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Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care

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Department for Education

Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care

Research report

December 2015

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Contents

Executive summary 6

Introduction 6

Aim and Methodology 6

Key findings 7

Conclusion 9

Recommendations 10

Introduction 12

The statutory context for children returning home to their families 13

The broader policy context 13

The legal status of a child 13

The definition of return home from care 15

Research context 15

Research aims and objectives 15

Methodology 16

Terminology 19

Data on local authority rates of reunification 19

Existing research evidence 20

An overview of local authorities' reunification policies and use of research evidence 22

Do authorities have a specific policy on reunification? 22

Is policy or practice around reunification evidence based? 23

Discussion of research evidence and effective practice in the findings 24

The Findings 26

Section One: The point at which reunification is considered as a possibility 27

When is reunification considered as an option? 27

Factors influencing when reunification is considered 28

Triggers for considering reunification 30

Section Two: The assessment and decision making process 32

The approach taken to the assessment and decision-making process 33

The range of issues considered during the assessment and decision-making process 34

How is risk assessed? 35

Who is involved in the decision-making? 35

Parents' understanding of the assessment and decision-making process 36

The use of family group conferences in the assessment and decision-making process 36

The impact of the revised Public Law Outline on the assessment and decision-making process 37

The impact of risk aversion 38

Section Three: The planning process and a child's transition home from care 40

The approach taken to the planning and transition processes 40

Promoting contact between children and their families 42

The use of phased returns home 42

The role of multi-agency working 43

Processes intended to strengthen and facilitate planning and transition 44

Families' experiences of involvement in the planning and transition process 45

Families' experiences of the transition timeframe 46

Section Four: The services available to support reunification and the provision of those services before and after return home from care 49

Local structures for delivering support 50

The range of support services available 51

Length and intensity of support 52

The provision of multi-agency support 54

The role of carers as a source of support 55

Stepping down support services 56

Families' experiences of support throughout the reunification process 57

Addressing the support needs of the entire family 59

Section Five: Post reunification monitoring and review 61

Maintaining a strategic overview of support provision 61

Co-ordinating support in individual cases 62

Post reunification breakdown 63

Monitoring numbers of children re-referred or re-entering care/accommodation 63

Section Six: Staff training and supervision 65

Disseminating best practice 65

Supervision 66

Conclusions and recommendations 67

The use of research evidence as a basis for policy or practice 67

Dissonance between reunification theory and practice 68

Tailoring approaches to different groups of children 68

Enablers and barriers to implementing effective practice based on research evidence 69

Recommendations 69

Appendices 72

Appendix One: Flowchart illustrating local authority care planning duties related to reunification 72

References 73

List of Tables

Table 1 Distribution of research participants by local authority site 18

Executive summary

Introduction

Reunification with family is the most common outcome for looked after children in England (Department of Education, 2014a). An increased policy focus in recent years has included reunification and re-entry to care data in the Improving Permanence for Looked after Children Data Pack (Department for Education, 2013) and the inclusion of reunification as part of the Children in Care research priority (Department for Education, 2014b). In addition, NSPCC has recently implemented the Taking Care practice framework in nine local authorities, intended to provide a more robust and evidence-based system of assessment and decision-making when children return home from care (Hyde-Dryden et al., 2015). The Taking Care practice framework has subsequently formed the basis for work, being jointly carried out by the University of Bristol and NSPCC, commissioned by the Department for Education (Farmer, 2015a; Farmer, 2015b; Wilkins and Farmer, 2015; Wilkins, 2015).

Aim and Methodology

This research carried out by the National Children's Bureau and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University formed part of a wider project to explore local authority reunification practice; to develop a peer learning environment for sharing good practice; and to disseminate that knowledge. The research explored how, and to what extent, local authorities implement, embed and monitor effective practice in respect of children who return home from care. It was also designed to understand the facilitators and barriers to achieving successful reunification.

The research involved a rapid review of the existing literature followed by a series of case studies in eight local authorities. The case studies included the following data collection:

- in-depth telephone interviews with eleven senior managers (based on a possible two interviews in each local authority);
- a total of eighteen focus groups were held across six local authorities. This comprised of one focus group with commissioners, senior and middle tier managers; one with frontline social care workers including team managers, and

one with representatives from other agencies that support return home in each authority;

- face to face interviews with 22 parents or carers, and nine children aged six to eighteen years

Key findings

The research findings are presented in six sections based around the different stages of the reunification process identified by existing research.

The point at which reunification is considered a possibility:

- there is an emphasis on the importance of considering reunification in the early part of the child's care journey
- the nature and function of a children's social care team determines their approach to reunification
- improved communication is needed between professionals and birth families
- social workers are required to use their professional judgement to plan for multiple reunification scenarios and be ready to adapt their approach
- a more proactive approach to considering reunification is needed where children have been looked after for a period of time

The assessment and decision making process:

- there is an emphasis on the importance of a comprehensive assessment process focused on the best interests of the child
- the practice of evidencing change in the level of risk to a child described by professionals, contrasts with research evidence that this does not always occur
- professionals referred to using a range of tools to support assessment and decision-making
- family group conferencing was cited by professionals in seven of the local authorities as being used in the assessment and decision-making process

The planning process and a children's transition home from care:

- there is recognition of the importance of careful planning, which needs to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances
- the legal status of the child impacts on the planning process
- there is a difference between parents being involved in planning and feeling *meaningfully* involved
- multi-agency working needs to be properly co-ordinated and embedded
- child friendly plans help planned return to family care

The services available to support reunification and the provision of those services before and after return home from care:

- support structures vary locally, but the overriding emphasis is on providing appropriate support in a timely manner
- a lack of clearly defined and embedded policy and protocol relating to reunification presents a potential weakness in support provision
- carers can provide an important source of support, although their involvement is not widespread
- adult and children's social care providers need to consider the needs of the whole family when supporting service users

Post reunification monitoring and review:

- senior managers and frontline workers were not always clear who maintained a strategic overview of support provision available following reunification
- it was acknowledged that support, monitoring and review was less rigid and structured following reunification in cases where children had been accommodated or had ceased to be looked after
- some monitoring of re-referrals and/or re-entry to care/accommodation was being undertaken in the majority of authorities, although practice varied
- there appeared to be no monitoring or analysis of the costs of reunification

Staff training and supervision:

- senior managers identified three broad avenues for training and information sharing

Supervision provides an opportunity to ensure that practice reflects both national and local policy.

Conclusion

Overall, local authorities in the sample were at the early stages of focusing on reunification as a specific area of policy and practice. Senior managers acknowledged a need to review and formalise their approach, and for two managers, this need to develop thinking around reunification policy and practice influenced their decision to participate in the project. Only one authority already had a specific written reunification policy, with some others including reunification in other policy documents. The fact that local authorities were at the early stages of focusing on reunification should be borne in mind when considering the approach described by professionals.

In terms of how local authorities use the existing research evidence base to inform their policy and practice, the findings suggest that some limited research evidence has been used to varying degrees. The majority of senior managers interviewed stated a need or intention to focus more closely on their use of research evidence.

The findings reveal a degree of dissonance between senior managers' descriptions of their local authority's approach to reunification and the everyday practice described by frontline workers and representatives of external agencies involved in supporting families. In part, this is likely to be the result of reunification policy and practice not having been a specific focus for local authorities.

The findings revealed examples of the approach to reunification being tailored to the age of the child. For example, social workers considered the possibility of older accommodated children "voting with their feet" when making reunification plans. A child's age was identified as influencing the appropriate pace of reunification once a decision had been made that a child could return home.

The findings highlight a number of enablers and barriers to implementing effective practice based on the research evidence. From these, it is possible to identify a range of factors which need to be in place for local authorities to implement effective practice based on the research evidence. There needs to be an emphasis on communicating with families, potentially involving an independent person who was not involved in a child entering care/accommodation in the first place. All professionals involved in reunification

need to understand the local structure of support provision, and senior management needs to maintain an overview to ensure gaps or weaknesses in provision are addressed. There was relatively little mention by professionals of innovative practice, which may reflect the fact that local authorities are in the early stages of focusing on policy and practice in this area.

Recommendations

The messages from existing research and the facilitators and barriers identified by families and professionals in this study provide a number of practice and policy issues that should be considered as local authorities develop their reunification policies further.

Senior managers and strategic bodies should

- Ensure that systems are in place for messages from research to inform the strategic approach to reunification practice and are systematically shared with frontline workers.
- Take a whole organisation approach to supporting reunification ensuring that the lead people in all relevant services, across children and adults, are engaged at an early point in the process.
- Monitor and analyse local reunification data to understand where they are succeeding in improving outcomes and where there are issues that need to be addressed, and supporting and training staff to make sense of these data.
- Reinforce the importance of engaging with families throughout. Recognising parents' support needs and address these within the system – in particular the importance of someone independent to understand and represent their needs during the process.
- Co-ordinate agencies involved in the process to ensure effective communication between professionals and with families; expertise is brought in at the most appropriate point; and effective co-ordination continues as support is stepped down.
- Introduce processes to help frontline workers and representatives of external agencies supporting reunification understand the structure of local support provision and keep up to date with changes occurring within the local support landscape.

Frontline workers and representatives of external agencies supporting reunification should

- Understand key messages from research.
- Seek to engage families in a meaningful way in the assessment, decision-making and planning process and ensure they understand what is happening.
- Take a holistic view to supporting families throughout the reunification process, for instance, supporting parents to address underlying issues and monitoring their progress; and focusing on parents' ongoing needs as well as those of their children.
- Acknowledge the potential complexity and changing nature of cases throughout the reunification process.
- Provide careful, planned, gradual yet timely support tailored to a family's specific needs to address the circumstances and issues faced by children and their parents.

Researchers and bodies commissioning research should

- Consider how messages from research can be creatively disseminated to local authorities for incorporation into policy, and also in a format appropriate for frontline workers, taking into account other pressures on their time.

Central government should

- Link national data sets to enable local authorities to systematically follow the journeys of children who return home and subsequently re-enter care/accommodation. For example, this could help children's services monitor non-statutory services accessed by families when a child is no longer looked after in order to better understand why reunification succeeds or breakdown.
- Publish local authority level data on re-entry to care/accommodation to provide authorities with context for considering their own data and enable them to make comparisons with statistical neighbours.

Introduction

Reunification with family is the most common outcome for looked after children in England (Department of Education, 2014a). An increased policy focus in recent years has included reunification and re-entry to care data in the Improving Permanence for Looked after Children Data Pack (Department for Education, 2013) and the inclusion of reunification as part of the Children in Care research priority (Department for Education, 2014b). In addition, NSPCC has recently implemented the Taking Care practice framework in nine local authorities, intended to provide a more robust and evidence-based system of assessment and decision-making when children return home from care (Hyde-Dryden et al., 2015). The Taking Care practice framework has subsequently formed the basis for work, being jointly carried out by the University of Bristol and NSPCC, commissioned by the Department for Education (Farmer, 2015a; Farmer, 2015b; Wilkins and Farmer, 2015; Wilkins, 2015).

The Department for Education commissioned the National Children's Bureau and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University to carry out research to explore how, and to what extent, local authorities implement, embed and monitor effective practice in respect of children who return home from care. The project was also designed to understand the facilitators and barriers in achieving successful reunification. In addition, the project included the development, delivery and testing of a series of learning sets and a coaching model for local authorities to help to support practice improvement in this area.

