A good practice overview of fostering and adoption activity

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a good practice overview of fostering and adoption activity

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Background

Councils are continually developing their services for children, young people and families. Across England, councils are looking at ways in which they can provide high quality and timely foster care and adoption services. Arrangements are being developed both within and across councils and with partner organisations, with the aim of supporting the achievement of the best outcomes possible for looked-after children. Alongside such arrangements, there is a drive to continue to develop innovative ways of ensuring an adequate supply of suitable carers. With this in mind, the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a good practice review of innovative approaches to practice.

Purpose and aim of the study

The aim of this study is to provide information on existing models of practice that would be useful to other councils considering adopting a similar approach in their own fostering or adoption services. The study focuses on three key areas:

- the benefits and challenges of approaches

- how models of working might be refined in the future

- any actual or future impacts expected through the new models of working.

The research team identified examples of good practice, carrying out a desk review of council websites, specialist journals and examples already collected by both the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) .

This was followed by a series of case studies, selected to offer a cross-section of council type, region and different types of practice and length of involvement in their given area.

Key findings

Approaches to fostering and adoption

Whilst a variety of approaches were taken in structuring and delivering fostering and adoption services, ultimately all councils wanted to improve looked-after children's outcomes. In addition, they wanted to: improve the pools of carers available for both foster and adoptive placements and the support offered to them; improve service provision and front-line practice; and reduce delays in finding children an adoptive family.

What works well

Interviewees reported numerous benefits associated with their council's approach to fostering and adoption services. Generally, positive impacts of the approaches related, firstly, to the council and its partners; secondly, to service managers and frontline staff and thirdly, to children and their carers or adopters.

Issues and challenges associated with councils' approaches

Generally, councils were positive about their fostering and adoption approaches and, therefore, reported relatively few issues and challenges associated with these. However, where they were reported, they commonly related to:

- communicating with stakeholders and developing partnership arrangements

- working with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)

- challenges associated with frontline staff

- setting up the infrastructure.

Conclusion and recommendations

This good practice report shows that the issues and challenges facing councils in this area appear to be similar. Generally, these relate to improving outcomes for children and enhancing provision whilst managing increased numbers of looked-after children and budget cuts. Moreover, councils' desired outcomes for their looked-after children are consistent.

Where our case study councils differ related to the mechanisms by which they hope to achieve their aims. Some councils, for example, have adopted business model approaches to bring about improvements. Others are working in small or large consortia to share practice and create economies of scale to reduce costs.

The research shows that more needs to be done to improve councillors' awareness of the fostering and adoption agenda. All councillors should be aware of their council's responsibility as 'corporate parents'.

Furthermore, in an era of local and national governments increasingly requiring evidence of impact and the value for money assessments, lead members and directors have a responsibility to find out the impact of service provision and its cost effectiveness. Councils could commission external bodies to evaluate their practice or develop their in-house expertise to demonstrate evidence of impact. Indeed, some of the case-study councils reported collecting and reporting impact to senior colleagues.

1   Introduction

Councils are continually developing their services for children, young people and families. Across England, councils are looking at ways in which they can provide high quality and timely foster care and adoption services. Arrangements are being developed both within and across councils and with partner organisations, with the aim of supporting the achievement of the best outcomes possible for looked-after children. Alongside such arrangements, there is a drive to continue to develop innovative ways of ensuring an adequate supply of suitable carers. With this in mind, the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out a good practice review of innovative approaches to practice.

1.1   Purpose and aim of the study

The aim of this study is to provide information on existing models of practice that would be useful to other councils considering adopting a similar approach in their own fostering or adoption services. The study focuses on three key areas:

- the benefits and challenges of approaches

- how models of working might be refined in the future

- any actual or future impacts expected through the new models of working.

1.2   Methodology

The methodology offered a two-phased approach. Initially the research team identified examples of good practice, carrying out a desk review of council websites, specialist journals and examples already collected by both the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

This was followed by a series of case studies, selected to offer a cross-section of council type, region and different types of practice and length of involvement in their given area.

The seven councils selected, whose individual approaches are summarised in case studies at the end of this report (Appendix 1: Council case-study reports)[1] were:

- Bournemouth Borough Council

- Cambridgeshire County Council

- Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

- The IFA Collaborative Project

- London Tri-borough (Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Westminster City and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham)

- Norfolk County Council

- City of York Council.

The research team carried out 34 telephone interviews with a selection of local authority officers, councillors and staff from partner organisations. Interviews were carried out in April and May 2012. Table 1 provides details of the number of interviewees by job role.

Table 1 Number of interviewees by job role

Job role	Number of interviewees
Head of Service/Team Manager	20
Councillor	7
Health Manager/Practitioner	3
Programme Manager	2
Social Care Practitioner	1
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	1
Total	**34**

2   Approaches to fostering and adoption

This chapter summaries the commonalities and differences between the case-study councils' approaches to fostering and adoption services. Further information on each council's approach can be found in the Appendix 1: Council case-study reports.

The research team and the LGA selected councils for inclusion in the study based on their differing approaches. Table 2 summarises each council's approach to fostering or adoption and the length of time in which they had been involved in its delivery.

2.1   Councils' approaches to fostering

This section discusses the case-study councils' ambitions for their fostering services before outlining the ways in which they have sought to achieve these aims.

