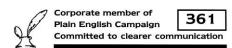# Matching in foster care

Making good decisions for children in care and care leavers

This report sets out our findings from a small research project that explored what contributes to good matching decisions for children in foster care. This project is the first part of a wider research programme that looks at decision-making for children in care, or on the edge of care, and care leavers.

The research activity took place in the summer of 2019 before the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. We are aware of the serious and varied challenges that the pandemic presents to practitioners and carers. Even as we publish this report, the picture is changing. We are confident, however, that our findings remain relevant.

Contents

Executive summary

Matching children to the right foster families is critically important for children's futures. Good matching decisions can help to ensure that fostered children have a secure base, feel loved and can enjoy their lives.

When matches do not work, it leads to further distress and instability for children, many of whom will have already experienced significant previous disruption and trauma. Unsuccessful matches can result in foster carers taking a break from fostering or deciding to stop fostering altogether, contributing further to the long-standing nationwide shortage of foster carers.

Recruiting enough foster families was a significant difficulty for all the local authorities and agencies that we spoke to or visited. Meanwhile, the number of children in care continues to grow, increasing the demand for foster carers.

Despite these constraints, we saw many examples of tenacious, effective work to identify suitable carers for children in need of foster care.

Positive and productive relationships between all relevant parties, including professionals, carers, children and their families, were a crucial ingredient of good practice.

Matching was most effective when high-quality, timely information was shared, based on a detailed understanding and analysis of children's individual needs and foster carers' skills and experiences. Children received up-to-date, accessible information about potential foster carers, and their wishes and feelings influenced the decisions about where they were going to live. In turn, foster carers received balanced, thorough information about children. The right people were involved in developing plans that carefully considered children's day-to-day and long-term care needs.

When these features of good practice were applied, children were more likely to settle well. The right support for children and their carers helped relationships to develop and flourish.

However, this kind of practice was not consistently evident, and there were several important areas for improvement that did not rely on recruiting more foster carers.

Above all, there was considerable scope for a more consistently child-centred approach to matching, including, for example, ensuring that children are prepared as well as possible for a move and that their wishes and feelings are appropriately taken into account throughout the matching process. At a time of enormous significance to their lives, the child's perspective should always be at the heart of matching decisions.

Main findings

- The serious shortage of carers is one of the most significant challenges in making successful matches for children. This shortage is particularly acute when seeking matches for groups of brothers and sisters, disabled children and teenagers.

- We saw many examples of persistent and thoughtful work to match children with the right foster carers, but there were several areas of improvement that did not depend on recruiting more foster carers.

- When children were given good information about their foster carers, it could reassure them and help them to settle and develop a sense of belonging. However, children did not always receive information about their foster carers or feel involved in the decisions and plans about where they were going to live. When they were able to say what they wanted, they did not always believe that their views made a difference to what happened.

- When we asked children what they liked most about their foster home, they said they valued feeling loved and being treated as part of the family. Foster carers' capacity to accept a child into their home and family should be a prime consideration when matching children with foster carers.

- Being able to live with their brothers and sisters was very important to children. If they were not able to live together, they wanted to be able to keep in touch and maintain meaningful and lasting relationships with each other.

- Social workers and professionals who had not been involved at the time of the match were sometimes unable to explain the reasons for matching decisions. This reinforces the importance of effective record-keeping so that people who have experienced being in care can understand how and why decisions were made about their lives.

- The best referrals for a match gave a full and balanced description of the children and represented their wishes and feelings effectively. Some carers and fostering agencies, however, felt that the information that was shared with them about children was too often out of date, incomplete or impersonal.

- Foster carers who felt empowered and confident in their role as part of a wider professional team were typically more likely to ask for additional information about children than carers who felt undervalued or less confident.

- Location of carers was one of the most important considerations when deciding on a match; getting this right meant that a child could, for example, stay at the same school and keep in regular contact with their family.

- Some carers said they had found that the practical demands of supporting children to keep in touch with their birth family were unexpectedly onerous.

- Local authorities generally recognised that more could be done to involve birth families meaningfully in matching decisions; similarly, more could be done to involve previous foster carers and to support their lasting relationships with children.

- We saw little evidence that professionals were looking for exact matches of religion, ethnicity or cultural identity between children and carers, but good efforts were made to address these needs.

- We saw several examples of children who had originally moved in with their foster carers on an emergency or short-term basis but had settled very well and were now being looked after by them permanently as part of their family. When the permanent match had been agreed formally, this helped to effectively address the longer-term support needs for carers and children.

- We found that 'staying put' arrangements[1] have yet to be routinely considered during the assessment and approval of carers or during the matching and commissioning stages.

- We often heard of the intangible and hard-to-predict 'click factor' that existed between some carers and children. Our findings suggest that 'chemistry' depends to a significant degree on good practice that encourages relationships to develop and flourish.

- When discussing individual matches for children, practitioners were able to articulate clearly what had gone well and what could have been better, but this rarely led to wider organisational learning that could improve overall matching practice.

Introduction

This report sets out our findings from a small research project that explored what contributes to good matching decisions for children in foster care. This project is the first part of a wider research programme that looks at decision-making for children in care, or on the edge of care.

The research activity took place in the summer of 2019 before the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. We are aware of the serious and varied challenges that the pandemic presents to practitioners and carers. Even as we publish this report, the picture is changing. We are confident, however, that our findings remain relevant.

Methodology

The research team used a range of methods to engage with stakeholders and gather evidence, including:

- visits to four local authorities, including:
  - case studies of 24 individual children in foster care, including semi-structured interviews with the children and semi-structured interviews or

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[1] A 'staying put' arrangement allows a young person to remain with their former foster carer/s after their 18th birthday, supported by the local authority. See: 'Staying put: arrangements for care leavers aged 18 years and above', Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs, 2013; www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-put-arrangements-for-care-leavers-aged-18-years-and-above.

focus groups with key individuals (such as foster carers, child's social worker, supervising social worker, team manager, independent reviewing officer, family-finder)

– focus groups with key professionals (such as family finders, commissioners, children's social workers, supervising social workers, team managers, independent reviewing officers)

■ meetings with representatives of independent fostering agencies (IFAs)

■ a meeting with a group of birth parents who had experienced their children being in foster care

■ national online surveys of children who are currently fostered, adults with experience of being in foster care, fostering service managers and currently registered foster carers.