To reflect the aims of exploring local authority practice, developing a peer learning environment for sharing good practice, and dissemination of that knowledge, the project was divided into three phases:

- research
- development and testing of learning sets and coaching models
- outputs and dissemination

This report draws together the findings from the research element of the project.

The statutory context for children returning home to their families

When considering the project findings, the reader should be mindful of the statutory context in which children return home to their families. This includes developments in broader policy relating to reunification, as well as the impact of a child's legal status on the statutory duties of a local authority.

The broader policy context

In addition to the aforementioned inclusion of reunification as part of the Children in Care research priority (Department for Education, 2014b) and the Improving Permanence for Looked after Children Data Pack (Department for Education, 2013), the new Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (Department for Education, 2015a) sets out local authority responsibilities for managing cases where reunification is being considered and once a child has returned home to their parent's care. The statutory framework in relation to care planning was also strengthened in April 2015 to drive improvement in terms of decision-making, assessment, planning and support for all children returning home to their families Department for Education, 2015b). In addition to the NSPCC's development of the Taking Care practice framework, a recent report commissioned by NSPCC on the costs of supporting children returning home from care found that the total estimated cost of all failed reunifications is £300 million a year compared to an estimated annual cost of providing support and services to meet the needs of all children and families returning home of £56 million (Holmes, 2014). The complexity of the broader policy and practice context should also be acknowledged, as local authorities need to develop approaches to reunification that fit alongside policies concerning other areas of practice, for instance, young people on the edge of care, permanence planning and adoption, with a focus on a continuum of care for children and families in need of services and support from children's social care services.

The legal status of a child

Local authorities have different statutory duties relating to decision-making, planning and supporting children returning home from care dependent on a child's legal status. The different legal status of looked after children are set out in the Children Act 1989 and Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations relating to care planning,

placement and case review (Department for Education, 2015b). Where a child is looked after under a care order, local authorities share parental responsibility with the child's birth parent or person who had parental responsibility before the child became looked after. A parent or other person with parental responsibility cannot remove the child from the care of the local authority[1]. Where a child is accommodated under section 20, local authorities do not share parental responsibility for a child, but instead assume day to day responsibility for their care. In such cases, a parent or other person with parental responsibility can remove the child from the accommodation[2].

Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department for Education, 2015a) provides a flowchart illustrating different scenarios for a child returning home to the care of their parents and the different planning and decision-making steps local authorities need to follow in each case (See Appendix One). Working Together also distinguishes between situations where a child returns home and legally ceases to be looked after (e.g. where a care order is discharged) and the situation where a child retains looked after status despite returning home to live with parents (i.e. a placement with parents where a care order remains in force). Again, local authorities will have different duties under the care planning regulations in each of these situations.

As the project progressed it became evident during data collection that often professionals were interchangeably reporting practice in supporting families where children were looked after under care orders or accommodated. This may indicate that social workers tended to view cases in terms of a child's placement (i.e. whether they were living with foster carers or parents) rather than in relation to their legal status. However, it was beyond the scope of the research remit to test social workers' understanding of children's legal status, and the associated statutory framework underpinning reunification practice, so the report does not draw conclusions about professionals' level of understanding in this area. Where professionals did distinguish between different legal statuses when discussing practice, this is reported in the findings.

[1] See section 31 Children Act 1989 and paragraph 1.22 Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review.

[2] See section 20 Children Act 1989 and paragraph 1.22 Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review.

The definition of return home from care

The definition of return home from care for this project was informed by the Department for Education Improving Permanence for Looked after Children Data Pack (Department for Education, 2013):

> *By using the term(s) return home/reunification we mean where a child ceases to be looked after by returning to live with parents or another person who has parental responsibility. This includes a child who returns to live with their adoptive parents but does not include a child who becomes the subject of an adoption order for the first time, or a child who becomes the subject of a residence or special guardianship order.*

When professionals described their practice during data collection, they included cases where a child's looked after status did not cease immediately upon return home from care (i.e. where a care order remained in place for a period following return home). Although these cases do not fall within the above definition of return home from care, such cases are reported in the findings as they represent one of the options available to local authorities when returning a child to their family's care.

Research context

As described in the introduction, this research forms one element of a wider project focused on reunification. The timing of the individual elements of the project was driven to an extent by the policy timetable, resulting in a degree of overlap in the completion of the interviews and focus groups for this research and the dates of the learning sets forming part of the wider project. As a number of individuals were involved in both the learning set workshops and an interview or focus group, the reader should be mindful that their responses may reflect both their authority's existing approach, and also ideas and issues discussed within the learning sets, along with plans for future practice.

Research aims and objectives

The aims relating to the research are:

- to identify what are the key success factors that need to be in place for local authorities to be able to utilise existing research evidence on effective practice

when developing and implementing practice around returning children home from care, including for different types of families and local authorities in different contexts

- to understand whether and how factors such as regulatory frameworks, local policies and procedures, assessment processes, practitioner knowledge and skills (including the provision of training around reunification practice), supervision arrangements, local service configurations (including cross-agency partnership working), and local authority resources, influence local practice, including the use of research evidence and national policy

The objectives of the research include:

- a detailed exploration of current practice in eight local authorities, including exploration of whether and how local authorities implement and embed effective practice based on existing research evidence, barriers and enablers to this, and any examples of innovation
- a clear picture of the range of different services and support offered by these authorities and the regulatory frameworks and policies that may underpin this provision.
- an understanding of how local authorities monitor and reflect on their practice, how they identify and address barriers and how they plan and commission the support services they provide for returning children home from care
- an understanding of how local authorities tailor their approaches to different groups of children and young people and their families (e.g. children of different age groups and the different reasons for entry to care) and how these are experienced by practitioners, children, young people, parents and other significant relatives before, during and after returning home

Methodology

The research phase of the project comprised a rapid review of the existing literature followed by a series of case studies in eight local authorities to understand how and to what extent they were implementing effective practice in their areas. The literature search terms and parameters of the review are detailed in Appendix Two, along with a synthesis

of the existing literature that has been used to inform the remainder of the project and has also informed the thematic structure of this report.

A stratified sample of local authorities was selected for inclusion in the project based on the following indicators:

- the proportion of children returned home from care and the proportion subsequently re-entering care (as reported in the SSDA 903 data and using additional analysis provided by the Department for Education);
- geographical location to ensure the inclusion of a range of regional representation;
- authority type to ensure the inclusion of a range of types of authority including unitary, metropolitan and London boroughs

Further details about the selection and key characteristics of the eight local authorities are included in Appendix Three, including a graph illustrating the spread of reunification rates. Within each local authority the following data collection methods were used:

- in-depth telephone interviews with senior managers;
- focus groups with commissioners, senior and middle tier managers; frontline social care workers including team managers, and representatives from other agencies that support return home;
- face to face interviews with parents or carers, and children aged six to eighteen years

Researchers secured eleven telephone interviews with senior managers out of a possible sixteen (based on two interviews in each authority). Three focus groups (one with commissioners, senior and middle tier managers; one with frontline social care staff; and one with representatives of other agencies supporting return home) were completed in six of the eight local authorities giving a total of eighteen focus groups out of a potential twenty-four. Thirty-one interviews were completed with families: 22 with parents and nine with children. The distribution of participants across the eight local authorities is detailed in Table 1 below, and a more detailed description of sample selection and the participation rates is provided in Appendix Three.

Table 1 Distribution of research participants by local authority site

Number of interviews/focus groups conducted				
Local authority site	**Interviews with senior managers**	**Focus groups**	**Interviews with parents**	**Interviews with children**
A	2	3	3	1
B	2	3	6	2
C	1	3	6	5
D	2	3	1	0
E	2	3	2	3
F	0	3	0	0
G	0	0	2	0
H	2	0	2	1
Totals	11	18	22	12

Collecting data from families and professionals provided for exploration of the issues from the perspectives of those receiving and providing reunification services and support. However, professionals and families were not reflecting on the same cases and the research was not comparative across local authorities. For some families, a considerable period of time had also elapsed since children had returned home (up to two years). However, rich data was obtained, which provides a valuable insight into the process of reunification.

The research design used in this study has allowed for the inclusion of the views of a wide range of professionals involved in the reunification process across the eight local authority areas. This was intended to provide an overview of reunification practice across a number of different types of local authority. The limitations of the study are explored in more detail in Appendix Three (together with further information about research ethics and confidentiality), however it is pertinent to highlight the differing timeframes that the research participants were referring to and that a number of the senior managers were reporting on new policies and practices that could be considered to have been at the early stages of implementation, and as a result had not yet become embedded or integrated into practice. As outlined above, a number of the families were reporting their experiences of reunification practice based on prior, rather than current involvement with children's social care services.

Terminology

The findings have been structured thematically, reflecting the different stages of the reunification process. Throughout this report, the terms *reunification* and *return home from care* have been used interchangeably. The term *children* has been used to refer to all children and young people participating in the study. *Looked after* children refers to those who are the subject of a care order and children accommodated under section 20. *Frontline workers* has been used as a collective term for all practitioners that participated in the social care focus groups (these participants included social workers, independent reviewing officers and team managers). The term *professionals* has been used to refer collectively to commissioning or senior managers, frontline workers and representatives of agencies supporting reunification.

Data on local authority rates of reunification

The methodology describes how local authorities were selected for the study, as far as possible, to provide a cross section of reunification and re-entry rates (see Figure 1 in Appendix Three). When considering these rates, it is necessary to consider what it is possible to infer from this data about an authority's approach to reunification, and also the time lapse between the publication of national data and the subsequent study timeframe. For example, the local authorities were selected based on published SSDA 903 data (Statistical First Release, Department for Education, 2012); along with additional re-entry to care analysis provided to the research team by the Department for Education. This data included rates of return home up to March 2012 and re-entry to care up to March 2013. The data collection period for this study, and therefore the practice reported by the participating authorities, ran from May 2014 to January 2015.

The interviews with senior managers suggest that the majority of local authorities in the sample are at an early stage in developing their approach and policies around reunification. Senior managers in two authorities were aware of their authority's current position and specifically identified a recent focus on this area of practice influencing their decision to participate in the research. Where local authorities have only recently begun to focus on reunification, the number of children returning home reported in the current SSDA 903 data is therefore likely to relate to the period prior to this, and a period of time will need to elapse before any potential changes to local authority policy and practice are reflected in the SSDA 903 data return.

As the wider project also involved the participation of local authority representatives in learning sets and the development of a coaching model for peer learning, local authorities were also likely to be in a very active phase of developing their approach and policies concerning reunification at the point at which staff members participated in interviews and focus groups for this research. The approaches and policies described by participants in the research may therefore also incorporate the very recent learning from these events, meaning that their impact will again not be reflected by current SSDA 903 data return. As such, caution needs to be exercised when trying to draw inferences from the reunification data contained in the SSDA 903 data and the policies and practice described by participants in the research.

Before presenting the findings from families and professionals concerning reunification practice, the following sections discuss local authorities' use of research evidence and the extent of their policies on reunification. This information provides background context against which the findings should be considered.

