Department for Education

Appendix three: methodology, ethics and study limitations

Children who return home from care: improving practice

December 2015

Georgia Hyde-Dryden*, Jennifer Gibb^, Joanna Lea^, Eliza Buckley^, Lisa Holmes*, Emma Wallace^, Clare Lushey* and Doug Lawson*

National Children's Bureau^ and Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University*
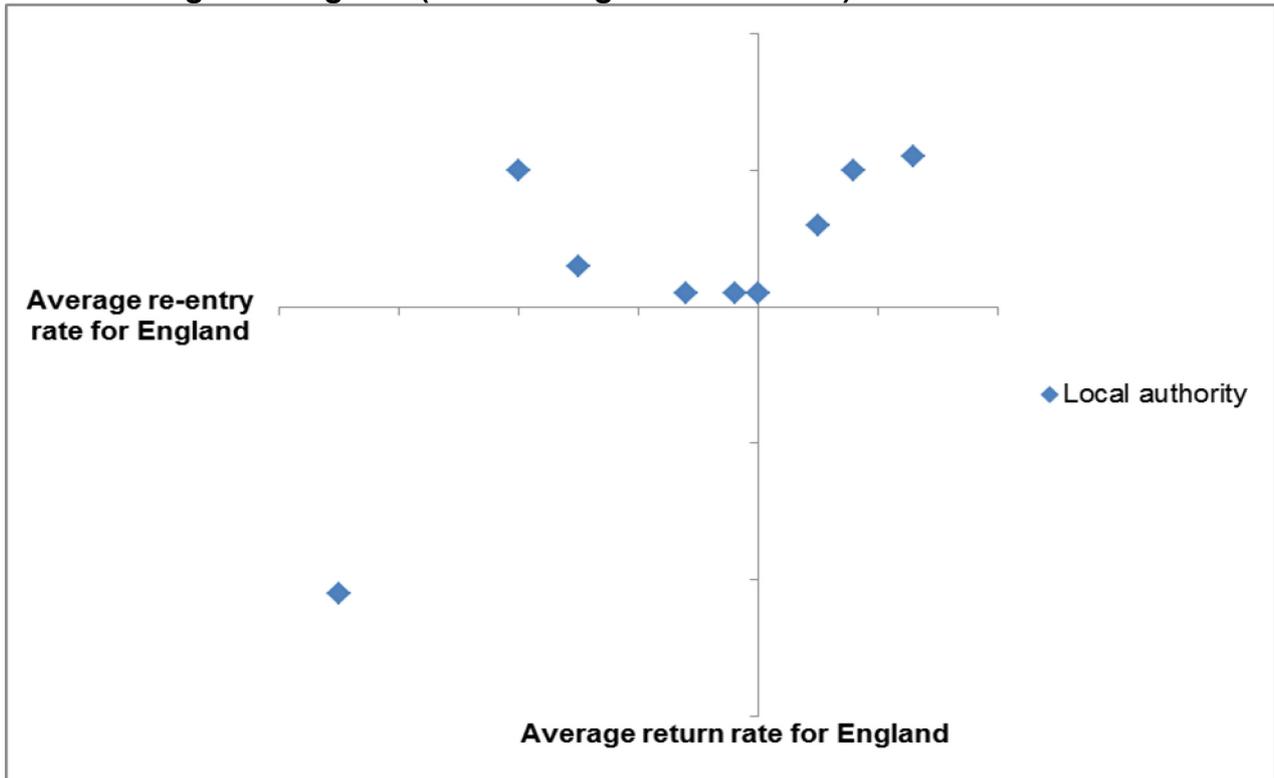
Contents

Methodology

Selection of the case study local authorities

In order to recruit eight local authorities with a broad range of characteristics for inclusion in the project, a stratified sample of local authorities was selected 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.

Invitations were initially sent to sixteen local authorities from the stratified sample representing a broad range of characteristics. Taking into account the characteristics of those authorities indicating they wished to participate, invitations were sent to a second wave of twenty authorities. This resulted in a sample of eight local authorities being achieved. The sample represented a good spread of geographical areas covering eight out of ten regions. There was also a good spread of types of authority including unitary authorities, metropolitan borough, non-metropolitan county and London boroughs. The proportion of children returned home across the sample as reported in the SSDA 903 return data for the year ending 31st March 2012 ranged from below five to fifty percent. The spread of rates of return home and re-entry compared to the average rates for England are illustrated in Figure 1 below..

Figure 1 - Spread of local authority sample by return and re-entry rates compared to the average for England (Year ending 31 March 2012).

N.B. Nine local authorities are shown as one research site consisted of two local authorities jointly providing services.

Once the final sample was identified, the following data collection was undertaken:

- in-depth telephone interviews with two senior managers;

- three focus groups, one 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;

- face to face interviews with four parents or carers, and three children aged six to eighteen years.

Collecting data from both families and professionals provided for exploration of the issues from multiple perspectives, including those receiving and providing reunification services and support.

Interviews with professionals

Sample selection and participation rates

Researchers provided local authorities with participant information sheets/ invitations relating to the telephone interviews with senior managers and focus groups with managers and frontline social care staff, and local authorities were asked to nominate the most appropriate staff members to participate. In the case of the telephone interviews, the research team subsequently contacted the nominated individuals by email or telephone to invite them to participate in the project and arrange an interview date. Local authorities were also asked to assist in arranging a focus group with representatives of local external agencies supporting return home by identifying and distributing invitations to relevant organisations.

From a total of sixteen potential telephone interviews with senior managers, interviews were secured with eleven. In one local authority, the arrival of Ofsted meant that it was necessary to cancel both interviews. In one of the smaller authorities with a limited number of senior level managers, it was agreed that managers would participate in the focus group rather than in telephone interviews. In one other authority an interview had to be cancelled at the last minute and could not be re-arranged despite several attempts to do so.

Three focus groups were completed in six of the eight local authorities giving a total participation rate of eighteen out of a potential twenty-four. Again, it was necessary to cancel the focus groups arranged in one authority following the arrival of Ofsted, and another authority attempted to arrange focus groups on a number of occasions, but was unable to secure attendance by staff.

Instruments

Telephone interviews took no longer than one and a half hours and senior managers were supplied with a copy of the interview schedule in advance (see Appendix Four). The interviews were recorded digitally with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Focus groups lasted for a maximum of one hour and participants were provided with a focus group information sheet in advance explaining the purpose of the group and the range of areas that would be covered. A separate focus group topic guide was prepared for each of the three sets of participants: commissioning, senior and middle tier managers; frontline social care workers; and representatives from agencies supporting

return home (see Appendix Four). The written consent of participants was obtained at the beginning of each focus group and the focus groups were recorded digitally with the consent of participants. Researchers subsequently listened to the recordings and prepared notes for use in analysis.

The interview transcriptions and focus group notes were thematically coded and analysed using NVivo 10.

Interviews with parents and children

Sample selection and participation rates

At each of the eight case study sites, researchers aimed to speak with three children (aged six to eighteen years) and the parents of four children (aged between birth and eighteen years). For families to be eligible for inclusion in the sample, children must have returned home from care within the last 24 months. To monitor the composition of the sample, the following information was recorded during preliminary conversations:

- success/failure of the most recent return home;
- recency of last return home;
- length of their most recent care period;
- the legal status of the child.

A two stage sampling process was undertaken to generate a sample that was both inclusive but also purposively tailored to ensure a mix of families in different circumstances.