For further information about our methodology, please see the separate Appendix.

Background

Matching and sufficiency

The majority (72%) of children in care are looked after by foster carers.[2] The more stable and settled a child's time in foster care has been, the more likely it is that their outcomes will be good.[3,4,5] Unplanned endings to foster care placements create further instability for children. They may also lead to carers taking a break from, or leaving, fostering,[6] leading to even fewer available foster homes for children who need them.

Good matching, therefore, plays a central role in ensuring that fostered children have a secure base, feel loved, and can enjoy their lives. It can ensure that carers are more likely to continue fostering into the future.

The most recent data shows that demand for foster homes has risen, while the number of carers has fallen.[7] In May 2019, the Fostering Network estimated that

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[2] National tables (A2), 'Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019', Department for Education, 2020; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019.

[3] Ott, E., 'Matching in foster care: lessons from research', Community Care Inform Children, 2017.

[4] Zeijlmans, K. et al, 'Matching children with foster carers: a literature review', in 'Children and Youth Services Review', Volume 73, 2016, pages 257–265.

[5] Rubin, D.M. et al, 'The impact of placement stability on behavioural well-being for children in foster care', in 'Pediatrics', Volume 119, Issue 2, 2007, pages 336–344.

[6] Rock, S. et al, 'Understanding foster placement instability for looked after children: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of quantitative and qualitative evidence', in 'British Journal of Social Work', Volume 45, Issue 1, 2013, pages 177–203.

[7] 'Fostering in England 2018 to 2019: Main findings', Ofsted, February 2020; www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-in-england-1-april-2018-to-31-march-2019/fostering-in-england-2018-to-2019-main-findings.

more than 8,500 new carers were needed over the next 12 months to keep up with demand.[8]

This serious shortage of carers is one of the biggest challenges in making successful matches. Recruiting enough foster families was a significant difficulty for all the local authorities and agencies that we spoke to or visited. This meant that compromises were inevitable. Making a decision about the best place for a child to live was often a tricky balancing act between looking for what was ideal and what was possible.

> 'The bottom line is there are not enough placements... With all the matching considerations, geographical, keep at school, need for two carers or can't be placed with other children. With all those things, unfortunately, children's choices are very limited'. (IFA representative)

Over the last five years, the average age of children in care has been steadily increasing.[9] Over three fifths are aged 10 or over, and nearly one quarter are aged 16 or 17. All the local authorities that we visited were increasingly targeting their recruitment activity towards carers who could look after teenagers.

> 'We're just doing a review looking at how we recruit carers [and] what additional support we can offer. Because we need more carers, but we need these carers to reflect our cohort too. For instance, lots of carers want to work with younger children, so how do we give them the confidence to work with older children?' (Service managers' and commissioners' focus group)

The growing number of older children entering care, including victims of criminal exploitation or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, added to the challenges faced by local authorities.

Recruiting more carers who could look after disabled children and groups of brothers and sisters were other significant priorities. A lack of carers from some ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds was also a common problem.

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[8] 'Thousands of new foster families needed this year to help change children's futures', The Fostering Network, May 2019; www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/media-release/2019/thousands-new-foster-families-needed-year-help-change-childrens-futures.
[9] 'Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019', Department for Education, 2020; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019.

The legal context

Guidance on matching is included in the national minimum standards[10] and in statutory guidance.[11]

In summary, the guidance states that:

- children should be carefully matched with carers and the fostering service should only suggest carers who can be reasonably expected to meet the children's needs

- when the match does not exactly meet every need, the placing authority and the fostering provider should make sure that the placement plan identifies any additional training, resources or support required for carers and children

- other than in an emergency, a child must only be placed with a foster carer whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances

- the placing authority should share information about the child with the fostering provider; they in turn should share this information with the carers, so that they can care for the child effectively.

Matching: what matters to children?

Being listened to and involved

Children were clear that they wanted to be involved as much as possible in decision-making. When children were involved, this helped family-finders know what they were looking for from a foster family. It could make sure that carers knew what was important to children, and children could find out more about their carers. Children were more likely to understand how matching decisions were made, and to trust that those making the decisions had their best interests at heart.

Social workers, commissioners and fostering agencies agreed that the involvement of children was critical to effective matching:

> 'Best practice is a pen portrait that the child was involved with. What we really look for is the detail, for instance… trying to understand the child as an individual, understanding their needs before we try and search.' (Placement commissioners' focus group)

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[10] 'Fostering services: national minimum standards', Department for Education, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards.

[11] 'The Children Act 1989: fostering services. Volume 4: statutory guidance on fostering services for looked-after children', HM Government, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-fostering-services.

Independent fostering agencies agreed:

> 'The better referrals are those where they have worked hard to get the young person to say something themselves. They really come alive and are becoming more prevalent now.'

> 'If the social worker could talk more to the children about what is important to them, they might be surprised that it is something that we may consider quite low down on the wish list. What we think is important to the child probably is not the most important thing in their life.'

One local authority had built into its procedures the requirement to consult with older children when making a referral for a placement. The very process of consultation, where the child and social worker sat down together to draft the profile, helped the child to better understand how and why decisions were made:

> 'Now we've got the needs assessment form and with older children we do an 'About me' profile that the child does themselves. It's not always accurate – but we can talk through it.'

Elsewhere, young people on the Children in Care Council had helped develop a template for children's profiles, establishing a process that was more accessible for children and captured issues that were likely to be important to them.

We saw good examples of real commitment and tenacity in working with children to find a match they were happy with:

> 'I sometimes think the placement team hates me because I rejected two possible placements, based on going through with the young person and they are saying "No, that won't work for me".' (Social workers' focus group)

Good practice as articulated in procedures, however, was not yet consistently achieved in practice.

