption. The literature review aimed to identify the existing evidence in relation to children and young people's views of the processes, and identify gaps which might lead to further commissioned primary research in this area, supporting the LGA's work with local authorities and other agencies in the development of fostering and adoption services.

In early 2012, the Government announced plans to ensure individual local authorities are delivering high quality adoption services which ensure children are placed in an adoptive family (or alternative permanent care solution) within 12 months of the decision being taken that the child will not return to their birth parent(s). This has included the publication of performance tables, ranking local authorities on the speed at which adoptions take place and including measures on how well they deliver services in relation to the care and improved life chances for looked after children moving through the system.

The Government Adoption Action Plan (DfE, 2012) advises how services for children might be developed to reduce delays to permanency placements, including issues relating to the priority given to the matching of ethnicity; the placement of children with prospective

adopters acting as foster carers prior to the court agreeing to full adoption; and referring children to the national Adoption Register if a local placement has not been found within three months of an adoption recommendation. The views and experiences of children already in the care system around these proposed changes to the processes will be of vital importance in shaping their development and ensuring they meet their individual needs and improve their life chances.

Alongside the recent developments specific to adoption processes, there has been a longer term commitment to the voice of children in care. The post of the Children's Rights Director in England has been held by Roger Morgan since 2004. The role and the team that works with Roger are appointed to ensure children and young people living away from home in any care arrangement, and those who receive social care support, are given the opportunity to have a voice in relation to the way in which they are looked after.

In more general terms, in relation to children and young people's voice as an influencer of service design and delivery, in March 2005, the first Children's Commissioner for England was appointed, with the post having been established under The Children Act 2004. The Children's Commissioner has a duty to ensure the views and interests of children and young people across England are promoted as an independent voice and have a direct impact on the planning and decision making taking place at a national and local level, both in terms of policy decisions and around service delivery relating to services for children and young people. The role is intended to bring children and young people's views and opinions to the centre of any decision-making process in order that their views influence decision makers who can better understand their interests through more direct involvement with them. In 2011, the current Children's Commissioner announced plans to further enhance the role of the Office for the Children's Commissioner (OCC) with greater alignment of their work to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

1.2 Methodology

This review focuses on literature published from 2000 to 2011, reporting on the experiences of children and young people in England. Two main sources were used for the search: relevant research databases and the websites of relevant national organisations. Searches were constructed to combine terms related to fostering and adoption processes and terms related to opinions, views and experiences of children and young people. Details of the search strategy can be viewed in Appendix 1. Initial searches produced 144 documents; these were screened on the basis of their abstracts to identify 43 for further analysis. From this group, the full documents were coded to select 26 items to contribute to this review. The screening proforma and coding frame used are in Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

1.3 About this report

This report presents an analysis of children and young people's views and experiences of fostering and adoption processes. The literature identified was wide ranging in scope, including national surveys through to small scale studies in individual local authorities.

In reviewing the outcome of the searches it was evident that a substantial amount of research and investigation has taken place during this time to gather children and young people's views of their experiences of a range of children's services. In their review, Mainey *et al.*, (2009) looked at children's views of the full range of children's services from education, social care and mental health services through to youth justice. Many studies record the views of looked after children in relation to the impact of their time within the care system and on the outcomes for these children and young people, for example, (Munro *et al.*, 2005). This review focuses specifically on children's views and experiences of the processes around fostering and adoption and not on their views in relation to the impact or outcome of their time in care.

Most of the studies included in this review acknowledge limitations in their approach to gathering the views of children and young people. Inevitably, access to children is mediated through the adults who are caring for them and it can be difficult for researchers to be confident that their views are

representative of the whole group of children or young people they are attempting to study. Any specific limitations are referred to within the report.

Perhaps understandably, there is limited evidence on the views of adopted children on the adoption process. Once children have been adopted they do not have the ongoing interaction with social care services experienced by children in foster care. Where possible any reflections on the adoption process gathered from children currently in foster care are included in the report as these may be relevant in the light of the publication of the 2012 Adoption Action Plan (DfE, 2012).

A number of studies clearly focus on processes such as access to information and advice that are of critical importance to fostered and adopted children. However, research designs do not always distinguish between different groups of children so that the views of all looked after children are often aggregated. As far as possible this report deals specifically with views and comments from those children and young people with first-hand experience of fostering or adoption but sometimes more general points may have been included where they are seen as useful and relevant to the review.

Four key questions about children and young people's views and experiences of fostering and adoption processes are used to organise the findings from the review in Section 2:

- What are fostered and adopted children and young people's views on decisions made about their care?
- What do fostered and adopted children and young people feel about the help they receive during their time in care?
- What are the views of fostered and adopted children and young people on arrangements for keeping in contact with their birth families?
- Do fostered and adopted children and young people think they receive the information and advice they need?

Section 3 offers concluding comments.

2 Experience of the fostering and adoption processes

Across the literature review the overall impression of children and young people's views on fostering and adoption processes varies from quite positive to very negative. This range is likely to reflect the very different approaches to selecting the children who took part, their age, their personal experiences in care, local variations in provision and a number of other individual factors. However positive or negative their individual perspective, there do appear to be common, consistent views as to what could improve the processes. Four questions have been used to explore the views and experiences of children and young people.

2.1 What are fostered and adopted children and young people's views on decisions made about their care?

Exploring this question through the review, it is possible to get some insight both into what children and young people think of the 'big' decisions made about their care and also what they think about how those decisions are made. Children and young people's views should be at the heart of any decision making process and recent developments in legislation and practice are intended to further reinforce that this is the case, for example, the Care Planning Regulations (England, Statutory Instruments, 2010); IRO Handbook (DCSF, 2010); the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (DFE, 2011b) and the Adoption National Minimum Standards (DFE, 2011a).

In a 2003 study of what contributes to a successful foster care placement (Sinclair and Wilson, 2009) children emphasised the need for a say in their 'careers in care' – whether they are fostered, adopted or live with another member of their family; and there was some evidence that making a choice gives the child a sense of commitment and the placement is more likely to succeed.

2.1.1 Being taken into care

One of the biggest decisions in the lifetime of a looked after child is the one made to take them into care, but children are not often asked whether they think this decision was right. In a study of 50 children and young people aged six to 16 years (Morgan, 2010a), the majority of whom were currently in foster care, just over half said that at the time they had not wanted to come into care. However, at the time of their first review after coming into care, almost 35 children said that they now thought it had been the right decision for them. Once placed in care, most of them said that they had not had a choice about where they would be placed.

2.1.2 Fostering versus adoption

Another particularly critical decision is whether a child is fostered or adopted. In giving their views on standards for children's services (Morgan, 2006b) children in foster care did not want to be 'pushed' into adoption if they preferred to remain where they were. They said that plans should be made based on what is best for the child and not because councils have to meet targets for numbers of adoptions. In a similar way they said that movement between placements should not be driven by changes in policy or budget issues.

The view that adoption should not be assumed to be the 'best' solution was echoed in a 2002 survey of children in care (Timms and Thoburn, 2006) looking at the impact of the 1989 Children's Act and children's experiences of court proceedings. In the five cases where adoption was mentioned, two were in a negative context: 'I don't want to be adopted'.

This survey is particularly interesting as it is the only reference found to children and young people who have experienced the breakdown of adoption:

I wished I'd known I was gonna end up in care again cos then I wouldn't have had to be adopted and

would be able to meet my birth parents now and not have to wait till next year.

The reason I went to court was because I was getting adopted but now I'm in foster care again.

2.1.3 Being adopted

In a study of 208 adopted children and young people (Morgan, 2006a), looking back on their experience of the adoption process (the average time since being adopted was seven years), children said that once the decision was made, the whole process should be as quick as possible and the child should be kept closely involved but they also wanted the time to be used to let them get to know their new family better.