Existing research evidence

One focus of this research is to identify the extent to which local authorities are using existing research evidence around return home from care as a basis for developing policy and implementing effective practice. The rapid literature review (see Appendix Two) provides an overview of the nature and range of the existing research evidence base and highlights the limited quantity of research that has been undertaken in England concerning return home from care. Some of the key themes emerging from that research include:

- the importance of high quality assessment and planning processes (e.g. Farmer et al., 2004; 2011; Wade et al., 2010)
- an emphasis on involving families throughout the reunification process (e.g. The Who Cares? Trust, 2006; Wade et al., 2014)
- the importance of timing, for instance, the point at which reunification occurs, and the pace of return home (e.g. Biehal, 2006; 2007; Sinclair et al., 2007; Thoburn, 2009; 2012; Wade et al., 2010)
- the role of foster or residential carers in promoting stability (e.g. Farmer and Wijedasa, 2012)

As well as local authorities being able to identify the available research evidence, they also need to be aware of the applicability of findings for practice (for example, sample size, methods, comparison groups), and be able to determine how robust that evidence is. This adds an additional and very important element to the process of local authorities using research as the basis of, or to inform, their policy.

An overview of local authorities' reunification policies and use of research evidence

Before considering specific elements of local authority policy and practice around reunification and their use of existing research evidence in developing and embedding effective practice, it is first helpful to explore the nature of local authorities' reunification policies. It is also useful to take into account the extent to which local authorities consider their policy and practice to be evidence based.

Do authorities have a specific policy on reunification?

Senior managers in one authority described having recently developed a specific, standalone strategy around return home from care. Senior managers in the remaining authorities said they did not have a specific reunification policy, or that elements of policy on reunification were incorporated within other policy documents, for instance, their looked after children policy and procedure guide.

> *Well, I don't think we have a specific policy relating to reunification. Rather we rely on the care planning regulations in that returns home are considered through the LAC reviewing process and would be informed by a core assessment where it was thought to be feasible.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Senior managers suggested that a driver to developing their approach to reunification had been the need to establish processes and practice in response to the revised Public Law Outline (PLO)[3], such as frontloading pre-proceedings. Several professionals also referred to their approach being based on the principle that where possible, children are best looked after by their families. However, a senior manager from one authority was unsure whether they had adequately set out their vision of enabling children to go home as quickly as possible when it was safe to do so. In the absence of a clearly defined approach, it was left to individual workers to decide based upon their individual values.

[3] The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a 26 week time limit for determination by the courts of care, supervision and other Part 4 proceedings. The revised Public Law Outline (2014) provides guidance on this process.

Several senior managers had recognised that they needed to develop their reunification strategy and policy, or were in the process of doing so, and, as already stated, this was identified by two managers as a reason why they had chosen to participate in the research.

Is policy or practice around reunification evidence based?

Senior managers were asked in interview whether their authority's current policy or practice on returning children home was evidence based and if so, what that evidence was, for instance, national research evidence, evidence of local need, or evidence from service users. Senior managers in all of the local authorities described their policy or practice being, to varying extents, evidence based. Senior managers in four authorities expressed a view that their policies and practice were based to an extent upon research evidence. This included the authority that had recently developed a specific return home from care strategy and another authority that had in recent years commissioned an external research organisation to look at its practice in this area. However, managers in all of the authorities described their policy and practice as incorporating a mixture of research evidence and local practice knowledge. Managers interviewed in five authorities stated they needed or intended to focus more on incorporating research evidence into their policies or practice.

The predominant approach described was one where policy and practice had evolved gradually, reflecting elements of research evidence and local practice knowledge, rather than policy being developed following any systematic consideration of the available research evidence. It is likely, therefore, that unless a strategic decision was made to develop a specific, standalone reunification policy, there had been little impetus for local authorities to stop and formally review whether their policy reflected the messages coming from research evidence.

When discussing their authority's approach to reunification, a number of senior managers made reference to messages from research evidence, although very few referred to pieces of research by name or author.

> *Our approach is evidence based in that we know that children's needs can be better met by the extended family. Evidence based in the sense that we know that*

if we get them back within the first six months it's generally better. Evidence based in that we're using the capacity to change guidance.

(Senior manager)

This quote also demonstrates how research evidence can be misconstrued as the research states that the likelihood of reunification decreases sharply after around six months in placement, but not that return within six months is necessarily better (Biehal, 2006). Biehal (2006) points to a common misconception that it is the passage of time that, in itself, reduces the chances of reunification occurring, rather than the factors contributing to the length of time in placement.

It is important to acknowledge that the picture provided of the extent to which local authority policy and practice is grounded in research evidence is based on the views of senior managers expressed in interview. The study did not involve any testing to validate these claims, nor did it test senior managers' or other professionals' understanding of research evidence.

Awareness of the research evidence around reunification was not limited to senior social work managers. Both frontline workers and representatives of external support agencies made reference to research evidence during focus groups, which will be discussed later in this report, although few were aware whether it formed the basis of, or informed their local policy on reunification.

Discussion of research evidence and effective practice in the findings

The interviews with senior managers suggest that although the majority of authorities did not have specific reunification policies, they considered their approach to reunification being, to varying extents, evidence based. The degree to which practice described in focus groups with different professionals supported these descriptions will be considered throughout the findings section. This will provide an indication of whether local authority policy and practice reflects specific research evidence; whether it is the case that individual professionals are aware of research evidence and describe it influencing their own practice; or whether professionals are referring more commonly to practice-derived information. As the interpretation of 'evidence based' or 'evidence informed' may have differed between the individual senior managers interviewed, considering the

perspectives of professionals other than senior managers in local authorities and across partner agencies will help in drawing conclusions about the current use of research evidence in policy and practice.

It is important to note that when professionals refer to research evidence, it may not always be possible to conclude from the data whether it is research evidence they are personally aware of and influenced by, or whether it is research evidence that has been acknowledged and referred to in policy and procedures informing local practice at a strategic level. This is particularly so when the reference is made by frontline workers who do not necessarily have a strategic or policy overview.

In addition to considering examples of professionals specifically identifying the use of research evidence, the findings section also explores where the practice and policy described by professionals corresponds with messages from research regarding effective practice, even if professionals had not identified this as being the case. The findings also explore issues emerging from the data that potentially facilitate or undermine effective practice.

The Findings

The research findings are presented in six sections based around the different stages of the reunification process identified by existing research:

- Section One explores the point at which reunification is considered as a possibility within the care planning process;
- Section Two focuses on the assessment and decision-making process;
- Section Three looks at the planning process and the child's transition home from care;
- Section Four considers the services available to support reunification and the provision of those services before and after return home from care;
- Section Five focuses on post reunification monitoring and review; and
- Section Six discusses staff training and supervision

As already stated, the research is not comparative in design. Families and professionals from across the eight local authority sites were asked to reflect upon their own experiences of the reunification process and were not reflecting upon the same cases or example case studies.

Section One: The point at which reunification is considered as a possibility

Key findings

- there is an emphasis on the importance of considering reunification in the early part of the child's care journey.
- the nature and function of a children's social care team determines their approach to reunification.
- improved communication is needed between professionals and birth families.
- social workers are required to use their professional judgement to plan for multiple reunification scenarios and be ready to adapt their approach.
- a more proactive approach to considering reunification is needed where children have been looked after for a period of time.

Perspectives

- senior managers and frontline workers stated reunification is considered as an option as early as possible, often as part of a parallel planning process.
- senior managers and frontline workers identify a number of practical challenges to considering reunification where a child has been looked after for a period of time.
- families were unclear about when, or if reunification was being considered.

When is reunification considered as an option?

Senior managers and frontline workers emphasised the importance of considering reunification as early as possible, to enable children to return home from care as soon as it was appropriate. This emphasis corresponds with research evidence that early assessment and support provide parents with a greater opportunity to overcome their difficulties and increases the likelihood of successful reunification (Thoburn, 2009; The Who Cares? Trust, 2006). Early consideration of reunification was described as frequently occurring as part of parallel planning, where a plan was developed for permanence alongside an alternative plan for a child to return to the care of their parents.

Frontline workers also described reunification as an ongoing consideration even if it was not the main plan for a child. The possibility of return home from care was considered whenever it was appropriate based on the circumstances of the case, with frontline workers using their experience of working with families to help them recognise when this point was reached. By contrast, families were unclear about when, or if reunification was being considered, and one representative of an external support agency described the point at which reunification was considered by local authorities as a little hit and miss. These views may indicate a need for increased communication between frontline workers, families, and support agencies to stimulate discussion and mutual understanding about the likelihood of reunification; a need for a clear reunification policy; or that an authority's implementation processes require further attention.

Factors influencing when reunification is considered

For frontline workers, the process of considering reunification differed depending upon the specific team they belonged to. For instance, frontline workers from one edge of care team worked on the assumption that, if possible, every child should stay in their family network. They started thinking about reunification and parallel planning immediately, speaking to the child, family and foster or residential carers to understand the situation. Once a child's case reached a looked after children team, frontline workers described considering reunification as part of the review process.

One senior manager referred to research evidence concerning the timing of reunification: that the likelihood of returning home reduces sharply after around six months in care (Biehal, 2006). The general view among professionals was that this initial period was the ideal time to focus on the issues that led to a child being looked after and to arrange support. However, senior managers in one focus group suggested that during this period, direct work with families sometimes took second place to paperwork and processing children in the system. Frontline workers in one focus group also emphasised a need to manage parents' expectations about the likelihood of reunification occurring, to avoid unnecessary disruption and confusion being caused if parents told children they would be going home.

Although senior managers and frontline workers recognised the benefits of considering reunification as early as possible, they also stated that where children had been looked after for a period of time, reunification was less likely to be considered as an option. One

reason given for this was the focus for social workers on removing children from environments where they were at risk of harm and the possibility that once a safe placement was found, children became less of a priority in a social worker's caseload.

> *Because I think frequently… well the research tells us doesn't it …that sometimes social workers can be so relieved that the child has gone into care, that they take their foot off the gas about then moving things forward.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Two senior managers considered there to be a potential conflict between revisiting reunification and the drive to achieve permanence and stability.

> *We've got to be very careful to make sure that you are not destabilising a placement or upsetting a child's plan by bringing up reunification when it's not a viable option. If you've just been through care proceedings and the child understands that they are in a placement, which is a long-term, whether they call it long-term or permanent foster placement, then at what point should you ever be reintroducing the idea of reunification? I think that's a really difficult balance to get right.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Senior managers and frontline workers also perceived revisiting the possibility of reunification where children had been looked after for a period as presenting a number of practical challenges. For example, in relation to long-term foster placements, senior managers suggested that revisiting reunification could be a concern for foster carers, and have a detrimental impact on the development of attachments between carers and children.

Overall, senior managers acknowledged that their authorities could be more proactive in considering reunification where children had been looked after for a period of time, unless that consideration had been triggered by specific events or circumstances. The nature of these triggers is considered in the following section.