Children were often uncertain about how decisions had been made and had a lack of trust in the amount of influence they could have over those decisions.

> Researcher: What information about you was shared?

> Young person: I don't know. Anything the foster carers wanted to know I think. I wasn't really involved. Although I specified a few things, I feel that even if these things didn't happen, it would not have changed the outcome. (Young person, local authority case study)

Over two thirds of children currently living in foster care who replied to our survey felt they had not been asked about their wishes and feelings before they moved into their foster home. Of those children who said that they had been consulted, very few felt that their views had made a difference.

One care leaver identified several fundamental problems that made it difficult for them to settle in with their new carers:

> 'I didn't know they had a large dog, which I was scared of, and had no choice but to stay there. [I] didn't know that it was a seven-person household and I struggle with lots of people. [I] wish I could have made requests as to what would suit me.' (18- to 21-year-old care leaver, care leavers' survey)

Effective recording

Access to a comprehensive history of the child's experiences and explanations of earlier decisions made for the child are critical for child-centred matching. An accurate record of the child's wishes and feelings helps them to make sense of their experience in care, either at the time or as an adult in the future.

However, children's limited knowledge about how decisions had been made, and the reasons for those decisions, was sometimes mirrored by professionals who had not been involved at the time of the match and not been able to glean this information from case records.[12]

Receiving good information about foster carers and where they are going to live

We heard and saw many examples of good written information about the carers and their home. This information helped children to settle, especially when it included pictures. This could reassure children, empower them to ask questions, and help them to begin seeing themselves as part of the foster family.

However, practice was inconsistent and, overall, children did not feel well informed.

Sometimes, the urgency of the situation limited the amount of information that could be shared with children quickly and easily. Even in emergencies, however, there should be an opportunity to tell children about the foster home before they move. Even small snippets of information about carers could play a vital part in reducing anxiety for children at a time that is already likely to be traumatic. Receiving as much information as circumstances allow about where they are going to live is the very least that children should expect.

Several of the fostering teams we spoke to acknowledged that there was more they could do, such as ensuring that profiles of foster carers were routinely updated and easily available at short notice to share with children. In one area, all newly approved carers had an illustrated profile to share with children, but some longer-

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[12] For more information on the importance of effective case recoding and management, see: MIRRA project, University College London, 2019; www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2019/oct/childrens-voices-omitted-care-records-ucl-study-finds.

standing carers there told us that they had either never produced one or had not updated an earlier profile.

Few survey respondents with either current or past experience of being in care remembered receiving information about their foster home before they moved in. When they had received information, it was often provided too late to help prepare them for the move.

Feeling loved and having a sense of belonging

We asked children what they liked most about their foster home, and they said they valued feeling loved and being treated as part of the family. This echoes findings from previous research about what is important to children in care.[13]

There were different ways in which foster carers in our study helped children to begin to feel valued, loved and part of the family. These varied from producing personalised information for them about the family or the home before they moved in, to ensuring that their new house felt like home by allowing them to decorate their rooms or put up the pictures and posters they wanted. In response to our survey, one young child living in foster care mentioned that they liked 'the pictures of me on the wall', something that most children might ordinarily take for granted.

Love and commitment were commonly occurring themes among our survey respondents, particularly for care leavers when looking back at what was important to them. One adult care leaver (from the 30- to 39-year-old age group) noted that 'The best foster home made me a part of the family. They loved, hugged and encouraged me. They also told [the] local authority that I was not leaving until I was ready'. This feeling of commitment and unconditional love is very important to children's feelings of security and stability.

Social workers should consider carefully whether carers have the capacity to accept the child as part of their home and family. Some children and care leavers told us about feeling segregated from other members of their foster family, feeling 'on parade' and generally being treated differently:

> 'It felt like a parallel universe in comparison to the rest of the house. You knew this was the foster child's food, room, bath stuff etc. etc… Everything was very separate.' (30- to 39-year old care leaver, care leavers' survey)

This care leaver reflected further on this feeling of difference:

> '[I] felt it in how I was treated, introduced and even how I was supported. I had adequate everything with no love in my first placement.'

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[13] Sinclair, I., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, I., 'A life more ordinary: what children want from foster placements', in 'Adoption and Fostering', Volume 25, Issue 4, 2001, pages 17–26.

Living with brothers and sisters

Research tells us that children who live with their brothers and sisters are more likely to have close relationships with their foster carers and to like living in their foster home.[14] Living together, or maintaining positive sibling relationships, can be a protective factor for children's mental health.[15,16]

Several children in our survey mentioned that the thing they most liked about their foster home was that they were able to live with their brothers and sisters. Conversely, other children identified that being separated from their siblings was the thing they disliked most about their foster home.

The law expects that children should be able to remain living with their brothers and sisters 'so far as is reasonably practicable in all the circumstances'.[17] The local authorities we visited sought to keep brothers and sisters together wherever possible. Sometimes, assessments of individual children's best interests led to decisions to separate siblings. However, sometimes the decisions were based on more practical considerations and reflected the limited choice of suitable carers:

> 'When it started they had four siblings... They split them, as to try and place them [together] is really difficult. They are very few and far between. They… split the olders and the youngers.' (Independent reviewing officer, case study interview)

Even if they are not able to live together, maintaining meaningful relationships with their brothers and sisters was very important to children and should be a significant consideration when matching them with a foster carer.[18]

Other children in the foster home

Many children told us they liked having other children to play with in their foster home. The absence of other children in the household was often identified as something they would have liked to be different. Although research has indicated that there is no clear link between having other children in the fostering household and placement outcomes,[19] we saw benefits of this for some children.

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[14] Hegar, R.L. and Rosenthal, J.A., 'Foster children placed with or separated from siblings: outcomes based on a national sample', in 'Children and Youth Services Review', Volume 33, Issue 7, July 2011, pages 1,245–1,253.

[15] Jones, C., 'Sibling relationships in adoptive and fostering families: a review of the international research literature', in 'Children & Society', Volume 30, 2015, pages 324–334.