In the first stage of recruitment, the eight local authorities were asked to identify all eligible families to take part in the research and send them invitation packs[1] . The invitation packs contained comprehensive information about the study, including all information necessary for informed consent, and encouraged parents and children to take part in the research highlighting the benefits of participation, which included improving support to families in the future. Participants were also informed that they would receive a £20 gift voucher as a thank you for their time. The packs distributed by local authorities were age appropriate, containing either information aimed at six to eleven year olds or the twelve plus age group. Families wishing to participate were asked to contact the research team at the National Children's Bureau directly by email, telephone, or using the FREEPOST envelope provided. In the local authorities which had large numbers of eligible families, i.e. circa 100, they were given the option of sending the invitation packs to a random sample, but in the event most local authorities mailed the packs to all eligible families.

---

[1] Local authorities were asked to exclude sensitive cases from the sampling if it was deemed unsafe for a female researcher to visit alone or if being involved in the research would risk jeopardising the longer term reunification outcome, or welfare of the child. In the local authorities which had large numbers of eligible families, i.e. circa 100, they were given the option of sending the invitation packs to a random sample, but in the event most local authorities mailed the packs to all eligible families

The first stage of recruitment resulted in twelve parent interviews and seven child interviews (a total of ten children).

The second stage of recruitment involved working with local authorities to top up the sample with the aim of achieving the target of four families per case study site. Local authority staff were asked to proactively contact eligible families to encourage them to take part in the research. Local authorities were requested, where possible, to undertake a purposive sampling approach to focus on the types of families that were under-represented in the first stage of recruitment, for example requesting children with a specific legal status or identifying young people who had returned to care. Du

Due to difficulties recruiting families in some of the local authorities, it was decided that additional participants would be included from areas in which more than four eligible families were willing to take part. Table 2 shows the numbers of families and children interviewed in each case study site

Table 2 The distribution of families by case study area

Case study site	Parent interviews	Children interviewed
A	3	1
B	6	2
C	6	5
D	1	0
E	2	3
F	0	0
G	2	0

Case study site	Parent interviews	Children interviewed
H	2	1
Total	22	12

A total of 31 interviews were completed: 22 parent and 9 child interviews[2] . The two stage recruitment process resulted in a fairly mixed sample. Table 3 below shows the achieved sample in terms of the information collected from the parent interviews. There were some gaps in the final sample; most notably it included no children who had returned to care following reunification, although the sample included interviews with parents of children who had returned to care.

Table 3 Final achieved sample from parent interviews

Sample criteria		Achieved
Total interviews	Parents interviewed	22 interviews
	Children interviewed	12 interviews
Children interviewed	6-11 yr olds	8 interviews
	12-18 yr olds	4 interviews
Age of eldest relevant child in the family¹	0-5	6 families
	6-11	5 families
	12-18	11 families
Success or failure	Success (still at home)	16 families

---

[2] [2] Six of the parent interviews were completed with more than one parent / partner in the interview for some or all of the time. Two of the child interviews were paired / triad interviews with siblings.

re. return home	Failure (back in care)	4 families
	Mixed (one or more relevant children back in care/at home)	2 families
Legal basis of placement prior to return home	Care order (Section 31 or 38)	6 families
	Voluntary (Section 20)	12 families
	Unclear / not known	3 families
	Mixed (different legal status for children)	1 family
Recency of last return home (data collected from date of interview)	Less than 6 months	4 families
	Between 6 and 24 months	16 families
	Mixed (different lengths of time children have returned home)	2 families
Duration of placement prior to return home	< 3 weeks	4 families
	3 weeks – 6 months	4 families
	> 6 months	12 families
	Mixed (for different children)	2 families

Instruments and fieldwork

Semi-structured interviews were completed with the parents and children, exploring:

- context/care history: background descriptions on why the child was taken into care and a care timeline including the number and type of placements and length of time living in and out of care;

- support while the child was in care: focused on the support the family did or did not receive while the child was in care;

- involvement in decision-making: families views on their involvement in planning for their child to come home;

- experience of transition: included planning and managing transition and how parents felt about this process, the support that families received during this time including help with practical arrangements and, where relevant, comparisons to previous moves;

- support once the child was back at home: the situation when the child moved back home and the support the family received to deal with the situation;

- overall: looked at families overall thoughts about the support they received throughout the entire process and any improvements they felt could be made.

Age appropriate topic guides and materials were developed for parents and children (see Appendix Four) to be used as a tool to guide the interview over the relevant topics but allowing parents and children to explain their own experiences. A total of 32 interviews were face to face and two parent interviews were being completed over the telephone. Interviews with parents lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and interviews with children generally lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

At the start of each interview, participants were advised about the issues that would be covered in the interview, the duration of the interview, the right to refuse to answer any questions and that there were no right or wrong answers. Researchers explained that everything would be confidential (unless something was said that the researcher felt put a child or vulnerable adult in danger, in which case the NCB child protection policy would be followed) and that no one would be told that the participant had taken part in the research. Before the interview continued, participants were asked to sign a consent form saying that they had fully understood the information that the researcher had provided.

Participants were also asked if the researcher could digitally record interviews to enable the write up during the analysis phase. It was explained to participants that only the research team working on the project would listen to the sound files.

During the interviews, the researchers remained alert to participant's distress, reminding participants that they had the right to stop the interview at any time and did not have to answer all of the questions. At the end of the interview, researchers asked a series of debrief questions checking that the participant was not distressed or uncomfortable with any of the questions that were asked and if any changes should be made for future interviews. An area specific support leaflet was also given to each participants detailing local and national support organisations that participants could contact should they feel the need. Participants were also promised a copy of the report summary once completed.

Analysis

Researchers synthesised data from the interviews into a framework in Microsoft Excel. Separate frameworks were developed for parent and child interviews, although the themes were similar. The main themes were agreed after discussions about the early findings and the research questions. Using the charts, researchers analysed the data to write the report.

Ethics

Prior to commencement of the study, researchers submitted an ethics checklist to information regarding the ethical issues and research governance approval was obtained Loughborough University's Ethics Sub Committee. Local authorities were supplied with where necessary.

Local authorities were asked to exclude sensitive cases from the sampling if it was deemed unsafe for a female researcher to visit alone or if being involved in the research would risk jeopardising the longer term reunification outcome, or welfare of the child.

Limitations

At the same time as participating in this research, representatives of local authorities were participating in a series of learning set workshops forming part of the wider project. Depending upon the timing of individual telephone interviews and focus groups, some participants' responses may therefore have reflected the very recent discussions at the learning set events.

The professionals and families participating in the research were not reflecting on the same cases. To allow a minimum of six months to have elapsed following reunification so that families could discuss the post reunification period, families were discussing events occurring up to two years ago, whereas professionals were discussing current policy and practice. This difference in timeframe may therefore mean families are referring to practice which has since changed in their local authority.

It is possible that by asking professionals to describe local practice that descriptions may tend to reflect what local practice should be, rather than the daily reality.

Although a sample of eight local authorities was achieved, the ability of one authority to participate in the project was limited following the arrival of Ofsted for inspection. However, the authority agreed to continue participating as far as it was able to do so.

Appendix four: instruments

Interview schedule: in-depth interviews with senior managers

December 2015

Introduction

Background information for interviewer

Interview Aims

As part of the Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care study, telephone interviews are being conducted with senior managers in local authorities to discuss issues concerning reunification at a strategic level, including the incorporation of national policy and research into local policy and practice.

The interview will explore whether, and how, the research evidence base has informed the development of local authority policy in this area. If authorities are not already using the research evidence base, the interview will explore whether authorities have any plans to do so in future. The interview will also address the barriers and facilitators to policy and practice around returning children home from care, for instance, relating to resources, staffing and joint-working with other agencies.

The interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Definition of return home/reunification

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 ceases to be looked after by reason of the making of an adoption, residence or special guardianship order.

Confidentiality

The interview is likely to last up to one and a half hours [NB. Check interviewee time available at the start of the interview]. What you tell us will be confidential and findings will be anonymised. In exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality has to be broken, for example, if it is felt that practice was putting children at risk, or there were concerns regarding professional misconduct. You may stop the interview at any time and you may also withdraw your data from the study at any time up until publication of the findings.

We plan to audio record the interview. The digital recording will be stored securely and will only be shared with colleagues in the research team. Is that OK?

Start recording

This is [name, CCFR] interviewing [name and LA] on [date]. Can I just confirm that you are still willing to participate in this interview and that you are aware and happy for the interview to be recorded?

Background

Can you confirm your job title and briefly outline your role and responsibilities in relation to children returning home from care?

How long have you held this role [in LA name]?

[Questions within [ ] and italics are designed as prompts for the interviewer to be used as and when appropriate].

Current policy/ practice

Can you briefly talk me through your authority's policy and practice on assessment, decision-making and the planning processes around children returning home from care?

- [Which professionals are involved in the assessment and decision-making processes?]

- [How are children identified for possible reunification?]

- [How does your authority identify the needs of children and their families when they are being reunified?]

[If there is none currently in place, please describe any policy or new practice that you plan to introduce in the future?]

Are different approaches needed when applying your practice/policy to different groups of Looked after Children?

- [For example, babies/older children, s20/s31, edge of care/longer term cases?]

- [Please describe]

- [If a child on a care order is placed with their parents, how is it decided whether or not the order should be discharged?]

How long has the current policy/practice been in place?

What stage is implementation of the policy/practice at?

- In development

- Partial or early stages of implementation (operating for less than 6 months)

- Full implementation (operating between six months to two years)
- Mature and embedded (operating for two years plus)

[If it is a planned policy or practice, when is it scheduled to start?]

Why was the policy or practice introduced?

- [Where did the impetus come from?]

Who was involved in developing the policy/practice?

- [Social care; other agencies; residential workers; foster carers; young people?]

How does the policy/practice fit within your authority's wider permanence policy, if one exists?

- [Is a written/electronic copy available?]

The evidence base for current policy and practice

Is your authority's current policy or practice on returning children home evidence based?

If **YES**:

What evidence is it based on?

- National or international evidence about effective ways of working
- Local evidence about need or effective ways of working
- Clear theory underpinning it (and if so what?)
- Evidence from service users

How is that evidence base incorporated into your authority's policy and practice?

- [Incorporated into written policy]
- [Used by individual staff to inform their practice]

If **NO**:

What has shaped the current policy/practice?

- [It has evolved in response to individual cases]
- [Resources/staffing]
- [The existing structure of the authority/services]

Do you know why the existing evidence base hasn't been used to develop your authority's policy and practice?

Was the policy or practice developed by your authority, or is it an adaptation or replication of something operating elsewhere?

Are there any future plans to [further] develop policy and practice in this area to reflect the national or local evidence base? [Please describe any.]

Monitoring and evaluation of current policy and practice

Has there been any evaluation or ongoing monitoring of your authority's policy/practice on reunification and its impact? [Please outline.]

If so, has this included:

- o   monitoring of re-referrals for abuse or neglect and re-entry into care?
- o   any work to look at the cost of reunification?
- o   looking at the cost of reunification breakdowns?
- o   looking at the staffing/resource implications of the policy/practice?

Has analysis of this data been undertaken? [What does it say?]

Are we able to access a copy of any findings?

Was this carried out in-house or by an external, independent evaluation team?

What changes to your policy/practice, if any, have resulted from the monitoring/evaluation?

Assessment of needs

How are children and families' ongoing support needs assessed?

-        [Does your authority use CAF, CiN processes?]

-        [Is there periodic ongoing assessment?]

-        [How long does this continue?]

-        [Is the assessment reviewed, and if so, how frequently?]

How long does the authority usually continue supporting children and families post reunification?

[How is this decided in individual cases?]

Does the authority have a policy or process for stepping down from support? If so, please describe.

Existing services to support reunification

How soon after children enter care do staff start working with them and their families to support potential reunification?

Can you describe the social care support available from within the local authority for children and families to support reunification – *both prior* to and *following* reunification?

Who commissions these services/has a strategic overview?

Does the authority monitor or evaluate the effectiveness and/or costs of this support provision?

- [If so, what has this revealed?]
- [Can you share copies with the research team?]

Can you give a brief description of the support services provided by partner organisations (including adult social care services) in your area used by children and families prior to or following reunification?

How easy or difficult is it to secure or negotiate these support resources within/across agencies?

- What would make this easier?

Who co-ordinates provision where multiple support providers are involved with a child and/or their family?

[Does responsibility for co-ordinating services change pre- and post-reunification?]

Does your authority evaluate or monitor the effectiveness and/or costs of these external support services?

- [If so, what has this revealed?]
- [Can you share copies with the research team?]

How integrated are the services provided by the authority and its partner organisations in relation to this area of social care?

- [How does the authority ensure provision is joined up, holistic?]

If your authority does evaluate or monitor the internal or external support provision available, has it revealed any gaps or overlaps in provision? [Briefly describe.]

How would you describe the strengths and deficits of the local support provision?

[Can the interviewee provide the names of any specific programmes or services provided by the LA or partners as part of their return home from care provision?]

Barriers and facilitators to good reunification practice

What factors have facilitated the implementation and embedding of your policy and practice around reunification?

- [Population factors]
- [LA structure]
- [Staffing]
- [Resources]
- [Joint working with other agencies]

What factors have hindered the implementation and embedding of your policy and practice around reunification?

- [Population factors]
- [LA structure]
- [Staffing]
- [Resources]
- [Joint working with other agencies]

How is the authority addressing or planning to address these barriers?

Which areas of the authority's current return home practice do you feel are the strongest and weakest?

- Why is this?
- Do you have plans to address this?

Staff training and supervision

How does the authority share knowledge and promote to frontline staff its approach to return home from care? [Formal training on assessment, decision-making, supporting children and families? Please describe]

- [Informal updates/guidance?][Innovative approaches?]

Thinking generally, how do you keep frontline staff informed about national policy changes and developments which have a potential impact on their work?

- [Circulation of written updates]

- [Regular discussion at team meetings]

- [Trickle-down of information to frontline staff]

- [Updating local policy and procedures]

How is training and best practice information on return home from care embedded within the authority's wider approach to staff development?

- [Is an electronic/written copy of this information available?]

Can you briefly describe the supervision arrangements operating for practitioners supporting families through reunification?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care

Focus group topic guide: Commissioners, senior and middle managers

Introduction

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University have been commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake research aimed at improving practice in respect of children who return home from care. The research involves one to one interviews with senior managers in local authorities; a series of focus groups with local authority staff and staff from other organisations involved in supporting families; case studies with families where children have returned home; and the development and testing of learning sets and coaching models to promote peer learning.

The focus groups

As part of the research, three focus groups are being conducted in each participating local authority: one with commissioners, senior and middle managers; one with frontline social care practitioners; and one with representatives from other organisations that support children and families prior to and after return home. Today's focus group with commissioners, senior and middle managers is intended to explore how local practice is implemented and embedded and builds on information gathered from the one to one interviews with senior managers.

The focus group facilitators

[Introduce [] from CCFR.]