Triggers for considering reunification

Professionals and families identified similar triggers for considering or re-considering the possibility of reunification, including:

- changes to a family's circumstances
- parents successfully addressing concerns about their parenting
- parents challenging the plan for a child who had not settled in placement or had experienced multiple placement changes
- placement breakdown (predominantly involving children accommodated under section 20)
- children "voting with their feet" [4]

These triggers demonstrate the range of potential reunification scenarios social workers face and the complexity of the decision-making that is required. In particular, cases of sudden placement breakdown or children "voting with their feet" highlight situations where social workers may have been unable to complete a planned and comprehensive assessment prior to a child returning home from care, or to prepare the family as intended for their return. In cases where, from experience, frontline workers suspected that reunification was likely to happen regardless of whether they considered it to be the best outcome for the child or family, they considered it preferable to prepare the child and parents for it. However, in cases where these situations occurred unexpectedly, such preparation would not be possible. Where social workers recognised that a placement was in danger of breaking down, or a child was likely to "vote with their feet", they were effectively planning for two different reunification scenarios, one gradual and one sudden. This highlights how the reality of reunification may not reflect the most effective practice identified by research evidence, although such scenarios and how best to manage them have been recognised in research (Farmer et al., 2011). This demonstrates circumstances where social workers are required to use their professional judgement, to plan proactively for more than one reunification scenario, and adapt their practice to get

[4] Where children "vote with their feet" a social worker's response will differ based on their statutory duty depending whether a child is looked after under a care order or accommodated under section 20.

the best possible outcome for a child, an approach which again reflects existing research (Monck et al., 2004).

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- At what point is reunification considered in your local authority as an option for children?
- What factors influence your organisation's approach to considering reunification once a child has been looked after for a period of time?
- How do different teams within your organisation approach reunification?
- What is the process within your organisation for discussing the possibility of reunification with birth parents and children?
- What would be your organisation's approach to a sudden placement breakdown or where a child "votes with their feet" and returns home to their family?

Section Two: The assessment and decision making process

Key findings

- there is an emphasis on the importance of a comprehensive assessment process focused on the best interests of the child
- the practice of evidencing change in the level of risk to a child described by professionals contrasts with research evidence that this does not always occur
- professionals referred to using a range of tools to support assessment and decision making
- family group conferencing was cited by professionals in seven of the local authorities as being used in the assessment and decision-making process

Perspectives

- frontline workers and senior managers describe their approach as collaborative and multi-agency
- professionals expressed mixed views on who should be involved in the assessment and decision-making process, although Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) were identified as having a key role
- parents reported differing levels of understanding and involvement in the assessment and decision-making process

Section One discussed the point at which reunification is considered as part of a child's care journey. It highlighted some of the factors influencing when reunification is considered and identified a range of potential trigger events for this occurring. This section considers the process of assessment and decision-making which then follows.

The approach taken to the assessment and decision-making process

Whatever the circumstances of a case and the specific assessment and decision-making processes followed by individual local authorities, social workers described looking to evidence change in the level of risk to the child, either through a change to a family's circumstances or change in the parents' behaviour. This contrasts with research evidence that this does not necessarily occur in practice where children or young people are accommodated under section 20, particularly for cases where young people "vote with their feet" (Wade et al., 2010).

The assessment and decision-making process was described by professionals as collaborative and multi-agency, with an emphasis on the best interests of the child. For example, a senior manager described commissioning an independent parenting assessment:

> *It would be comprehensive… it wouldn't be a quick decision… it would be absolutely making sure that this was the right decision for the child.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Cases were viewed as being individual and therefore decided upon their own merits:

> *I don't think it's a one size fits all, I think there are some general principles and there is a process, but the factors that influence individual decisions are just that.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Although frontline workers in one focus group described collating existing information about a case including previous assessments completed by social workers in other teams, they viewed undertaking their own assessment to develop a personal perspective as a valuable part of the process.

These approaches correspond with research evidence that the quality of assessment is associated with successful return home from care (Farmer et al., 2004; 2011; Wade et al., 2010).

In addition to providing evidence supporting a decision that a child could safely return home to the care of their parents, the assessment process was equally viewed as

needing to provide social workers with the confidence to argue that a child should not return home from care if that was what their assessment indicated. Parents' experiences of the assessment and decision-making process are considered later in this section.

The range of issues considered during the assessment and decision-making process

Frontline workers and senior managers identified a wide range of issues that they considered as part of the assessment and decision-making process, further supporting the idea of assessment being a comprehensive process. These included:

- the circumstances leading to the involvement of children's social care
- parents' own resilience and care needs
- parents' willingness to engage with services
- parents' capacity to change behaviours and provide consistent care in the long term
- parents' ability to manage risk factors such as learning disabilities and substance misuse
- the wishes and feelings of a child and their parents
- a child's vulnerability and the potential impact of unsettling them
- changes occurring since a child became looked after
- the success of prior interventions
- the home environment
- the support required
- whether parents understood the impact of events or their behaviour on their children

This reflects research by Farmer and colleagues (2012) and Wade and colleagues (2011) that addressing the issues that led to a child becoming looked after and demonstrating parental capacity to change are key to successful reunification.

How is risk assessed?

Frontline workers and senior managers described drawing on a range of assessments to assist their decision-making, for instance, independent parenting assessments; psychological assessments; and needs assessments for young people. Professionals in three local authorities also described using specific tools to assess change and level of risk, including the graded care profile, distance travelled tools, and the Signs of Safety ® model[5]. A senior manager in one local authority described their Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) using the Going Home? practice tool (Social Research Unit Dartington, undated) when reviewing plans for reunification. The evidence underpinning tools such as these that help local authorities assess level of risk or parental capacity to change will vary, meaning senior managers need to consider whether there is sufficiently robust evidence for their effectiveness.

Who is involved in the decision-making?

The assessment and decision-making process followed was described as being dependent upon the circumstances of the case and the point in the child's care journey at which reunification was considered as an option. A common factor was the involvement of multiple professionals or agencies in the process, although this is not reflected by existing research (Brandon et al., 2005). Views on the involvement of multiple professionals were also mixed. An IRO reflected how involving professionals who had not been directly engaged with a family could provide a more independent perspective, an approach similar to the NSPCC's Taking Care practice framework (Hyde-Dryden et al., 2015). Yet, frontline workers in one focus group stated that it was sometimes appropriate for a relatively small group to make a decision about reunification, and that involving a larger group of professionals with little *direct knowledge* of the family could be disrespectful of the review process.

IROs, in particular, were viewed as having a key role in reviewing and challenging care plans and decisions about the best interests of the child.

> *We expect our IROs to have a strong voice for the child and in their care plan, and we expect them to challenge us if they think that something isn't right.*

[5] See Signs of Safety for further information.

(Senior manager)

Parents' understanding of the assessment and decision-making process

There was substantial variation in the extent to which parents reported that they understood the reunification assessment and decision-making process. Even if they knew that assessments were being completed, they were not clear about the weight attached to different opinions, what evidence would be used to inform the decision, or at what point consideration was being given to their child returning home from care.

A number of parents said they had known from early on that children were likely to return home from care, but not when. They were aware that both children's wishes and professionals' judgements about the child's wellbeing were being taken into account in making the decision. Some parents had felt confident that professionals wanted their children to return home and had welcomed packages of support and assessments explicitly geared towards this. However, substantial numbers of parents reported being kept in the dark, at least at some stage. They felt there was a lack of transparency around terminology; processes; timescales; details of their children's placements; the nature of professionals' concerns; and/or their rights as parents. Consequently, it was common for parents to feel that they had not been involved in the decision-making process. These findings suggest instances where the quality of assessments is being compromised and where effective practice needs further development. This may also reflect existing research that in-depth assessments are not always undertaken before a child returns home from care (Farmer et al., 2011).

The use of family group conferences in the assessment and decision-making process

Professionals across seven of the eight local authorities referred to the use of family group conferences in the assessment and decision-making process[6]. Professionals described family group conferences as providing a means of engaging the extended family to understand their perspective on potential return home from care; to gauge the

[6] See Family Group Conferences for further information.

level of attachment between parents and children; to identify family strengths; and to understand how the family needed to be supported. Overall there was a view that these conferences should be used more often when reunification was being considered. Representatives of external support agencies in one focus group suggested that family group conferences provided an innovative way of involving families in managing their own risk levels; putting the plan back to the family; and empowering the family and child. This approach may therefore address some of the issues raised by parents about the lack of transparency around timescales, processes, and lack of involvement in decision making discussed above. It also corresponds with research evidence from Wade and colleagues (2010), which found an association between involving parents and children in the planning and decision-making process and stability following return home from care.

The impact of the revised Public Law Outline on the assessment and decision-making process

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a 26 week time limit for determining care proceedings in the courts, with the new process for achieving this time frame set out in the revised Public Law Outline (Ministry of Justice, 2014). The change has particular implications for the assessment and decision-making process where children are in the early stages of their care journey - where they become looked after under a care order and social workers are considering reunification as a possibility. In one authority, frontline workers and senior managers suggested that where a decision was made to commence court proceedings under the revised Public Law Outline, the 26 week time frame could create difficulties. For example, a senior manager described how the reduced time frame sometimes did not allow for a full assessment of capacity to change to be completed. This could therefore directly impact social workers' ability to fully understand or assess the factors which had led to a child becoming looked after and the parents' capacity to change. The reduced time frame means that social workers have had to focus on 'frontloading' or undertaking assessments in the pre-proceedings period, which they may previously have undertaken once court proceedings were underway.

Some of the difficulties linked to the revised time frame for care proceedings may, in part, be due to local authorities still adapting to the revised timetable. One senior manager acknowledged they were still embedding a process of frontloading assessment and support prior to the commencement of court proceedings. However, the data from parents and professionals suggests that there may also be a lack of communication

between them about the timetable for assessment and decision making where court proceedings are issued.

The impact of risk aversion

The issue of risk aversion was also identified as a factor impacting on the assessment and decision-making process. Both frontline workers and senior managers acknowledged that some professionals were more risk averse than others, which may have deterred them from considering the possibility of reunification, or proceeding with it. Senior managers were viewed by some frontline workers as seeking to reduce the number of looked after children, whilst at the same time not wanting staff to take risks for fear of something going seriously wrong and a child being left in a risky situation. However, one senior manager acknowledged the need to take risks on occasion, describing how on paper, return home from care may not look appropriate for a child, but suggesting that sometimes it was right to start the conversation and consider the possibility. Senior managers in one focus group also suggested that there were sometimes more incentives for children to remain looked after than return to the care of their parents, for example, because it was perceived that the standard of living would be higher and carers might be able to offer a more stable environment. They also suggested that busy social workers may not feel they had the skills and confidence to take risks or say that the best place for a child would be at home.

In terms of how risk aversion around assessment and decision-making can be addressed, it was suggested that tools and guidance could assist social workers in making difficult decisions. Senior managers in one focus group also highlighted a lack of research evidence available to inform their approach to decision-making, being aware of only one piece of work, the *Study of infants suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm* (Ward et al. ,2010; Ward et al., 2012).

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- What issues are considered by professionals as part of the assessment and decision-making process locally? Is this standardised for all potential reunification cases?
- Which tools are used by your local authority to support assessment and decision-making? Are these appropriate/sufficient to support social workers?
- Does your organisation have an established process for keeping parents and children informed about the assessment and decision-making process and involving them in it?
- Is the issue of risk aversion acknowledged, discussed and addressed by professionals within your local authority?

Section Three: The planning process and a child's transition home from care

Key findings

- there is recognition of the importance of careful planning, which needs to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances
- the legal status of the child impacts on the planning process
- there is a difference between parents being involved in planning and feeling *meaningfully* involved
- multi-agency working needs to be properly co-ordinated and embedded
- child friendly plans help planned return to family care

Perspectives

- professionals and parents considered gradually increasing contact between children and families in a phased manner to be an important element of the reunification process
- some parents felt they were given insufficient notice of reunification and that the transition period was too short
- professionals recognised how eager some children were to return to their families and how the reality may not match their expectations

Section Two discussed the assessment and decision-making processes undertaken when social workers considered the possibility of reunification. This section explores how the planning process and transition home are approached once a decision is made that a child is likely to return to their parent's care.