[16] McBeath, B. et al, 'Intervening to improve outcomes for siblings in foster care: conceptual, substantive, and methodological dimensions of a prevention science framework', in 'Child Youth Services Review', Volume 39:, 2014, pages 1–10.

[17] Section 22C(7)(b) and (8)(c), Children Act 1989; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/22C/2015-04-01.

[18] Kenyon, P. and Forde E, 'Thousands of siblings split up in care system', BBC News, January 2020; www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51095939.

[19] Berridge, D., 'Fostering now: messages from research: a summary', in 'Fostering & Adoption', Volume 29, Issue 4, 2005, pages 6–8.

In our case studies, we saw several examples of when a child already living in the home helped a new child to settle in. For example, we saw one child placed with another child from a similar cultural background. They shared a common language and religion. They were able to enjoy cooking familiar food together. Another child moved into a home with children who had also gone into care while their brother or sister remained living at home. Again, this shared experience helped the child to settle in.

As well as other foster children, the children in our case studies developed good relationships with the carers' birth children and grandchildren. Sometimes, placing children in a more extended family was a conscious decision during the matching process:

> '… there's another young person in place, and the daughter and the grandchildren, it has that very homely feel. And I think because [child] came from quite a large family himself, I considered that to be a really good thing for him.' (Social worker, case study interview)

Pets

The importance of pets to children was mentioned with striking frequency, particularly dogs. Several of our case studies highlighted the role of a family pet in getting the child interested in a potential foster home, or in settling them in. A supervising social worker said:

> 'It's how you explain it to someone that age to get them on board, get them excited about meeting the dog for instance.'

One child had received an introduction booklet produced by the family dog.

Some research identifies that children may find it easier to engage with animals than other humans and they are often used in therapies to help them process trauma and to develop positive attachment relationships.[20,21] In cases where children had left pets behind when they moved to their foster home, having another pet to play with and care for in their new home had helped them settle in, and several social workers had taken this into account when matching children with carers.

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[20] Morris M., 'Animal magic – using the Health and Social Care Standards for looked after children', in 'Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care', Volume 17, Issue 4, 2018, pages 1–7.
[21] Luke, N. et al, 'What works in preventing and treating poor mental health in looked after children?' NSPCC and Rees Centre (University of Oxford), 2014.

Matching: what matters to foster carers?

Receiving good information about children

Whenever we asked social workers to talk to us about individual children, their answers were invariably rich in detail, affection and insight. Their responses gave a vivid view of children's likes and dislikes and what made them 'tick'.

This contrasted markedly with what we heard about the variable quality and depth of information about children that was shared with carers at the matching stage.

Information was limited by how long children had been known to children's social services. When a move had been planned and children were already known to the local authority, carers were more likely to have seen the child's profile, spoken to the child's social worker and even met the child. When the child had been moved in an emergency, carers were much more likely to report that they had known nothing about the child before they moved in. Often, the information we heard about the children had been gathered and shared with carers later, after the children had moved in.

One foster carer gave a very good example of why receiving information at the matching stage, or as soon as possible, can really help the match to work and improve the relationship:

> 'We adored her, but if we'd just been told such a simple piece of information then actually it would have all made sense… there was so much information we found out in the week before she left that actually would have made such a difference!
>
> I think every child I've had, I've found out a lot of information later on. Sometimes it's not too bad, but sometimes it's actually quite significant… you may have addressed a situation a different way, or you may have understood it better. I just think it's a shame.'

In several cases, the gaps in initial information were not addressed retrospectively, and some foster carers referred to information that they had been given that later turned out to be incorrect or out of date:

> 'Most of what we were told was not actually factual but hearsay from previous carers. A lot of false accusations regarding the child.' (Foster carer, five to nine years' experience, survey)
>
> 'We had some concerns initially as it said on his record that he scratches and bites… we questioned that, and it happened when he first came into care, and he doesn't do that anymore, but it was still on his record.' (Foster carer, case study)

Some carers believed that information was deliberately withheld so as not to deter them from agreeing to look after a child. They were clear that they needed the full picture:

> 'Just because a child comes with a 'label' such as drugs, arson, doesn't mean a carer will say no to a placement. It does erode trust with the local authority or agency if information is deliberately withheld. More importantly, it can lead to a placement breakdown.' (Foster carer, one to four years' experience, survey)

This mistrust contributed to some isolated views from carers that having no information was better than inaccurate information. One carer told our survey:

> 'I don't want to know anything… often papers written by individuals are biased and I like to have a clean sheet.' (Foster carer, five to nine years' experience, survey)

Most carers, however, felt that the more information they had, the more informed a choice they could make. It provided the opportunity for foster carers to improve their understanding of individual children and adapt their support strategies accordingly. There was a common agreement that, if information is not shared effectively, it could have significant implications for children, including the risk of further instability.[22,23]

Receiving good information from previous carers

Information from previous carers was generally important to foster carers. Carers found this kind of first-hand knowledge invaluable. It could help new carers to understand a child better and offer the necessary continuity and consistency:

> 'We all met together a week before introductions started. We had discussions about what it is like looking after [child]… This is about how [child] is feeling, this is how we deal with this…' (Social worker, case study interview)

However, some carers reported that local authorities did not readily facilitate this and left it to the initiative of individual carers to speak to previous carers.

Not all young people with experience of care were happy with the idea that information about them had been shared in advance, as they worried that carers might form a negative opinion of them before ever meeting. They were more positive, however, about potential carers receiving information from a previous carer if the child had been involved in producing, or had seen, that information.

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[22] Rock, S. et al, 'Understanding foster placement instability for looked after children: a systematic review and narrative synthesis of quantitative and qualitative evidence', in 'The British Journal of Social Work', Volume 45, Issue 1, 2015, pages 177–203.
[23] Street, E. and Davies, M., 'Assessing and matching foster care relationships: an interactional framework', in 'Adoption & Fostering', Volume 23, Issue 2, 1999, pages 31–41.