Adopted children's top ten ideas to improve the adoption process

- Make it quicker
- Involve and support the child more
- Keep the child in touch with what is happening – in their birth family as well as the adoption itself
- Give more information about adoption
- Don't change social workers in the middle of being adopted
- Don't separate brothers and sisters
- Go to only one foster home before getting adopted
- Make the process more enjoyable and fun
- Have more trial days with the new family
- Let children themselves make the final decision on their new parents

(Morgan, 2006a, p.10)

In this same study, adopted children and young people were asked what they thought about being from a different background to their adoptive parents. They were asked whether their adoptive families were from a different race to them, had a different religion or spoke a different language. None of the children said they had any problems because of a difference in race, religion or language; fewer than one in ten had adoptive parents from a different race to their own. Almost one in ten said their adoptive families had a different religion to theirs or that they had no religion but their adopted parents did.

The children and young people in this study particularly recommended that children should play a big part in the decision on their new parents and suggested that they could be helped to take part in the decision if simplified processes were written out for them. Although two thirds of these children said they were too small at the time to have a choice, there is evidence elsewhere that children do not believe that arbitrary rules should be made about when a child is old enough to be included in such important decisions (Morgan, 2006b). Children drew up ways for adults to test out whether a child is old enough to make an important decision for themselves and these are also included in guidance issued by the former DfES (DfE, 2011c)

Questions for adults to ask when deciding whether children understand something enough to make a decision about it

- Can the child understand the question they are being asked?
- Does the child reasonably understand the main reasons for what is being proposed?
- Does the child understand what choices they have to decide between?
- Does the child reasonably understand what will happen depending on the choices they can decide to take?
- Can the child weigh up these different choices against each other?

- Can the child tell you their personal choice, rather than repeating what someone else thinks they should do?
- Can the child keep to one decision without constantly changing their mind?

(DfE, 2011c, p.8)

2.1.4 Private fostering

'Private fostering' describes an arrangement where a child under 16 lives for more than 27 days in a row with a family who are not their parents or close relatives, and this is not arranged by a local council. In a survey of children in private foster care, (Morgan, 2008) Ofsted found that 22 of 34 children had a say in choosing their foster parents, with children placed in the previous two years being more likely to have a say in the decision. (It is important to record that this study only reflects the views of a sample of privately fostered children known to social services and that there are well documented concerns that private fostering still takes place without social services being notified.) Most of the children said that their private placement was right for them – only two said they were not sure. Thinking about everyday decisions, most of these children said they had a say and that their views were taken notice of. Children in one of the discussion groups said that children should have a say in leaving a private placement if it was not working out, but they were anxious that social services would not be able to offer any alternative placement. One child had direct experience of this when she ran away from an unsuitable placement.

2.1.5 Placement decisions for those in foster care

There are differing accounts of the extent to which fostered children have been able to have a say in the major decisions about their care over the time period of the review. A 2005 national survey capturing the views of foster children (Morgan, 2005) recorded that two thirds of children had no choice in the decision of which foster home they were placed in and a quarter had not been asked what their care plan should say.

Interviews with a small group of care leavers looking back on their experiences of being in care (Gaskell,

2010) revealed that they had all experienced decisions made on their behalf which they found bewildering – with some having been placed in foster homes when their preference was for a children's home and vice versa. This group of young people had also experienced frequent moves between care placements and were well aware of the negative impact of such changes on themselves and others:

I was lucky, I didn't move that much. It's the moving that messes kids up.

In terms of placements, young people want a choice and said that it can take too long to find a placement even when everyone agrees it is needed (Morgan, 2006c). They felt that it was very important that brothers and sisters are placed together whenever possible unless it is not right for individual children. They also said that they should not have to change schools just because of a change in placement. In a separate study, children had mixed views on whether it is ever right to separate siblings in care (Morgan, 2009). Just over a third of fostered children with siblings in care said it was never right to separate them, but this suggests that there are children who think there can be good reasons in particular cases for separating sibling groups. (In all, 316 children from children's homes and fostering services took part in the survey.) In discussions, children were also asked whether siblings separated at one point should be brought back together. Children thought that this depended on the situation – how long they had been apart, how close they were to their present carers, so that moving a child away from a carer might be worse than them not being able to join a sibling.

In the most recently published Children's Care Monitor (Morgan, 2012) over half the children surveyed said that their opinion was always asked about the things that matter to them and that their opinion always, or almost always, made a difference to their lives; these findings are in line with those in Care Monitor reports from previous years. At the time of the survey, 86 per cent of fostered children thought that they were in the right placement for them and 73 per cent rated their latest move of placement as being in their best interest. However, the Care Monitor also records an increase in the average number of placements for children taking part, from four placements in the 2010 survey to five in 2011, and that children think they are being moved to new placements when it is not

appropriate. This was reported to be because of the cost of their placement or because it was only planned as a short-term arrangement even though it has since worked out to be good for them. Overall, children said that they wanted more say in:

- deciding on placements
- deciding about my future
- decisions about contact with my family.

Under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (England. Statutory Instruments, 2010), major decisions should be included in the child's care plan. The Children's Care Monitor (Morgan, 2012) reported that 66 per cent of children in foster care knew that they had a care plan and most of them knew what was in it, leaving a third of children in foster care who do not know about their care plan. Of those foster children who knew what their care plan contained, three quarters agreed with what it contained and 60 per cent of children who knew they had a care plan said they had a say in what was in it. Although less than a third of children had helped to write their own care plan, 64 per cent said that they did not want to change anything in it.

2.1.6 Review meetings

Review meetings are the key mechanism designed to make sure that children receive the care that is right for them throughout their time in care. There is some indication that children's experience of review meetings has improved over time. A local authority study carried out in 2000 (cited Munro, 2001) reported a range of views; for some, meetings were unproblematic and reasonably pleasant but for others they were occasions where they felt powerless and helpless. There were complaints that plans made were not implemented, wishes were overruled without explanation and that concerns were not addressed or were put off to the next review. Professionals would not let children get involved in big decisions, for example, where they should live or how often they should see their birth mother.

In 2006, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) (Morgan, 2006c) organised a series of discussion groups on placements, decisions and reviews. The children and young people involved came from a variety of placement types and it is not possible to distinguish the views of those in foster care from those in other types of care. However, the report states that invitations to participate were sent to groups of children who were as representative as possible of children and young people receiving social care services or living away from home and, consequently, their experience of placements, decision making and reviews should be relevant for this review. There was a big variation in how much say children had in decisions about placements. Some thought their views made a big difference to the final decision. Others thought that they had been asked but that what they had said did not really count in the final decision. Some commented that, although someone else makes a decision and this is not the right way to do it, this does not necessarily mean the decision is the wrong one. Children and young people reported that the best way to involve them is simply to ask what they think and feel and really listen to what they say; give children a choice of who to talk to and don't ask at all if a decision has already been made. Three quarters of children responding to the survey reported that they go to their review meetings in order to:

- find out what's going on
- have a say about what will happen to them.

Some were concerned about the number of people attending the review meetings and that many people they did not know were present. They reported difficulties in talking about personal things in front of a lot of strange people.

In work carried out by Sherbert Research (2009), ten of the 15 young people consulted knew about their review meetings and had attended them. They knew the review meeting offered a chance to make changes to their care plan but eight of the ten said they did not feel confident about expressing their views; they felt that meetings were too formal; they felt excluded; and they wanted more timely feedback afterwards.

I think our information gets lost, we're not important enough.

Many of the views expressed in this study suggest that children are desperate to be listened to:

Every child should be listened to, no matter how difficult they are to talk to.

Stop holding meetings and writing notes ... do something about it to make life better. It takes too long to action things.

It is puzzling that a process specifically designed to involve children and young people is one from which they can feel so alienated. Some clue as to where the problem might lie is suggested in the findings of a research project involving interviews with 11 young people (McLeod, 2006). This explored effective communication between social workers and young people, and found that what listening meant to young people was very different to how it was understood by social workers. Young people saw listening as 'action'; if a social worker did not act on what they had heard they had not listened. Young people believed that they knew what was best for them and that their wishes were too often overruled. The social workers viewed listening as an attitude; more of a receptive process, a way of showing that the other person's point of view is valued and respected.