2.1.1 Councils' ambitions for fostering provision

Despite the council's adopting different approaches to structuring their fostering services, our analysis shows that similar characteristics emerged when exploring the ambition of their services.

Table 2 Councils' approach to fostering and adoption services

Council name	Approach established	Provision	Summary of provision
City of York Council	2008	Fostering provision	This council introduced a 'Staying Put' programme. The programme builds on the attachment between carers and young people aged 18 years and over to provide them with a family environment to help their transition into adulthood and independent living.
Bournemouth Borough Council	2009	Fostering provision	The Access to Resources Team (ART) adopts a business model to support better placement matching. It helps reduce pressure on social workers by removing some administrative aspects of placement finding, such as contracts and financial negotiations.
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council	2009	Fostering provision	This council has adopted two evidence-based programmes of support for foster carers: 'Multidimensional treatment for foster care' (MTFC) and 'Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents supported and trained' (KEEP).
Norfolk County Council	2011	Fostering provision	This council's programme of change introduces a dynamic purchasing system (DPS) and an intensive foster care programme to support children with complex needs.
The IFA Collaborative Project	2012	Fostering provision	A consortium of 11 councils have developed a collaborative approach to purchasing independent foster care placements.
Cambridgeshire County Council	2011	Fostering and adoption provision	Working alongside Coram, this Council seeks to improve early permanence planning, speed up placing children and establish concurrent planning for children under two years olds.
London Tri-borough Council	2012	Fostering and adoption provision	Three London Boroughs came together within one children's services directorate to form one Fostering and Adoption Service, comprising four dedicated teams.

Ultimately all councils wanted to improve looked-after children's outcomes. Other key characteristics included a desire to:

• enhance placement provision

• create financial savings through efficient structures and processes

• improve service provision and frontline practice

• increase their pool of foster carers and the support offered to them

• be proactive in their placement management.

Improving placement provision

All councils sought to improve placement provision by improving placement matching, placement stability and offering an increased placement choice. Councils wanted to enhance their placement matching capabilities by increasing their pool of foster carers. Furthermore, they wanted to have a better understanding of their local looked-after children and carers population to identity any gaps in the availability of foster carers, especially for children with specific needs (such as sibling groups, babies or those with complex needs).

As a result of the better matching and an increased pool of carers, councils aimed to increase their local portfolio and enhance placement choice. Within some councils they sought to achieve this through collaborative working arrangements.

To further enhance placement provision, councils wanted to improve placement stability and reduce disruptions and placement breakdowns. They sought to achieve their aims through better placement matching and enhanced support to carers.

Seeking financial savings

Interviewees in almost all councils indicated that one of the ambitions for their fostering approach was driven by a need to create efficiency savings and reduce costs of placements, whilst improving outcomes. Some councils wanted to reduce the reliance on costly out of

borough and/or independent sector placements by enhancing in-house provision. One lead member described their ambition of their approach as making the council 'more self-sufficient'.

Councils identified a need to improve structures, processes and procedures by introducing more efficient and, therefore, cost-effective ways of working. For one council, this meant developing robust policies to better manage its carers and fostering provision. The intention of having lean and robust systems in place was to help the council to know its populations; speed up processes; prevent delays in placement matching; and enhance placement stability. The intention of each of these elements was to create efficient ways of working to improve looked-after children's outcomes.

Enhancing fostering provision and practice

Councils reported a desire to enhance their fostering provision and frontline practice to improve looked-after children's outcomes. Some councils chose to adopt a business model to drive up standards. This helped enable councils to clearly identify their aims and communicate their expectations to providers. In some cases this has created a healthy competition between private providers. By developing league tables and tiered systems for choosing placements, Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) have been incentivised to provide the best quality service and for the best price. This has also helped ensure they have a regular stream of work.

Most of the councils had built up existing partnerships with other councils, partner agencies (such as health and education services) or charitable organisations, to improve their provision. They hoped to share learning as well as, in some instances, collaboratively commission provision.

A small number of councils talked about wanting to reduce pressures on social workers and to develop social workers' skills and knowledge. By moving to smaller locality teams or larger specialist teams, councils aimed to support social workers to focus on the core aspects of their role. Other councils adopted a business model to enable social workers to focus on supporting children and not have to spend time on

administrative aspects such as placement finding and matching.

Increasing the pool of foster carers

Interviewees from across the councils talked of an ambition to increase their pool of foster carers and improve the support packages offered to them. Both formal and informal support was offered to foster carers. Informal support included setting up meetings, events and forums for carers to share issues with other carers. Within one council, a group of kinship (or 'connected') carers has been established. Across the councils, foster carers also have access to formal training covering topics such as attachment and social learning. Two councils[3] offered more intensive and specialised programmes of training and support such as MTFC or KEEP. These evidence-based programmes, which are funded by the Department for Education[4], were developed at the Oregon Social Learning Centre (OSLC) in America. The programmes train foster carers to deliver individualised treatment to children. Supported by clinical staff, foster carers provide children with lots of encouragement, celebrate their achievements to help improve behaviour and encourage children to learn life skills within a nurturing environment.

Proactively managing placement provision

Our data showed that councils sought to offer a more proactive management of placements. For one council, they recognised that mainstream looked-after children were not getting the desired level of attention within the service. The fostering service has focused its efforts on the emergency safeguarding placements and children going through court proceedings. It decided it needed to improve its focus on the looked-after children cohort and enhance the provision available to them, through a more proactive approach. Within another council, interviewees also talked about adopting a more proactive approach to 'managing the market'.