Being treated as a professional

Foster carers who felt empowered and confident in their role as part of a wider professional team were typically likely to be more proactive in seeking information about children, including from previous carers. One carer said:

> 'Any child that comes to us always has an 'All about me' book. We will not take a child without one.' (Foster carer, five to nine years' experience, foster carers' survey)

In most areas, the inclusion of foster carers in meetings about the child was embedded in practice, and their input was genuinely considered. Many carers that we spoke to told us that they felt respected and supported as part of the professional group around the child. Decision-makers we spoke to recognised how this was a critical factor in achieving good outcomes for children:

> 'The two social workers that have been involved have been really respectful of the carers, which isn't always the case but that's been really, really key. The carers feel like "we're all in it together"... we shared all we have, we were very open, they read all the files – and I think that's one of the reasons why it was successful. Because that's not always standard practice. Carers quite often say they don't know half the facts.' (Supervising social worker, case study interview)

However, foster carers in one focus group said that the level of information they received and their involvement in decision-making depended too much on individual social workers' approaches.

> 'I think that... some of them don't necessarily see us as professionals and they don't treat you as one.'

According to our survey of fostering service managers, carers' experience and skills and their ability to meet the child's individual needs were the most important considerations when deciding on a match. Foster carers, on the other hand, commonly believed that having a vacancy was the main reason for being matched with a child. This may, in part, reflect the fact that an ideal match is not always possible – but it perhaps shows carers did not always hear the important message that their particular skills and experience were also important factors when deciding on a match.

The involvement of foster carers' birth children

'Children who foster' is a commonly used phrase to describe carers' birth children and is an apt description of the central role they play in fostering.

Many foster carers told us that the potential impact on their birth child(ren) was an important consideration when deciding whether to look after a child. Carers often sought their children's views so that they had a direct influence on the match. For example:

'… my own children don't want young children. They want eight [years old] and above, so I have to respect what they want as well, otherwise it wouldn't work.' (Foster carers' focus group)

Many studies have identified that relationships were more likely to thrive when there was an age gap between birth and foster children, particularly when the birth children were older and could be involved in a 'caring' capacity.[24] Some carers were very clear in requiring a gap in ages between the foster child and their birth children.

Carers and professionals alike recognised that fostering has a strong impact on carers' children and overall family dynamics. Local authorities and agencies placed a high value on investing time and resources in engaging and supporting birth children:

'Training and recruitment need to understand and embrace where the birth children are, and what it all means to them. It's particularly hard for primary-school-age children to have children come into the house [who] will require 100+% of the parents' attention, display behaviours they haven't seen before etc. I have seen placements that disrupt because the impact on the birth children hadn't been appreciated.' (Independent reviewing officer, case study interview)

Birth children need appropriate help to understand the behaviours that they may be seeing. They need space to have time with their parents. Some foster carers suggested that often these concerns were not always given enough priority.

We did, however, hear good examples of when carers' children had received specialist support to help them understand their own feelings as well as the feelings and behaviour of the foster child. One local authority, for example, began to develop relationships at an early stage with children who foster, by involving them to 'skills to foster' training. They also matched some existing foster carers with applicants during the assessment process:

'[They had] children of similar ages. They spent time as two families together. It gave those children a better sense of what might happen.' (Social workers' focus group)

Positive relationships with, and support from, carers' children (including adult birth children) enhanced fostered children's experiences of family life:

'The support and involvement of birth grandchildren and children who spent time with foster children helps them to feel part of the family. We were all pulling in the same direction.' (Foster carer, case study interview)

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[24] Hojer, I, Sebba, J. and Luke, N., 'The impact of fostering on foster carers' children – an international literature review', Rees Centre (University of Oxford), 2013.

The impact of fostering on the birth child needs to be carefully considered at the matching stage, but also reviewed and supported on an ongoing basis.

Additional support and training

We often heard from carers about the additional support the local authority had put in place to help them meet a child's needs. This included increased contact from supervising social workers, useful practical assistance (such as taxis to support the school run) and help from specialist individuals or services (such as psychologists). This additional support was more likely to be provided when carers were relatively new, or to meet a child's specific needs.

Although there were acknowledged and clear benefits to offering carers the additional support, it was not always easy to secure. Carers' needs were sometimes initially addressed through training before agreement was given to an enhanced package of support.

Other matching considerations

Location

The location of carers was a key matching consideration for decision-makers. Finding carers in the right area might mean a child could:

- be near their family and friends (or live away from their home area if that was in their best interests)
- have access to specific support they needed
- stay at the same school.

However, the latest data from the Department for Education (at the end of March 2019) showed that only one fifth of children in foster care lived 20 miles or fewer from their home community, and only half lived within the boundary of their local authority.[25] An all-party parliamentary group (APPG) inquiry into children missing from care in 2012 found that living away from family and friends can lead to children going missing and subsequently being groomed or exploited.[26]

Research demonstrates a negative correlation between changes of either foster home or school and children's educational attainment.[27] School can be an important source of stability for children at a time when other parts of their lives are subject to

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[25] 'Children looked after including adoption: 2018 to 2019', Department for Education, 2020; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019.
[26] 'Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care. The APPG for runaway and missing children and adults and the APPG for looked after children and care leavers', Department for Education, June 2012; www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-from-the-joint-inquiry-into-children-who-go-missing-from-care.
[27] Sebba, J. et al, 'The educational progress of looked after children in England: linking care and educational data', Rees Centre, University of Oxford and University of Bristol, 2015.

change or uncertainty. The local authorities we visited recognised this and tried hard to avoid additional disruption:

> 'Unfortunately, we didn't get much choice in terms of location, but we ensured that… he still went to the same school and could still see his sister. And these carers have done that, although they are a bit out of the way.' (Social worker's manager, case study interview)

Location was significant for foster carers too. If they were not close to suitable schools or the child's home area, they were less likely to be able to look after school-age children or those who would need to see their families regularly.

Although children rarely said that location was important, they did like being able to remain at the same school or continue to see their family, and this was made possible by choosing carers in the right location.