Confidentiality and informed consent

What you tell us today will be treated in the strictest confidence and all findings from this research will be anonymised. In exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality has to be broken, for example, if it is felt that practice is putting children at risk, or there are concerns regarding professional misconduct. You are free to say as much or as little as you want throughout this session. We do not provide local authorities with feedback on anyone's level of participation. You may also withdraw your data from the study at any time up until publication of the findings.

We will be making an audio recording of the discussion today and this will be transcribed for analysis. Individuals' names will not be included in the transcription. The recording and transcription will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

[The facilitators will talk participants though the contents of the consent form and ask them to complete it.]

Introducing the focus group members

[Ask participants to introduce themselves, indicating their current role (commissioner/senior/middle manager) and the length of time they have been involved with policy and practice concerning children returning home from care.]

Definition of return home

For the purposes of this research we are using the definition of return home contained in the Department for Education's Data Pack on Improving Permanence for Looked after Children (2013):

A child is recorded as returning home from an episode of care if he or she 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 become the subject of an adoption order for the first time, nor a child who becomes the subject of a residence or special guardianship order.

Assessment and decision-making process

1.   When would social workers begin to consider reunification as an option?

 [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

        At point of entry into care?

        Case conference?

        Permanence planning meeting?

        Care plan?

        LAC review?

2.   What types of issues would social workers cover as part of the assessment process? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

        Difficulties faced/reasons for entry to care?

Family stressors

Extent of family engagement/readiness to change?

3.   How would social workers assess whether the risks have been addressed, or changes have been made?

4.   Who would be involved in the decision-making process?

Planning for reunification

5.   What sort of planning and preparation would you expect to be carried out before this child could return home?

6.   In your authority, would you consider a phased/staged transition back to birth parents? [i.e. the use of foster support or respite foster carers?]

7.   How would that work?

8.   How effective has that approach been?

9.   Would external agencies providing support to this family have involvement in the planning process?

10.   Can you outline the process and the point in the process where the child returns home? [Note for focus group facilitator: Link this back to the answer to question 1 above]

11.   What local practice is there in respect of maintaining contact between children in care and their birth family prior to return home?

Ongoing support from the authority

12.   What types of ongoing support would you expect to be available from the authority? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

Ongoing social worker support?

Family support worker?

Adult mental health services?

13. As an authority, is there a particular approach to the timing of support where children are returning home, i.e. an emphasis on frontloading of support; or post reunification support?

14. How do you decide the appropriate length of that support and its intensity?

15. How does gradual step down from support fit within the authority's approach?

Referral to external agencies for intervention or ongoing support

16.   Can you explain how the referral process to external agencies works within the authority? [Note for focus group facilitator: Ensure you capture all the different referral routes for the range of services available locally. Capture services for both the child and the parents/carers/family].

17.   How do you work with your partner agencies?

18.   Is there a multi-agency team?

19. As an authority, do you aim to involve external agencies at particular points in the return home process, i.e. an emphasis on frontloading of support; or post reunification support?

20.   Who would be involved in deciding which externally provided intervention is appropriate?

21. How do social workers decide the appropriate length of support intensity?

22.   How important is gradual stepping down from external interventions and support?

23.   What, if any, are the processes within the authority for monitoring families post return home and follow up? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following prompts if required].

        Open CAF case/open CiN case/regular reviews?

24.   What is the process, if any, for reviewing what led to a reunification breakdown?

Final questions

25.   Do you think there are any particular gaps in service in your areas?

        If so, what are they and how do you think they could be addressed?

Conclusion

Are there any other issues that you think are particularly important in relation to working and supporting families and young people locally throughout reunification?

[The group facilitators will provide a brief outline of the next stages of the research (case studies/learning sets and coaching model).]

Many thanks for your time.

Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care

Frontline social care practitioners

Introduction

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University have been commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake research aimed at improving practice in respect of children who return home from care. The research involves one to one interviews with senior managers in local authorities; a series of focus groups with local authority staff and staff from other organisations involved in supporting families; case studies with families where children have returned home; and the development and testing of learning sets and coaching models to promote peer learning.

The focus groups

As part of the research, three focus groups are being conducted in each participating local authority: one with commissioners, senior and middle managers; one with frontline social care practitioners; and one with representatives from other organisations that support children and families prior to and after return home. Today's focus group of frontline social care practitioners is intended to explore your experiences of working with and supporting families and young people throughout the reunification process; the barriers and facilitators you face in doing this; and awareness of the evidence base (if one is used) that informs practice locally.

The focus group facilitators

[Introduce [] from CCFR.]

Confidentiality and informed consent

What you tell us today will be treated in the strictest confidence and all findings from this research will be anonymised. In exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality has to be broken, for example, if it is felt that practice is putting children at risk, or there are concerns regarding professional misconduct. You are free to say as much or as little as you want throughout this session. We do not provide local authorities with feedback on anyone's level of participation. You may also withdraw your data from the study at any time up until publication of the findings.

We will be making an audio recording of the discussion today and this will be transcribed for analysis. Individuals' names will not be included in the transcription. The recording and transcription will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

[The facilitators will talk participants though the contents of the consent form and ask them to complete it.]

Introducing the focus group members

[Ask participants to introduce themselves, indicating their current role and the length of time they have worked with families where children are returning home from care.]

Definition of return home

For the purposes of this research we are using the definition of return home contained in the Department for Education's Data Pack on Improving Permanence for Looked after Children (2013):

> *A child is recorded as returning home from an episode of care if he or she 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 become the subject of an adoption order for the first time, nor a child who becomes the subject of a residence or special guardianship order.*

Assessment and decision-making process

1.   When would you begin to consider reunification as an option?

   [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

   At point of entry into care?

   Case conference?

   Permanence planning meeting?

   Care plan?

   LAC review?

2.   What issues would you cover as part of the assessment process?

   [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

- Difficulties faced/reasons for entry to care?
- Family stressors?
- Extent of family engagement/readiness to change?

3.   How do you assess whether the risks have been addressed, or changes have been made?

4.   Who would be involved in the decision-making process?

Planning for reunification

5.   What sort of planning and preparation would you expect to do before this child could return home?

6.   Would you consider a phased/staged transition back to birth parents? [i.e. use of support or respite foster carers?]

7.   Would you discuss potential support with external/internal providers?

8.   Can you outline the process and the point in the process where the child returns home? [Note for focus group facilitator: Link this back to the answer to question 1 above]

9.   What local practice is there in respect of maintaining contact between children in care and their birth family prior to return home?

Ongoing support from the authority

10.   What types of ongoing support would you expect to be available from the

authority? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

Ongoing social worker support?

Family support worker?

Adult mental health services?

11.   Would you arrange support to be given at any particular stage, i.e. frontloading support or post reunification?

12.   How do you decide the appropriate length of that support and its intensity?

13.   Do you have a process for stepping down gradually from support?

Referral to external agencies for intervention or ongoing support

14.   What types of intervention are available to families locally when children are returning home from care?

- For children and/or their parents
- Which services are used most regularly?

15.   Can you explain how the referral process to external agencies works in the authority*? [Note for focus group facilitator: Ensure you capture all the different referral routes for the range of services available locally. Capture services for both the child and the parents/carers/family].*

16.   How do you work with your partner agencies?

17.   What types of intervention would you arrange?

18.   How long do interventions typically last for?

19.   At what point would you want the parent and/or child to receive the intervention? [i.e. prior to, throughout, following reunification?]

20.   What is the level of take up like for interventions*? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]*

Do families engage better with some interventions than others?

- Is there much drop out?

21.   How do you decide the appropriate length of support and its intensity?

22.   Is there any phased step down from support?

Post reunification

23.   What, if any, are the processes within the authority for monitoring families post return home and follow up? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

Open CAF case/open CiN case/regular reviews?

