Children who return home from care: improving practice

Evaluation report on the learning set programme

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Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University to undertake a programme of research and action learning to explore how, and to what extent, local authorities implement, embed and monitor effective practice in respect of children who return home from care. Alongside research, NCB designed and delivered learning sets to support local authorities in developing and improving reunification practice.

The learning sets brought together strategic leads, frontline managers and practitioners from seven local authorities[1], with up to three representatives from each area. The programme delivered four sessions between July and October 2014, which included presentations by external speakers, reviewing research evidence and group exercises to develop solutions to shared challenges. By the end of the four sessions, all participating authorities had created an action plan for developing reunification practice in their area.

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the learning sets, which explored the following questions:

1. What have the sets achieved in terms of changes to local authority policy and practice?
2. What is the impact on policy and practice and, where possible, on families?
3. What can be learned about application of peer learning approaches in local authorities?

To assess the degree to which the sets had achieved their aims of increasing understanding about: whether and how a peer learning environment facilitates the implementation of effective practice and the potential of this approach to lay the foundations for lasting change.

Findings are based on 12 feedback forms[2] completed by representatives of six local authorities at the end of the learning set programme and eight telephone interviews with participants from six authorities. Participants held a range of roles, encompassing social

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[1] Eight local authorities participated in the research and were invited to join the learning sets. Of these, seven attended the learning sets.
[2] A total of 22 people attended the learning sets across the four sessions. The number of feedback forms received represents 55% of the total learning set participants.

workers, senior managers and service managers. The majority of those interviewed held a strategic or leadership role in their local authority.

Evaluation Findings

This section summarises findings on:

- Why local authorities participated in the learnings sets

- The issues that action plans developed in the sets aimed to tackle

- Outcomes that have been achieved in implementing action plans and participating in the learning sets

Motivation to participate

Motivation for participating in the learning sets largely stemmed from local authorities wishing to improve reunification practice. At the time of the sets, many of the participating authorities were going through a period of transition and/or service redesign and some were prompted to attend to support an improvement plan following an unsatisfactory Ofsted rating.

The majority of participants joined the learning sets in the hope of becoming more aware of current research on effective reunification practice as well as to have the opportunity to reflect on their existing practice and develop a local plan for improvement. Interviews highlighted that participants particularly valued the research-centred approach to the learning sets and the benefit of having time and space to focus on reunification. They were also keen to share learning with other local authorities in attendance as "*a good way to share experiences and find solutions together*".

Action plans developed by the learning sets

The learning set programme supported each participating local authority to develop an action plan for driving improvement in local reunification practice. Action plans had multiple strands incorporating both the needs that had motivated authorities to participate in the sets, as well as new areas prompted by participating in the sets.

There were five overarching areas of focus to the action plans: developing reunification policy; changes to reunification practice; data gathering and analysis; multi-agency support around reunification; changing culture and attitudes:

- **Reunification policy**: Several local authorities used the learning sets to formulate an approach to developing a policy, as well as consider how to embed and implement it.

- **Review of existing reunification practice**: A range of aspects regarding reunification practice were included in area action plans, covering assessment and identification, as well as reviewing existing plans and placement decisions. For example, one authority focused on understanding how to identify cases where reunification might be a possibility.

- **Data gathering and analysis**: Obtaining accurate, useful local data on reunification was a key concern for all of the participating authorities. This included: understanding the numbers of children returning home; the number of successful returns; and length of stay at home preceding family breakdown. Authorities shared in common the need to gather more data and to interrogate existing data further or using a different approach, and these issues were incorporated into action plans.

- **Multi-agency support for reunification**: Some authorities used the learning sets to progress work around developing a multi-agency approach to supporting children, young people returning home and their parents. For example, in one authority this was being pursued by working with third party organisations to identify gaps in reunification support and develop a plan to ensure that these are filled.

- **Changing culture and attitudes**: Many of the aforementioned areas of focus were underpinned by activity aimed at changing culture and attitudes around reunification and contact with birth families. This included work around a perceived conflict between: achieving permanence; considering reunification; and contact with birth families.

Outcomes achieved to date

Due to the stage at which the evaluation was conducted (just a few months after the programme ended) the outcomes and impact identified were predominantly at a policy and practice level. However, where possible outcomes achieved for children, young people and their families have been drawn out.

Evaluation data highlights nine overarching outcomes achieved by the learning sets:

- **Development of a local action plan**: All participating local authorities designed and developed action plans to improve effective reunification practice in their area and were in early stages of implementing these.

- **Improved confidence to drive change in local areas**: Two thirds of participants agreed that they were more confident to drive cultural changes in their respective authorities as a result of the learning sets. Many attributed this to becoming more informed during the learning sets via both discussion of research findings and opportunities to share with other areas. Being up to date in terms of research and information meant participants felt confident that they could answer any questions

that might arise in their area about changes and assured that planned changes were grounded in tangible evidence.

- Individuals from local authorities on improvement plans following Ofsted inspections, spoke of finding comfort in the fact that other areas were facing (or had faced) similar issues.

- **Changes in reunification policy and awareness**: Several authorities reporting having a reunification policy in place partly as a result of participating in the learning sets. In addition, participants spoke of an overall increase in awareness of reunification within their teams and of starting to raise awareness across the authority. This was seen as contributing to greater emphasis on the importance of reunification as an option and better understanding of how it relates to different agendas, as well as the role that multiple agencies can play.

- **Developments in reunification practice**: As a result of participating in the learning sets, a range of new guidance and tools had been developed to support social workers and other professionals in understanding both when and how to consider (or revisit) reunification. This included: new practice guidelines for social workers; activity to support Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to think about reunification; and creation of a new performance framework for social workers that includes measures related to reunification. As a result of this increased focus on reunification, one authority reported a rise in the number of children for whom return home was being actively considered.

- Some authorities had also used the learning sets as an opportunity to trial practices used in participating authorities and/or others discussed during learning set sessions. One participant spoke very highly of a presentation delivered by NSPCC on their 'Taking Care' tool3 and, as a result, is now using the tool in their local authority.

- **Improved involvement of parents in return home planning**: A number of the changes to practice implemented by learning set authorities were focused on involving parents in reunification. Achievements included: adaptation to supervision record sheets to include parental involvement and establishment of a new social work post, involved in all potential reunification cases, with a sole remit of working with parents.

- **Better understanding and use of data**: Undertaking work in this area has seen many review existing data monitoring and reporting practices. Subsequently, one authority developed an audit tool to identify areas of data collection that require further exploration; these areas are now being pursued. In another authority,

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[3] More information on the NSPCC tool can be found here: NSPCC: Taking Care Materials

asking new questions of existing data has resulted in a better understanding of children and young people who return home, why they were in care in the first place and how to support their specific needs.

- **Changes to support for families**: A couple of authorities included in their action plan the aim of improving support for families when children or young people return home. These areas had made some progress, for example, reviewing the support packages for families or working with IROs to ensure that appropriate support is provided for a child regardless of whether they are returned home or in placement, including consideration of how such support might alter or reduce.

- **Shared knowledge and learning between local authorities**: The majority of participants believed that the sets had supported them to share information and ideas with colleagues and work together to create solutions. The opportunity to learn from different levels of professionals was seen as one of the most useful aspects of the learning sets, providing an opportunity to consider practical issues and developments from both a strategic and operational perspective in one conversation.

- **Greater awareness of reunification research**: All participants reported that they felt more aware of current research on effective reunification practice as a result of attending the learning sets. Participants valued the combination of focusing on both research evidence and implications for practice and said that it helped them to introduce practice changes locally as well as provide reassurance that they were on the 'right' path.

Peer learning

The evaluation findings highlight some areas that were found to work particularly well about this approach to peer learning as well as some of the challenges.

What worked in peer learning

There was a perceived value in bringing local authorities together to learn from each other and participants were able to highlight four features of the learning sets that helped them to develop and implement their action plan:

- **A problem solving approach**: Participants cited addressing challenges and finding solutions together as one of the most successful aspects of the learning sets. For example, many participants referred to the same problem-solving session at the learning sets as being particularly helpful; looking at responses to IROs; the powers IROs have in different local authorities; and their role in returning children home from care.

- **Sharing knowledge**: One of the features of the learning sets that was thought to work particularly well was being able to both learn and teach in a non-judgemental, safe, space. Many of the participating local authorities were keen to share innovative approaches they had developed, as well as issues that they found problematic, and saw the learning sets as a safe place to test the waters of these approaches, educate others and learn from other areas.

- **Different levels of professionals**: Having a range of professionals in attendance (from strategic leads and service managers to social workers) was felt to work particularly well in the peer learning sessions. Referring to the earlier example of the discussion on the role of IROs in reunification practice; some managers interviewed said that they found it especially interesting that frontline workers had very different views on the issue to those in more managerial roles. Getting a range of professionals' input in this topic allowed more effective solutions to be developed that were collectively 'owned', thus avoiding a top down approach to addressing IRO and social worker tension.

- **Time and space**: The learning sets also gave participants dedicated time and space to stop, reflect and examine current practice in one specific area. Participants felt that having time away from a demanding office environment, stimulated them to engage in specific action planning. This was then supplemented by the model of the learning sets, which encouraged local authorities to feedback on progress at each session, thus helping to ensure that momentum was maintained once they returned to the fast-paced work environment.

Challenges of peer learning

Despite the aspects of peer learning sessions that were found to help facilitate benefits, there were also features of peer learning events, more generally, which worked less well for participating local authorities:

- **Practical issues**: Practical challenges related to attending any event were found; namely, the commitment of time, travel and capacity, particularly in light of decreasing resources. However, participants also noted that it was worth taking the time to participate.

- **Heterogeneity in local authorities**: Some attendees cited local authority context as a potential challenge of peer learning sessions, meaning that, whilst there may be ample opportunity for learning, approaches that work in one local authority will not necessarily translate to another.

- **Fear of sharing failure**: There was an overarching view that peer-learning only worked when individuals were honest and uninhibited by a fear of sharing failure. This was perceived to be successfully overcome in the learning set sessions

through careful, skilled facilitation; setting ground rules and managing expectations for participation.

- **Bringing the learning back into the authority**: Finally, participants spoke about the need to maintain momentum locally once the sets had ended and ensure that the learning is 'brought back' into the area and disseminated beyond those who participated. To overcome this challenge, some had developed local steering groups or multiagency learning sets to keep reunification on the agenda despite competing priorities.

Conclusion

The Return Home from Care learning set programme aimed to increase understanding of:

- Whether and how a peer learning environment facilitates the implementation of effective practice

- The potential of this approach to lay the foundations for securing lasting change

Facilitating the development and implementation of effective practice

As a result of the programme, seven local authorities have an action plan in place to develop more effective reunification practice in their area. The sets effectively supported and led participating authorities to devise an approach to developing area of practice they had previously identified as well as prompting them to explore issues that had not been considered, such as data monitoring/ analysis and relationships between key stakeholders (e.g. social workers and IROs). The focus of the plans developed was underpinned and informed by research and learning about effective reunification practice.

The learning set programme made a significant contribution to developing effective practice through the achievement of a number of outcomes in participating local authorities, including:

- Increased confidence in participants to drive change in their local authority

- Development of tools and guidelines to ensure reunification is considered as an option wherever appropriate

- Greater involvement of parents in return home planning

- Better understanding and use of local reunification data

- Improvements in support to families, including use of multi-agency approaches.

The role of peer learning in developing practice

Based on the evaluation of this programme, it is possible to tentatively identify some key success factors of this approach:

- **Independent and knowledgeable leadership**: The learning sets were led by an independent body seen as having extensive knowledge of the children's social care field in terms of both policy and practice. Having an external agency convene the sets was also seen as helping maintain momentum and removing some burden from participants.

- **Time and space to focus on one issue**: Many participants spoke about the benefits of having time away from daily pressures of the workplace to 'step back' and focus on reunification policy and practice.

- **A research-centred approach**: Adopting a research-centred approach to the learning sets enabled the development of action plans that are underpinned by tangible evidence and has helped participants to build a case for change in their authorities.

- **A safe space to share and learn**: In order to achieve the outcomes noted in this report, participants needed to feel comfortable sharing their challenges and failures, as well as successes. A safe space was seen as created by skilled facilitation of the group, working towards a common purpose (improving practice to achieve better outcomes for children and young people) and clarity of expectations.

- **Focus and structure, with flexibility**: The importance of having clearly, structured sessions that build in some room for participant-led interaction was viewed as a success factor by participants.

- **Having the 'right people' in the room**: Specifically, the need for a mix of levels – from practitioner through to strategic lead. This was seen as enabling the development of realistic solutions to challenges; improving efficiency by having decision makers in the room; increasing the likelihood of learning being cascaded further into each authority.

Future peer learning approaches

In consideration of future peer learning opportunities, the evaluation findings highlight the importance of recognising the wider policy and funding pressures that local authorities have to contend with and are likely to affect participation in such activity. There is also the need to balance maintaining momentum with allowing time to pass to in order for change to happen.

Overall, peer learning was seen as important and believed to have a distinct value in providing a form of peer review alongside more formal assessment mechanisms (i.e.

Oftsed). Participants expressed some desire to continue operating as a group whilst in the process of implementing their action plans, though stressed that the mechanism for doing this would require careful thinking. Follow up work was seen as potentially beneficial in providing implementation support as well as maintaining motivation amongst participants. Finally, there may be benefit from assessing the impact of the sets over a longer period of time to more fully understand contribution of peer learning to developing effective reunification practice.

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University to carry out a project combining research and action learning to explore how, and to what extent, local authorities implement, embed and monitor effective practice in respect of children who return home from care. Alongside a programme of research with local authority professionals and families where children had returned home from care, NCB designed and delivered a series of learning sets to support local authorities in developing and improving reunification practice.

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the learning sets, based on feedback from participating local authorities. The learning set programme was delivered over four sessions to representatives from seven local authorities (see below for details). Findings reported here are based on feedback forms completed following the final learning set meeting and telephone interviews carried out between two and four months after participation.

Return Home from Care learning sets

The learning set programme was delivered to seven of the eight local authorities recruited to the wider Return Home from Care research programme[4], with the aim of increasing understanding of:

- Whether and how a peer learning environment facilitates the implementation of effective practice

- The potential for this approach to lay the foundations necessary for securing lasting change.

Specifically, the learning sets aimed to achieve this by:

- Bringing together managers and practitioners from across selected local authorities to work together on key challenges and solutions for implementing effective practice in returning children home from care

- Providing participants with safe, yet challenging opportunities to engage with, absorb and robustly examine the key findings from the research review and case study sites

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[4] Authorities were recruited to provide a mix in terms of: proportion of children returned home from care (and re-entering care); geographical location; authority type (unitary, metropolitan and London boroughs).

- Creating facilitated opportunities to enable managers and practitioners with diverse experiences to work together, to examine key research findings, reflect on their relevance, and explore the implications for translation and implementation to effect sustainable practice and service development

- Providing participants with the resources and opportunities to identify key priorities for their practice/services, set achievable, measurable and realistic goals, outline clear plans for their implementation including challenges and potential solutions

- Supporting participants to share information and ideas, provide robust challenge to colleagues and create solutions to tricky problems

- Providing participants with information in the most accessible formats, equipping them with tools and information to help to drive improvements locally

- Evaluating and capturing impact and disseminating ideas on how to ensure that practice changes and the key ingredients for achieving them are communicated to a wider audience

- Ensuring that learning from practice is used to inform and shape local and national policy.

The learning sets brought together strategic leads, frontline managers and practitioners from participating local authorities, with up to three representatives from each area (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Learning sets attendees by role

- Other
- Team manager
- Social work consultant
- Social worker
- Senior practitioner
- Service manager
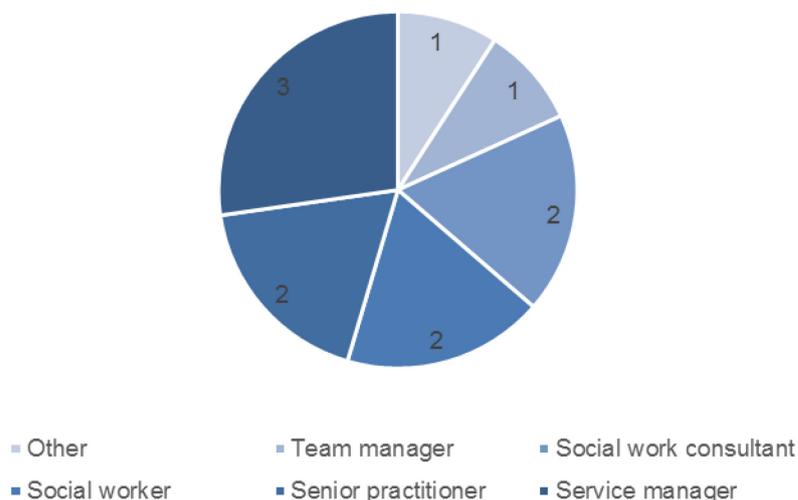
Source: RHFC learning set feedback form (N=12)

Across four sessions 22 people participated from seven local authorities. The programme delivered four structured sessions at 3-weekly intervals between July and October 2014. Seminars were structured to include:

- Presentations by external speakers, for example on research evidence, policy context and coaching approaches

- Syntheses/digests of research findings and evidence with time for raising questions and exploring for practice

- Reflective exercises undertaken as individuals/pairs; individual area/paired areas; small/whole group to develop solutions and approaches to developing practice

- Reviews of progress, challenges and learning, for example attendees were requested to report back at each session on progress in developing/embedding their action plan.

By the end of the four sessions all participating authorities had been supported to create an action plan for developing reunification practice in their area.

See Appendix 1 for the learning set programme.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation aimed to assess:

- What the sets have achieved in terms of changes to local authority policy and practice

- The impact on policy and practice and, where possible, on families

- What can be learned about application of peer learning approaches in local authorities

In order to examine whether and how a peer learning environment facilitates the implementation of effective practice and the potential for this approach to lay the foundations necessary for securing lasting change.

A post-hoc evaluation of the learning sets was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Evaluation data presented in this report is based on 12 feedback forms completed by representatives from six local authorities at the end of the learning set programme; representing 55% of the total learning set programme participants. Representatives held various roles within their local authorities, encompassing social workers, senior managers and service managers.

Data from feedback forms is supplemented by qualitative data from eight follow-up telephone interviews with participants from six authorities. Interviews were carried out between January and March 2015 and explored implementation of the action plans developed during the learning sets, the benefits and challenges of peer learning and outcomes achieved. The majority of those interviewed held a strategic or leadership role in their local authority. This may reflect the time pressures on frontline staff who were often keen to participate in interviews but frequently needed to rearrange or cancel due to unexpected issues, such as court appearances or case emergencies.

See Appendix 2 and 3 for the feedback form and interview topic guide.

Terms

Throughout the report, the term 'participants' is used to refer to local authority representatives who participated in both the learning sets and evaluation. Direct quotations from survey data and telephone interviews are presented anonymously in italics.

The terms 'reunification' and 'return home from care' are used interchangeably.

Evaluation findings

This section outlines evaluation findings on:

- Why local authorities participated in the learnings sets

- The issues that action plans developed in the sets aimed to tackle

- Outcomes that have been achieved in implementing action plans and participating in the learning sets

- What worked in peer learning, as well as some of the challenges

Motivation to participate

Motivation for participating in the learning sets largely stemmed from local authorities wishing to improve practice around returning children home from care. At the time of the learning sets, many of the authorities were going through a period of transition and/or service redesign, or had identified reunification as an area requiring improvement in their local authority. Others had received an unsatisfactory Ofsted rating, which had prompted them to reflect on their own practice, with a particular focus on looked after children and reunification.

As a result of this wider context, many of the participating local authorities had already begun work to develop return home from care practice and saw the learning sets as forming part of this journey; coming at a convenient time to benefit from and incorporate learning from sessions into improvement plans and policy design.

Feedback forms show that individuals' specific expectations of participating in the learning sets to be wide ranging (see Figure 2). Consistent with the overall aims of the learning sets, ten participants (n=12) hoped to become more aware of current research on effective practice in returning children home from care, nine wanted to reflect on their own practice regarding what works and nine also hoped to develop a plan for improving practice locally. Further details of participants' hopes for the learning sets are outlined below.

Figure 2: Participants' expectations of learning sets

Expectation	Count
To become aware of current research on effective practice in return home from care	10
To develop a plan for improving practice locally	9
To reflect on my own practice about what works	9
To use research evidence to make a case for change in my authority	8
To focus in-depth on one area of practice	7
To improve monitoring and support following a child's return home from care	6
Learn how to inspire others to change practice	5
To improve awareness of what might go wrong when a child returns home from care	4
To get support from colleagues	4
To feel more confident to address cultural change within my authority	3

Source: RHFC learning set feedback form (N=12)

A research-centred approach

The research-centred approach to the learning sets was valued by most participants:

> *"Being involved in something that had an element of being research and data driven, it felt like this is a good place for us to be"*

Almost all identified an increased awareness of current research as a motivation for attending and saw the learning sets as a way of learning from reliable sources. Many attendees came with particular areas they wanted to learn more about; most notably assessments and evaluations, specific processes around returning children home from care and the opportunity to learn from reliable data on reunification. Indeed, participants at the first learning set meeting stressed the need to have evidence to take back to their local authority in order to promote change[5].

Raising awareness and changing practice

Data from feedback forms and interviews indicate that participants hoped the learning sets would enable them to increase awareness of returning children home from care and raise the profile of reunification within their respective local authorities. It was generally

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[5] Source: Notes from Action Learning Set 1

felt that return home was sometimes overlooked as an option; participants hoped to raise awareness of the issue to give the best possible outcome for all children:

> "I decided to take part because we wanted to learn from the project so to promote and improve practice on returning home from care."

In line with one of the main aims of the learning sets – ensuring learning from practice is used to inform and shape local policy – participants cited potential practice changes as a primary motivation for attending. In interviews, local authorities identified several key issues that they had found to be problematic in their respective areas; these included having a reactive, as opposed to proactive, mind-set about returning children home from care; low motivation to involve parents; and inadequate contact arrangements with families. They hoped to develop solutions to these challenges through participating in the learning sets.

Time and space to focus

Time and space to reflect on their own practice and focus in-depth on an area of practice was a key motivator for many participants. Interviewees who attended the learning sets spoke of the opportunity to step back and reflect on the issue of returning children home. One participant explained:

> "Just to have time out with others and time out from the day to day work to reflect and plan really interested me"

Opportunity for peer learning

Despite the learning sets being a peer learning programme, in feedback forms just four attendees (n=12) identified support from colleagues as something they expected to get from participating. In contrast, interviewees described the opportunity for peer learning as one of the biggest draws of participation. Participants specifically hoped to have opportunities to learn from other local authorities and to benefit from colleagues' varying perspectives, feedback and ideas in order to understand how other areas approached reunification practice. One attendee noted that the learning sets were expected to be "*a good way to share experiences and find solutions together*".

Some participants were also keen to have the opportunity to share their experiences of testing new approaches to return home practice:

> "We felt like we were developing some really innovative approaches to reunification so one, it was about testing out what other people think of that but the other was about saying, well if it is innovative and it is working then we should be adding to the research."

Finally, participants also expected the learning sets to act as a networking opportunity; allowing them to interact and make connections with authorities based in similar areas or with reunification statistics comparable to their own.

Action plans developed by the learning sets

The learning set programme supported each participating local authority to develop an action plan for driving improvement in reunification practice in their area. This section outlines the broad areas covered by action plans, based on data from telephone interviews with eight participants from six local authorities.

As noted earlier, many of the local authorities in the learning set group described themselves as on an 'improvement journey'. As a result, the action plans developed were often seen as forming part of a wider programme of work aimed at progressing the authority along that journey.

Local action plans had multiple strands incorporating both the needs that had motivated authorities to participate in the sets as well as new areas explored and prompted by the sets themselves. Based on interview data, it is possible to identify five overarching areas that local authorities chose to focus on in their action plans: developing reunification policy; changes to reunification practice; data gathering and analysis; multi-agency support around reunification; changing culture and attitudes. Each area is explored in turn below.

Reunification policy

Several local authorities had included developing a reunification policy as a key part of their action plan: "*We didn't have a reunification policy. Before we have focused on adoption and special guardianship*". Activity at the learning sets was used to formulate an approach to developing this policy as well as plan how to embed and implement it. Some authorities focused specifically on how to embed their new reunification policy to ensure a consistent approach to practice: "*to mean we can answer questions such as 'what can I expect from the process of reunifying a child*?"

Review of existing reunification practice

A range of aspects regarding reunification practice were included in area action plans, including some very practical changes. These covered assessment and identification as well as reviewing existing plans and placement decisions. For example, one authority focused on understanding how to identify cases where reunification might be a possibility. Another authority worked to develop reunification as a multi-service process as opposed to sitting solely within looked after children by involving a wider range of professionals, including Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and other service teams. Finally, there were also some who looked at improving planning for reunification to

increase clarity around appropriate options for children and young people (underpinned by some of the data activity outlined in the following section):

> *"We're doing a significant piece of work around the menu of placement options when young people enter the care system, we need to be more robust at recognising whether this is a two-week respite or if we need to bite the bullet and look at permanence planning."*

Data gathering and analysis

Obtaining accurate, useful data around reunification in their area was a key concern for all of the authorities participating in the learning sets. This included: understanding the numbers of children returning home; the number of successful returns; and the length of stay at home preceding family breakdown. Authorities shared in common the need to gather more data and to interrogate existing data further or using a different approach. This was encompassed by action plans in a range of ways, including:

- Gathering data on reunification as a specific data set in order to understand the key features of this specific population

- Developing an approach to using data as a planning tool for practice

- Testing out longitudinal analysis with a subset of children and young people in order to track outcomes over time

- For one authority, '*going back to basics'* in recognising that their current approach to monitoring and analysis was not working: "*We didn't have a clear sense of our data; I had an oversight of the main headlines but we didn't know how many had a plan around returning home, how many actually did return home, after how long and why*".

Multi-agency support for reunification

Some authorities described used the learning sets to progress work around developing a multi-agency approach to supporting children, young people returning home and their parents: "[the purpose was to] *develop a multi-agency plan and arrangement where there will be more input from education, CAMHS and health*". In one authority this was being pursued by working with third party organisations to identify gaps in support around reunification and develop a plan to ensure that these gaps are filled. For some areas this was about developing a new approach to support – in others it meant ensuring that existing multi-agency work transferred to reunification to ensure that all children and young people get the support they need: "*Once children are looked after the multi-agency aspect tends to reduce, we needed to link them [the children] back up and also help them to access universal services*". On occasion, this also included work around commissioning and contracting "*to ensure that every partner we work with is clear about our expectations around contact with families and the eventual return home*".

Changing culture and attitudes

Finally, many of the aforementioned areas of focus were underpinned by activity aimed at changing culture and attitudes around reunification and contact with birth families. Activity here included group work within service areas or individual teams "*looking at how reunification happens and when it should happen and how, collectively, we can go about that*".

There was some suggestion of a need to redefine the, perhaps, entrenched views of social workers around birth families not being capable of change, as well as some perceived conflict between; the need to achieve permanence for a child; considering reunification; and contact with birth families:

> "*Sometimes encouragement to retain birth family contacts is neglected at the expense of permanence and stability.*"

> "*We've been a 'rescuing authority' so what we've done is we've looked at children in these terrible family settings and we've seen ourselves as rescuing them in a sense. Then the problem is, once you've 'rescued' a child or young person it becomes almost impossible to then be the person who places them back in the environment you rescued them from.*"

Outcomes achieved to date

This section outlines the overarching outcomes achieved by the learning sets, based on feedback forms and telephone interviews with participants. It includes outcomes achieved in individual areas when implementing action plans. Due to the stage at which the evaluation was conducted (just a few months after the programme ended) the outcomes and impact reported are predominantly at a policy and practice level. However, where possible outcomes achieved for children, young people and their families have been noted.

Evaluation data highlights nine overarching outcomes that the learning sets have achieved:

- Development of local action plans

- Improved confidence to drive change in local areas

- Changes in reunification policy and awareness

- Developments in reunification practice

- Improved involvement of parents in return home planning

- Better understanding and use of data

- Changes to support for families

- Shared knowledge and learning between local authorities

- Greater awareness of reunification research

Overview

Feedback forms asked participants to rate the degree to which the learning sets had achieved their stated objectives. The vast majority of attendees rated the events, discussions, activities and the staff supporting the events as 'good' or 'excellent'; only one participant described them as 'satisfactory'; and none described any aspect as 'poor'. One participant summarised their views:

> *"A really useful four days which I have found incredibly useful. It has been very well organised and facilitated. Thank you!"*

Figure 3 shows the degree to which participants thought the learning sets met their stated objectives. It was widely held that all objectives, including considering research evidence, working together to create solutions and setting area-specific goals, had been achieved 'very well' or 'well', with the remainder classifying them as being 'acceptably' achieved.

Figure 3: Degree to which learning set objectives were met
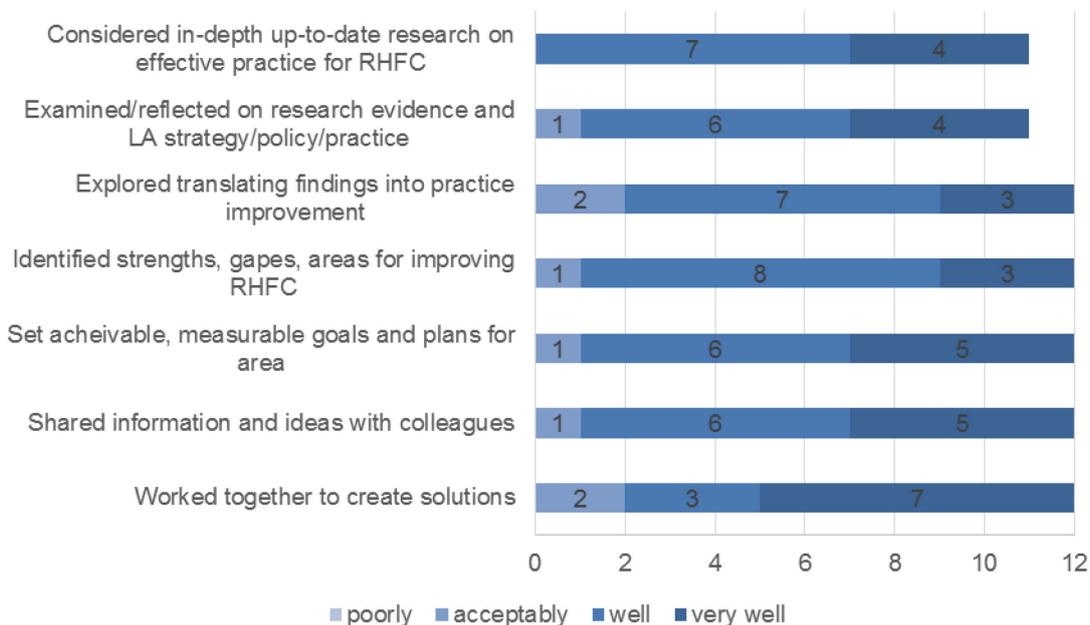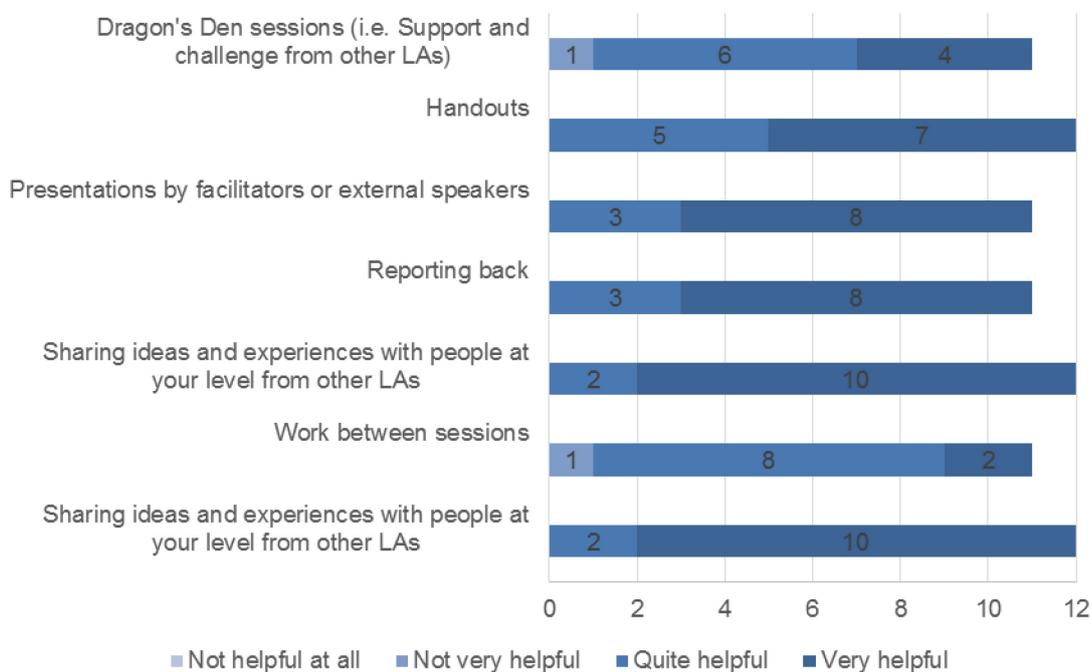