Ethnicity and cultural identity

There is no legal requirement in fostering to match children's ethnicity, culture, language and faith with the background of their carers. The Children Act 1989 guidance states that 'foster carers and fostering services should ensure that full attention is paid to the individual child's gender, faith, ethnic origin, cultural and linguistic background, sexual orientation and any disability they might have', and that foster carers must be 'informed, trained and confident' at dealing with issues relating to these characteristics.[28]

Our research found that the matching decision was more likely to be influenced by carers' availability, location, skills or experience than religion, ethnicity or cultural identity. However, children's cultural needs were considered to some degree in all the areas we visited.

Social workers often told us about the ways in which they met these needs when the foster carers themselves were of a different background to the children. In one of our case studies, for example, a match for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child with a family of a different ethnic group had worked, in part because:

> '… there was a strong religious similarity… so, they were Muslim, they live in an area that's quite multi-cultural, there's a mosque literally two minutes' walk from the house…' (Social worker, case study interview)

One foster carer we spoke to stated, like many survey respondents, that culture was not a concern: 'We've looked after children from every culture and religion. There's no difference.'

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[28] 'The Children Act 1989: fostering services. Volume 4: statutory guidance on fostering services for looked-after children', HM Government, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-fostering-services.

In practice, she had proactively sought to meet children's cultural and religious needs, including seeking peer support from other foster carers and accessing resources in the local community. Living with other children from a similar heritage and, in particular, with the same language had enabled the child to share cultural experiences and religious practices.

One foster parent articulated powerfully the benefits of a strong match of culture and ethnicity:

> 'I have heard carers… saying that it shouldn't matter what race the children or carers are, as long as they are being nurtured and looked after. But when you hear black kids say, 'I don't want to be black anymore', or 'Do you like being black?' there are obviously some issues around that. I think it is important… He knows he is Jamaican, so he has taken an interest in Jamaican things. We've not had to make any special efforts to give him Jamaican food or culture as it's part of the family.' (Foster carer, case study interview)

Some foster carers talked of informal training between themselves on practical issues, such as how to maintain Afro-textured hair. Overall, however, social workers and foster carers would benefit from more training opportunities to help them understand how to support trans-cultural matching more effectively.

Children currently in foster care did not often specifically mention culture or ethnicity as an important factor. For some care leavers responding to our survey, where there was not a close ethnic match, this could be outweighed by having a good overall experience:

> 'I had a positive experience in care. Matching was not positive in regard to ethnicity. However, the carers were lovely and very supportive… I had a safe home to live in.' (30- to 39-year-old care leaver, care leavers' survey)

However, we did hear from care leavers and foster carers about some aspects of living with carers of a different ethnic background that had a negative impact on their experience:

> '… my carer tried to do my Afro hair with European products and accessories and it hurt. It was annoying and it was the wrong products. I hated it and complained and I was moved…' (Care leaver, 30- to 39-year-old, care leavers' survey)

The Muslim Fostering Project report (2019) argues that effective matching requires social workers to be able to understand and interpret the diverse cultures that exist in England – to be 'culturally competent'.[29]

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[29] 'The Muslim Fostering Project: Report', The Fostering Network, 2019; www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/muslim-fostering-project.

Involvement of birth parents

> 'We work hard to engage with birth parents and make sure relationships are as positive as can be. If they are important to the children, they are important to us.' (Foster carer, case study)

There was a broad agreement that involving children's birth parents effectively in the decision-making and planning was likely to help children to settle with their new foster carers. This was particularly important to birth parents themselves, who felt that their involvement in the early planning of a placement meant that future good relationships with professionals and foster carers were more likely.

> 'It's also important [that] mum is really happy with the carers and relays that message to the children. Helping the children to settle and feel safe, as they have been given mum's blessing'.

> 'The birth family and foster carers are working together and it's okay. That's made a real big difference and those children have managed to settle a lot better than before. They were worrying about what's mum and dad going to think, what can I and can't I say. It helps them feel very relaxed.' (Foster carer, case study)

It was rare – usually because of the limited choice of carers – that parents were able to have a say in whether a child should move to a prospective carer. More commonly, their involvement and input informed the search for a match. But such consultation was not routine in all local authorities: '… sometimes we consult with parents about what they would like for their child', Local authority social worker.

It was more difficult to engage birth parents when relationships were tense, but we encountered several examples where disagreements about the overall plan for children did not prevent professionals seeking the views of birth parents:

> '… having made the decision that the foster carers were going to be the long-term carers for the children… mum actually sent an email to say that she approved of it. She wasn't saying that she didn't want the children back but she was saying that, in the scheme of things, that actually she appreciated this couple and approved of them as carers for her children.' (Independent reviewing officer, case study interview)

Local authorities too acknowledged that more could be done to involve birth parents. Parents who we spoke to did not feel as fully engaged with decision-making as they would have liked, and felt that some of the important information they had about their children should have contributed to the matching process more.

Lasting relationships

Keeping in touch with birth families

We have already addressed the importance to children of maintaining links with their brothers and sisters if they are not able to live with them. Contact with birth families was often an important consideration when matching children to carers too.

If the child's plan specified that they would see their parents frequently, carers were often chosen because they were able to support and encourage these relationships:

> '… location was a big factor as they were still seeing parents three times a week back then.' (Social worker, case study interview)

However, some foster carers saw this responsibility as too onerous. This feeling could be exacerbated by carers' lack of understanding at the matching stage of the likely demands.

Some carers had developed positive relationships with children's birth families and managed contact independently. However, carers who supported families staying in touch through more formal arrangements reported varying experiences of support. Some felt that social workers listened to their concerns about the level or timing of contact, and were willing to challenge the decision, while other social workers were seen as more likely to stick too rigidly to an agreed plan:

> 'They need to know who their family are. If they didn't see them, I think they're more likely to go with their feet and find them. So, I can see why we need to do it, but you need a good social worker who can see that the needs change and respond to it.' (Foster carers' focus group)

In our survey, fewer than half of carers believed that their supervising social worker helped them to manage the arrangements for children to see their birth family. As this is often such an important part of the foster carer's role, it is vitally important that social workers plan and provide support for carers in managing the children's family time and the children's reactions to this.