A study by Thomas and O'Kane (2000) attempted to find out what children think of the processes which involve them in decision making, by looking at the most recent meetings attended by the children and comparing their views with those of the adults involved. It seemed that the children had a whole range of different feelings and experiences about taking part in meetings about themselves. The researchers suggested that some of the techniques used during their research might usefully be applied to help children participate more effectively in the meetings about them. For example, before their interviews each child received an information pack and the researchers asked the children to draw pictures and tell stories to explain their point of view; some made charts which focused on the decisions to be made.

The importance of finding ways for children to be part of decision making was stressed by young people taking part in the Blueprint project (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004). Their key message was that the effort needed to make sure young people can really be involved in decisions had to be made; whether it was

time, interpreters, drawing or building trusting relationships, it had to be done. Some had good experiences of reviews but others felt out of place and under pressure. They were adamant that children in foster care should have more say in decision making.

I should have more say, they don't understand my life like I do.

Don't dismiss what I say because I'm young.

Even when they felt they had more of a say, young people did not feel they were given enough explanation about how and why decisions were made or that they were involved in the decision making at the right point. They gave their ideas for making meetings better.

Some of the ideas to improve review meetings

- Wait till we've finished talking, wait their turn
- An advocate or a friend at meetings
- Proper planning with young people and making sure it's their independent ideas
- Young people should help chair their meetings
- There should be no shocks or surprises for young people in meetings
- Reviews could be done over the phone or on video links on a particular day so not everyone has to come together in one room
- No more than four people at your meeting, if you decide you want someone and it's not their turn, you can invite them
- Call them CHOICE meetings not reviews
- Strangers should never be at your reviews
- Young people choose where it will happen – comfy chairs, cuddly toys, nice bright, warm room

- People turn up on time
- Should include how you are feeling emotionally, do you think social services are listening to you and taking on your points of view, and money – do you have enough?
(Voice for the Child in Care, 2004, p.7)

Other ideas on what is appropriate for review meetings came from practitioner-led research (Martin, 2009) to gather children's views of professional attendance at review meetings. Children felt that professionals should only attend their meetings if at least one of the following was true:

- that the professional had information to tell people about
- that the professional needed to hear information and sometimes pass it on
- that the professional should have some relevance to the young person
- that the professional has a specific need.

This group of children were often not sure who has the final say in a decision after it has been discussed in a review and often they didn't know what to do if they were not happy with a review decision. They suggested simple ways to improve reviews including letting children write their views more; letting younger children draw more to show what they felt; explaining things in more simple words; holding reviews in less worrying places; having an advocate who you could brief to speak for you; using a computer programme like 'ViewPoint'; having fewer people there but the important ones; and having better and more interesting forms to fill in.

2.1.7 Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

The 2002 amendment to the Children's Act 1989 (GB. Statutes, 2002) made it a legal requirement for an IRO to be appointed to lead and manage case reviews, monitor the local authority's performance in respect of reviews, and to consider whether it would be appropriate to refer cases to the Children and Family

Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). A web-based survey (Morgan, 2011) asked for the views of different groups of looked after children on independent reviewing officers. They thought that IROs are important for checking how decisions about them are made and most had a good understanding of the role of the IRO, particularly in running review meetings. Over half the children thought that most or all of the big decisions about their lives in care were made in reviews but this leaves a substantial proportion of children who think that the big decisions are taken elsewhere.

2.1.8 Involvement in other decisions

A survey of children and young people by Timms and Thoburn (2006) suggested that there are children involved in family proceedings who would like to be able to attend court and speak to the judge but do not appear to have the opportunity to do so. Others want adults to speak for them in this context but to continue to have a say in how their views are expressed through an advocate.

Fostered children want to be involved in day-to-day decisions about their lives including bedtimes, pocket money and sleepovers (Morgan, 2005). The difficulty associated with decisions around sleeping over, visiting friends' houses or going on holiday recurred throughout this review. In the Blueprint project (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004) young people commented that they could not believe so many social services are still carrying out police checks before a young person can stay over at a friend's house, even though guidance says that this should not happen. The time taken to make decisions about things which seem very simple matters for children living at home is a big issue for some children and young people in care:

Decisions take too long, by the time it's made, you might not need it any more, it's too late. It makes you give up and not bother asking in the first place, like with money for school trips, it's all over by the time they make their minds up and you feel like a fool and the odd one out.

(p.7)

Fostered children want their foster carers to be able to make all the usual decisions that parents make (as long as they keep to the care plan) and things like staying

overnight or going on a foreign holiday as a family should not have to go back to social workers for a decision (Morgan, 2006b).

2.1.9 Decisions about leaving care

Being involved in the decisions about when and how they will leave care is a very significant issue for young people and they are aware that not getting the 'right' decision for them at this time can have a massive impact on the next stage of their lives:

Independence doesn't just happen because you turn a certain age or because it's decided for you to leave care.

(Voice for the Child in Care, 2004)

In a series of discussion groups with young people who had just left or were about to leave care (Morgan and Lindsay, 2006), young people were clear that they should have a say in when to leave care. There was considerable variation in whether they felt that they had a say in their leaving care or 'pathway' plans. Some received very short notice that they would be leaving care:

I didn't get any say. I didn't realise I could have a say

The Plan was just a piece of paper ... both parties should live up to their word.

(p.12)

Others had experience of commitments about leaving care arrangements being broken. For example, the financial help with tuition fees and accommodation, promised to one young person, was withdrawn from her only a few weeks before she needed to confirm acceptance of a place at university. She had put her hopes on getting this financial support, as it had been agreed as part of her pathway plan.

Understandably the provision of accommodation for children and young people to move into was one of their highest priorities and the view was that accommodation needs should always be addressed individually, making a decision about what is best for the young person concerned. The young people consulted had clear ideas about how the process could be improved.

Ideal ways to leave care would be:

- With us choosing when it's the right time to leave
- With us being given more time to move on and somewhere to come back to when we need it
- With everyone across the country getting the same entitlements and leaving care grants
- With all the information you need about our past, our families and us
- With a clear plan prior to leaving care not after!
- With us knowing what support we'll be getting and having people to turn to for help when you need it, 'Social services keeping its promises'
- With us getting a flat instead of having to live in a hostel
- With us having enough money to get by and give us a proper start in life
- With no delay in receiving our allowances 'Allowances paid directly into bank account would be easier'.

(Morgan and Lindsay, 2006, p.24)

The Right2Bcared4Pilots that began in 2007 in 11 local authorities included some of the key features for improvement that these young care leavers identified. The pilots were based on the following principles:

- Young people in care should not be expected to leave care until they are 18 years old.
- They should have a greater say in decision making prior to leaving care.
- They should be properly prepared for living independently.

The evaluation of the pilots (Munro *et al.*, 2011) found that not all young people want to remain in care until they are 18 years old. Of those young people involved in the evaluation, 62 per cent of care leavers said that it should be their choice when they wanted to leave care. Most young people felt quite involved with their pathway plan. They reported that delays in completion of plans or failure to review and update them undermined their relevance. Seventy-one per cent reported that they were encouraged to express their wishes and feelings at review meetings, but only 53 per cent felt that they were always listened to.

2.1.10 Gaps identified

There is little information about how children are currently involved in decisions about whether or not they should be adopted, or any retrospective work with children who have been adopted to reflect on the decisions made about their care.

There is also little indication of whether anything is known about discriminatory behaviours within the decision making processes. For example, only one of the studies (Munro, 2001) appears to have deliberately given children an opportunity to say whether they had experienced any racism in relation to their interaction with social services. The only comment was about desired contact with their birth family to give them knowledge of their identity and culture. Social services had apparently made considerable efforts to place children in 'same race' placements and any comments on this appeared positive. Within the literature reviewed there is an emphasis on whether children in care feel discriminated against in general compared to children who are not, rather than on discrimination within fostering and adoption processes. It might be interesting to explore whether dissatisfaction with care plans or review meetings varies for different groups of fostered children.

2.2 What do fostered and adopted children and young people feel about the help they receive during their time in care?

Local authorities act in the role of 'corporate parents' to children in their care. Guidance published for

children and young people (DfE, 2010) says that this means that they should feel 'cared about' as well as 'cared for'. Looking back at the previous section of this report, it is apparent that children do not always feel they have a voice in decisions. This section looks at how they feel about the support they get and, where it is available, when, where and how they need it.