Other council specific ambitions related to:

• providing consistent provision between in-house and independent providers by introducing common and streamlined processes and procedures

• having an open, honest and transparent monitoring and quality assurance system to provide the council with evidence about service quality and impact; this would also help to drive up standards

• a political ambition to join up services.

2.1.2 Fostering services

Despite there being commonalities in councils' ambitions for their fostering services, they adopted a range of approaches to achieve these aims. These included adopting:

• a business model approach

• a collaborative method

• a specialist programme to support children.

Business model approaches

With the aim of reducing out of borough and residential care placements, Norfolk County Council introduced a number of initiatives, including a **Dynamic Purchase System (DPS)**. The DPS is an electronic system that sets up and manages a list of independent fostering agency (IFA) providers. The DPS enabled the council to set up a 'league' table of IFAs based on the quality and cost of their provision. Each IFA is given a score based on their recruitment of foster carers and their Ofsted rating for placement stability. To help IFAs secure work, they are driven by a desire to be at the top of the league table which has in turn helped the council have a more suitable pool of carers from which to choose; it has driven up standards and at the same time reduced costs.

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3   See the Norfolk County Council and Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council case-study reports for further information.

4   For further information see: http://www.mtfce.org.uk/

The **Access to Resources (ART)** team was set up by Bournemouth Borough Council. This approach applies a procurement and commissioning model to placement finding and contract management. The council took a deliberate decision to locate the ART team independent of the social care team and within the strategic directorate of children's services. The ART team comprises colleagues with experience in either social care or contract management to help the council achieve better placement matching, enhanced placement stability and negotiate competitive and consistent prices within and across agencies. ART colleagues with expertise in social care take the placement finding work away from frontline children's social workers. Armed with risk assessments, referral forms and knowledge of the child, ART colleagues develop a list of potential care plan options from which the social worker chooses their preferred placement. Generally, social workers are given two or three options from which to choose, this is also the case for short notice placement and for children with complex needs.

For children with complex needs, ART manages a virtual multi-agency team. This team, which comprises the virtual headteacher, health and social care colleagues and other professionals, makes the final placement decision. In a similar way to mainstream placements, ART provides the virtual team with a range of care plan options, outlining the associated funding requirements for individual elements of the placement to meet the child's needs. The ART model bases its success on knowing its thorough local market knowledge. This is supported through rigorous monitoring and quality assurance procedures which have helped it improve standards and provision, as well as reduce cost (for example, through better and consistent management of contracts, notification periods and additional payments to foster carers).

> *Social workers are very skilled people and they do a particular job, but what they don't do is commissioning and we can do that, we can pull this together and make a much better service and look at outcomes in terms of value for money.*
>
> Lead member

Collaborative working

While all the councils worked collaboratively with partner agencies (such as health and education) and with colleagues within the fostering and adoption services, some of the case-study councils adopted a consortia or partnership approach.

In the south-east of England eleven councils have developed an **IFA collaborative project** to improve the quality and reduce the costs of IFA provision. While the councils seek to place children in-house, they also wish to ensure they are developing the IFA market to meet their placement needs, where required.

The consortia invited IFAs to tender for a place on the framework agreement. Successful providers have been placed onto one of three frameworks (general placement; parent and child placements or placement for disabled children). Each provider is ranked and arranged into two or three tiers based on the quality and cost of their provision. All IFAs on the frameworks have an Ofsted rating of good or above; providers failing to achieve this standard are not considered.

To support placement matching, anonymised referrals are sent to all providers across the tiers. Tier one providers are considered above lower tier providers. This decision has been made to incentivise IFAs to provide the best provision for the best price.

The London **Tri-borough**, **a merging of three councils' children's services directorates**, was driven by a political decision to create economies of scale and improve practice. In joining together as one directorate, four fostering and adoption teams were introduced comprising: Recruitment and Assessment; Duty and Placement; Connected Persons; and Permanence and Post-order. Each team has a manager and dedicated team that specialises in its given area.

The Recruitment and Assessment team works with foster carers and adopters from initial enquiries through to approval. It is hoped that this will offer a more structured recruitment process, and a new assessment process that will improve the rate at which new adopters are recruited and matched with children.

The Duty and Placement Team offers dedicated support, training and supervision to carers. They work hard to retain carers and provide stable placements.

Pooling carers has enabled the service to make better matching and has maximised the support and training available to carers.

Across the three councils, the Connected Persons Teams were small and undertook a range of Family and Friends work. The new merged team consolidates the remit of the Connected Persons work into one service with dedicated staff with knowledge, skills and expertise in this area. They undertake all assessments, supervision and support of approved Connected Persons' carers. They are also involved in a family court proceedings pilot which aims to reduce the timescale for care proceedings down to six months.

The Permanence Team has responsibility for special guardianship, long-term fostering, residence orders and adoption. When a child is identified as likely not being able to return home, all locality teams refer or consult with the Permanence Team at this early stage. The team supports with a concurrent planning-type model, to reduce delay in achieving permanence for looked-after children. It also offers support to birth parents.

The Post-order Team includes support for adoptions and special guardianship support plans; for adopted adults; access to records; intermediary services and events; and support seminars for adoptive families.