24.   Have you any experience of cases where children have re-entered care?

25.   What is the process, if any, for reviewing what led to the reunification breakdown

Final questions

26.   Do you think there are any gaps in service in your areas?

- If so, what are they and how do you think they could be addressed?

27.   Are you aware whether your policies are based on or informed by research evidence?

        If so, what is this?

Conclusion

Are there any other issues that you think are particularly important in relation to working and supporting families and young people throughout reunification?

[The group facilitators will provide a brief outline of the next stages of the research (case studies/learning sets and coaching model).]

Many thanks for your time.

Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care

Focus group topic guide: Staff from external organisations

Introduction

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University have been commissioned by the Department for Education to undertake research aimed at improving practice in respect of children who return home from care. The research involves one to one interviews with senior managers in local authorities; a series of focus groups with local authority staff and staff from other organisations involved in supporting families; case studies with families where children have returned home; and the development and testing of learning sets and coaching models to promote peer learning.

The focus groups

As part of the research, three focus groups are being conducted in each participating local authority: one with commissioners, senior and middle managers; one with frontline social care practitioners; and one with representatives of other organisations that support children and families prior to and after return home. Today's focus group is intended to explore your experiences of working with families and young people throughout the reunification process; the barriers and facilitators you face in doing this; and awareness of the evidence base (if one is used) that informs practice locally.

The focus group facilitators

[Introduce [] from CCFR.]

Confidentiality and informed consent

What you tell us today will be treated in the strictest confidence and all findings from this research will be anonymised. In exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality has to be broken, for example, if it is felt that practice is putting children at risk, or there are concerns regarding professional misconduct. You are free to say as much or as little as you want throughout this session. We do not provide your organisations with feedback on anyone's level of participation. You may also withdraw your data from the study at any time up until publication of the findings.

We will be making an audio recording of the discussion today and this will be transcribed for analysis. Individuals' names will not be included in the transcription. The recording and transcription will be stored securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

[The facilitators will talk participants though the contents of the consent form and ask them to complete it.]

Introducing the focus group members

[Ask participants to introduce themselves, indicating their organisation, current role and the length of time they have worked with families where children are returning home from care.]

Structure of local support services

1.   Can you explain how support provision is structured locally for children and families? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

- Are you part of a multi-agency team? Who leads?
- Is provision co-ordinated? Who leads this?
- Are you called upon as and when necessary?

2.   What sort of system or forum is there for discussing local service provision and need with children's social care staff?

Initial referral from children's social care

3.   How would a case normally be referred to you from children's social care?

4.   Would you discuss the case with a social worker pre-referral?

5.   What types of issue would be discussed?

6.   At what point in the reunification process do you become involved?

Prior to, throughout, or following reunification?

7.   What would be the normal process once initial referral is made?

8.   Who is involved in the process?

Provision of interventions/support

9.   How long does support or an intervention typically last for?

10.   Which services are used most regularly?

11.   What is the level of take up like for interventions/support? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

- Do families engage better with some interventions than others?

- Is there much drop out?

12.   Who decides the appropriate length of support/an intervention and its intensity? [Note for focus group facilitator: Use the following as prompts, if required]

- The support provider?

- Children's social care?

- A joint decision?

13.   Do you have a process for stepping down gradually from support or an intervention?

14.   If the family was receiving a number of forms of support/intervention, would this provision normally be co-ordinated?

15.   Who would be responsible for this?

16.   How important is this co-ordination?

Monitoring progress/follow-up

17. How much ongoing communication would there usually be between you and children's social care to discuss a family's progress?

18. Is there a formal review process?

19.   How frequent is this?

20.   What is covered?

21.   How adequate is this?

Final questions

22.   Do you think there are any gaps in service in your areas?

If so, what are they and how do you think they could be addressed?

23.   Do you face any particular obstacles when providing support to children or parents going through a reunification process?

24. Are you aware whether your policies locally are based on or informed by research evidence?

        If so, what is this?

Conclusion

Are there any other issues that you think are particularly important in relation to working and supporting families and young people throughout reunification?

[The group facilitators will provide a brief outline of the next stages of the research (case studies/learning sets and coaching model).]

Many thanks for your time.

Interview topic guide: Children and young people

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

- explain who NCB, funder and aim of study
- explain:
    - issues to cover
    - confidentiality/anonymity (including how applies to this study and limits)
    - duration of interview
    - recording (including permission)
    - reporting (including anonymity in reporting, use of quotes)
    - no right/wrong answers - want to hear own views/experiences. Right to refuse to answer any question
    - any questions (also outline opportunity to ask questions at end of interview)
- confirm consent – sign consent form

CONTEXT – CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES (5 mins)

- How long have you been living (back) here?
- Who lives with you?
- What is it like living here?
- What do you like doing in your free time?
- Who do you like to spend time with?

During this interview we want to focus on the last time you moved from care back home. As I've explained we will ask you some questions about your time in care, your involvement in the decision making about moving back home and then how you felt about being back at home.

CARE / PERMANENCE HISTORY (5 mins)

(For the interviewer) LEVEL OF DETAIL WILL DEPEND ON CHILD'S AGE, ABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT. IF INFOMRAITON HAS BEEN PROVIDED BY PARENT, INTERVIEWER CAN LEAD AND SIMPLY CONFIRM WITH THE CHILD.

I know you have not always lived here with your family, and I would like to ask you some questions about where and with whom you have lived in the past – is that OK? Just so I remember let's use this sheet to mark the important things down so I can refer back to it.

RESOURCES: timeline (this will be referred to throughout the interview), people stickers

These questions apply only if the child is still living at home

- You are living with your family and … - LABEL ON THE TIMELINE ALL PEOPLE MENTIONED

- How long have you been back here / living with them?

- Where were you living before that? Foster carers / children's home?

- How long did you live with them for? How old were you when you moved there?

- Who were the people looking after you there?

- Did you get on with any other family members/children in the children's home?

Questions for children back in care

- When you were living back at home with your family who were you living with? - LABEL ON THE TIMELINE ALL PEOPLE MENTIONED

- When did you move back home?

- How long did you stay at home?

- Where were you living before that? Foster carers / children's home?

- How long did you live with them for? How old were you when you moved there?

- Who were the people looking after you there?

- Did you get on with any other family members/children in the children's home?

- Was that your first move away from home / living with parent(s)?

    - IF NO, THE INTERVIWER SHOULD BRIEFLY COVER: how many times did you move before that? Types of placements

BEFORE RETURNING HOME: CARERS / FAMILY CONTACT (8 mins)

I'd like to talk with you a bit about when you were living {INSERT NAME} with foster carer/at children's home. About the people who looked after you and helped to make sure you were ok, and what that was like for you. Is it OK to talk about that? You don't have to if you don't want to. You can skip anything you don't want to talk about. Is that OK?

INTERVIWER TO BE ALERT TO DISCOMFORMT AND PROBE TO CHECK FULLY

REFER TO THE TIMELINE FROM PREVIOUS SECTION – ADD MORE PEOPLE STICKERS WHERE NECESSARY, DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THOSE WHO THE CHILD LIVES WITH VS. OTHERS (POSITIONED FURTHER AWAY AND LINKED VIA A DRAWING LINE).

RESOURCES: star and round stickers, pens and key

Question for the children at home: Can you put a star sticker (CYP TO DECIDE ON COLOUR AND RESEARCHER TO ADD TO KEY) next to the people who were helpful and supportive of you while you were living with {INSERT NAME}. Who did most to help you?