Throughout the review, the importance of social workers in fostered and adopted children's lives was evident time and again. Their views on standards for children's social care (Morgan, 2006b) reported that the social worker they have is far more important in relation to how well they are looked after than whether they live in a 'good' or 'bad' council, and some suggested that because of this they should have a say in who their social worker is. All the children taking part in one local authority study (Munro, 2001) mentioned the importance of their social worker in their lives. They saw their social worker as a powerful and a strong ally when the relationship was good. All 15 young people contributing to the Blueprint project (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004) valued the role of social workers in their lives but at the same time all felt that social workers could improve how they engaged with and listened to young people. If they felt supported by their social worker they felt that the system was looking after them.

2.2.1 Continuity of support

Concern is often expressed about continuity in placements for looked after children and young people, but there appeared to be some evidence that continuity of support was seen as more important than continuity in placements for fostered children. Children appreciate that placement moves can be necessary, but feel that support should always be there from their social worker; they want their social worker 'not to change so often' (Morgan, 2005 and 2006c; Munro, 2001).

As soon as you were beginning to trust them (social workers) they moved on.

(Gaskell, 2010)

Turnover amongst social workers is high and impacts directly on how well young people felt they are cared for. These feelings were mostly based on difficulties they had faced in contacting and accessing their social

worker when they needed help. They wanted social workers to be more proactive in making contact. In work focusing on young people's views of safeguarding (Sherbert Research, 2009) young people talked about a lack of trust in their social workers arising from their previous experiences; the high turnover in their social workers and not seeing positive outcomes as a result of meetings with them. They pointed out that the longer children are in care, the more mistrustful they become.

2.2.2 How social workers can help

At the time of going into care children and young people want an emotional connection with the person who is seen as being responsible for their safety (Sherbert Research, 2009).

One in five fostered children (Morgan, 2005) said they had wanted more **reassurance** about their foster homes before they moved in, and that this is not the same as getting information. Asked what the best thing their social worker did for them, they said just listening and talking things over. They want their social workers to visit more frequently. Young people know that social workers are overworked and have to cope with a lot of rules and regulations (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004) but they stress that they want more time with them; for them to be 'available'. The importance of this was stressed by contributors to the Blueprint project:

You need to have the name of someone you can contact at social services 24 hours a day – you need to know someone is there in the middle of the night. Social workers should make sure there is someone for young people if they are sick and on holiday and you should know who that is before they go away.

(p.6)

On the other hand, some young people said that their social workers could be too nosy and interrogative about private emotions (McLeod, 2006). In this study the views of social workers and the children they were responsible for were analysed independently. The social workers appeared to think that getting children to explore their feelings was an important part of listening but these young people saw it differently. They wanted social workers to be available and reliable, not to patronise them and to be friendly 'but in a practical way'. Varying the support offered to suit the age and

individual needs of the child is obviously crucial. Children want support from their social workers that is flexible (including enabling children to exercise choice), responsive and individualised/personalised; they want it to be respectful of children's views and wishes and participative (Oliver, 2010). Again children described positive relationships with their social workers as those which combine friendliness with the provision of emotional and practical support.

Being late and disorganised or breaking promises or not keeping appointments clearly signal to children that they are not important to the social worker and make them feel that their social worker is not acting in their best interests (Sherbert Research, 2009; Munro, 2001). Younger children felt that their social worker could come to their foster home to play games, watch TV and relax with them.

List for an 'Ideal' social worker

- Listener – listens to how they feel and what they want
- Makes them feel important/valued
- Kind
- Talkative
- Friendly
- Lovely
- Outgoing
- Happy to get involved
- Understands you
- Knows what you've been through
- Get to know them as people, beyond family history
- Not bossy
- Flexible

- Relaxed
- Helpful
- Reliable and on time
- Feeds back in an appropriate way why decisions have been made/delayed
- Respectful
- Organised
- Proactive
- Acknowledge positive change they notice in the young person
- Have a laugh

(Sherbert Research, 2009, p.22)

2.2.3 Trust and confidentiality

Fostered children are concerned about how information about them is handled and shared amongst the adult responsible for their care (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004). They often feel that they have no control over personal information and how widely it will be shared. In talking about changes in their social workers young people stressed that new social workers should make an effort to:

Meet you and know your files so you don't have to explain things over again, it may be upsetting for young children.

Adopted children wanted future adoptive parents to be told the good things and the things that are changing about them as well as the problems and the past. Fostered children were clear that foster carers should not phone social workers 'behind their back' and make decisions without involving them (Sherbert Research, 2009):

They should ask you and talk with you if you don't like what they say.

They often make the point that it takes time to get close to people before they feel sufficiently safe to

confide in them and that children will only share views and concerns when they do feel safe.

Social workers must not make promises they can't keep.

2.2.4 Making sure things are going well for fostered children

Regular contact with their social workers is seen by fostered children as very important in making sure that they are safe and happy in their current placement. Asked how placement breakdown can be avoided, children said that their social worker should visit the placement regularly and the child, carer and social worker need to be able to talk things through (Morgan, 2006c). Children want to be able to get in touch with their social worker directly whenever they feel the need to. They said that being able to chat rather than only making contact in a crisis helps to avoid problems arising with their placements; this is especially important at the start of a placement. They said that they must be able to talk to their social worker alone but that they are often not given the opportunity to do this. Children say they need to go out of the house to feel free enough to discuss problems about the placement and that it should be easy to go and have a coffee or a walk.

Most privately fostered children said their social worker visited regularly; just under half said they had visits every six weeks (which is the legal requirement for the first year in private foster care) (Morgan, 2008). They usually discussed how they are getting on in the placement. Like other fostered children they want to be able to keep in touch with their social workers and to be able to contact them and ask for a visit if necessary. They suggested that social workers should phone children regularly and also contact school to make sure everything is OK or pay surprise visits to their houses. They want social workers to be more 'untrusting at the beginning' checking out everything about a private foster care placement for themselves, for example, who else lives in the house, what clothing the children will have and what food is available.

Don't just accept it if the child has not said there is anything worrying them.

They also wanted social workers to make sure their school knows about the arrangements and to be able to check with their doctor or counsellor if they have any problems.

In 2011 15 per cent of children reported that they were being personally affected by budget cuts in their local council (Morgan, 2012). Some of them were able to say what these effects were and the most frequent suggestions were:

- less educational help
- lower personal allowances
- fewer activities to do.

2.2.5 Making sure that things are going well for adopted children

Adopted children stressed the importance of checking that children and young people are happy and settled in their new families while the adoption is going through (Morgan, 2006a). They suggested five main ways to do this.

How social workers should check children are happy in new families

- Ask the child – but listen to the answers
- Make visits to see the child
- Speak to both the parents and the child – both alone and together
- Spend time talking to the child away from the family
- Check how the child is fitting in at school

(Morgan, 2006, p.26)

The children also said that social workers could phone more and that they should use observation skills to see if everything seems OK:

Observe how they interact with each other.

Study body language between the adoptive parent and the child.

(p. 27)

As with fostered children they said that social workers must make sure that the child feels safe telling the truth. From their perspective the most important thing that social workers do for them is to find them an adoptive family and they give advice on how best to do this.

Top ten things social workers should look for in choosing a family to adopt a child

- That they are kind and caring
- That the child is likely to get on with them and be happy
- That they like children and really do want another one
- That they have the same background as the child they are adopting
- That they will be able to look after the child properly
- That they have things in common with the child
- That they understand the child's needs
- That their police check is OK
- That they live in the right surroundings for the child
- That they will go on loving the child for ever

(Morgan, 2006, p.24)

2.2.6 Help when leaving care

Generally young people leaving home for the first time can reasonably expect continuing levels of family support, especially if things go wrong but, for those leaving care, the situation is more harsh and uncertain. A study by Morgan and Lindsay (2006) reports young

people's experiences can be hugely different; the help they receive can be excellent or it can be poor. A common message though is that they do not get enough help once they have left care. There were some suggestions that young parents are treated differently to other care leavers. Most agreed that social workers interfere more with things to do with their baby and treat them like second class citizens. Care leavers often feel angry that promises of support and help made to them before they left care were not being followed through. They have concerns about whether arrangements for accommodation are sufficient to keep them safe from harm. Being made to leave care at the wrong time feels like they are being abandoned by a system that is meant to care for them. Some young people were informed that they would be leaving care right at the start of or during the middle of their GCSE exams.