Specialist programmes to support children

Norfolk County Council decided to focus its provision on providing in-house mainstream placements. Alongside this, they commission complex placements through an **intensive foster care programme**. This is funded through efficiency savings made elsewhere in the service. The intensive foster care programme has two main projects, which will commence in autumn 2012. Firstly the council will work in partnership with a local charity (called 'Break') and secondly, it will work with Suffolk County Council to provide Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). Both programmes will support foster carers of children with complex needs.

Building on their success with MTFC, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council piloted the **KEEP programme**, which began in 2009. KEEP provides foster carers with in-depth training over a 16-week

programme. The groups, which are facilitated by KEEP trainers, meet every week for around two hours with up to 12 carers attending. KEEP is an evidence-based programme designed for mainstream foster carers rather than those dealing with the more complex cases that require MTFC. The KEEP programme runs over a shorter time span than MTFC making it more accessible. The council also provides a call line that the foster carers can contact to get advice and share experiences. The line is available to carers seven days a week in order that they feel fully supported. The fostering social work team make the majority of referrals to KEEP but the programme also incorporates family and friends carers.

The City of York Council was one of eleven councils involved in the **Staying Put** pilot programme since 2008. Although each council involved in the pilot was able to develop their own programme, the City of York Council chose to follow the programme within its original design, taking a family-based approach. The council wanted to provide young people (aged 18 years or over) and carers who wanted to stay together, the opportunity to do so. They achieved this by paying foster carers directly rather than young people receiving the money themselves in the form of benefits. This prevented foster carers becoming 'landlords' and ensured that the young person remained in a family environment.

As part of the programme, young people are visited by their accommodation officer and link worker to discuss their level of interest in joining the Staying Put programme. During Staying Put, young people receive regular reviews and when they decide to leave the placement, they have an exit interview. City of York Council continues to fund the programme after its three-year pilot ended.

2.2 Councils' approaches to adoption

The research team carried out fewer interviews with colleagues focused on adoption services specifically. Most of the case studies selected concentrated on foster care provision.

Councils' ambitions for adoption provision

As with councils' approaches to fostering provision, our research shows councils' aims for their adoption services shared common characteristics. These related to:

• improving the pool of adopters

• reducing delays in finding children an adoptive family

• developing staff knowledge to support early permanence planning.

Through consortia and/or partnership working, councils sought to improve their pool of potential adopters. For some councils, they worked with neighbouring councils to place children within adoptive families, where in-house placements could not be sought or it was not suitable to place a child locally. Within some of the smaller councils, they had established partnership arrangements with other similar sized councils to match (or 'swap') adopters and children. Working together in this way enabled the councils to have a wider pool of adopters from which to choose and improved the chances of children being placed with an adoptive family from an earlier age.

Whilst discussing with Bournemouth Council their procurement and commissioning model (ART) they also identified their involvement in the **South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC)**. Comprising fifteen councils and four voluntary agencies[5], the SWAC was launched in 2000. It aims to provide centrally coordinated family-finding services to secure placements for children across the region. It also provides supportive relationships between councils and agencies. Rigorous monitoring processes have been established including: the development of a spreadsheet of all adopters; and staff holding regular matching meetings to support efficient placement matches.

A standard inter-agency fee applies to all placements in SWAC. In addition, smaller groups of councils have developed relationships where they now 'swap' children and families. For some of the smaller councils where children cannot be placed with local adopters, councils came together to match children with families. This increased the chance of children achieving permanency but it also improves adopters' chances of adopting younger children. The arrangement for younger children (under three years) has been set up with no payment fees.

Councils reported a desire to speed up placement decisions and matches. They were keen to work with judiciary, for example, to find ways to reduce delays and develop effective and efficient ways of working. One service manager explained their rationale for adopting a collaborative approach to help speed up placement decisions for children:

It was about looking at our adoption service … what do we need to do to improve the timeliness of adoption placement …. What can we do in terms of our permanency planning process and actually looking at the rate of children going into the legal system and how we can get them adopted at the earliest opportunity; and what the cohort of adopters were coming through; so it provided an opportunity to build on what we already had but to actually do it in maybe a different way and to work with some of our agencies that had expertise in this area.

Some interviewees talked about supporting their staff to think about permanency planning at the earliest stage. They wanted their staff to have a thorough understanding of the service and its ambition to facilitate earlier permanency planning discussions. Within one council, for example, the Kinship (or connected) Carers Team had started to work alongside its permanency team where it seemed likely a child would need a permanent provision. Having these discussions earlier, it was hoped, would enable smoother transition for the children as they were

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5   The councils include Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly; Devon County Council; Dorset County Council; Gloucestershire County Council; Somerset County Council, Wiltshire Council; Bath and NE Somerset; Bournemouth Council; Bristol City Council; North Somerset Council; Plymouth City Council; Poole Council; South Gloucestershire Council; Swindon Borough Council and Torbay Council. The voluntary agencies include: Action for Children; Families for Children, Clifton Children's Society and SSAFA Forces Help.

already known to the permanency team who had been involved throughout their care journey.

Cambridgeshire County Council and Coram are working together to improve early permanency planning and reduce delays in achieving permanent placements for children. The council is also exploring the viability of a concurrent planning process and has begun to recruit carers to meet this aim. Concurrent planning is a care option for children aged up to two years where a period of foster care is anticipated during the care proceedings and where adoption is expected to be the most likely outcome. Concurrent planning places children with foster parents who have also been approved as suitable adoptive parents ('concurrent carers') at the start of court proceedings.