Question for a chatty YP: Who looked after you/was there to make sure you were OK when you lived there? [prompt e.g. foster carer, care worker].

MAY NEED TO ADD MORE PEOPLE TO THE TIMELINE E.G. SOCIAL WORKER

- Who else was around to help you?

    - [Probe: other members of the foster family, members of own birth family, social worker, IRO, advocate, teacher, counsellor, therapist etc, other adult/peer?]

    - Who did/could you speak to if unhappy about something?

    - Was there anyone else you used to see about making things better for you? Did you like them? Why/why not? Did they make you feel OK?

- What did they do that was helpful?

    - What kinds of things did they do with you, or for you? Was that helpful? Anything else?

Question for the child at home: Can you put a circle sticker (CYP TO DECIDE ON COLOUR AND RESEARCHER TO ADD TO KEY) next to people who you thought were unhelpful / unsupportive / could have done more to help.

Question for chatty YP: Was there anyone who was unhelpful / unsupportive of you when you were living in care?

MAY NEED TO ADD MORE PEOPLE TO THE TIMELINE E.G. SOCIAL WORKER

• What did they not do to help? In what way were they unsupportive?

• When you were living {with foster carers/in children's home}, did you get to spend time with your family at all?

- Who did you get to see? [mother/father/siblings/wider family]

- How often?

- Did you like that?

• Was there anyone you would have liked to have seen more?

- [Who arranged for you to see your family? Social worker? Or someone else? Were you happy with how that worked?]

- Did they ask you who you wanted to see and how often you wanted to see them and where? Did they listen to you? Did they explain why you were seeing them the amount you were/or why you weren't seeing them as much?

DECISION MAKING ABOUT RETURNING HOME (5 mins)

I'd like to talk about before you were coming home, when you and your family got ready for you to come home. I'm going to first ask you questions about how involved you were in making the decision to move back home and then ask you about your experience of moving back home. I want to understand if people listened to what you thought about it. Would that be OK? You don't have to talk about anything you don't want. Just let me know and we can skip any bit you don't like.

INTERVIEWER TO BE ALERT TO DISCOMEFORT AND PROBE TO CHECK FULLY

• Can you remember when you first found out that you'd be going home to your family? Can you remember who told you, and what they said?

- [Probe: Mum/ dad, siblings, social worker, foster family /children's home staff, advocate, IRO, Children's Rights worker?]

- How long did you have to wait from being told before you actually went home?

• Before you were told you were going home:

  - did anyone ask you what you thought about it?

  - Who?

  - Did they talk to you before they had decided, or not until after?

  - [Were you asked many times what you felt about it or just the once?]

IF NECESSARY ADD MORE 'PEOPLE' TO THE TIMELINE

o For each person:

  - ☐ [Did you tell them how you felt about it?]

  - ☐ Do you think they listened to you?

  - ☐ What difference did it make what you said?

  - ☐ Why do you think that?

  - ☐ What happened after you talked about it with [each one]?

  - ☐ Did it change anything?

  - ☐ Did things happen how you wanted them to?

EXPERIENCE OF PREPARATION/TRANSITION HOME (10 mins)

o How quickly did things happen? Did you move straight home quickly? Or did you just spend a bit of time there to start with?

o IF HELPFUL MARK ON THE TIMELINE WITH THE CHILD

o Did {INSERT KEY NAMES FROM ABOVE}/anyone ask you how you wanted this to happen?

  ▪ [Probe: whether you would move back straight away or just spend a bit of time there to start with, such as at weekends? Ask you when you wanted to go back?]

o Did {INSERT KEY NAMES FROM ABOVE} they explain things so you knew what was happening?

- After it was decided that you were going to live with your family again. How did you feel about it? REITERATE THAT THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS AND THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE FELT SEVERAL DIFFERENT EMOTIONS.

Question for a child living at home: SHOW CYP THE EMOTIONS CLOUD: do any of these words and images represent how you felt about moving back home?

RESOURCES: emotions cloud, statements, 2 faces

Question for a child living at home: Show cyp the 2 faces and ask them to draw / write about how they felt about going home.

• Were you looking forward to going home? If so, what were you looking forward to most?

• Did you have any worries about going home? You don't have to tell me what they were, if you don't want to.

  o If comfortable: What kinds of things did you worry about? Anything else? Was there anything you thought you might miss, when you went home? (Carers? New friends? School?)

IF NECESSARY ADD MORE 'PEOPLE' TO THE TIMELINE

• Was there anything you thought might be difficult for you or your family when you came back home?

• Did you talk to anyone about {reiterate things they mention}?

If so:

  o Who did you talk to?

  o Did they listen/ understand/ do anything to help?

If spoken to more than 1 person:

  o Who did you like to talk to the most at this time?

  o Who was most helpful?

  o Who was less good to talk to or less helpful?

If not:

- o   Do you think it would have helped to talk about it? Why?

- o   Would you have liked to have talked about it?

Thinking about all the people who talked to you when you were getting ready to return home.

In the case of a child living at home:

•   Who was the most helpful / supportive person? ADD ANOTHER COLOUR STAR STICKER TO THE TIMELINE AND KEY.

•   Did you get any other help, to get ready for moving back to your family?

- o   Probe: social workers, anyone else? What did they do? Was it helpful?

•   Who was the least helpful / unsupportive person? Who didn't listen to you? Who could have supported you more? ADD ANOTHER COLOUR STICKER TO THE TIMELINE AND KEY.

In the case of a chatty CP:

•   Did you get any other help, to get ready for moving back to your family?

- o   Probe: social workers, anyone else? What did they do? Was it helpful?

- Did you find anyone unhelpful / unsupportive when you were getting ready to move back to your family? Who? In what way?

- Was there anything else anyone could have done, to help you and your family get ready for you to come home?

- Was there anything they should have asked you about more?

- Or explained to you better?

- Done differently?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY IF TIME:

SHOW THE YP THE STATEMENT CARD AND ASK THEM TO COMPLETE THE SENTENCE

When I was getting ready to come home…

- … it would have been easier if …
- … the thing that helped me most was …

LIFE AFTER RETURN HOME (10 mins)

The next bit is asking a bit about how things have been since you came back to live with your family… Is it OK to talk about that? You don't have to answer anything that you don't want.

- What was the BEST thing about coming home, for you? Were there any other good things about being back home?
- Was there anything that wasn't so good? Was there anything you'd have liked to be different?
- How much did your daily life change, when you went back home? Was anything hard to get used to? What help did you have dealing with those things?
  - o [Did you have to change school or anything like that? Who organised that for you? Were you OK with that?
  - o Did you keep in touch with your {foster carer/ res. Care workers?} or not? Did you see them after you moved back with your family?
  - o Were there any other changes?]

In the case of a quiet CY: ASK CYP TO ADD ANOTHER COLOUR STICKER TO TIMELINE: STAR FOR THOSE WHO WERE HELPFUL ONCE AT HOME AND A CIRCLE FOR THOSE WHO WERE UNHELPFUL ONCE AT HOME

• After you went home, did you see your social worker to talk about how things were going? Check you were OK/ if you wanted to talk or for anything to be different?

- How helpful was this?
- What did you talk to them about?
- Did they listen to you?
- In what way did they help you?

- Did you feel like you could tell them how you really felt?

- [How often did you see them? Where? What did they do? Did they talk to you on your own?]

• Who else did you see? Prompt with list of people mentioned previously

REPEAT ABOVE PROMPTS FOR EACH PERSON CYP MENTIONS

Applied to a child still living at home:

• Was there anyone else you would have liked to have seen again, but haven't? Or anyone you would have liked to have seen more regularly? What would you have like to do with them or talked to them about?

   o Prompt with list of people mentioned previously

• Was there anything else anyone could have done, to be more helpful, after you came home? [Was there anything that would have made things easier, or nicer for you?]