Previous foster carers

Some of our case studies highlighted the importance of keeping in touch with previous carers. Many of the foster carers that we met told us about former foster children, now adults, with whom they were still in regular contact. One was soon to give away a former foster child at their wedding.

One child in our case studies had returned to live with former foster carers. The carers had kept in touch with the child's social workers and received regular news about the child's progress. When the child's situation changed and the local authority was seeking a new foster home, the fact that these carers already had a relationship with the child was recognised as a significant advantage:

'… it's also about not minimising attachment. We don't always do it well to keep children in contact with people who have been so important to them, previous carers notably. [The sister] still gets to see [carers] through [the child] and that's also so important for her.' (Independent reviewing officer, case study interview)

The family finder involved in this match concluded:

'That's a lesson learnt for me, as we used to just tail off contact with previous carers, and now we know it's [often] important to keep this contact rather than sever this link.'

The Fostering Network has highlighted that, even though the importance of loss and attachment is widely understood, the relationship between foster carer and child is not always recognised. Their research showed one third of foster carers and one third of children and young people had been prevented from keeping in touch, and over half of the children and young people in care and care leavers said they were not supported at all.[30] Some carers were unaware that it was possible to keep in touch after the children had left their care.[31]

Planning for the future

Achieving permanence

We saw many examples of children staying with carers permanently after originally moving there on an emergency or short-term basis. However, the rationale for agreeing a permanent match was not always clear and we did not always see evidence that this match had been formally agreed. If a placement simply drifts into permanence, there is a risk that children's long-term support needs, at different stages of their childhood, will not be properly considered.

Staying put

In our case studies, carers and professionals recognised 'staying put'[32] as a positive initiative that increased stability for children and young people. We heard about many examples of young people staying with their foster carers beyond 18.

However, there was sometimes a vagueness about staying-put plans, particularly during matching and early planning stages:

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[30] Swain, V., 'Keep connected: maintaining relationships when moving on', The Fostering Network, 2016; www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/keep-connected.

[31] 'Not forgotten: the importance of keeping in touch with former foster carers', The Fostering Network, 2019; www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/keep-connected.

[32] 'Staying put: arrangements for care leavers aged 18 year and above', Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs, May 2013; www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-put-arrangements-for-care-leavers-aged-18-years-and-above.

'I suppose I'm not talking to [the foster carers] about the future. I get the impression that they're happy for him to remain there... it strikes me that they are viewing it long-term. Although I've not directly had that conversation.' (Social worker, case study interview)

Typically, conversations specifically about staying-put options were not held until a child became 16 years old, or later. Our findings suggest that staying put has yet to be routinely integrated into practice during the assessment and approval of carers or later, during the matching and commissioning stages.

When children are living with IFA carers, this situation could be even more complicated. Many of the IFA representatives we spoke to identified complexities around staying put, due to inadequate support or financial compensation from local authorities. Despite a recent narrowing of the gap, young people living with local-authority-approved foster carers are 16% more likely to stay with their foster carers beyond 18 than young people with IFA carers.[33]

Chemistry

In one of our case studies, a social worker told us what she thought about the relationship between a young person and his carers:

'I know that this probably sounds like a ridiculous, hippyish thing to say but there's just something that actually you can't map out on paperwork. A little bit of magic almost happened.' (Child's social worker, case study)

This was undoubtedly a successful match that had, on paper, not seemed feasible:

Supervising social worker (to children's social worker): 'You could have looked at them and said, this doesn't look like it on paper and said no... alternatively you could have said, I've got no other choice, let's go ahead. But you went to see them...'

Social worker: 'You're right, it was seeing them. And when I met them I was struck by how open-minded, how tolerant, how lovely, how kind, and how thoughtful they were. And that was the bit that hadn't really come through in the paperwork, because that's the soft information about people...'

Supervising social worker: 'I think it's part of the magic isn't it, that you can't necessary work out from Form Fs and assessments and so on. You have to see it and understand it.'

This case study was typical of several in which foster carers and social workers spoke of something intangible or unpredictable that had made the match work – the 'click'

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[33] 'Fostering in England 2018 to 2019: Main findings', Ofsted, 2020; www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-in-england-1-april-2018-to-31-march-2019/fostering-in-england-2018-to-2019-main-findings.

or chemistry that research tells us can be an important factor in creating stability and should be considered when making matching decisions and planning care.[34] In these cases, there was a 'connection' or the child 'just fitted in'.

To some extent, the 'chemistry' had developed over time and was not so easily identifiable at the matching stage. But these cases were usually characterised further by one or more aspects of good matching practice that had clearly helped to provide a base on which relationships could develop and flourish.

Decisions were based on a thorough knowledge of the carers and children. Comprehensive and balanced information allowed the personalities of children and carers to shine through and was shared effectively. Carers had particular skills that helped them to relate well to children and understand behaviour.

Our findings suggest that 'chemistry' depends to a large degree on good practice, which provides a foundation on which relationships can develop and flourish.

Conclusion

> 'It is not always possible to predict how a match will work but the best predictors are warm, well-supported, resilient carers with the commitment and flexibility to embrace a child within their family and social workers who know their children well and can paint a fair and balanced picture of the support they need.' (Fostering services manager, survey response)

As we have seen, the needs of children, foster carers and indeed decision-makers themselves can vary greatly. Trying to balance these needs when matching children with carers is often a complex process. This is made more difficult in the context of a shortage of foster carers and a changing profile of the children in care population.

All our conversations pointed to the shortage of suitable carers as being the most significant barrier to making good matches. We saw many thoughtful and effective ways to address shortfalls in matches that were, on paper, less than ideal. We also saw some very creative practice. Social workers and carers regularly made great efforts to understand and meet the needs of children, and often in difficult circumstances.