The council is working with Coram to build on their expertise of working with other councils, such as Harrow and Kent. An adoption service manager, who is jointly funded by the council and Coram, has been appointed. This post is funded by the council for the two-year duration of the programme of work. The manager has a core role in driving forward improvements and in working with the judiciary to reduce placement delays.

3 What works well?

Interviewees reported numerous benefits associated with their council's approach to fostering and adoption services. Generally positive impacts of the approaches related, firstly, to the council and its partners; secondly, to service managers and frontline staff and thirdly, to children and their carers or adopters[6].

3.1 Council and partners

Interviewees from across the councils talked about the impact of their fostering and adoption approaches on the council and partner agencies. Even where councils' approaches to fostering or adoption were recent developments and had not yet had time to embed and/or demonstrate hard evidence of impact, interviewees discussed early signs of change alongside future anticipated benefits.

The actual or expected impact of the approaches related to:

- sharing learning

- creating financial savings

- enhancing awareness of fostering and adoption services.

Benefits of shared learning

Regardless of the approach councils adopted, all cited shared learning as a benefit of their fostering and adoption practice. This related to sharing knowledge and practice between councils, within councils' fostering and adoption service teams, with partner agencies (such as education, health or CAMHS) and providers and between frontline colleagues (this is discussed in further detail in section 3.2).

Where consortia had been developed, case-study interviewees explained how the councils within these groups had shared knowledge of different ways of working. They invested time to explore different ways of working and then adopted the best approach to roll out across the consortium. While developing a consensus across large groups was sometimes challenging, it was supported by establishing work-stream groups and through regular consultations with managers, practitioners and carers or adopters. These approaches were adopted across small and large consortia. Indeed, some interviewees explained that the more authorities involved in a consortium, the more views from which there are to learn.

It's very exciting working with another local authority as you get a lot of shared solutions and you have more people to discuss the problems with to get new ideas from.

Head of service

Across all the councils, regional learning emerged as a theme, particularly when interviewees spoke about adoption services. This was true regardless of the councils' size and composition. Councils were keen to share pools of adopters and improve the matching potential within and between authorities (see the SWAC example in Chapter 2).

Where councils were working with external providers or partners, such as Coram, interviewees described how they had benefited from the experience and knowledge that the partner agency brought to the relationship. Councils were able to benefit from this learning and knowledge; they could adapt and apply it within their own setting. Having this willingness and desire to learn was seen as a facilitating factor. They shared a strong desire to learn from each other within a backdrop of managing increased numbers of looked-after children whilst at the same time reducing service costs. As one

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6   As the reported benefits and challenges of councils' approaches to fostering and adoption shared common themes, these are reported collectively in subsequent chapters.

7   See Cambridgeshire County Council case-study report.

service manager explained: "[Council] is self-critical and reflective; we often say "how can we do this better?"

> *It's more a case of bringing their expertise to our table.*
> Lead member

Rigorous monitoring and quality assurance (QA) processes were a contributing factor in supporting shared learning and communication. Overall, councils had either developed, or were in the process of developing, monitoring and evaluation procedures. Having access to high quality and up-to-date data helped councils have 'sensible conversations' with service managers, staff, providers and partners. This information also facilitated conversations with senior managers and lead members. Furthermore, it had helped improve their knowledge and understanding of fostering and adoption within their council (see 'Improved awareness of fostering and adoption section' overleaf).

Vignette: The importance and impact of monitoring

Bournemouth Borough Council's ART team has a rigorous monitoring and quality assurance process. It conducts gap analyses and provides trend data; collects placement and profile information on all looked-after children. It uses this information to better plan and manage placements and have performance discussions with in-house and external providers.

> *We manage the placements very tight (sic), this is what foster agencies and residential children's home providers tell us, that we are kind of on their backs all the time ... we challenge them all the time; because we have that communication with them, we can do that. We have established relationships with senior partners in all the agencies.*
> Council officer

Weekly meetings are held between team managers where all looked-after children are discussed. This helps the team know all their

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children; identify additional support needs; assess placement stability, and; where necessary, start to consider alternative provision. Managers are able to use their knowledge of children, carers and placements to better meet individual's needs.

In addition to team meetings, quarterly monitoring reports are given to elected members and senior managers. These provide evidence about the team's impact and any funding implications. It also raises the profile of the approach so the director, senior managers and councillors can consider its application in other areas of the council.

ART managers meet with senior partners in all IFAs every four to six months. These meetings discuss placements and practice and share feedback from social workers. In addition, 'challenge' or 'disruption' meetings are held between ART and providers, where, for example, a provider offers an unsuitable placement. The ART team will discuss this with the provider to help them better understand the council's expectations and why the placement was considered inappropriate. This has helped improve standards and a consistent approach. All providers also produce fortnightly placement stability reports for the ART team.

Achieving financial savings

Interviewees across all the case-study councils talked about actual or anticipated financial savings associated with the approach. Reported savings ranged from around £5000 per foster care[8] placement to around £300,000 over a fifteen-month period[9].

Councils gave a number of examples for how they had, or plan to, achieve financial savings. Interviewees argued that having more streamlined processes and consistency in provision resulted in efficiency savings. For example, councils were able to negotiate better contract prices and notification periods with IFAs and they reduced double placement payments. One small council felt that they had negotiated a better price with

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8   See Norfolk County Council case-study report.