Children and young people in foster homes were less likely to feel that they had general help to prepare for life as an independent adult than children leaving care from children's homes (Morgan, 2012). In this latest Care Monitor report, 24 per cent of care leavers said that they were being personally affected by councils having less money but no details of specific impacts were given.

2.2.7 Getting help when things go wrong

A study by Morgan (2005) reports that most fostered children can readily identify someone who they could go to for help if things are going wrong for them. If they had a problem 81 per cent of fostered children said that they would go to their foster carer. In addition, children reported feeling able to approach another member of their foster family, a teacher, a social worker, their birth parent, another child or young person who is a friend or an adult friend.

In cases where care plans are not being kept to, half the children said they could talk this over with their social worker (Morgan, 2006c). One in three said that this was something they would put in a complaint to their council. In discussions, others suggested they would get help from their foster carer or their advocate if they had one. Some suggested they should be able to go to court but could see there might be problems with this. Generally they were not aware that the person

who runs their review meeting could go to Cafcass if their plans were not being carried out and that Cafcass could take the matter to court. A few of the children said that if their plan had gone badly wrong then they would consider running away or doing something harmful to themselves.

It was also reported that children in foster homes are much less likely to know what an advocate is and therefore to be able to exercise their legal right to have help when they use their council's complaints procedure (Morgan, 2012).

In extreme cases children approach organisations such as ChildLine. According to ChildLine's most recent report (Hutchinson, 2011), one in 26 of all looked after children in the UK contacted them for help in the year 2009–10. Children in foster care appear less likely to seek help from ChildLine than children in residential homes.

2.2.8 Support from other children

Morgan (2006a) reported a quarter of adopted children said that they had met up with other children being adopted while they were going through the process. For those who had felt this was helpful, it made them feel less alone, having people they could talk to who understood their feelings. However, almost half the children who had not met up with others reported that they would not have wanted to:

Because each case is different. If I began comparing myself, everything would become more complicated.
(p.18)

A survey of 410 fostered children (Morgan, 2005) found some fostering services arrange meetings between groups of fostered children; others don't because it makes foster children feel 'different'. Just over one in ten fostered children taking part in the survey attended this kind of meeting; most of the others did not and did not want to. Views on the usefulness of the meetings were mixed: some had a good time and enjoyed sharing ideas; others said they were long and boring and there was too much talk about just one thing; others reported things were promised but never happened. However, the report pointed out that, although the meetings were not universally popular, in any one area quite a number of

foster children might want to have the opportunity to meet others in foster care.

2.2.9 Gaps identified

There was almost no information identified about the support children want or need in relation to care proceedings although, in the report *About Adoption* (Morgan, 2006a), children did say that the judge had been an important part of their adoption. Their experiences as to whether this had been a positive or negative issue were not followed up.

There is no real evidence available as to whether fostered children have different perspectives on the processes around leaving care as they approach adulthood compared to other young people leaving residential children's homes.

2.3 What are the views of fostered and adopted children and young people on arrangements for keeping in contact with their birth families?

Keeping in touch with family and friends and the ongoing relationships with their birth families are key issues for children in care (Morgan, 2009; Hutchinson, 2011). Their care plan should set out the arrangements for keeping in contact with their birth families. Children and young people can only keep in touch with their birth families with the support of the adults who are responsible for them once they are in foster homes or living with their adopted families. Their experiences of the processes that have an impact on their ability to keep in contact with people they care about are very important and often strongly influence their perception of social services as a whole (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004).

2.3.1 Having enough contact with family and friends – fostered children

Timms and Thoburn (2006) suggested that children's opinions on decisions about contact were either not sought or not taken on board, with 60 per cent of the

children in their study reporting that they did not see enough of their birth fathers and 40 per cent saying they did not see enough of their birth mothers. It is worth noting that children were not asked whether the contact set out in their care plan was insufficient or inappropriate, just whether they felt they had enough contact; there might be many reasons for these feelings. However, a single local authority study (Munro, 2001) also reported high levels of dissatisfaction, with only two of the 15 children studied reporting stable and satisfactory contact with their birth family; the rest were unhappy both with the amount of contact and their involvement in deciding how much contact there should be.

In response to an open survey question about the 'worst thing about being fostered' (Morgan, 2005), the most frequently cited response volunteered by children was no longer seeing their birth family and friends. The levels of contact reported in the survey varied, with a third of the children having no contact with their birth parents but nearly a third having contact with a birth parent most weeks. Just under half the children in this study had no contact with any of their birth grandparents whilst 18 per cent had contact with a grandparent 'most weeks'. A third of the foster children had contact with at least one brother or sister but this was usually because they were fostered in the same family. A range of different levels of contact would be expected depending on the individual circumstances of the children. However, there was no question in the survey that asked whether the agreed arrangements for keeping in contact were being respected.

Ofsted carried out a detailed study of children's views on contact (Morgan, 2009). In this survey just under half of the children were fostered. The children considered that it's not just contact with parents, brothers and sisters that is important; they want to be able to keep in contact with extended family members and close family friends. The children were aware how difficult this can be.

Because you might want to see some people but not others.

They stressed that there is no simple rule for deciding which family members they should have contact with:

It depends on which parent, which sibling.

These children said it was very important that social workers take account of whether the child wants contact; that in general they should be able to keep in contact provided contact is safe; and that social workers and children should agree arrangements together. The extent to which the decision is finally made by the social worker or the child should depend on the age of the child. Children should not only have a say in who but in how much and what sort of contact.

Fostered children who took part in a small scale consultation on the contact they had with their birth families (The Fostering Network, n.d.) recognised how complex this area is. They each have different wishes in relation to the contact they would like, how frequent it should be, what the nature of the contact should be and where it should take place. They understood how difficult the decision making process around contact can be involving social workers, foster carers, birth family members and themselves. At the time of this study all the children were happy with where their individual contact visits took place. All saw a variety of family members including adopted siblings.

2.3.2 Things that get in the way of keeping in contact – fostered children

There are specific instances reported where the decisions, actions and attitudes of the adults responsible for them get in the way of keeping in contact with people that fostered children care about (Morgan, 2009). Being placed away from their home area could mean losing contact. Children can miss out on contact because of the attitude of adults:

Not being allowed to visit father in hospital because 'they' thought it would upset me.

Other examples included carers who sometimes did not really want children to keep in touch and did not help them to, and a relative who was not allowed to visit them in their foster home because they smoked. There was also an example of contact being stopped as a punishment for bad behaviour.

Young people contributing to the Blueprint project (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004) also talked about being placed a long way from home causing them to

lose contact with people they cared about. They said that, often, social workers don't seem to have the time to make sure that contact with families happens and that, if seeing their families was difficult for young people, they didn't feel encouraged enough to keep trying to work it out. A lot of young people didn't think that social workers took the importance of friendships and the relationships they had with brothers and sisters anywhere near seriously enough:

When you are in care any relationships you make are special and mean a lot to you because you don't have many people in your life that truly want to be there and so the ones that do should be encouraged by social workers.

(p.11)

Children thought getting news of their family was an important thing that social workers should do for them and were frustrated when their social worker said they would and it then did not happen, or the social worker refused to try to get news for them (Morgan, 2009). Lack of support from their social workers was also identified as a barrier by young people (Sherbert Research, 2009). Most said they were not adequately listened to when it came to matters concerning contact with their families. They felt that social workers could listen more and be better at finding constructive solutions:

In meetings I'd like her to be a bit more open. I say I want to see my mum she says I can't, and that's that. I want her to say, 'We can't do that at the moment but how about thinking about this or what would you like to happen?' It gets me annoyed: I just think they can't be bothered.