The approach taken to the planning and transition processes

Just as professionals described the assessment and decision-making process as being dependent upon the individual circumstances of the case, the processes of planning and making the transition home from care were also described as being case specific. Factors affecting the planning and transition processes include the child's legal status

prior to reunification (whether the child was the subject of a care order or accommodated under section 20), and the child's legal status once they return to the care of their family (whether a care order would be in place or whether the child would cease to be looked after). The statutory duties of local authorities related to planning were discussed in the introduction section.

Frontline workers highlighted the importance of careful planning in all circumstances to give reunification the best chance of success. A senior manager emphasised the importance of proceeding with reunification in as planned way as possible even if everyone was eager for it to happen, and identified family group conferences as a useful format for discussion.

> *Sometimes even though everybody wants it to happen, research tells us if it's done in a planned way, then it's more likely to succeed.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

This recognition of the need for careful planning echoes the studies of Farmer and colleagues (2011) and Wade and colleagues (2011), which found good planning to be associated with fewer breakdowns following return home.

Professionals identified a number of issues that they addressed as part of the planning process including:

- establishing the expectations of parents, local authorities and all agencies involved
- exploring the views of parents and carers
- involving parents in developing a time frame for transition
- explaining to the child what needed to happen
- looking at extending contact
- considering practical issues such as the location of a child's school, ensuring the family has the necessary furnishings and white goods, and assessing accommodation issues

Written agreements were identified as a useful tool for ensuring everyone, including parents, understood what had been planned, the use of which reflects the NSPCC's Taking Care practice framework guidance (NSPCC, 2012). Whether parents had made the necessary changes, and whether the problems that initially led to a child becoming

looked after had been resolved, were described by professionals as being considered as part of the earlier assessment process.

Overall, professionals highlighted a need for flexibility in reunification planning so the plan could be adapted should circumstances change, for instance, if new information was discovered or an incident occurred.

In addition to the need for flexibility and a tailored approach to suit the specific circumstances of a case, the data revealed a number of common elements in professionals' descriptions of the planning and implementation process.

Promoting contact between children and their families

Professionals and parents agreed that relationships were at the heart of reunification work, so contact was a key factor. Frontline workers in one focus group highlighted the need to undertake conflict resolution work with parents and children to overcome historical issues before reunification. It could be difficult for families to overcome previous tensions and potentially impossible within a child's time frame. Once such initial issues were dealt with, increasing contact became part of the planning process. However, one frontline worker noted how high their expectations of children were around contact, in that children were expected to form a relationship with mum and dad based on a contact visit once every two weeks.

Contact centre staff played a key role in promoting the development of relationships between parents and children, and senior managers in one local authority described operating a hands-on model where there was an expectation that social workers would be involved in contact work alongside staff in contact centres, if they were best placed to provide it.

The use of phased returns home

Phased return home from care was described as involving gradually increasing contact between a parent and child, for instance, progressing from going home for dinner, to staying overnight and eventually staying for longer periods. It was referred to by professionals in the majority of local authorities, and families also considered it an important element of the reunification process. The research evidence shows that children who returned home gradually over a longer period of time are more likely to still

be living at home six months later (Wade et al., 2010), suggesting that a phased return home represents an example of potentially effective reunification practice.

Phased return home was reported as being tailored to the individual child and family, and factors considered by social workers included the period of time a child had lived away from home and the current make-up of the birth family, for instance, the presence of any new siblings. Frontline workers described how, for young children in particular, a phased return could be unsettling or confusing, and so it therefore needed to be undertaken at an appropriate pace for the child. Senior managers in one authority referred to the need for very clear reunification plans, which depending upon the age of the child, used coloured illustrations and timelines to show what was going to happen. Recognition of the need to tailor the pace of reunification to the needs of the child and family reflected the findings of the evaluation of NSPCC's Taking Care practice framework, where parents valued social workers exercising some flexibility in the pace of the reunification process (Hyde-Dryden et al., 2015).

Professionals also found that older children could face difficulties straddling the two worlds of home and care during a phased return, and might attempt to avoid the upset of leaving their placement by simply not returning to it and remaining with their birth parents. Children were described by one social worker as often craving to go home, so a phased return provided an opportunity to see how the reality matched up to their expectations. In one authority, frontline workers had achieved this by arranging a one month trial of living at home, while the child's placement was kept open.

The role of multi-agency working

Professionals across several local authorities described the use of multi-agency working within the planning and transition process, although the precise structure for this differed between authorities. For example, representatives from external support agencies in one local authority described social workers making other agencies aware of any proposed returns home from care and holding a meeting to plan who would be involved in providing support in the first two weeks of reunification; who the children would speak to; and what issues the parents were struggling with. Frontline workers in another authority described having a multi-agency joint action team supporting the network forming the team around the child to ensure a child had a supported experience when they returned home.

Representatives in one focus group of external support agencies suggested that the badly planned and co-ordinated involvement of multiple agencies could have a potentially detrimental effect on reunification. The issue of working with housing departments was identified by professionals in two authorities as presenting particular difficulties when planning a child's return home from care. For example, where frontline workers had to resolve the "catch 22" situation where families needed a larger house to accommodate their returning child, but they could not be given one until the child had actually returned. It was suggested that the involvement of multiple agencies in the planning and transition stages could be strengthened if support services were more embedded within the process, and by having a single channel for organisation, planning and communication between organisations.

Processes intended to strengthen and facilitate planning and transition

Frontline workers in one focus group described processes within their local authority intended to facilitate the reunification process and make working with other agencies smoother, such as the involvement of commissioning or other panels. However, the approach could create a number of logistical obstacles and unnecessary bureaucratic process for social workers making arrangements to enable a child to return home from care. One social worker described the process making him feel as though he was the only person who wanted a child to return home. Frontline workers suggested that although the use of panels and multi-agency forums to review a social worker's plans for reunification could result in suggestions for action that had not been considered, they could equally be another hurdle for social workers to clear without contributing anything new to the planning process, particularly in cases where the required course of action was obvious. They were also perceived as removing some of the decision-making power from social workers and team managers.

These findings suggest that although panels and other forums may have been introduced to promote robust planning and support reunification, and may work well in some cases, they may also add to social workers' workloads without always being perceived as adding value in terms of good practice.

Families' experiences of involvement in the planning and transition process

Families had mixed experiences of the planning and transition process. One parent reported being fully involved at all stages of planning for transition. She was invited to meetings with professionals, who communicated well with her and each other, and she was helped to express her views by a support worker. In a number of other cases, parents felt that they had had no say, nor were they asked their opinions about their child coming home, with social workers determining what was going to happen. As a result, in several cases, parents appeared to have felt that their views, needs (and perceptions of their children's needs) counted for little or nothing.

> *It was always under their terms… It was what they wanted.*
>
> *(Parent)*

Families described high levels of staff turnover and several stressed that practice – including involvement in planning – varied greatly between individual social workers.

Families' mixed experiences reflect the comments of senior managers in one authority who described how where children were voluntarily accommodated, parents were very involved in working out how a child could return home safely. However, where a decision was made to apply for a care order, the process became more focused on the child and their carers, with the involvement of parents tending to be limited to issues of contact.

Overall, it appeared that in many cases parents were not meaningfully involved in reunification planning. Although some parents described being informed of, and involved in meetings, this did not necessarily mean that they felt able to express their views, or believed that these were welcome. As research evidence highlights the importance of involving parents and children in the planning process (Wade et al., 2010), this reported failure to do so may undermine stability following reunification. However, the reader should be mindful that practice in local authorities may have changed as the experiences described by parents occurred between six months and two years previously.

Children also had mixed experiences of feeling involved and listened to within the planning process. Some older children played a key role in shaping how it happened, particularly if they had "voted with their feet". Among those who had driven the process themselves by expressing a strong desire, or declaring an intention, to move home, some

described feeling listened to by professionals, particularly carers, who had helped them make the move. Younger children tended to report that social workers or carers had explained what was going to happen in relation to their transition home. Although some struggled to remember what was said, none gave the impression that they had been asked to play a part in shaping the plans drawn up by practitioners and parents. Those interviewed generally recalled being happy about what was planned, although one younger child described feeling she had been lied to because so much time had passed between being told she was going home to actually moving there. This underlines the potential for distress to be caused to young children by lack of clear communication about the process of reunification.

Parents and professionals also highlighted how transition home could be made more difficult for parents where they were unable to match the level of financial and material resources that children received whilst living with carers, including holidays, pocket money and days out. This could create a source of tension or resentment following reunification. This situation, which is a result of the system rather than being a consequence of carers' actions, needs to be considered by local authorities as part of the planning process.

Families' experiences of the transition timeframe

In relation to the pace of reunification, children returned home from care very rapidly (within a day or two) in a few cases when professionals considered (typically practical) problems to have been solved. Otherwise, families experienced longer transitional periods in which contact was increased (and/or supervision reduced) in stages, over the course of a few weeks or several months. This reflected the use of phased returns described by professionals.

Parents expressed mixed views about the length of transition periods. In one case a mother had agreed to a short-term, voluntary placement whilst in hospital having a new baby, which involved a rapid transition home from care for an older child following the birth. However, there were other examples, typically when children had been looked after for longer, where parents were critical about being given very little notice or having to cope with short transition periods, contradicting professionals' descriptions of returns being planned.

They didn't give me much of a chance… three years, and they're coming home I think over the space of six weeks' holiday. They wanted it to go from pick them up from school, bring them to tea, have them overnight, and bring them home. They've not been with me for three years, so that's a lot of change for them, it's a lot of change for me, and they didn't really acknowledge any of that… just expected me to cope… Mary Poppins like, perfect. I don't think that's realistic for any parent.

(Parent)

Once the assessment and decision-making processes were complete, families had a general preference for transition periods of at least a month. It was common within the sample for contact visits to be increased in length over a period of around six weeks. This was described as long enough to get 'back in the swing of things' after feeling out of practice, anxious and low in confidence. Similar views came from children, for instance, one group of siblings said they were happy with their month-long transition (including weekend stays) which helped them get used to living with their dad.

We used to stay here at weekends and sometimes we would come here and have tea and stuff because we were going to live with him, so we could get used to what was going to happen.

(Child)

Although the message received from professionals is that they recognise a need for robust planning for reunification, the findings from families indicate that some have not felt fully involved in the planning process or been comfortable with the pace of transition home. This suggests that whether professionals are aware of the research evidence, or they are operating on common sense and general practice ideas around reunification planning, the messages are not always being transferred into effective practice.

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- What type of issues are considered locally as part of the planning and transition process?
- What issues are taken into account when considering a phased return?
- How are organisations locally made aware of a planned return home from care and involved in the planning and transition process?
- How do you and other organisations ensure that families are meaningfully involved in the planning process?

Section Four: The services available to support reunification and the provision of those services before and after return home from care

Key findings

- support structures vary locally, but the overriding emphasis is on providing appropriate support in a timely manner
- a lack of clearly defined and embedded policy and protocol relating to reunification presents a potential weakness in support provision
- carers can provide an important source of support, although their involvement is not widespread
- adult and children's social care providers need to consider the needs of the whole family when supporting service users

Perspectives

- professionals and parents identified resources as having an impact on the length of time support was available
- parents wanted tailored support to address the underlying issues that led to their children becoming looked after
- representatives of external support agencies and parents considered social workers to have a key role in the success of multi-agency support provision (i.e. by promoting communication)

Section Three discussed the planning and transition process where a decision has been made for a child to return to their parent's care. This section considers the range of support available to families before and after reunification and issues impacting provision of that support.