Source: RHFC learning set feedback form (N=12)

Overall, it can be seen that attendees had a very positive view of the learning sets (see Figure 4). Participants thought that the presentations by facilitators and external speakers, sharing ideas and experiences with people at their level from other local authorities, working with others at different levels to agree goals and action plans, the

hand outs and reporting back were 'very' or 'quite' helpful. Just one participant felt that the work between sessions and the Dragon's Den sessions were not very helpful.

Figure 4: How helpful were these aspects of the action leanring events?

Source: RHFC learning set feedback form (N=12)

Development of a local action plan

One of the key reasons participants attended the learning sets was the hope of developing a plan to improve practice locally. As discussed in section 2.2, all participating local authorities designed and developed action plans aimed at improving reunification practice in their area and were at varying stages of implementing these with some significant achievements so far.

Improved confidence to drive change in local areas

Two thirds of participants agreed that they were more confident to drive cultural changes in their respective authorities as a result of the learning sets. Many attributed this directly to the information that was shared during the learning sets; through research findings and through communication with other areas. Indeed, knowledge of up to date information was cited as one of the main areas that participants' confidence stemmed from. This enabled participants to feel confident that they could answer questions that colleagues may have about changes – whether practical or cultural – and to feel assured that changes were grounded in tangible evidence which could be referred to if needed. This appeared to give participants a new-found confidence to take back to their local areas.

As noted earlier, some of the participating local authorities were on improvement plans following Ofsted inspections. Individuals attending from these areas spoke of finding it comforting that other areas were facing (or had faced) similar issues. This was described as a "*shared sense of struggle*" which increased the confidence and motivation of workers to drive change:

> "*I don't think that it's anything particular from anybody that presented but I think that it is more about actually being involved in the sets, the action learning set, and knowing other people were experiencing similar things.*"

One third of participants indicated that they did not feel more confident to address cultural change, which may be due to the varied pool of individuals in attendance as well as the fact that some of these did not feel they had the authority to drive cultural change in their area.

Changes in reunification policy and awareness

As noted earlier, several authorities reported having a reunification policy in place partly as a result of participating in the learning sets. In addition, participants spoke of there being an overall increase in awareness of reunification within their teams and of starting to raise awareness across the authority. Specifically, this had led to a greater emphasis on the importance of reunification as an option and better understanding of how it relates to different agendas (i.e. permanency) as well as the role that multiple services/agencies can play:

> "*I'd like to think that a number of social workers on the looked after team are much more aware of the option of reunification.*"

Some participants also said that the learning sets helped them to understand how to develop successful delivery changes in terms of policy. Specifically, they explained that facilitated sessions at the learning sets had helped them to understand the difficulties of developing a new policy and the challenges of implementing it, as well as to think through how this may work in their area.

Developments in reunification practice

As a result of participating in the learning sets, authorities have developed a range of new guidance and tools to support social workers and other professionals in understanding both when and how to consider (or revisit) reunification. Work undertaken in the different authorities so far, includes:

- New practice guidelines for social workers informed by the learning sets: "*We developed guidance for social workers which covers when they might revisit reunification and how to raise it with foster carers who sometimes have less motivation to let a child go home*"

- Activity to support IROs to think about reunification: "*We took the project into the IRO review meeting to say 'when you are looking at a child returning home this is some of the research, here are some of the questions you can ask, issues you may need to think about'*"

- Creation of a new performance framework for social workers that includes measures related to reunification – "*For example, it asks about young people's satisfaction with contact; involvement of parents in reviews*"

As a result of this focus on reunification practice, one authority reported an increase in the number of children for whom return home was being actively considered.

Some authorities had also used the learning sets as an opportunity to trial practices used in other participating authorities. For example, in one area the individual participating was inspired by a new approach one local authority was using to keep reunification on the agenda: "One local authority was holding regular, quick-fire meetings bringing key people around the table to debate the issues rather than letting things drift". In between learning set sessions, this worker trialled this in their own area by implementing 'as and when' reunification team meetings and found this approach to work as a useful way of ensuring timely support is provided in their area.

Another participant spoke very highly of a presentation delivered by NSPCC, which incorporated their 'Taking Care' tool[6] with the evidence on which it is based, why and how it works in practice. Following hearing about this at the learning sets, this authority is now using this tool to improve reunification practice.

Improved involvement of parents in return home planning

A number of the changes to practice implemented by learning set authorities were focused on involving parents in reunification from an earlier stage of the care planning process. Achievements to date include:

- Small tweaks to current practice: "*We've adapted our supervision record sheet so that we make sure that parents are included in that – so social workers are asked about what involvement parents have had with them and current planning*"

- Carrying out joint visits that include parents when a case is transferred to a new team or staff member

- Establishment of a new social work post, involved in all potential reunification cases, with a sole remit of working with parents. The authority achieved this by revising an existing social worker post, removing a case load to enable to them to

work across cases: "*we took somebody off case loading and now they're our reunification social worker*"

Better understanding and use of data

As noted earlier, data was an area of focus for all of the participating authorities. At the learning sets they were encouraged to examine and reflect on local reunification data. Many participants said that this statistical breakdown of local figures helped them to understand where their local authority was 'at' in terms of reunification practice and highlight any problematic areas. One participant shared:

> "*We did the data analysis and that was really quite interesting in terms of what children had gone home and come back and the ones that had remained. I think just doing that statistical analysis and having those figures did help. Our figures weren't actually terrible, we were quite proud of the fact we'd had children return home – but when we analysed these a lot of them were before they'd made it to the Children Looked After team so it did mean that we really had to look at our team and what our team's morals and values were- and that only came about because of discussions in the learning sets*"

Undertaking work in this area has seen many review their existing practices in terms of data monitoring and reporting. In one area, an audit tool has been developed and used to identify areas of data collection that require further exploration, which will now be pursued. In another authority, asking new questions of existing data has resulted in a better understanding of children and young people who return home, why they were in care in the first place and how to support their specific needs:

> "*It showed us that we had a large group who were looked after for a really short period of time. So the figure meant something – we could look at those on the edge of care, use of police powers etc*"

Changes to support for families

A couple of authorities included in their action plan the aim of improving support for families when children or young people return home. These areas had made some progress, for example, reviewing the support packages for families or working with IROs to ensure that appropriate support is provided for a child regardless of whether they are returned home or in placement, including consideration of how such support might alter or reduce: "*We did a piece of work looking at how support changes once they are in placement*". One area reported that children are now classified as 'children in need' for the first few months following return home as opposed to the case being closed at this point. This means that a support plan is drawn up, including linking them with other services and third-party support providers.

Shared knowledge and learning between local authorities

The majority of participants believed that the sets had achieved the objective of supporting them to share information and ideas with colleagues either 'very well' or 'well' and that the sets had helped them work together to create solutions 'very well' or 'well'. Peer learning was considered to be particularly helpful, with one participant stating:

> "Learning from other local authorities was extremely useful and having a slightly larger group to share ideas with was beneficial."

However, one participant noted that it may have been useful to have worked in small cross-authority groups to achieve maximum benefit.