(p.18)

2.3.3 How social services could help

In contributing their ideas for standards for children's social care services (Morgan, 2006b), children and young people identified how important it was to keep arrangements for contact with their own families under constant review. They recognised that as they grow older, their needs change, their family's situation changes and their relationships change and they want contact arrangements to be adapted in line with these changes. The review system was not seen as an effective way to do this. Some foster children also

wanted to be able to return to foster carers and keep in contact after they leave.

Morgan (2009) reports that practical help could make a big difference, for example, children need help with travelling, either with costs or maybe being driven somewhere or having a taxi booked. Contact visits also need to take place somewhere appropriate: 'lived in and homely' and not in big areas like a hall or meeting room. Fostered children recommended that informal contact, especially if combined with an outing, worked well (The Fostering Network, n.d.).

Supervision of contact visits by social workers was not always felt appropriate or helpful in keeping contact going:

I don't understand why visits are supervised, I can understand if you're being abused but if nothing's happened then there's no reason.

(Morgan, 2009, p.18)

Views on how helpful and committed social workers are when supporting contact with families varied, with some children saying they did not give it enough priority and others acknowledging that great efforts were made. Some said they are too busy with other things to find time for contact work but that this was wrong:

There should be enough people to take you to see your family so that you can see them more often, not just when social services can do it.

(Voice for the Child in Care, 2004)

Young people involved in the Voice for the Child in Care (2004) study also thought that every social services department should have a contact team; a team where the only thing they do is arrange and support contact between young people and their families.

Good ways reported by children and young people to support contact included letterbox arrangements, birthday cards, emails and social networking, provided that these were safe for individual children (Morgan, 2009). There were comments that, sometimes, fostered children are not allowed to use computer-based communications. There were suggestions that any time young people want to contact their friends they should be able to do it for free by being given phone credit.

It's a big issue that needs to be taken seriously. It's one of the most important things, but social services don't see it that way.

(p.32)

2.3.4 Adopted children and contact arrangements

In 2006, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) (Morgan, 2006a) found that well over half the 208 adopted children in its study had some or regular contact with their families. Two thirds of the children said they had no say themselves in whether or not they had contact. Children who had been adopted most recently were more likely to have contact with their birth families, but over a quarter of children and young people adopted for ten years or more still had regular contact with their birth families. Almost two thirds of children got news about their birth family and 85 per cent thought it was important or very important to be given news, but that each child should have a choice about whether or not they wanted to have any news about their birth family. The children did not appear to be asked whether they thought that the contact they had was the right amount or the right sort for them.

In suggestions made by children for social care standards (Morgan, 2006b), adopted children said that any reduction in contact with their families should be made as gradually as possible. Decisions about how much children should keep in touch with, or be given information about, their birth families should be made on the basis of what is best for an individual child and these decisions should be kept under review as the child grows.

2.3.5 Gaps identified

There does not appear to be evidence as to whether issues related to insufficient contact between fostered or adopted children is because the care plans don't have the 'right' contact arrangements in them or because the arrangements in the care plan are not being kept to. There is also no information on whether different groups of children feel that their wishes in relation to contact are being treated differently to other groups. There is also no retrospective work with adopted children as to whether the contact

arrangements made for them have proved to be adequate or helpful in the longer term.

You need it before you come into care, not afterwards.

2.4 Do fostered and adopted children and young people think they receive the information and advice they need?

Lack of the right information at the right time is a recurring theme throughout the review of literature. When children do not receive the information they need the emotional effect on them can be stark:

No-one explained anything. I didn't know what was happening. It was horrible.

(McLeod, 2006, p. 3)

Children and young people consistently report that they lack information at critical points, for example:

- as they move into the care system
- when moving from one placement to another
- on leaving care.

Some children said that not everyone would want exactly the same amount of information at the same time but that they should be able to ask for it when they are ready (Morgan, 2010a).

2.4.2 Information about foster carers and adoptive parents

Morgan (2005) reported a third of fostered children consulted had not been given enough information about their foster family before moving in:

Children should be told everything about their carers before they move in.

Ideas from children about what they ought to know included:

- other children in the household
- carers' interests
- pets
- carers' race and religion.

Photographs of people, places, buildings and your bedroom would be useful.

(Morgan, 2006b).

2.4.1 Moving into care

In Morgan's (2010a) study, children were asked what could be done to make moving into care easier for them and their overwhelming response was 'knowing what was happening'. More than half the children taking part in this study, which focused on moving into care, had not known they were going into care until it actually happened, even though only some of the cases were emergency placements. Children coming into care want to know why they are in care, who put them there, how long they will be in care and what will happen to them while they are in care. Care leavers contributing to the Blueprint project (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004) suggested that all young people should have information packs that:

answer questions, tell you what to expect and what your rights are with photos and pictures in them.

Where councils had provided information packs these were liked by children; unless the pack arrived too late:

Over three quarters of privately fostered children (Morgan, 2008) felt that they had the right amount of information about their carers before they moved in. Those few children who wanted more information would like to have known earlier exactly where they were going to live, how old their carers were and what would happen if the arrangement didn't work out.

Adopted children highlighted how important getting information about their adoptive family is for children (Morgan, 2006a). Although most said that they had been told everything or most things they wanted to know, a quarter had been told very little at all.

Top ten things children want to be told about their adoptive families

- 1 What sort of people they are
- 2 The number of children and young people in the family
- 3 Where they live
- 4 Their personality and beliefs
- 5 Reassurance that they want you and are friendly towards children
- 6 Their family background
- 7 Why they want to adopt you
- 8 If they have any pets
- 9 Have a story book or DVD about the family
- 10 If they will have contact with their birth family

(Morgan, 2006a, p.20)

The need to understand the nature of the process they are about to experience, already seen for foster children, is echoed in the views of adopted children. Children wanted to know and understand what being adopted would actually mean for them (how would it feel), as well as what would actually happen (how does adoption work) and how much say they would have in what happens.

2.4.3 Information about the past

In Morgan's (2006a) study, most adopted children thought it was very important for them to know about their lives before they had been adopted. Children who had been adopted in the previous five years before the survey were twice as likely to say that they knew a lot about their life before being adopted compared to children adopted ten years ago.

The top things adopted children wanted to know about their past

- 1 Why they couldn't stay with their birth family and so were adopted
- 2 Details about their birth family
- 3 Whatever the individual child asks about
- 4 About their own life before they were adopted
- 5 Where they were born
- 6 If they have any brothers or sisters living somewhere else and why they were split up
- 7 Whether they can make contact with their birth family

(Morgan, 2006a, p.29)

However, not all children wanted to know about their life before and said that it should be up to individual children to decide what they wanted to know and when.

2.4.4 When leaving care

From a number of the studies in the review it was clear that many young people leaving care feel inadequately prepared and report they lack access to the information they need.

Suggestions for what leaving care plans for young people should include

- Detailed information on young people's rights (including exact entitlements to benefits, grants and other support)
- Advice on how the young person will be prepared to leave care
- Information about ongoing financial support
- Advice on help with accessing benefits

- Advice on employment, continuing education and training
 - Healthcare advice
 - A back-up plan, if things go wrong
 - Advice on maintaining contact with family and friends
 - Information on support for recreational activity
 - Advice on how to access professional support
- (Morgan, 2006b p.13)

What foster children want more advice or information about

- Emotional, physical and sexual well-being
 - How to look after yourself
 - Future plans
 - Becoming independent
 - Information about their family
 - Children's rights
- (Morgan, 2010b, p.10)

They thought that it would be helpful to have all this information in one place. A number of young people in this study expressed anger at the lack of information provided to them and felt that it threatened their safety and well-being.

Some felt that all care leavers should be allowed to see their own case files and to take ownership of legal documents that they would need, for example, to apply for a passport or when applying for a Criminal Records Bureau check related to future employment.

2.4.5 Other useful advice

Children in foster care also have needs for information and advice at times when they are not facing major transitions. Ofsted's study of children's experiences of getting advice (Morgan, 2010b) found that most children in foster care felt that they were getting all or nearly all of the advice they needed. Foster carers were their main source of advice, followed by social workers.

2.4.6 Gaps identified

The ability for children and young people to make decisions depends on them being able to get access to the right information. A lot of very important information for children is available online and yet children and young people consistently report that they do not have the information they need. Two possible areas for further exploration may therefore be:

- The extent to which online sources are accessed and what children and young people think of the material provided.
- How children and young people would prefer information to be provided.

3 Conclusion

Despite all the efforts from practitioners and policy makers, it is clear that children and young people in foster care and adoptive placements still feel that they are **not sufficiently involved in the key decisions that concern them**. Children and young people continue to report that they do not feel that their views are listened to or that they can influence some of the most important decisions about their lives. There appear to be differences in levels of awareness of their entitlements and in understanding how systems designed to ensure that their rights are respected can work for them. Over time, the number of different 'types' of adults who should be helping and supporting children and young people in foster care and moving through to adoptive placements has increased but this has resulted in a picture that can appear confusing to someone unfamiliar with it. In the course of reviewing the literature the list of sources of help or redress mentioned included: independent reviewing officers, council complaints systems, Cafcass, children's care councils, advocates and guardians, Ofsted inspectors, the Children's Rights Director and the Children's Commissioner. Children and young people themselves though are still most likely to see their social worker or their foster carer and perhaps a teacher as the people most likely to be able to help them to solve a problem.

Throughout the review, in every aspect of provision whether relating to keeping siblings together or giving fostered or adopted children the opportunity to meet with other children going through similar processes, the **importance of taking into account individual needs and choices** was stressed repeatedly by children and young people. Their apparent concern is that there are some issues around adults responsible for their care determining 'what is best', regardless of whether it is 'best' for the child or young person as part of their own personal definition. This is particularly pertinent in light of the newly published Adoption

Action Plan (DfE, 2012). This quite clearly acknowledges that adoption may not be right for every child, but there is an emphasis on radically reducing 'delay' in adoption that might have an impact on the decision making process. Whilst children did not want delay in the administrative processes required around adoption once they knew it was going ahead, they definitely wanted sufficient time to have a choice, wherever possible, of adoptive parents and enough time to get to know them in order to help make sure their new family was right for them.

Most of the improvements that children would like to see in the fostering and adoption processes **require additional resources**. Improving the support they receive from social workers would require increased numbers of staff and more flexible working arrangements. Being able to offer children and young people more choice of foster carers or adoptive parents requires more resource to be put into the recruitment and selection of prospective carers. Allowing children and young people to remain in placements where they are settled and feel safe regardless of whether or not this is the most cost-effective solution for their council requires difficult decisions about the use of limited budgets. Making the arrangements for care leavers appropriate to the needs of each individual requires that priority be given to better accommodation and educational support.

Children and young people are well aware that their lives can be affected by budget constraints and policy changes. There is plenty of evidence that children are being asked what they think the system should be providing for them but, as with their views on what should happen to them as individuals, they may feel that 'other things' get in the way of someone actually doing something about what they say.

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Appendix 1 Search Strategy

This section provides information on the precise search strategies used with each of the bibliographic databases in terms of the keywords used and also their combination. All searches were limited to publication years 2000-2012, in English language only. Throughout, the abbreviation 'ft' denotes that a free-text search term was used and * denotes the truncation of a term.

Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)

(searched via CSA 22 February 2012)

ASSIA is an index of articles from over 600 international English language social science journals, which provides unique coverage of educational and developmental aspects of children.

- #1 Adoption
- #2 Adoptive services (ft)
- #3 Adopted children
- #4 Adopted people
- #5 Adoptive families
- #6 Adoptive fathers
- #7 Adoptive mothers
- #8 Adoptive parents
- #9 Boarding homes (ft)
- #10 Foster care
- #11 Foster carers
- #12 Foster young people
- #13 Foster parents (ft)
- #14 Foster famil*
- #15 Foster home*
- #16 Placement
- #17 Placement review*
- #18 Family placement team*
- #19 Social worker support (ft)
- #20 Short break homes (ft)
- #21 Kinship care (ft)
- #22 Private foster care (ft)
- #23 Fostering (ft)
- #24 Foster children
- #25 Looked after children
- #26 Independent review officer
- #27 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20 or #21 or #22 or #23 or #24 or #25 or #26
- #28 Childrens views
- #29 Childrens perceptions
- #30 Childrens experiences
- #31 Young peoples views
- #32 Young peoples perceptions

- #33 Young peoples experiences
- #34 Childhood attitudes
- #35 Adolescent attitudes
- #36 Young peoples attitudes
- #37 Childhood opinion*
- #38 Adolescent opinion*
- #39 Young peoples opinion*
- #40 #28 or #29 or #30 or #31 or #32 or #33 or #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or #38 or #39 or #40 or #41
- #41 #27 and #40

British Education Index (BEI)

(Searched via Dialog Datastar 21 February 2012)

BEI provides information on research, policy and practice in education and training in the UK. Sources include over 300 journals, mostly published in the UK, plus other material including reports, series and conference papers.

- #1 Adoption
- #2 Adoption services (ft)
- #3 Adopted children
- #4 Adopted people (ft)
- #5 Boarding homes
- #6 Foster care
- #7 Foster carers (ft)
- #8 Foster parents (ft)
- #9 Foster famil*
- #10 Foster homes (ft)
- #11 Placement
- #12 Placement review (ft)
- #13 Family placement team (ft)
- #14 Social worker support (ft)
- #15 Short break homes (ft)
- #16 Kinship care (ft)
- #17 Private foster care (ft)
- #18 Fostering (ft)
- #19 Foster children
- #20 Looked after children (ft)
- #21 Independent review officer (ft)
- #22 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20 or #21
- #23 Childrens views (ft)
- #24 Childrens perceptions (ft)
- #25 Childrens experiences (ft)
- #26 Young peoples views (ft)
- #27 Young peoples perceptions (ft)
- #28 Young peoples experiences (ft)
- #29 Childhood attitudes
- #30 Adolescent attitudes
- #31 Pupil attitudes
- #32 Student attitudes (ft)
- #33 Young peoples attitudes (ft)

- #34 Childhood opinion* (ft)
- #35 Adolescent opinion* (ft)
- #36 Pupil opinion* (ft)
- #37 Student opinion* (ft)
- #38 Young peoples opinion* (ft)
- #39 #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or #27 or #28 or #29 or #30 or #31 or #32 or #33 or #34 or #35 or #36 or #37 or #38
- #40 #22 and #39

IDOX Information Service

(searched online 23 February 2012)

The IDOX Information Service covers all aspects of local government. Key areas of focus include public sector management, economic development, planning, housing, social services, regeneration, education and environmental services.

- #1 Adopt*
- #2 Foster*
- #3 #1 or #2
- #4 Children
- #5 Young people
- #6 #4 or #5
- #7 Opinion*
- #8 Attitude*
- #9 Experienc*
- #10 Perce*
- #11 View*
- #12 #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11
- #13 #3 and #6 and #12

Social Policy and Practice

(searched via OvidSP 23 February 2012)

Social Policy and Practice is a bibliographic database with abstracts covering evidence-based social policy, public health, social services, and mental and community health. Content is from the UK with some material from the USA and Europe.

- #1 Adoption
- #2 Adoption services (ft)
- #3 Adopted children
- #4 Adopted people (ft)
- #5 Boarding homes
- #6 Foster care
- #7 Foster carers (ft)
- #8 Foster parents (ft)
- #9 Foster famil*
- #10 Foster homes (ft)
- #11 Placement
- #12 Placement review (ft)

- #13 Family placement team (ft)
- #14 Social worker support (ft)
- #15 Short break homes (ft)
- #16 Kinship care (ft)
- #17 Private foster care (ft)
- #18 Fostering (ft)
- #19 Foster children
- #20 Looked after children (ft)
- #21 Independent review officer (ft)
- #22 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5 or #6 or #7 or #8 or #9 or #10 or #11 or #12 or #13 or #14 or #15 or #16 or #17 or #18 or #19 or #20 or #21
- #23 Childrens views (ft)
- #24 Childrens perceptions (ft)
- #25 Childrens experiences (ft)
- #26 Young peoples views (ft)
- #27 Young peoples perceptions (ft)
- #28 Young peoples experiences (ft)
- #29 Childhood attitudes
- #30 Adolescent attitudes
- #31 Young peoples attitudes (ft)
- #32 Childhood opinion* (ft)
- #33 Adolescent opinion* (ft)
- #34 Young peoples opinion* (ft)
- #35 #23 or #24 or #25 or #26 or #27 or #28 or #29 or #30 or #31 or #32 or #33 or #34
- #36 #22 and #35

Social Care Online

(searched online 23 February 2012)

Social Care Online is the Social Care Institute for Excellence's database covering an extensive range of information and research on all aspects of social care. Content is drawn from a range of sources including journal articles, websites, research reviews, legislation and government documents and service user knowledge.