These questions apply if the child is still living at home

• What are things like for you now? SHOW A SCALE WITH FACES WITH 1 BEING NOT AT ALL HAPPY AND 5 BEING VERY HAPPY – how happy are you that you are now living at home?

• Is there anything you would like to change to make things even better?

   o IF APPLICABLE: Could anyone like your social worker, or anyone else, help with this?

   o Do you think you could talk to them about it? Why/ why not?

Question that apply for those back in care:

• What is life like for you now that you have moved back into care? SHOW A SCALE WITH FACES WITH 1 BEING NOT AT ALL HAPPY AND 5 BEING VERY HAPPY – how happy are you that you are now living here?

• Is there anything you would to change to make things even better?

   o Could your social worker, or anyone else, help with this?

   o Do you think you could talk to them about it? Why/ why not?

•   Were you involved in the decision making about you being moved back into care?

For those with multiple re-entries:

•   How did each time compare with the latest time you moved from care to home? Did you get more / less support? Were you involved less / more in the decisions?

•   Thinking about what we have talked about already was there anything particularly different about previous moves?

OVERALL (5-10 mins)

RESOURCES: A4 paper, periods of time

We are interested in finding out how the support you received changed over time. USING THE PERIODS OF TIME ASK:

•   How did the support you receive change from when you were:

- in care and when you were preparing to move back home?

- preparing to move back home and living back home?

- in care and when you were living back at home?

o   More or less support

o   When did they get the most support?

o   When did they get the least support?

•   Overall, how helpful were the people outside your family, when you were getting ready to come home, and afterwards? What marks out of ten would you give them? RECAP ALL THE PEOPLE MENTIONED – USE PICTURES, ADD MARKS OUT OF TEN

•   What could they have done differently, to get ten out of ten? DRAW TO-DO LIST

• How good were they at listening to you? How good were they at understanding how you felt? (Marks out of ten? Is there anything they could have done differently? What should they have asked you? ADD TO TO-DO LIST

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY IF TIME:

RESOURCES: agree / disagree cards and statements

I'm going to show you some statements and ask you if you agree or disagree with them:

  • I was asked my views about returning home before the decision was made

  • People listened to my concerns about moving home

  • I got the support I needed when I moved back home

  • I was helped to settle in back home

• Overall do you think children services staff LIKE social workers [INSERT OTHERS MENTIONED IN INTERVIEW – IRO, ADVOCATE, FAMILY SUPPORT WORKER] did a good job in making sure you were looked after well? And your views and needs have been listened to?

  o What has been good about this?

  o What has been less good?

• What advice would you give people like [social workers/ any other workers mentioned] about the best way to help children and families like yours in the future?

• [If you were in charge, who would support the children? How many different people? What would they be like? What would they do to help them get ready to go back to their families? What could they do, to make it as easy as possible for the children? What would be the most important thing for them to do?]

• Is there anything we haven't covered that you think is important and you want to tell us?

DEBRIEF

AT THE END OF EACH INTERVIEW WE NEED TO DEBRIEF WITH EACH CYP.

Since this is a sensitive subject for many of the people we are talking too, we always like to ask a few questions at the end about how you felt the interview went – is that OK?

o Was that OK for you?

o Did any questions make you feel uncomfortable? If so, how could they be changed / reworded or just not asked?

o Did you understand all the questions? If not, what language needs to be changed?

o What did you think of the activities? Any suggestions on how to improve them?

o Any questions that we should ask other cyp?

o Anything else you would like to tell us about the interview?

• CHOOSE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING TO END THE INTERVIEW:

  • And finally, what do you hope to do in the future.

  • What do you plan to spend your vouchers on?

  • What are you up to for the rest of the day?

THANK PARTICIPANT AND REMIND THEM WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT WITH THE INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY AND REPORTING. THE INFORMATION WE ARE COLLECTING WILL BE INCLUDED IN A LARGER REPORT TO DFE; THE REPORT WILL BE FINALISED NEXT SUMMER. WE WILL BE WRITING A SHORTER REPORT FOR PARTICIPANTS WHO TOOK PART IN THIS SECTION OF THE RESEARCH – WOULD YOU LIKE TO RECEIVE A COPY?

OFFER SUPPORT ORGANISATION INFO SHEETS. PROVIDE VOUCHER AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN FOR IT.

Interview topic guide: Parents and carers

DfE - Return Home From Care

THROUGHOUT THE TOPIC GUIDE CHILD IS REFERRED TOO BUT IF MORE THAN ONE CHILD WE MUST MAKE IT CLEAR WHICH CHILD WE ARE TALKING ABOUT AND ASK THE QUESTIONS WITH REGARDS TO ALL CHILDREN.

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

•   Explain who NCB, funder and aim of study – make it clear we are not here to make a judgement and we have no previous knowledge of their history as we do not read case files, we just want to hear their experiences.

•   Explain:

    o   Issues to cover

    o   Confidentiality / anonymity

    o   Duration of interview

    o   Recording (including permission)

    o   Reporting (including anonymity in reporting, use of quotes)

    o   No right / wrong answers – want to hear own views/experiences. Right to refuse to answer any question

    o   Any questions?

•   Confirm consent and sign form

CONTEXT – CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES (5 mins)

Resources: A3 paper, pens

It would be really helpful if we could draw a family tree so I have this information to refer back to.

•   Who lives in this house?

- (IF CHILD NOT AT HOME) Where does your child live?

- Childs father?

- Are there other family members you see a lot?

CYP still living at home:

- How long has {NAME OF CHILD} been living with you?

- What do you enjoy doing with {NAME OF CHILD} e.g. eat dinner together, a specific activity?

IF IT IS AN UNUSUAL CASE [CHECK RECRUITMENT LOG] ALLOW PARTICIPANT TO TALK BRIEFLY ABOUT THE BACKGROUND TO THE SITUATION. THIS CAN BE DONE IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE TIMELINE.

- Would you mind giving me some background in terms of the set up? (E.g. when did you adopt the children? Adopted from the same LA?)

CARE / PERMANENCE HISTORY (5 mins)

I know that {NAME OF CHILD} has not always lived with you. I would like to ask you some questions about where else and with whom they have lived. Is that OK?

RESOURCES: timeline, front doors

ASK THE PARENT TO DRAW A TIMELINE DEPICTING EACH STAGE THAT THE CHILD HAS MOVED IN THE LAST 2-3 YEARS. MARK ON THE TIMELINE EACH MOVEMENT FROM HOME TO CARE AND VICA VERSA AND WRITE THE TYPE OF PLACEMENT E.G. FOSTER CARE / CHILDREN'S HOME AND LENGTH OF TIME IN EACH PLACEMENT. HAVE A SEPARATE LINE FOR EACH CHILD AND LINK THE SAME PLACEMENTS FOR DIFFERENT CHILDREN.

• So starting from today {NAME OF CHILD} is living {INSERT LOCATION E.G. HOME / CARE AS PER ABOVE INFORMATION}

• How many times have they moved in the last 2-3 years?

• How old was {INSERT NAME OF CHILD} when they first went from living with you into local authority care?

For each placement change ask:

 o When did they move from home / care?

 o Type of placement

 o (For the most recent placement, can they tell us the child's legal status? ie, were they voluntarily accommodated (Section 20), or on a Care Order: Interim (Section 38), full care order (S.31), secure accommodation (S. 25) or other?)

 o How long did they live at home / in care?