9   See Bournemouth Borough Council case-study report.

IFAs due to the relationships they had with their provider, stating that this was something that would not be achieved through a consortia approach. Whereas a member of one of the larger consortia approaches felt that they managed to negotiate better prices with providers as a result of their consortium.

Councils are having to save money on one hand and facing cost pressures on the other. Our safeguarding social services budgets are going up every year and in the long term that's not sustainable. So these sorts of more efficient ways of working are really the only solution we've got for long-term sustainable funding.

Lead member

Councils explained that having a greater understanding of a child's needs and being able to provide better placement matching had reduced costs. Better matching often resulted in improved placement stability resulting in fewer disruptions or moves and their associated costs. In addition, due to councils having a greater understanding of their looked-after children's needs, at the matching stage they were able to have more informed discussions with providers about the provision needs, their desired outcomes and associated costs. As these were negotiated upfront, councils reported a reduction in additional payments to carers later on in a placement.

Councils talked about the impact of improving looked-after children's outcomes and its impact on societal costs. As young people's outcomes had improved, councils argued that they were less likely to become homeless, reliant on the benefit system or not be in education, employment or training. Avoiding these adverse outcomes, interviewees reported, would reduce financial costs to society.

It was evident that whilst councils could talk about efficiencies and financial savings, at this point in time, they did not have the hard data to support their claims. They recognised that this was something that needed to be explored in the future.

Improved awareness of fostering and adoption

Interviewees reported one of the added values of their approaches had been improving councillors' awareness of their fostering and adoption services. In some instances, this was as a result of a specific approach or centrally funded programme or pilot.

In other councils, councillors had undertaken a more active role in supporting their fostering and adoption services. Across most of the councils, for example, at least one councillor sat on their fostering and/or adoption panel.

Councils also talked about how councillors were actively involved in consulting with looked-after children and carers. Within one council, for example, the councillors hold an annual staff event. At this event, foster carers were invited which helped raise their profile. It offered the additional advantage of making them feel included in the council's developments.

Vignette: Engaging with looked-after children

Norfolk County Council's '**Kids in Care Council**' offers young people in care the opportunity to meet on a monthly basis with a council officer. They are consulted on various proposals that might affect children in care and are asked for their views on the commissioning process. They are involved in interviewing for new council staff. They are reported to be a proactive group.

The 'Kids in Care Council' presentation was instrumental in making all members aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents and extend their knowledge. This was incredibly powerful as the young people said what really mattered to them.

Lead member

The lead member of Norfolk County Council is extremely supportive of the 'Kids in Care Council' and attends some of the meetings. On one occasion the councillor arranged for them to do a presentation to all of the 84 elected councillors.

3.2 Service managers and staff

In addition to the reported benefits to councils and their partners, specific examples of the benefits of councils' approaches to service managers and social workers emerged. These benefits related to creating:

- more streamlined and effective processes

- greater awareness of looked-after children, carer and adopter populations

- enabling social workers to carry out their core role.

3.2.1 Streamlined and effective processes

Across the councils, interviewees cited examples of how their approach to fostering or adoption had resulted in a more streamlined and effective service. Consortia councils had streamlined systems and processes by introducing a single form or process across a number of councils[10]. Not only had this resulted in a single and consistent approach, but it also supported a streamlined and efficient procedure.

> ### Vignette: Streamlining processes
>
> The London Tri-borough has introduced a single enhanced referral and assessment procedure across its fostering and adoption services. Previously three forms were used across the London councils, each with a different format. The new process streamlines previous procedures and is better matched to the court system. This seeks to improve the process for social workers, carers and children and will enable earlier, faster and better planning discussions with permanence teams and the judiciary.

Changes to administrative processes were further enhanced through improved monitoring and quality assurance processes. This enabled councils to communicate their expectations; monitor and challenge provision to in-house and independent providers in a consistent way. Interviewees reported that this had helped improve standards and enhance provision.

Councils that adopted a collaborative approach to fostering or adoption services had invested time to work with their service managers and front-line staff to communicate service developments. This enabled staff to fully understand their ambition for the service and what the council was trying to achieve for their looked-after children. Holding consultations and enabling two-way conversations helped social workers to have a better and thorough overview of the model and feel engaged in its development thus creating a sense of ownership. As one service manager explained:

We had work streams … so social workers, irrespective of where they were in which authority, they participated fully in the plans. That gave ownership and helped people take the best forward. One of the things is we learned different ways that we could do things, we learned about more successful ways of doing things and maybe were more acknowledging of the things that we didn't do so well and we were able to identify why those things didn't work.

Greater awareness of looked-after children, carer and adopter populations

Interviewees reported that service managers and senior leaders in the council have a better and more thorough understanding of their looked-after children population, their pool of carers and adopters. This has helped managers look at where there are gaps in provision. One council, for example, reported that it has had to adapt and provide more placements for large sibling groups; others reported increases in demand for mother and baby placements or placements for babies. In addition, having access to this data has supported councils to provide better placement matches and choice (see section 3.3 below). One service manager described the information they have on their looked-after children:

We are confident we know far more about our looked-after children population and increasingly our children on the edge of care than many other similar authorities. We know the age profile, the gender profile, the reasons they have been accommodated, the types of placement they're in, we know how far away they are.

The interviewee went on to explain the benefits of having access to such information:

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10 Also see The IFA Collaborative Project case-study report.

We have an awful lot of information that we can, at the drop of a hat, show to anyone who wants to see it because it is regularly updated through a decent computer system. Alongside of that we have a clear evidence of efficiencies and we can evidence improved placement choice, improved placement stability, a real value for money approach and I think that has been the most powerful, and that is due to the fact that we believe we should be asked questions about these things, so we have set up the system to enable us to report quickly and accurately.

One council, for example, has a very active lead member who sat on the adoption panel. Following the panel meetings, additional meetings were set up between social workers, team managers, councillors and the panel advisor, to discuss issues arising from the panel discussions. This created an opportunity to gather more detail, share knowledge, discuss trends and enhance all stakeholders' understanding of current provision and service demands.

What we've managed to do through ART is to take away the extraneous stuff that those workers don't need to do. They're the professionals who bring their own discipline to bear on delivering a service to a child. What we're doing is taking away the requirements of placement finding.

Council officer

Enabling social workers to do their core role

Interviewees across all councils explained how their approach to fostering services had enabled social workers to carry out their core role. Through Bournemouth Borough Council's ART team, for example, social workers were able to focus on the core social work skills while ART colleagues managed the placement finding, contracts with providers and costs. Within the London Tri-borough, social workers' skills were best utilised through its four specialist teams. This has helped to reduce pressure on social workers and increased placement choice (see section 3.3 below).

Further benefits of the approaches related to social workers having the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge. Specific examples related to: developing social learning techniques; peer to peer learning; utilising the expertise of partners to support

social workers' knowledge in specific areas, such as concurrent planning.

3.3 Children, families and carers

The research team asked interviewees about the impact of their councils' approaches to fostering and adoption services on children and on carers and/or adopters.

Benefits for children

For their looked-after children populations, councils reported that their approaches to fostering and/or adoption services had, or would, improve outcomes for children. This was as a result of:

- accessing an enhanced pool of foster carers or adopters

- providing better placement matching and choice

- improving placement stability

- facilitating more in-house or local placements

- creating a faster system.

Enhanced pool of foster carers or adopters

All councils reported having, or expecting to have, a wider pool of foster carers or adopters from which to choose. Within councils where a consortium approach had been adopted, this related to there being a larger number of in-house and/or private providers. The pooling of foster carers and looked-after children maximised the potential to make better placement matches.

Vignette: Increasing the pool of foster carers

Norfolk County Council adopted a Dynamic Purchasing System for maintaining a list of IFAs. Introducing this system has led providers to enhance provision and provide competitive placement costs resulting in an increased pool of foster carers of 117 per cent.

Some councils reported the benefits of explicitly providing support packages to carers. In some councils, their proactive advertising had encouraged some prospective carers to enquire about becoming a foster carer or adopter. From the outset, this enables potential carers and adopters to see that their council will proactively support them in their role.

Better placement matching and choice

Across all the case-study councils, interviewees said the benefits of their approach had (or would) improve placement matching and enhance choice. This was often facilitated by the council or consortium having a thorough understanding of their looked-after children population and their in-house and independent sector providers (see section 3.2 above). A service manager from one council explained the added value of enhanced placement choice for social workers:

From a social worker point of view, the ideal world is that when a placement is needed, you have a choice of placements and the reality is very often that you don't have a choice of placement – you have one and it may not be in the right area of the city; it may already have a child in it who is not the ideal age to go with the child you want to put in. But if by having an established consortium, and they are able to gear up to offer us choice, then that would be a very distinct benefit.

Improved placement stability

As a result of better placement matches, councils reported a direct link to improved placement stability. For example, within Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and Norfolk County Council, where foster carers are supported through MTFC and the KEEP programmes, councils reported that carers felt well supported and better equipped to deal with their foster child's needs. Other councils reported that their multi-agency approach, working with education and health services, had also facilitated improved placement stability. For example, through joint working, education and health services had a better understanding of individual children's needs and were able to offer appropriate support early on in the child's care. This was a contributing factor in supporting more stable placements across the councils.

Creating more in-house or local placements

Interviewees reported that their approach had resulted in larger numbers of children being placed with either in-house providers or placed locally through an IFA. Councils that had adopted collaborative arrangements, for example, spoke about expecting to be able to place more children locally. Not only was this supported by having access to a wider pool of carers within the region, but councils' enhanced understanding of their looked-after children, carer and adopter populations also facilitated this. Norfolk County Council, for example, cited how they had managed to reduce costs while placing more looked-after children within the council, through its approach to outsourcing complex placements.

Benefits for foster carers or adopters

Councils reported benefits of their approaches for foster carers and adopters. Generally, these related to enhanced support provision and collaborative working between the council and its carers.

Interviewees talked about how they offered enhanced packages of support to foster carers or adopters. Generally, councils supported carers and adopters by:

- being responsive and proactive to initial enquiries and not enabling potential carers and adopters to slip through the net

- offering training, both specialist and generic, to provide carers with the skills, knowledge and confidence to best support their foster or adoptive children

- providing forums for carers or adopters to meet, share practice, issues or challenges.

Further enhancing support to carers is the joint working between councils and carers/adopters. Interviewees talked about having open, honest and transparent relationships with their carers and providers. This has helped improve standards across the councils, but also helped carers to know what is expected of them. Carers have been able to engage in dialogue with their council about, for example, payments and standards. Having this two-way dialogue also helped carers to feel listened to and valued.