- #1 Adoption
- #2 Fostering
- #3 Adopted children
- #4 Adopted people
- #5 Foster children
- #6 #1 or #2 or #3 or #4 or #5
- #7 Childrens views
- #8 Childrens opinions
- #9 Childrens perceptions
- #10 #7 or #8 or #9
- #11 #6 and #10

Website searches

(searched 24 February 2012 and 28 February 2012)

Website	Number of results found
Action 4 Children	0
Association of Directors of Children's Services	0
Barnardo's	4
The British Association of Adoption and Fostering	1
The Coram Institute and Coram Family	0
The Children's Commissioner	2
The Department for Education	3
The Hadley Centre	2
Loughborough University Centre for Research in Social Policy	0
National Children's Bureau	1
Ofsted	2
Research in Practice	0
Rights4Me	17
Results from searches using Community Care as a reference source	11
Results from searches using Google	10

Appendix 2 Screening proforma

A.1 Item Title

A.2 Coded on abstract?
(single code to be allocated)

A.2.1 Yes and adequate
(adequate enough to make decisions about its relevance)

A.2.2 No, coded on full report

A.2.3 No, abstract and full report not available

A.3 Relevance to key research question
(multiple codes permitted)

A.3.1 Views of children/young people

A.3.2 Fostering processes (includes collection from birth family, meeting with new social worker, introductory information, visits from social worker, advice on choices, review of status, inclusion in decision making – how was it achieved, end of foster care placement)

A.3.3 Adoption processes (includes meeting with new social worker, introduction to potential adopting family, information and choices, communication of arrangements, information on contact with birth family, arrangements for ongoing contacts with birth family, visits, review meetings, inclusion in decision making, completion of adoption process)

A.3.4 Wider themes, not restricted to 'processes' (include details in A.4)

A.3.5 Irrelevant content

A.4 Wider themes

A.4.1 Give details

A.5 Type of literature
(single)

A.5.1 Evaluation report

A.5.2 Peer reviewed research article (e.g. academic journal)

A.5.3 Other research article (e.g. in practice journal)

A.5.4 Literature review

A.5.5 Meta analysis

A.5.6 Opinion/discussion piece

This presents an opinion or makes an argument
(from media source or professional journal)

A.5.7 Other
(please enter details in A.6)

A.5.8 Inadequate information

A.6 Other type of literature
(please enter details)

A.6.1 Give details

A.7 Country/area involved
(multiple) Please select country. Enter area in text if applicable

A.7.1 England

A.7.2 Other

A.7.3 Inadequate information

A.1 Item Title cont'd

A.8 Research design <i>(make a judgement on best fit – could be multiple but aim for single)</i>	A.8.1 Experimental <i>(e.g. RCT)</i> A.8.2 Quantitative <i>(e.g. QED comparison group; baseline and follow-up survey)</i> A.8.3 Qualitative A.8.4 Mixed-methods A.8.5 Literature review A.8.6 Other research design <i>(please enter design details in A.9)</i> A.8.7 Not research A.8.8 Inadequate information
A.9 Other research design <i>Please enter brief description of other design (NB not specific methods)</i>	A.9.1 Please enter design details
A.10 Research methods <i>(multiple) Main methods used (incl. web and telephone surveys/CATI)</i>	A.10.1 Survey A.10.2 Interviews <i>(face to face or telephone or via web)</i> A.10.3 Observation A.10.4 Secondary analysis <i>(i.e. new analysis using data collected for a previous study)</i> A.10.5 Literature review/scoping study <i>(as a main method, not just a few references to theory/research)</i> A.10.6 Other method <i>(please give details in A.11)</i> A.10.7 Not research A.10.8 Inadequate information
A.11 Other research methods <i>Enter brief description of methods if not included in list</i>	A.11.1 Describe other method
A.12 Study population (single)	A.12.1 Please enter details <i>(only applies to research projects, e.g. number, age and key characteristics of study population. For example: 'Study of 50 children aged 5 and 6 all eligible for free school meals' i.e. who has been studied?)</i> A.12.2 Not research A.12.3 Inadequate information
A.13 Identify as key item <i>(single) Is this one of the 50 most relevant items? If coded as 'possibly' add explanatory comments to text box</i>	A.13.1 Yes (use for definite 'yes') <i>This item addresses one or more of the outcomes, is highly relevant and authoritative and has a robust research design, and should be considered for including in the review as one of up to 20 key studies. Note: please order the full text</i> A.13.2 Possibly (use if item fits in some of 'yes' but not all) <i>Note: consider ordering a full copy – you will need this if you are to summarise it in the review</i> A.13.3 No (use for definite 'no') A.13.4 Inadequate information

A.1 Item Title cont'd

A.14 Has QA check been carried out?
(single)

A.14.1 Yes

A.14.2 No

A.15 Extra notes

A.15.1 Please enter any extra notes for this item

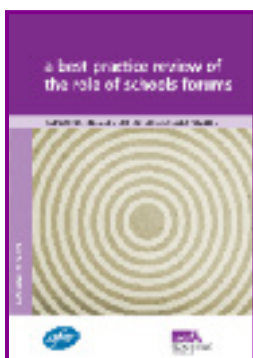
For example, if you feel this item addresses an important issue that is not currently covered by the outcome measures, note it here

Appendix 3 Coding frame

Full reference	
<hr/>	
Research summary/overview	
<hr/>	
Aims	
Key findings	
<hr/>	
About the source	
<hr/>	
Project/ Programme/ Activity/ Intervention	
Type of literature	
Country	
Study population	
Research design/method	
Relevance	Fostering processes
Relevance	Adoption processes
<hr/>	
Review of evidence	
<hr/>	
Overall relevance rating	Highly Mostly Some Limited
Robust design	
Rigorous conduct	
Credible claims	
Reviewer comments	

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



A best practice review of the role of schools forums

The findings from this review indicate that schools forums were generally perceived to have a strong influence on funding decisions by providing a platform for discussion at the strategic level about funding decisions at the local level. Their effectiveness was characterised by connected, proactive and child-centered behaviour.

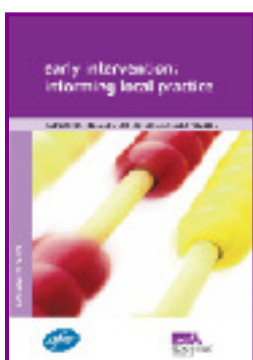
www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGSF01



Hidden talents: a statistical overview of the participation patterns of young people aged 16–24

This report offers a start point for the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned research to inform the Hidden Talents programme. It reviews available statistics, data and commentary to establish what can be reasonably deduced to inform policy in response to young people aged 16–24 years who are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGHT01



Early intervention: informing local practice

The findings from this review of literature shows that the case for investing in early intervention approaches to improve outcomes for children and families and in bringing about cost savings in the longer term is widely accepted and supported. More needs to be done within the UK to identify and evidence the extent of potential cost savings, this will help enable policy makers and local commissioners to make informed commissioning decisions.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGLC02

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

The current financial climate and its impact on local authority service planning and delivery is at the forefront of local decision making. Lead members and officers will want to understand how decisions around service delivery may impact on the experiences of children and young people within the care system.

This report explores children and young people's experiences in relation to:

- their views on decisions made about their care
- the help they receive during their time in care
- arrangements for keeping in contact with birth families
- the information and advice they need.