When discussing individual children, practitioners were able to tell us what had gone well and reflect on where matching practice could have been better. Support was usually readily available to practitioners to help them reflect on practice.

There was little evidence, however, that this had translated into wider organisational learning that could improve overall practice across the service. For example, meetings to consider potential learning from an unplanned ending – sometimes

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[34] Sinclair, I. and Wilson, K., 'Matches and mismatches: the contribution of carers and children to the success of foster placements', in 'British Journal of Social Work', Volume 33, Issue 7, 2003, pages 871–884.

known as 'disruption meetings' – were not always held, even when required by local authority policy.

There were several areas of practice that can be improved to promote good matches.

Above all, the matching process must be child-centred. For example, children should be prepared well for a move. They should be involved as much as possible in creating the information that is shared with carers. Decisions should always take their wishes and feelings into account.

Children need to know as much as possible about the people they will be living with before they move in, including through meeting them first and visiting the house wherever possible. Similarly, carers need to have good information about children so that they can provide appropriate care that is sensitive to their individual needs.

Relationships are central to good matching. Good practice in all relevant aspects of matching can really help these to develop and flourish. As one independent reviewing officer we spoke to said:

> 'Social work without relationships just doesn't work. The young people that I meet recognise the values of these relationships. The carers and professionals aren't a string of workers, they are individuals of significance to them.' (Independent reviewing officer, case study interview)

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Scope of the research

This research focused exclusively on children in short-term, long-term and emergency foster care. It excluded children living with family or friends who were approved as foster carers (also called 'connected persons' or 'kinship' carers). A future phase of the good decisions project may look at the distinct issues relating to decisions about children living with family or friends foster carers.

While we do not underestimate the impact that the commissioning and procurement process can have on the matching process,[35] this project looked specifically at the decisions involved in choosing a foster family, and not at the decisions about what kind of care the child needed (for example, foster care versus children's home), or the approval of foster carers.

Methodology

The research used a range of methods to engage with stakeholders and gather evidence:

- Visits to four **local authorities**, including:
  - six case studies of individual children in foster care, which involved semi-structured interviews with the child (where appropriate) and semi-structured interviews or focus groups with significant people involved in the child's life (for example, foster carers, child's social worker, supervising social worker, team manager, independent reviewing officer, family finder)
  - focus groups with professionals in the local authorities to gain a wider perspective on the policy, culture and procedures surrounding matching (for example, family finders, commissioners and recruitment specialists; foster carers; and social workers).

- Two focus groups with representatives from a total of 21 **independent fostering agencies** (IFAs) to explore whether, and in which ways, their approach to matching differs from that of local authorities and how they work with local authorities to agree a match. These focus groups were held in London and Manchester, with a mix of independent and group-owned IFAs.

- Engagement with four **birth parents**, facilitated by Family Rights Group, to explore their involvement in the matching process

- **Nationwide online surveys** of children and adults who are currently fostered or have experience of being in foster care (76), fostering service managers (75) and currently registered foster carers (1,005). This allowed

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[35] Hayes, D., 'Policy: commissioning – placement planning', Children & Young People Now, May 2020.

us to gather a wider range of views to help us triangulate the qualitative evidence we gathered in our case studies.

All research was subject to ethical clearance and every effort has been made to anonymise contributions from those taking part in the report.

Sampling

We selected local authorities and IFAs according to the following criteria:

- they did not have an inadequate Ofsted judgement

- they did not have an upcoming inspection (between January 2019 and July 2019)

- they were not currently in a state of flux.

We identified four local authorities, including a pilot, which voluntarily agreed to take part. These were:

- two large 'shire' counties

- one metropolitan authority

- one London authority.

Each participating local authority provided details of 12 cases, from which we selected six case studies according to the following criteria:

- age range (five to eight, nine to 13, and 14 to 17)

- representative mix of gender and ethnicity

- one who had lived in three or more foster homes/with three or more foster families

- one living with IFA carers

- one placed out of area.

The two IFA focus groups covered a mixture of:

- large, medium and small agencies

- independent/belonging to an organisation

- voluntary and private

- north and south.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this research. First, the local authorities that took part were from a narrow geographical spread, predominately from the south-east area of the country, which means that some of the issues experienced, such as high house prices, may not be representative of all areas.

Second, due to the need to gain consent, local authorities selected their own pool of case studies from which we chose the children to include. Even though the project was undertaken in a research rather than inspection capacity, it is possible that participating authorities identified cases that demonstrated particular practice that they wanted to highlight.

Third, the original research design included interviewing parents, but our pilot found that the distress caused by carrying out these interviews potentially outweighed the benefit. Consequently, we sought the views of parents not related to our case studies through focus groups.

Finally, because of the sensitive nature of the research, we only tried to talk to children aged 13 and over, and then only when appropriate. We let the young people feed back to us in whatever format they chose, for example by phone or email, but even then, we only managed to hear directly from a small number of the children in our case studies.

Language

From the outset of this project, we have tried to be mindful of the language used when discussing children in care and the sometimes negative connotations of certain words and phrases. In its report on 'Language that cares',[36] TACT worked with children in care to come up with alternative terminology that was less likely to 'other' them. The TACT report includes some words that were commonly used in our discussions about matching, as well as our survey results. For example, the words placement, respite, contact, birth parents and siblings, which came up frequently in our discussions with social workers, carers and the children themselves, are all considered to be too formal or procedural, and therefore have the potential to stigmatise children in care.

For many of these words, we have tried to use alternatives that describe the experiences of children, rather than use 'professional' language. However, we also wanted to be transparent about the various aspects of matching and use words that would be understood by the people involved in the process. In addition, in many instances the words used are direct quotes, and we have left them in to ensure we were true to our research participants.

Although the term 'matching' itself may be imperfect, and we did consider alternative titles for this project, we found there to be a lack of suitable alternatives that are easily understood when describing the process.

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[36] Oritz, S., 'Language that cares – changing the way professionals talk about children in care', TACT Fostering and Adoption, 2019; www.tactcare.org.uk/news/language-that-cares.

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