The opportunity to learn from different levels of professionals (ranging from frontline workers to heads of services) was highlighted by attendees as one of the most useful aspects of the learning sets:

> "It was good to be with colleagues at different levels. In my view this was vital in understanding objectives because each role within the group brought something new to the table."

This appeared to boost the effect of peer learning by providing an opportunity to consider practical issues and developments from both a strategic and operational perspective in one conversation.

Greater awareness of reunification research

All participants reported that they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that they felt more aware of current research on effective reunification practice as a result of attending the learning sets. Participants valued the combination of focusing on both research evidence and implications for practice. It was felt that the presentations gave attendees the "*cold, hard facts*" but this was then supplemented by reflecting on what was happening on the ground to give a realistic and achievable idea of how to incorporate the research evidence into everyday practice.

In addition to helping local authorities to introduce practice changes, increasing awareness of research evidence also helped to reassure authorities that they were on the right path – specifically, that reunification is a tough issue to get 'right' and that it deserves to be reflected on methodically to achieve the best outcomes for all children.

Promisingly, some individuals also described the learning sets as a '*springboard*', improving their awareness of research and reigniting interest in further learning. One participant shared:

"It absolutely refreshed your curiosity around a piece of work- one of the speakers mentioned something and I followed it up and read the piece after."

Whilst the learning sets did not have the resources to cover all relevant research around returning children home from care, the approach taken appears to have sparked an interest (whether professional, personal or both) and given attendees the tools to build on the knowledge gained from the learning sets if desired.

Peer learning

Peer learning was overwhelmingly found to be a positive experience, with the events seen as marking a distinct change in how local authorities typically interact. Indeed, there was an overarching belief among participants that local authorities need to move away from a reluctance to share knowledge and good practice with others, to having a much more honest and transparent relationship; for the sake of children in their care. One attendee summarised:

> *"Ultimately we're working with children that have experienced the same things. Okay, maybe in different places, but a lot of the things – such as domestic violence or neglect – although when you look at them individually they're different, actually in terms of the reasons children come into care and may or may not be able to return home, they are very similar and I think that sharing what has gone right for some people, compared to what hasn't gone so well, I think it's really crucial to be able to understand what we then put in place. I don't think it's just about neighbouring authorities in terms of statistical neighbours… it can help in any kind of authority."*

The remainder of this section draws together evaluation findings to highlight what was found to work well about this approach to peer learning as well as some of the challenges.

What worked in peer learning

There was a perceived value in bringing local authorities together to learn from each other and participants were able to identify good practice in doing this; highlighting specific features of the peer learning experience that helped them to develop and implement their action plans.

Problem solving

Participants cited addressing challenges and finding solutions together as one of the main aspects of peer learning that was found to work. Group conversations around self-identified issues within return home from care practice were found to be a particularly valuable way of achieving this. For example, many participants referred to the same problem-solving session at the learning sets as being particularly helpful; looking at responses to IROs; the powers IROs have in different local authorities; and their role in returning children home from care. Tensions between IROs and social workers were raised as problematic by some areas. These local authorities found it useful to discuss this issue as a group, comparing practice between local authorities to arrive at practical solutions.

As discussed earlier, some local authorities also found it helpful to hear that other local authorities had problems and to learn that they were not alone in the issues they were facing. Even where specific solutions were not arrived at, participants took away a sense of reassurance.

Sharing knowledge

Participants in the evaluation felt that one of the features of the learning sets that worked particularly well was being able to both learn and teach in a non-judgemental, safe, space.

Participants attached considerable value to hearing what other local authorities had to say. In regard to the above example of discussing IROs involvement in returning home from care cases, and potential tension with social workers, one local authority was able to share knowledge about good practice in this area which helped others.

Many of the participating local authorities were also keen to share innovative approaches they had developed, as well as issues that they found problematic. The learning sets were viewed as a safe place to test the waters of their approaches, educate others and learn from other areas. One participant shared: *"It wasn't just people coming to market their approach, there was a real honesty about what was working well and what wasn't working well"*. This two-way learning was thought to be one way in which the learning sets worked to ensure a level playing field for the participating authorities where each had something to contribute. One participant, whose local authority was on an improvement plan, explained:

> *"For an authority that's been where we've been its important not to think you're spending six months just trying to catch up to where everybody else started from. We were truly peers."*

Different levels of professionals

Having many different groups of professionals in attendance, from strategic leads and service managers to social workers, was felt to work particularly well in the peer learning sessions. Initially one local authority considered only sending one member of staff to the learning sets, however, on reflection, they stated that they felt it was much more advantageous sending multiple members of the same local authority, who each worked at different levels.

One member of staff from this area shared:

> *"I think it [only sending one member of staff] would have diluted some of the work that would have been undertaken - if I'd had to go back and recreate it, you'd have lost some of it".*

Participants felt very strongly that *"there need to be people across all levels"* at any peer learning session and the learning sets achieved this range of professional input, capitalising on each person's wealth of experience. Having this varied pool of professionals was felt to be important because "*you need to see it from all perspectives*" and it avoided being a classic top down approach to developing solutions for problematic areas. Furthermore, the varying levels of professionals was also thought to help the implementation of plans after the event. Indeed, the plans consequently have support from every level to help implement changes to practice and policy.

Referring back to the above example of a specific discussion around the role of IROs in returning children home from care; some managers found it especially interesting that frontline workers had very different views on this issue from those who had a more managerial role. One manager shared:

> *"It helped shape my thinking about what responsibility I hold to share the challenges we face with the IROs in a way that is constructive".*

Getting a range of professionals' input in this topic allowed more effective solutions to be offered, which suited workers at all levels and avoided a top down approach to developing solutions for addressing IRO and social worker tension. Participants thought it may have been helpful to also invite IROs to attend the learning sets to offer an additional perspective; this speaks to the value of involving a range of professionals in peer learning and is something to perhaps consider for future events.

Furthermore, having a varied range of *"interested and interesting"* professionals of all levels in attendance was felt to facilitate good networking opportunities for all involved. These networking opportunities were not reserved for interacting with professionals in different local authorities, but also interacting with colleagues from the same local authority who may not have had the chance to work together.

Time and space

Peer learning opportunities also worked by giving participants dedicated time and space to stop, reflect and examine current practice of one specific area. The fact that their respective local authorities had approved the training and given them time out to attend the peer learning session suggests both a commitment to returning home from care practice, but also the perceived value placed on peer learning as a means of improving practice and policy.

Participants also felt it was important not to overlook the benefit of having time away to exclusively think about one topic, knowing they had the support and commitment of their areas. Indeed, having time away from the ever-demanding office environment, stimulated participants to engage in specific action planning.

Similarly, the learning sets encouraged local authorities to feedback to the group which increased the need to complete the actions upon their return to the office, in between

sessions. This 'homework' model not only gave participants a set time away from the office to develop return home from care practice in their local authority but also helped to ensure that attendees still thought about these action points they had developed once they returned to the hectic office environment.

Challenges of peer learning

Despite the aspects of peer learning sessions that were found to help facilitate benefits, there were also features of peer learning events, more generally, which worked considerably less well for participating local authorities.

Practical issues

Practical challenges related to attending any event were found; namely, the commitment of time, travel and capacity. In an area that frequently faces a decrease in resources, these aspects were identified as potential challenges, but it was also noted that participants thought it was well worth taking the time to participate.

In future, to decrease travel time and costs, it may also be useful to facilitate peer learning events with geographically neighbouring local authorities, or indeed with local networks of organisations within the same local authority, bringing together government, community and voluntary sector agencies.

Heterogeneity in local authorities

Some attendees cited local authority context as a potential challenge of peer learning sessions. Whilst there may be ample opportunity for learning, approaches that may work in one local authority do not necessarily translate to other local authorities. Indeed, authorities can be very different in terms of population, geographical size, staffing numbers etc. and so participants had to remain vigilant at all times regarding their own environment when considering what would and wouldn't work in their areas.

Fear of sharing failure

There was an overarching view that peer-learning events only worked when individuals were honest; and thus, local authorities not adopting an open and honest narrative was perceived as a potential challenge and something found to hinder peer learning sessions working as effectively as possible. This was successfully overcome in the learning set sessions by careful, skilled facilitation; setting ground rules and managing expectations for participation.

Peer learning opportunities need to stress that there is no judgement, so people are not constrained by fears of failures or the risk of reputational damage. Events need to foster an environment of honesty between local authorities, where every individual feels

confident sharing examples of what has gone well, but also what hasn't gone so well, in their respective areas. It is only through this type of interaction that potentially problematic areas, such as returning home from care practice, can benefit from professionals with a wide range of experiences formulating solutions together.

For many local authorities who attended the learning sets, this level of honesty was somewhat intimidating; especially for those who had received inadequate inspections prior to the learning sets. However, a participant from such a local authority whole-heartedly believed that they got so much more out of the learning sets as a result of being totally honest, rather than going in with a sit-on-the-fence attitude and choosing to disclose minimal information. This participant shared: *"My advice would be to just kind of embrace it, to be brutally honest".*

Bringing the learning back into the authority

Finally, participants spoke about the need to maintain momentum locally once the sets had ended and ensure that the learning is 'brought back' into the area and disseminated beyond those who participated. To overcome this challenge, some had developed local steering groups or multiagency learning sets to ensure that momentum was not lost and to keep reunification on the agenda despite competing priorities.

Conclusion

The Return Home from Care learning set programme aimed to increase understanding of:

- Whether and how a peer learning environment facilitates the implementation of effective practice

- The potential of this approach to lay the foundations for securing lasting change

This final section explores the degree to which the learning sets achieved their aims and reflects on what the evaluation findings might mean for the future of peer learning approaches.

Facilitating the development and implementation of effective practice

As a result of the programme, seven local authorities have an action plan in place to develop more effective reunification practice in their area. The sets effectively supported and led participating authorities to devise an approach to developing area of practice they had previously identified as well as prompting them to explore issues that had not been considered, such as data monitoring/ analysis and relationships between key stakeholders (e.g. social workers and IROs). The focus of the plans developed was underpinned and informed by research and learning about effective reunification practice.

The learning set programme made a significant contribution to developing effective practice through the achievement of a number of outcomes in participating local authorities. Whilst the six local authorities that participated in the evaluation were still in the relatively early stages of implementing their action plans, the findings demonstrate some tangible changes to practice to date[7]. This has resulted in the following achievements, among others:

- Increased confidence in participants to drive change in their local authority

- Development of tools and guidelines to ensure reunification is considered as an option wherever appropriate

- Greater involvement of parents in return home planning

- Better understanding and use of local reunification data

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[7] Evaluation interviews were conducted between January and March 2015, approximately 2-4 months following the learning sets ending.

- Improvements in support to families, including use of multi-agency approaches

The evaluation also highlighted some of the successful work that learning set participants had undertaken in beginning to shift working culture and attitudes around return home, particularly amongst social workers and IROs, as well as examples of local authorities sharing and testing other area's approaches to reunification.

The role of peer learning in developing practice

This report has highlighted a number of insights in terms of peer learning approaches to working with local authorities. Based on the evaluation of this programme, it is possible to tentatively identify some key success factors of this approach, along with suggestions for the development of future peer learning models:

- **Independent and knowledgeable leadership**: The learning sets were led by an independent body seen as having extensive knowledge of the children's social care field in terms of both policy and practice. The 'interesting and interested' nature of this leadership was viewed by participants as a key success factor. Having an external agency convene the sets was also seen as helping maintain momentum and removing some burden from participants.

- **Time and space to focus on one issue**: Many participants spoke about the benefits of having time away from daily pressures of the workplace to 'step back' and focus on reunification policy and practice. This was thought by strategic leads to be particularly beneficial for social workers who rarely received such opportunities.

- **A research-centred approach**: The opportunity to learn about and explore research on effective reunification practice was a key draw for participants and something they felt had been successful. Adopting a research-centred approach to the learning sets enabled the development of action plans that are underpinned by tangible evidence and has helped participants to build a case for change in their authorities.

- **A safe space to share and learn**: In order to achieve the outcomes noted in this report, participants needed to feel comfortable sharing their challenges and failures, as well as successes. A safe space was seen as created by skilled facilitation of the group, coming together to achieve a common purpose (improving practice to achieve better outcomes for children and young people) and clarity of expectations regarding participation in the sets.

- **Focus and structure, with flexibility**: The importance of having clearly, structured sessions that build in some room for participant-led interaction was viewed as a success factor by participants. This provided a mix of informal and formal learning opportunities.

- **Having the 'right people' in the room**: Throughout this report, the data has reflected the benefits of having multiple representatives from each authority attending the programme, including the need for a mix of levels – from practitioner through to strategic lead. This was seen as underpinning the achievement of the learning sets in several ways: enabling the development of realistic and pragmatic solutions to challenges; improving efficiency by having decision makers in the room; increasing the likelihood of learning being cascaded further into each authority.

Future peer learning approaches

In consideration of future peer learning opportunities, the evaluation findings highlight the importance of recognising the wider policy and funding pressures that local authorities have to contend with and are likely to affect participation in such activity. There is also the need to balance maintaining momentum with allowing time to pass to in order for change to happen.

Overall, peer learning was seen as important and believed to have a distinct value in providing a form of peer review alongside more formal assessment mechanisms (i.e. Ofsted). Participants expressed some desire to continue operating as a group whilst in the process of implementing their action plans, though stressed that the mechanism for doing this would require careful thinking. Suggestions included, follow up learning set meetings, an online forum or convening meetings virtually. Follow up work was seen as potentially beneficial in providing implementation support as well as maintaining motivation amongst participants. Finally, there may be benefit from assessing the impact of the sets over a longer period of time (for example, a year following participation) in order to understand the true contribution of peer learning to developing reunification practice.

Appendix One: Learning Set Programme

**Improving Practice in Respect of Children who Return Home from Care:
Participants Learning Sets Programme**

The Events: Four meetings of learning sets

Location: To be held at NCB, 8 Wakley St, London ECIV 7QE

Dates: June 10th, July 1st, July 29th, September 9th

Time: 10.45-3.30

How to find us, nearest public transport details and map
http://www.ncb.org.uk/get-involved/contact-us

Introduction

The Department for Education has commissioned the National Children's Bureau and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University to undertake a twelve month research study aimed at improving practice in respect of children who return home from care. The study, involving eight local authorities, will explore reunification practice, develop a peer learning environment for sharing good practice and disseminate that knowledge. The research is divided into three phases:

- Case studies

- Development and testing of learning sets and coaching models

- Outputs and dissemination

The research

The specific aims of the research are:

- To identify 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 policy and practice around returning children home from care, including 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

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working), and local authority resources, influence local practice, including the use of research evidence and national policy.

- To identify whether, and how, a peer learning environment can help to facilitate the implementation of effective practice by local authorities, and the sharing of learning both within and between local authorities.

- To disseminate learning and support to local authorities, to facilitate their more effective utilisation of evidence-based approaches in supporting reunification of families.

The learning sets

All eight of the case study authorities are being brought together for a series of four structured seminars, at regular three weekly intervals at NCB. The facilitated sessions are designed to boost and build progress over the course of the programme and to sustain momentum beyond the life of the project. These events will bring together a total of 24 participants, three per LA of strategic, frontline managers and practitioners to consider research on returning children home and how to translate the findings into practice in a sustainable way. The programme deliberately targets participants at three different levels, to ensure that any strategies developed are informed by experience and knowledge from strategic, operational and practice levels; thus increasing their likely relevance, effectiveness and longer term impact. Participants will work together to address multiple practice themes in a flexible, in-depth, challenging and supported way; with inputs from facilitators and external experts alongside opportunities to work in and across levels, in a mixture of small and large group formats with local and other colleagues.

Aims and objectives of learning set programme

By the end of the programme of four learning events participants will have:

- Considered in depth the most up-to-date research on what is effective practice in working with children and their families for reunification, including the factors that hinder or promote positive outcomes for children.

- Examined and reflected on the research evidence and considered these findings against what is currently happening in their local authority at the level of strategy, policy and practice.

- Identified strengths, gaps and areas for improving practice with respect to working with children who return home from care.

- Explored how to translate the findings into practice improvements and identified actions to address obstacles to this aim.

- Set achievable, measurable and realistic goals and outlined clear plans for their implementation.
- Shared information and ideas and provided robust challenge to colleagues whilst working together to create solutions.

The learning set programme structure

Below is the outline programme for the first of the four learning set events. Subsequent events will have a similar structure but with some notable differences, e.g. after the first event, the opening session will comprise a very brief recap, with LAs then presenting on progress with their plans during the intervening period. There will also be differences in how feedback and challenge is structured in, as well as with, timings and presentations e.g. there will be external speakers on key themes to fold into and boost own resources and ideas.

We also recommend that in preparation for the first session you take a look at this DfE data pack Improving Permanence for looked after children Data Pack 2013, which you may/may not be familiar with. You may find it helpful to take a good look at the data and begin to consider some of the questions posed within the pack.

Facilitators

Sheryl Burton is NCB's Programme Director - Health and Social Care, with responsibility for NCB's practice development work to address the health, wellbeing and care needs of children and young people, especially those most vulnerable, such as children in care. Sheryl joined NCB in June 1995 as a senior development officer and since then has directly run or managed a wide variety of practice development projects, consultancy and training, covering a range of areas including safeguarding and children in care. Sheryl joined NCB from Local Authority social services, with experience as practitioner and manager and her publications include: Sawyer, E and Burton, S (2012) *Building Resilience in Families Under Stress: Supporting Families Affected by Parental Substance Misuse and/or Mental Health Problems;* Fauth R, Jelicic H, Hart D, Burton S, Shemmings D, et al (2010) E*ffective Practice to Protect Children Living in Highly Resistant Families*. London: C4EO*;* Burton, S. (2009) *The Oversight and Review of Cases in the Light of Changing Circumstances and New Information - How do People Respond to New (and Challenging) Information?*

Sheree Kane is the Principal Development Officer for Vulnerable Children at the National Children's Bureau. She has extensive experience working in Children's Social Care within statutory services from practitioner to senior management level and more recently as an Independent Consultant and Trainer. She has worked with statutory services in preparing for inspections and has written numerous local authority policies and procedures to support work with looked after children and care leavers. Sheree has

developed a large training portfolio in the field and has a number of publications to her credit including the 2008 NCB publication *Managing the Transitions from Adolescent Psychiatric Settings Toolkit.*

Appendix Two: Learning set feedback form

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Returning Children Home from Care Project
Action Learning sets Programme Evaluation form

1a. What is the name of your Local Authority? _____

1b. Are you a: (*Please tick one or fill in the blank box provided*)

☐ Service manager (or equivalent)   ☐ Social work consultant

☐ Team manager (or equivalent)   ☐ Senior practitioner

☐ Social worker   ☐ Commissioning manager

Other...

2. How well did the programme meet its objectives? Please tick one option for each objective

Objective	Very well	Well	Acceptably	Poorly
Considered in depth the most up-to-date research on what is effective practice in working with children and their families for reunification, including the factors that hinder or promote positive outcomes for children.				
Examined and reflected on the research evidence and considered these findings against what is currently happening in their local authority at the level of strategy, policy and practice.				
Identified strengths, gaps and areas for improving practice with respect to working with children who return home from care.				
Explored how to translate the findings into practice improvements and identified actions to address obstacles to this aim.				
Set achievable, measurable and realistic goals and outlined clear plans for their implementation in your area.				
Shared information and ideas and provided robust challenge to colleagues.				

Working together with colleagues to create solutions.				

Please use this box to explain your answers

3. We are interested to understand what you (as an individual) were hoping to gain from participating in the learning sets. Please indicate below by ticking each area that applies to you:

Reason for participating in learning sets….	Please tick
To become aware of current research on effective practice in return home from care	
To develop a plan for improving practice locally	
To get support from colleagues	
To feel more confident to address cultural change within my authority	
Learn how to inspire others to change practice	
To use research evidence to make a case for change in my authority	
To focus in-depth on one area of practice	
To improve awareness of what might go wrong when a child returns home from care	
To improve monitoring and support following a child's return home from care	
To reflect on my own practice about what works	
Other:	

4. To what degree do you agree with the following statements?

Following participation in the learning sets…	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
I am more aware of current research on effective practice in return home from care						
I was able to develop a plan for improving practice locally						
I obtained support from colleagues						
I feel more confident to address cultural change within my authority						
I learned how to inspire others to change practice						
I am able to use research evidence to make a case for change in my authority						

5. What priority area(s) for improvement did your authority participants decide to work on?

6. What changed in your LA (in terms of actions, progress, practice) as a result of participation in the learning sets?

7. How would you rate the following? *(Please tick one box per statement)*

	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
a) The events in general	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) The discussions	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) The activities	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) The support from staff running the events	☐	☐	☐	☐

8. How helpful were these aspects of the action learning events?

	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful
a) Presentations by facilitators or external speakers	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) Sharing ideas and experiences with people at your level from other LAs	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) Working with others at different levels from your authority to agree goals; outline road map and agree actions	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) The Dragon's Den sessions (i.e. support and challenge from other LAs)	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) Work between sessions	☐	☐	☐	☐
f) Handouts	☐	☐	☐	☐
g) Reporting back	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. What made the learning sets work well?

10. What made the learning sets work less well?

11. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

And finally...

As part of our evaluation of this programme our research centre would like to carry out some brief (30-45 minute) telephone interviews with a sample of learning set participants. Interviews will explore your experience of the learning sets. All findings from the interviews will be confidential and reported anonymously.

If you would be happy to be contacted please enter your details below.

Your name: _____

Email: _____

Telephone number: _____

Please note that we will be selecting a small sample to interview so you may not be asked to take part in an interview even if you provide your details. Either way, we would like to thank you in advance for your support.

Appendix Three: Learning set topic guide

RHFC Learning Set evaluation: Telephone interview topic guide

INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

- Explain who NCB, DfE funded, aim of study – to understand if and how effective practice around RHFC is implemented

- Learning sets one part of a larger study which also includes – family and professional case studies

- Explain:

  - Issues to cover

  - Confidentiality / anonymity

  - Duration of interview – 45 mins

  - 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?

- Confirm consent

CONTEXT

- Briefly, what is your role at {X} Local Authority?

- What is your involvement in terms of RHFC practice and policy?

- How would you describe RHFC in your local authority?

MOTIVATION

- Why did you choose to take part in the learning sets?

- PROMPTS: what were you hoping to get out of participation? Specific areas that you hoped to explore?

Areas of focus – local area action plans

- What was the focus of your local area action plan?

- What role did the learning sets play in supporting you to develop this?

  Guidance/facilitation; drawing on research evidence; peer support/sharing; time/space to step back and plan

- What are the challenges facing your authority in terms of RHFC?
  PROMPTS: *Developing effective practice; planning; capacity and skills (i.e. social workers and emphasis on relationships); push towards or need for multidisciplinary approaches.*

Implementing your action plan

- What has happened in your local authority as a result of the learning sets?

  PROMPTS: Have there been any changes to practice or policy? Changes for yourself? Engagement with/profile of RHFC as an important area of focus?

- What have you found to be challenging in implementing your action plan?

- In what ways have (or did) the learning sets helped you to work through or develop solutions for these challenges?

- What would help you to further implement the action plan?

  PROMPTS: locally; training/support; peer learning role.

- Would you say that the learning sets have helped facilitate implementation or development of effective practice around RHFC? In what ways?

- What do you think are the benefits of peer learning – particularly for local authority staff working in tricky areas such as RHFC

- And what are (or have been) some of the challenges?

Outcomes

- In what ways has peer learning benefited you and your authority?

- We collected some information on outcomes in the feedback forms and I was hoping to explore some of these with you to get a deeper understanding:

  - Would you say you are more aware of current research on effective practice in return home from care? What difference has this made? How have you used this knowledge of current research/why is it important?

  - Would you say you feel better able to address or drive cultural change in your authority? In what ways? What role did the learning sets play in this?

- Overall, what would you say the impact of the learning sets has been?

  For the participants; your LA; practitioners; young people/children?

  PROMPTS: What do you hope might be the future impact?

Learning for the future

- What would advice would you give others thinking about developing peer learning between local authorities – particularly around an issue like RHFC?

That's all of my questions, anything else? Thank you and close