There is limited research evidence from the UK about the effectiveness of different forms of support for reunification, although there is valuable evidence, for instance, about the importance of specialist services and purposeful social work (Biehal, 2006; Farmer and Wijedasa, 2012; Thoburn et al., 2012). Unsuccessful reunification has been associated

with minimal and/or poorly co-ordinated support services (Thoburn et al., 2012), so it is important that local authorities and support agencies have effective processes and structures in place for delivering support to children and parents.

A local authority's statutory duty to plan for and provide support will depend upon the legal status of the child and whether they cease to be looked after when they return to the care of their parents. The flow chart contained in the current Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (Department for Education, 2015a) (see Appendix One) highlights the care planning routes local authorities must follow depending upon the circumstances of a child's return home from care, including where they have a duty to provide support. The statutory duty to support children provides a baseline level of provision and authorities can provide a level of support in excess of these requirements. For example, senior managers in one authority stated that social workers had the same commitment to accessing support and resources regardless of the child's legal status.

Local structures for delivering support

Local structures underpinning support provision for children returning home from care varied between local authorities, although the overriding emphasis was described as ensuring that appropriate support was available in a timely manner to meet the specific needs of children and parents. Senior managers and frontline workers commonly described support being provided as part of a package, for instance, using a team around the child. The use of locality teams; multi-disciplinary teams covering different districts within a local authority, was identified as one means of ensuring that the skills required to work with a family were available. It was also viewed as providing continuity of service for families as they moved up and down the support tiers. In another authority, senior managers described a model where specialist services sat alongside universal services, meaning those specialist services were available to everyone needing them, not only families with social worker involvement. In two further local authorities, edge of care teams were identified as providing a useful resource for supporting children returning home from care.

A lack of clearly defined and embedded policy and protocol around reunification was identified by professionals as a potential weakness in the provision of support. Although this followed periods of change in some authorities, it was viewed as a nationwide problem. Without this, professionals suggested the system was reliant on social workers'

passion for their work and on social workers possessing the requisite experience to compensate for the lack of guidance.

The range of support services available

Professionals across the eight authorities described a wide range of universal and targeted services available to support reunification in addition to the support of social workers and carers[7], including:

- family support services
- substance misuse workers
- children's centres
- CAMHS
- education
- health
- specialist interventions including Multi Systemic Therapy, the Triple P Parenting Programme and Family Nurse Partnership
- mentoring services
- therapeutic services
- adult services such as mental health
- troubled families
- targeted youth support
- domestic violence workers

Frontline workers also identified extended family, such as grandparents as a useful form of support during the reunification process.

There was some awareness amongst professionals of the evidence base for support services. For example, frontline staff in one focus group referred to positive findings from the evaluation of the pilot Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) (Harwin et al., 2011; 2014) and professionals also referred to the Triple P Parenting Program[8] as being evidence based.

[7] N.B. Not all services were available in every local authority.
[8] For further information Triple P Parenting.

In terms of gaps in support, one senior manager identified an absence of provision around domestic violence and in particular, provision for perpetrators.

> *There are some support services for women but the intervention that reduces the risk of harm and domestic violence per se is pretty limited, but highly prevalent in our referrals.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

Housing was identified as presenting difficulties for local authorities supporting families due to the welfare cap on housing benefit, particularly in high cost areas. Parents also identified difficulties in relation to housing, although they were unsure whether this was part of a bigger problem due to a shortage of council housing, or because social workers were slow to liaise with housing departments.

CAMHS was identified by several professionals as an area where there were gaps in provision for families in relation to reunification, for instance, in terms of thresholds for the service, waiting lists and strict eligibility criteria.

Professionals also suggested a need for 'foster grannies' to support parents and help address what they perceived as a cycle of poor parenting across generations; increased support for kinship care due to a growing number of children in kinship placements; and a need for long-term support for families, particularly in the case of large sibling groups where neglect had been an issue.

When considering provision of support services, it should be noted that the recording of service use within social care management information systems, at a child and family level is notoriously poor (Gatehouse et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2008; Holmes et al., 2012; Holmes and McDermid, 2012), and there is a difference between services being available to families and those services actually being accessed in practice.

Length and intensity of support

Professionals emphasised how deciding on the length and intensity of support could not be done using a one size fits all approach, but was decided based on the assessment of individual families' needs. Generally, the decision was described as initially being made by the social worker and team manager, usually with input from other agencies, multi-agency teams or commissioning panels, and ratified by senior level managers and IROs.

Again, the exact process for providing and reviewing support depended on the legal status of the child.

Senior managers and frontline workers referred to the length of social workers' involvement being decided on a case by case basis rather than having fixed timescales, although they most frequently talked about continuing involvement for three to nine months post return home before their involvement tapered off. However, families in the sample had often not experienced support being tapered off in this way. The process of stepping down support services is considered later in this section. There was some discrepancy between senior managers' and frontline workers' views on why social worker involvement in cases ceased. Frontline workers in one focus group suggested that sometimes cases could be closed to reduce the number of looked after children, whereas a senior manager described having the sense that the staff within the authority were sensible enough not to close cases for pragmatic or capacity reasons. The potential implications of social workers ceasing involvement were considered in a study by Ward and colleagues (2010), which found that pressure to close cases, could result in support being withdrawn prematurely. The study also found that parents were unlikely to re-refer themselves if they subsequently experienced difficulties because of the risk of their children being removed from them once again. A study by Farmer and colleagues (2011) also identified instances of cases being closed prematurely, where children subsequently experienced negative outcomes and in some cases, the breakdown of reunification.

The length of support provided by other agencies varied depending upon the nature of that support and the individual needs of the family, although support was generally described as being initially intensive before gradually reducing, leaving families with services such as children's centres, which would be available in the longer term. Both professionals and families identified resources as having had an impact on the length of time support was available.

Despite professionals judging how long support was necessary, there was a risk that families would disengage from services when children returned home from care. Reasons suggested by professionals for this included parents not believing support would help or understanding its purpose; parents wanting to be like other families without social care involvement; and because some families experienced a honeymoon period immediately after a child returned home before tensions and issues started to emerge. However, parents provided an alternative perspective, for instance, they described

disengaging from services where they felt support was inappropriate if it was inadequately tailored to meet their needs; or because they were sometimes glad to stop working with a social worker they considered unhelpful or unprofessional.

The provision of multi-agency support

As discussed earlier in this section, support services were often provided by multiple agencies working together around the child and parents. Professionals considered there to be strengths and weaknesses to multi-agency working, for instance where agencies each had their own processes, referral routes and working styles. Parents also had mixed experiences of agencies working together.

Communication was viewed as key to successful multi-agency working. However, the complexity of the multi-agency support system created difficulties, and in practice there was not always a consistent structure for exchanging information, particularly for those support agencies outside of the statutory arena. This links with the perception of local authorities lacking a clearly defined and embedded policy and protocol on reunification. Representatives from support agencies and families described social workers as being central to the communication process, for instance, by linking families up with support services, or ensuring that the appropriate professionals and extended family members were made aware of any recommendations made by the courts. However, the limits to social workers' powers were also acknowledged, for instance being unable to compel other professionals to attend meetings. This could have a negative impact on addressing issues that were central to progressing plans for reunification such as housing.

Senior managers generally thought they were moving towards effective partnership working, for example, through children's trusts and safeguarding boards, although they acknowledged that more could be done to integrate social work and external agencies supporting families though reunification. One authority was trying to develop forums for professionals to constructively challenge one another as a way of improving the service. A number of senior managers referred to the benefits of co-locating professionals from multiple agencies as it enabled staff to talk informally.

The role of carers as a source of support

Carers were identified by professionals and families as an important source of support during reunification, supporting both children and parents. This reflects research evidence that the support of residential or foster carers post reunification is associated with stability (Farmer and Wijedasa, 2012). Professionals across four local authorities referred to the involvement of foster carers in supporting reunification, although their involvement was not described as being common, and professionals did not refer to the existence of research evidence concerning its potential impact.

Whether there was an expectation that foster carers would be involved in supporting the reunification process differed between authorities. Where foster carers were willing to support reunification, they were involved in helping parents understand a child's routines and behaviour, or providing respite care in the early days following a child's return home. Senior managers in one local authority where there was an expectation that foster carers would support reunification described how they supported foster carers via their supervising social workers, through training, and also by providing psychological support where necessary to deal with the issues carers themselves faced when children returned home to their parents. This represents an innovative approach, acknowledging the role of foster carers and the emotional impact reunification can potentially have on them as individuals.

Although frontline workers had experience of foster carers supporting reunification, they also described instances where this was not happening, for instance, where foster carers were having difficulty accepting that families had moved on from historical problems. Frontline workers in one focus group suggested that foster carers would benefit from receiving training about reunification and being more involved in the reunification planning process.

In addition to the support of foster carers, parents identified carers in residential homes and schools as a particular source of support. Examples were given of staff always being available on the phone if a parent needed help; and attending therapy sessions with a family during a phased transition. Parents felt that it helped that the carers in residential schools and homes often took the time to really get to know their children and understand their behaviours. Carers were then able to spend time communicating this knowledge and understanding to parents, who in turn felt better placed to support and manage the care of their children once they returned home.

Stepping down support services

In order to make the transition from receiving statutory social work support to other forms of support such as early help or community services, authorities described local processes for stepping down support in a controlled and gradual manner. Senior managers and frontline workers emphasised the importance of gradually reducing support to avoid children re-entering care. They described a process during the course of stepping down services, for instance, from a child protection plan, to a child in need (CiN) plan and finally to the Common Assessment Framework process[9], and this was viewed by a representative from an external support agency as helping to ensure that ongoing support was withdrawn slowly. Once a case was phased down to the CAF process, a lead professional would be identified to oversee the case instead of the social worker. The identity of the lead professional would depend who was best placed or most involved with the family.

A number of local authorities had either recently reviewed their stepping down processes or were in the process of formalising them. Examples included local authorities using the team around the child or multi-agency teams to plan and implement step down. One senior manager described what this meant:

> *There's clear awareness now amongst practitioners that you can't just… close a case and hope for the best. You have to have a clear plan about what that family needs, what services need to be put into place.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

It was noted by one senior manager that some families were difficult to engage in the stepping down process, for example, if they were in the honeymoon period where they felt they could manage without support.

While professionals talked about a gradual stepping down of support following reunification, this was not always the experience of parents. However, this may again reflect that parents were describing events occurring some time ago, whereas local authorities were describing their current policies. This also reflects existing research

[9] The Common Assessment Framework was fully implemented across English local authorities in 2008 and was designed to support vulnerable children and families with additional needs that do not meet the threshold for more intensive interventions, such as those associated with social care or safeguarding.

findings that step down processes are not always implemented systematically (Holmes et al., 2012). Parents recognised that individuals providing support would change as their circumstances changed. In instances where adequate time had been allowed for a hand-over between professionals, parents generally felt they were still being well supported. This demonstrates effective practice in ensuring that the level and quality of support remains consistent as different support providers become involved with families.