• Were there any plans at any point for {INSERT NAME OF CHILD} to come home that did not work out?

REPEAT FOR EACH CHILD

BEFORE RETURNING HOME (10-15 mins)

I'd like us to talk now about when {NAME OF CHILD} returned to your family in {ADD DATE OF MOST RECENT RETURN HOME}. I'd like to understand what you and your family's situation was before that happened, how it came about that {NAME OF CHILD} was able to return home, what was involved, what support you had (before, during and after) and how you think things went. Would that be OK?

• When {NAME OF CHILD} was taken into care at this time (refer to drawn timeline choosing the most recent period of time) what was the family situation?

 o You've said that you currently live with {INSERT NAMES FROM FAMILY TREE} was it the same then?

•   May I ask about the reasons why {NAME OF CHILD} was moved to {NAME OF PLACEMENT}? We don't have to talk much about that if you don't want.

  o Were you/{NAME OF CHILD} /wider family members having difficulties, or needed help with anything?

  o May I ask, what were you/they having help with?

•   What support did you/your family have to help you overcome the difficulties you were facing?

  o What/how/when/where/from whom?

  o How useful was this from your point of view?

  o Do you think the right support was there, to ensure things got better, as best they could/as quickly as they could?

  o Was the support sufficient?

  o What else might have been helpful?

DECISION MAKING (8 mins)

I would now like to ask you some questions specifically about how much you felt involved in the decision making process about {NAME OF CHILD} returning home. Is that OK? Thinking about [most recent return home]

•   What changed in order for discussions to begin about {NAME OF CHILD} returning home?

  o When was it first discussed that {NAME OF CHILD} could possibly move back home?

  o Who talked to you about this? e.g. social worker, IRO?

  o How did this work? E.g. did the social worker approach you first or did you ask someone about it?

- What was the process of deciding that {NAME OF CHILD} would come home?

  o   What happened? What happened next?

  o   Who did what/when, where and how?

  o   Who was involved and how? E.g. CYP, parents, which services, foster family/children's home staff, IRO, legal representatives etc.

  o   What meetings did you have?

  o   What else happened as far as you were aware e.g. what else did the different professionals involved do e.g. to assess needs?

- What was agreed about the plan for returning home?

  o   Was this to happen gradually?

  o   Over what timescales?

  o   Did things start by you having more/more independent contact with {NAME OF CHILD}

- What did you think of the decisions made about when/ how {NAME OF CHILD} would return home?

  o   Would you have preferred anything different?

- What was the process like for you?

  o   What was good about the process?

  o   What was bad about the process?

- How involved in the process did you feel? Did you feel like you have a choice?

- That you were supported to make choices right for you?

- Who made the ultimate decisions? What did you feel about this? Did you agree with the decision?

- Overall, how does this experience compare to other decisions that have been made about who looks after your child and where in the past?

  - Was the process any different? How?

EXPERIENCE OF PREPARATION/TRANSITION HOME (8 mins)

I would like to ask some questions around preparing for {NAME OF CHILD} returning home and how you felt about this. IF APPLICABLE SPECIFY WE WILL FOCUS ON THE MOST RECENT RETURN HOME. Is that OK?

- Once the decision had been made that {NAME OF CHILD} was going to live with you again, how did you feel about this? Can you remember?

  o   What did you hope would happen?

- What if anything were you looking forward to?

- What, if any, worries or concerns did you have?

- Was anything emotionally difficult for you – e.g. stressful/difficult or upsetting?

  o   Building relationships with {NAME OF CHILD}

  o   How this would affect other family members/your relationships with them?

  o   Adjusting to having them home again in other ways?

- Were you, your family or child given any help to plan for /organise this/support you?

  o   What/how/when/where/from whom?

  o   How useful was this from your point of view?

  o   Was the support sufficient?

  o   What else might have been helpful? E.g. continuity/involvement of services such as family support workers; drug/alcohol councillors/adult mental health services etc.

- Were you able to talk to anyone about these things? Who? E.g. social worker (different to your child's) Other professionals?

  o What support did they provide? type/frequency/over what period of time - and how helpful was this?

  o Did you feel able to tell them anything you wanted to/ask for help with anything you had a problem with?

  o Did professionals understand your needs?

  o Would anything else have been helpful?

- Thinking about practical matters what arrangements needed to be in made? E.g. living arrangements/schooling/transport/register GP

  o How did you/your family find sorting all of it out? What was difficult?

  o Did you/your family have any help with that – probe details of what/when/how from whom? How useful was that? What else might have been helpful?

CYP moved from care to home multiple times:

- How does this time compare to your previous experiences of {NAME OF CHILD} moving back home in terms of:

  o The planning process

  o The support you received

  o Professionals understanding your needs

  o Your involvement in the decision making

If the child is still at home:

- What are things like for you now {NAME OF CHILD} is back with you?

  o What has been good about them being back home?

  o What has been difficult?

If the chils is back in care:

- What were things like when {NAME OF CHILD} came home last?

  o What was good about them being back home?

  o What was difficult?

- Was there anything anyone could have done differently to avoid {NAME OF CHILD} going into care?

LIFE AFTER RETURN HOME (8 mins)

- What support, if any did you receive after {NAME OF CHILD} came home?

  o From whom/how long did this last

  o Was this sufficient?

  o Probe previous support mentioned that might have continued + additional/new types of support. E.g continuity/involvement of services such as family support workers; drug/alcohol councillors/adult mental health services etc).

- Is there anything else you would have liked support with?

OVERALL (5 mins)

Thinking now about the entire process from {NAME OF CHILD} living in care, the planning of them moving back home and then finally coming back home.

- Overall, how do you feel about how you and your family have been supported over the years in terms of enabling {NAME OF CHILD} to come home?

  o What has worked well?

  o What has worked less well?

- Overall, have you felt there has been a professional/or professionals who have a good understanding of your needs and who have worked to support you and help you deal with any difficulties?

- Overall, how would you describe your experiences and contact with children's services professionals over time. How well have things worked for you?

  o   What has been good about this?

  o   What has been less good?

- Have different services worked well together?

- How should things be improved for other families like yours?

  o   What should they be doing differently to give CYP the best chance for things to work in being with their families?

- Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have already discussed today?

DEBRIEF

AT THE END OF EACH INTERVIEW WE NEED TO DEBRIEF WITH EACH PARENT.

Since this is a sensitive subject for many of the people we are talking too, we always like to ask a few questions at the end about how you felt the interview went – is that OK?

- Was that OK for you?

- Did any questions make you feel uncomfortable? If so, how could they be changed / reworded or just not asked?

- Did you understand all the questions? If not, what language needs to be changed?

- Any questions that we should ask other parents?

- Anything else you would like to tell us about the interview?

THANK PARTICIPANT AND REMIND THEM WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT WITH THE INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY AND REPORTING. THE INFORMATION WE ARE COLLECTING WILL BE INCLUDED IN A LARGER REPORT TO DFE; THE REPORT WILL BE FINALISED NEXT SUMMER. WE WILL BE WRITING A SHORTER REPORT

FOR PARTICIPANTS WHO TOOK PART IN THIS SECTION OF THE RESEARCH – WOULD YOU LIKE TO RECEIVE A COPY?

OFFER SUPPORT ORGANISATION INFORMATION SHEETS. PROVIDE VOUCHER AND ASK PARTICIPANT TO SIGN FOR IT.

IF APPLICABLE, ASK FOR CONSENT FOR YP TO TAKE PART IN INTERVIEW.

This research was commissioned under the under the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy. The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: improving.permanence@education.gsi.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications