




executive summary **the experiences of fostering and adoption processes – the views of children and young people: literature review and gap analysis**

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Background

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

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



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

Key findings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding comments

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

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

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

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



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