Families' experiences of support throughout the reunification process

Parents expressed differing views on whether they had received adequate support during the reunification process and what constituted good support. For some, good support was seen as having regular contact with a person they trusted, with regular contact being anything from weekly to six weekly. Contact could be face-to-face or over the phone, depending on what the parents felt was most appropriate for their needs. However many parents expressed concern at the level of support they received throughout the reunification process or at specific points.

Parents emphasised the importance of receiving tailored support to ensure that the main issues that led to their children becoming looked after were resolved before reunification. This perspective reflects research evidence identifying the need to address underlying issues and parental capacity to change prior to reunification occurring (Farmer et al., 2012; Wade et al., 2011).

Although professionals emphasised the importance of timely support and intervention, a few parents commented that they would have benefited from earlier intervention. Some families requested support from social care services or other professionals, for example GPs, but were advised that they did not meet eligibility criteria or the problem was not severe enough to receive support. This often resulted in the problem becoming worse before support was finally provided.

> *I asked for help with how to deal with my children's behaviour. I asked the social worker. All I wanted was some support to manage their behaviour, and I know some of their behaviour was down to me, but I wanted to know how to fix the situation. But the social worker didn't want to help, she didn't do anything. It just meant that everything got worse as I just couldn't cope with them.*

(Parent)

Having support withdrawn too soon or stopped abruptly was another common issue raised by parents. Parents believed that social workers needed to think longer term about the support they offered families.

> *What I see social services doing, is just doing something for a quick result but not for the long haul and really it should be the long haul. I believe if [my child] and I had been supported from the beginning we wouldn't be here now.*
>
> *(Parent)*

Parents discussed how support could be inconsistent depending on the team or professionals involved in the case. Having a change in social worker or team lead could either have a positive or negative impact on support.

> *When we moved to the corporate parenting team everything changed. The children were on a full care order but it was then that we started to discuss them coming home. They gave me excellent support, the social worker and her manager. Both listened to me and what we needed, it was such a difference from the previous social worker.*
>
> *(Parent)*

Parents often felt that they were being judged by their social worker and other professionals, which inhibited them from asking for the support that they needed in case they were seen as unfit parents. Generally, parents viewed receiving support from someone independent as helpful. When this was the case it made a real difference to parents' perceptions of how well they were treated and understood. This reflects the value parents placed on the involvement of independent professionals in the evaluation of NSPCC's Taking Care practice framework (Hyde-Dryden et al., 2015).

In terms of making children aware of the support available to them, one authority had a participation unit that helped ensure that children had good information and an understanding about the range of available services. While the data does not reveal how successful this unit has been in achieving its aim, it is an example of an innovative approach to engaging and communicating with children.

Addressing the support needs of the entire family

Parents and professionals emphasised the importance of taking into account the needs of the entire family in order to provide effective support. For example, parents found that having someone to support their needs, in addition to their child's, during the reunification process made a real difference in terms of their perceptions of how well they were treated and understood.

> *I think it has been useful having a family support worker. She is now someone I can tell things too. I talk to her and she gives me advice. I find this helpful. She really understands how to deal with [son].*
>
> *(Parent)*

However, parents' needs were not always taken into account. Senior managers in one focus group described how professionals focused predominantly on the child during reunification with little focus on the parent, except when contact was being addressed. They acknowledged that they needed to develop their approach in this area to include a focus on what parents required to care for their children.

> *You go into these situations and there's great support around the children and unless you're extreme as the parent, there is very little support.*
>
> *(External support agency)*

A number of existing research studies highlight the importance of involving parents and children in the reunification process and considering their needs, in order to increase the likelihood of successful and stable return home (Thoburn, 2009; The Who Cares? Trust, 2006; Wade et al., 2011).

Responsibility for addressing the support needs of the whole family does not rest solely with children's social care. Frontline professionals in one authority referred to the role of adult services in the reunification process, stating that until recently, they had not considered their service users as parents. Again, this is echoed by existing research (e.g. Cleaver et al., 2011; Smith, 2004; Ward et al., 2012).

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- Does a local policy or protocol exist underpinning the provision of support where children are returning home from care? How systematically is this implemented?
- What factors are taken into account locally when considering the length and intensity of support provision?
- How well do different organisations work together locally to provide support for children and their families? How is the lead person for each service engaged in the process?
- What is the process locally for discussing support with families?

Section Five: Post reunification monitoring and review

Key findings

- senior managers and frontline workers were not always clear who maintained a strategic overview of support provision available following reunification
- i was acknowledged that support, monitoring and review was less rigid and structured following reunification in cases where children had been accommodated or had ceased to be looked after
- some monitoring of re-referrals and /or re-entry to care/accommodation was being undertaken in the majority of authorities, although practice varied
- there appeared to be no monitoring or analysis of the costs of reunification

Perspectives

- professionals acknowledged the complexity of co-ordinating and monitoring post-reunification support provision across multiple agencies
- frontline workers described potential difficulty identifying the most appropriate way forward where a reunification was unsuccessful, particularly in borderline cases where parenting was just good enough

Section Four explored the provision of support to families before and after reunification. This section considers how cases are reviewed and monitored in the post reunification period.

Maintaining a strategic overview of support provision

Frontline workers and senior managers did not always appear entirely clear who within local authorities had a strategic overview of the support available or provided, when children returned home. In some cases, professionals were unsure but assumed responsibility would rest with a senior manager, for example, the head of service, a director, or with Children's Trust Boards. One senior manager described how his authority tried to build in an understanding of gaps in the service by having a process for

monitoring commissioned services and using performance boards to consider whether the right services were available.

Co-ordinating support in individual cases

The co-ordination of support in individual cases was described as being initially the primary responsibility of the social worker in conjunction with the team manager, and sometimes also in conjunction with a multi-agency team. When it was considered appropriate for social worker involvement to cease (which would depend upon the legal status of the child), the responsibility for co-ordinating support would be transferred to a lead professional as part of the stepping down process. As previously discussed, the lead professional would be whoever was best placed or had most involvement with the family.

Professionals acknowledged, however, that once the level of support in a case was stepped down, it could be a complex process for someone to co-ordinate provision across multiple support agencies. For example, one senior manager commented that:

> *The statutory framework that you get for looked after children through the IRO process and formal mechanisms to bring people together is significantly different to what we're able to deliver in terms of children in need.*
>
> *(Senior manager)*

A senior manager highlighted the difference between children returning home with looked after status where the child is 'placed with their parents' compared to children who had been accommodated, where the child's looked after status ceases once they return to their family. Retaining looked-after status meant that a structure of support and review remains a statutory requirement. The manager suggested that child protection plans could be used to replicate some of this formal structure, although support such as personal education plans and health assessments would still drop off once looked-after status ceases.

Professionals were clear that someone needed to have an overview and co-ordinate provision. A representative from an external support agency explained that an overview of support was required post reunification to ensure that promised services were actually delivered. An example was given of cases where nobody appeared to be responsible for

maintaining an overview and where services had not been delivered four or five years after a child returned home to their family.

A further difficulty identified by representatives of external support agencies was the potential delay in communication when children changed legal status, which resulted in a period when agencies were unclear as to the identity of the social worker or lead professional.

Post reunification breakdown

Where a child returning home to their parents was unsuccessful, professionals described how it would often occur very suddenly. In terms of the process triggered by a breakdown, one senior manager confirmed that if it had been precipitated by a significant incident, they may undertake a multi-agency case review. The majority of professionals described how social workers would re-assess the risks to the child to decide whether the threshold had been met for them to once again become looked after. Frontline workers highlighted how it could be difficult to identify the most appropriate way forward, particularly in borderline cases where parenting was just good enough. Young people could also change their minds about where they wanted to live, and parents could change their minds about continuing section 20 agreements.

Monitoring numbers of children re-referred or re-entering care/accommodation

Senior managers in six local authorities described undertaking some monitoring of re-referrals and/or re-entry to care/accommodation, although practice varied between local authorities. For example, one local authority had introduced the monitoring of re-referral and re-entries to care/accommodation over the last six months to enable them to identify why reunification was not successful and why issues were not picked up earlier. They wanted to undertake more detailed analysis and now had sufficient data to begin this process. In two authorities, monitoring was being undertaken, although not in any systematic way but on a case by case basis. A senior manager in one of these authorities viewed this as improving the quality of their step down processes. Although learning from monitoring re-referral and re-entry to care/accommodation was being discussed at a strategic level, for instance in management meetings or fed through to

safeguarding boards, the data suggest that there is currently little structure in place for systematically disseminating messages from learning to frontline staff.

None of the local authorities appeared to undertake any monitoring or analysis of the costs of reunification. Practice also varied in terms of monitoring the effectiveness and cost associated with providing services to support reunification. For example, two authorities described not undertaking any analysis; in one authority services were considered as part of their sufficiency strategy; whilst a senior manager in another authority referred to the existence of evaluations of interventions such as the Triple P Positive Parenting Program and national work about return on investment.

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- Who is responsible for maintaining a strategic overview of support available and provided to children who have returned home from care?
- Do you have an established process locally for transferring responsibility for co-ordinating post-reunification support from a social worker to a lead professional?
- What processes are triggered within your organisation when reunification is unsuccessful?
- What data do you currently collect on children returning home from care re-referrals and re-entry to care/accommodation?
- How could data from monitoring the number of children re-referred or re-entering care following reunification inform your authority's approach?

Although some monitoring is taking place across the local authorities, without systematic processes in place for monitoring and analysing re-referral and re-entry to care/accommodation and the related costs, local authorities seeking to develop their approaches and policies on reunification will be limited in their ability to evaluate the impact. Systems for monitoring and analysing data, and disseminating learning from it, therefore need to be developed as part of reunification policies. This was also a key theme emerging from the learning set workshops and all authorities included activities to review how they monitor and analyse data in their action plans.

Section Six: Staff training and supervision

Key findings

- senior managers identified three broad avenues for training and information sharing
- supervision provides an opportunity to ensure that practice reflects both national and local policy

Perspectives

- managers in three authorities acknowledged that the focus on reunification in training could be increased – mandatory training, meetings, event or briefings and making resources available
- supervision is viewed as providing an opportunity for social workers to reflect on good reunification practice and how this can be applied to individual cases

Disseminating best practice

Senior managers highlighted a range of processes for training social workers and disseminating information about new policies, initiatives and research. Senior managers in two authorities stated that reunification was covered as part of their training programme, although managers in three authorities acknowledged that there could be more of a focus within training on reunification practice. The majority of senior managers described having three broad avenues for training and information sharing:

- mandatory and basic training
- meetings, events or briefings to cascade new policy or initiatives down from senior management to frontline workers
- sources of information that staff members could access independently

One senior manager described their authority as having a core comprehensive training and development pathway for social workers covering subjects including attachment, reflective supervision, the PLO process and permanence. In one authority, principal social workers were responsible for stimulating team discussions on good practice and

for sharing information about relevant research, although a senior manager acknowledged that this process could be strengthened by providing principle social workers with more of a framework for identifying research. Representatives from partner agencies were also invited to discuss their services with staff. A number of authorities provided social workers with access to social work resources for instance, Research in Practice and Community Care Inform. Senior managers and frontline staff in one authority also noted their links with the social work department of their local university.

Senior managers also described how they monitored social work practice. One authority had a process of reviewing random case files where managers would subsequently provide feedback to individual social workers and team managers. The process was intended to provide a 'critical friend'. Senior managers in another local authority were considering options for monitoring how effectively change was being embedded and new practice was being applied, not just in relation to reunification practice.

Supervision

Questions for professionals considering their local authority's approach to reunification

- What training have staff members in your organisation received relating to reunification?
- What (additional) training would staff benefit from?
- Is reunification addressed as a specific topic in supervision sessions?

Supervision was viewed as being the opportunity for social workers to reflect on what was involved in good reunification practice and how they were applying this to cases. Supervision generally involved one to one formal sessions and reflective discussions, but in one authority also involved clinical supervision where social workers could discuss cases with a family therapist. One senior manager described how reunification had recently been added as a specific topic to be addressed in supervision. As the data suggest that there is a disconnect between ideal and actual practice, supervision provides an opportunity for managers to ensure that practice in a case reflects both national and local policy and also those factors which research evidence tell us are key to successful reunification.

Conclusions and recommendations

The development of approaches to reunification by local authorities occurs in light of an increasing policy focus in this area. It is, in many ways, an opportune time for local authorities to re-evaluate their approach, for instance, following publication of the revised Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance (Department for Education, 2015a) and the development of NSPCC's practice framework and guidance on reunification (Wilkins and Farmer, 2015; Wilkins 2015; NSPCC, 2012). However, the complexity of the policy and practice landscape also needs to be acknowledged as authorities need to develop approaches that fit within the wider framework on adoption, children on the edge of care and achieving permanence for all looked after children.

Overall, local authorities in the sample were at the early stages of focusing on reunification as a specific area of policy and practice. Senior managers acknowledged a need to review and formalise their approach, and for two managers, this need to develop thinking around reunification policy and practice influenced their decision to participate in the project. Only one authority already had a specific written reunification policy, with some others including reunification in other policy documents. The fact that local authorities were at the early stages of focusing on reunification should be borne in mind when considering the approach described by professionals. As local authorities in the sample were also participating in learning set workshops focussed on reunification at the time of the research, the data may also reflect very recent insight from those events.

The use of research evidence as a basis for policy or practice

In terms of how local authorities use the existing research evidence base to inform their policy and practice, the findings suggest that some limited research evidence has been used to varying degrees. The majority of senior managers interviewed stated a need or intention to focus more closely on their use of research evidence.

The fact that in the past there has been little central focus on reunification as a policy area may provide an explanation as to why there has only been limited use of research evidence by local authorities in the sample. Without this specific focus, policy and practice have evolved gradually and there will have been little impetus to take stock and review research messages.

Professionals and families identified a number of examples of what they considered to represent effective reunification practice. Much of this practice reflected the messages from research evidence, although the current limited use of research by local authorities suggests that this was likely to be coincidental rather than a conscious decision to incorporate evidence into practice.

Dissonance between reunification theory and practice

The findings reveal a degree of dissonance between senior managers' descriptions of their local authority's approach to reunification and the everyday practice described by frontline workers and representatives of external agencies involved in supporting families. In part, this is likely to be the result of reunification policy and practice not having been a specific focus for local authorities.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that although professionals, and particularly senior managers, described approaches that aligned closely with the effective practice identified in the research evidence, families' experiences of reunification suggested that this was not always achieved in practice.

As local authorities begin to focus on developing their approaches to reunification, it will be important for senior and commissioning managers to ensure they understand the factors facilitating or hindering effective practice and to feed this into their future decision-making and strategy development. This should be a continuous process.

Tailoring approaches to different groups of children

The findings revealed examples of the approach to reunification being tailored to the age of the child. For example, social workers considered the possibility of older accommodated children "voting with their feet" when making reunification plans. A child's age was identified as influencing the appropriate pace of reunification once a decision had been made that a child could return home.

A child's legal status also had an impact on the approach taken to reunification as it determined a local authority's statutory duties. Testing social workers' understanding of legal status was beyond the scope of the research remit, and although professionals often interchangeably reported practice in supporting families where children were looked

after under care orders or accommodated, they did also refer to practice relating to specific legal status.

Enablers and barriers to implementing effective practice based on research evidence

The findings highlight a number of enablers and barriers to implementing effective practice based on the research evidence. From these, it is possible to identify a range of factors which need to be in place for local authorities to implement effective practice based on the research evidence. For example, a key factor is that both senior managers and frontline workers understand the messages from research. Reunification needs to be prioritised as an issue by local authorities, for instance, organising teams and staffing to enable frontline workers the opportunity to undertake sufficient direct work with families to help them overcome issues and to provide continuity in their relationship. There needs to be an emphasis on communicating with families, potentially involving an independent person who was not involved in a child entering care/accommodation in the first place. All professionals involved in reunification need to understand the local structure of support provision, and senior management needs to maintain an overview to ensure gaps or weaknesses in provision are addressed. Local authorities need to ensure that where appropriate cases are monitored for a sufficient period of time following reunification, for instance, for a minimum period of six months in line with the NSPCC's Taking Care practice framework (*N.B*. R*evised Taking Care guidance is due for publication shortly*) (NSPCC, 2012). Authorities also need to understand their local data on reunification and re-entry to care/accommodation, as well as the costs of reunification in order to assess how successful their approach is.

There was relatively little mention by professionals of innovative practice, which may reflect the fact that local authorities are in the early stages of focusing on policy and practice in this area.

Recommendations

The messages from existing research and the facilitators and barriers identified by families and professionals in this study provide a number of practice and policy issues that should be considered as local authorities develop their reunification policies further.

However, a number of the following issues are not unique to reunification practice and are fundamental to effective practice across children's social care.

Senior managers and strategic bodies should

- ensure that systems are in place for messages from research to inform the strategic approach to reunification practice and are systematically shared with frontline workers
- take a whole organisation approach to supporting reunification ensuring that the lead people in all relevant services, across children and adults, are engaged at an early point in the process
- monitor and analyse local reunification data to understand where they are succeeding in improving outcomes and where there are issues that need to be addressed, and supporting and training staff to make sense of these data
- reinforce the importance of engaging with families throughout. Recognising parents' support needs and address these within the system – in particular the importance of someone independent to understand and represent their needs during the process
- co-ordinate agencies involved in the process to ensure effective communication between professionals and with families; expertise is brought in at the most appropriate point; and effective co-ordination continues as support is stepped down
- introduce processes to help frontline workers and representatives of external agencies supporting reunification understand the structure of local support provision and keep up to date with changes occurring within the local support landscape

Frontline workers and representatives of external agencies supporting reunification should

- understand key messages from research
- seek to engage families in a meaningful way in the assessment, decision-making and planning process and ensure they understand what is happening
- take a holistic view to supporting families throughout the reunification process, for instance, supporting parents to address underlying issues and monitoring their

progress; and focusing on parents' ongoing needs as well as those of their children

- acknowledge the potential complexity and changing nature of cases throughout the reunification process
- provide careful, planned, gradual yet timely support tailored to a family's specific needs to address the circumstances and issues faced by children and their parents

Researchers and bodies commissioning research should

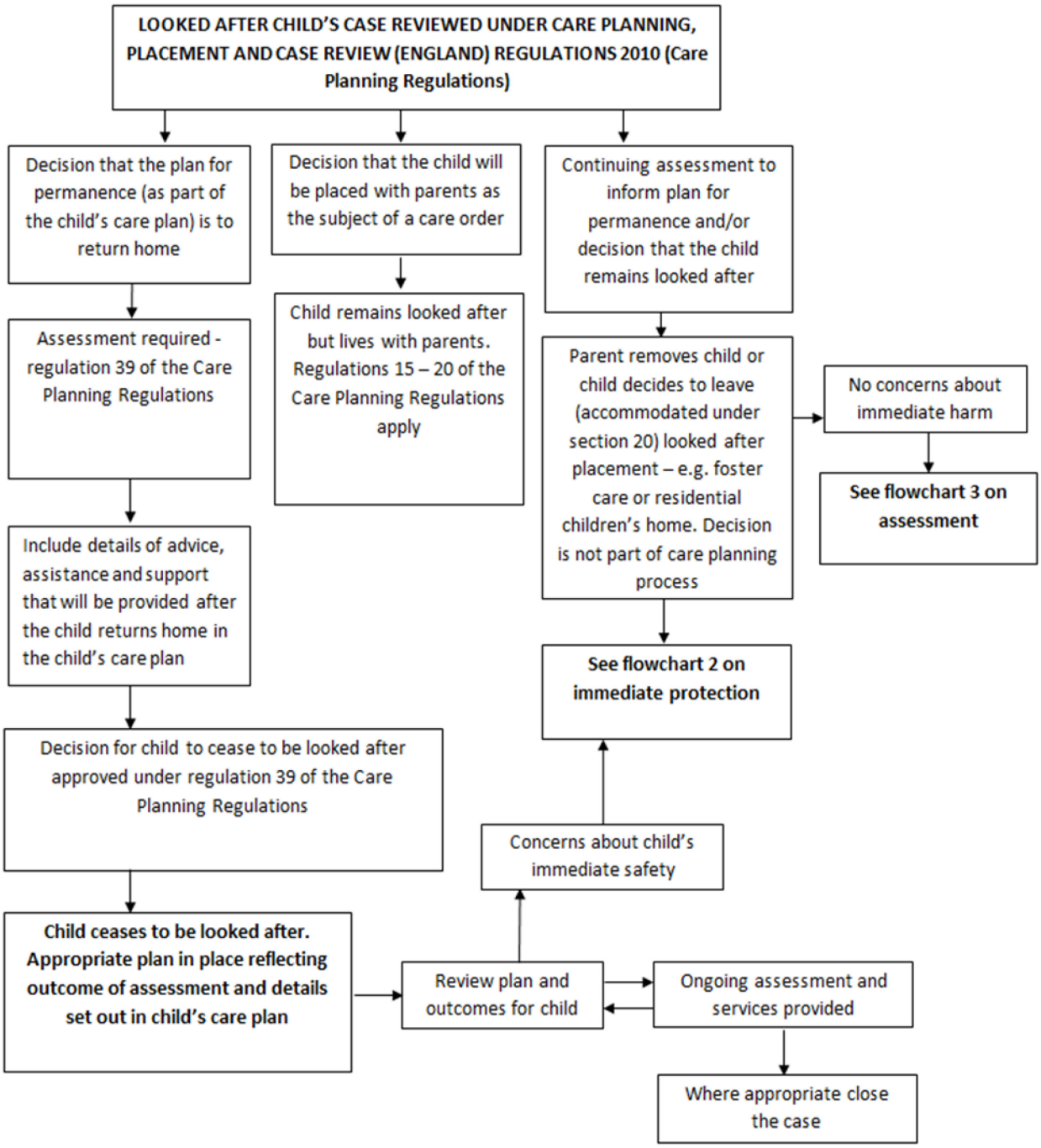
- consider how messages from research can be creatively disseminated to local authorities for incorporation into policy, and also in a format appropriate for frontline workers, taking into account other pressures on their time

Central government should

- lnk national data sets to enable local authorities to systematically follow the journeys of children who return home and subsequently re-enter care/accommodation. For example, this could help children's services monitor non-statutory services accessed by families when a child is no longer looked after in order to better understand why reunification succeeds or breaks down
- publish local authority level data on re-entry to care/accommodation to provide authorities with context for considering their own data and enable them to make comparisons with statistical neighbours

Appendices

Appendix One: Flowchart illustrating local authority care planning duties related to reunification



Reproduced from *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children* (2015a) London: Department for Education.

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