4 Issues and challenges associated with councils' approaches

This chapter outlines the issues and challenges councils have faced in implementing their fostering and adoption approaches and how these have been overcome. It also presents some of the wider challenges fostering and adoption services currently face.

Generally, councils were positive about their fostering and adoption approaches and, therefore, reported relatively few issues and challenges associated with these. However, where they were reported, they commonly related to:

- communicating with stakeholders and developing partnership arrangements

- working with IFAs

- challenges associated with frontline staff

- setting up the infrastructure.

4.1 Communicating with stakeholders and developing partnership arrangements

Most interviewees mentioned the challenges associated with communicating with partners and stakeholders. When developing consortia or collaborative approaches, for example, councils noted issues around ensuring that the many people involved in different working practices were able to inform decision making and agree a shared way forward.

Interviewees also commented on some of the logistical difficulties. These included: deciding where to meet; who should attend from each council, while still keeping relevant people up to date with developments; and keeping the process manageable and time efficient. While these difficulties had been overcome, interviewees talked about the potential negative impacts that a lack of communication, delays in communication or miscommunication had on programmes of work and how these should be avoided.

Although all councils were positive about the partnerships they had developed with other councils and outside organisations, such as voluntary sector providers and IFAs, some interviewees reported this as an area of concern. Generally, their concerns related to roles and responsibilities not being clearly outlined. Interviewees were worried that this may cause problems at a later stage. Other councils raised concerns about the financial implications of setting up new partnership arrangements and the availability of staff to complete the work where they were the lead council.

How did councils overcome these challenges?

Keeping lines of communication open was seen as a way of overcoming many difficulties. Indeed, interviewees noted that good communication helped to achieve buy-in and engagement when developing new programmes of work. Having structures in place helped provide stakeholders with the opportunity to discuss their views, share ideas, feel engaged and collectively agree a way forward. Regular meetings (with senior managers, councillors, foster carers/adopters and children), helped promote communication and prevent confusion or misunderstanding around service developments. This also helped to ensure work continued to be delivered to a high standard, as staff were clear about what was expected of them and how the service was changing.

All councils proactively communicated with their looked-after children populations; indeed, it was seen as a priority by many of the councils. Councils sought to gain children and young people's perspectives on their services and to make fostering and adoption processes more child friendly. This was supported by some councils establishing a looked-after children's council, for example.

Councils offered insights into what helped them develop effective partnership working. The south-east consortium for example, commented that allocating specific roles to each council helped them move forward as it built on each of the separate council's strengths.

Councils noted the importance of establishing clear roles and responsibilities across partnerships. This enabled all parties to know their duties; what was expected of them; and helped prevent problems occurring later. Furthermore, when working with partner agencies, interviewees noted it was good practice to establish escalation procedures should any areas of disagreement arise later. Several councils emphasised the importance of having a lead person for partners and staff to approach with any issues. This also helped ensure clear lines of communication.

Several interviewees mentioned that mutual trust and respect needed to be built into relationships so that people could work together effectively. Several councils felt that they had built trust through previous or long-standing arrangements but acknowledged the difficulties associated with starting up arrangements from scratch.

When working with IFAs, councils noted the importance of clarifying their expectations to providers. One council had done this through a commissioning process with different organisations bidding for the work while others set up regular meetings and monitoring reports.

4.2   Working with IFAs

Several interviewees mentioned challenges associated with working with IFAs. While relationships tended to be positive, councils recognised the need to utilise independent sector provision while, at the same time, reducing the associated costs.

How did councils overcome these challenges?

Some councils overcame this tension by introducing a competitive system to commissioning IFAs by introducing league table models[11]. Creating a competitive culture between IFAs improved provision quality and reduced costs.

No challenges were discussed in relation to working with education or CAMHS, but some councils felt they needed to strengthen or form these links in the future.

4.3   Challenges associated with frontline staff

As with any service improvement developments, this is often an unsettling time for staff. Indeed, interviewees explained that relationships with some social workers had become challenging when a new programme had been introduced. This was particularly true where the social workers felt that their roles and responsibilities were changing or perceived that service improvements would lead to them being de-skilled or having less responsibility. In fact, across the case-study councils, the new approaches sought the opposite and intended to better enable social workers to focus on their core role and reduce bureaucratic burdens.

How did councils overcome these challenges?

Councils adopted a number of strategies to communicate developments to staff and actively encouraged their engagement and input. These included, for example, setting up work-stream groups where social workers from across the councils could contribute to the collaborative approach. In others, councils set up a transparent and clear decision-making scheme comprising sub-groups and a decision-making board. Sub-groups provided practical solutions and decisions while the board collated views and adopted a fair and open approach to developing a consensus for moving forward.

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11 See Bournemouth Borough Council and The IFA Collaborative Project case-study reports.

Another facilitating factor was reported to be senior managers' buy-in. This was seen as important in sending messages to staff that new programmes of work were supported by councillors and directors and required staff engagement.

4.4   Setting up infrastructures

Several of the councils reported logistical challenges in setting up partnership arrangements within and between councils. Interviewees noted the importance of having the infrastructure set up before joint working started. Difficulties emerged when telephone and computer systems were not set up therefore making day-to-day work more difficult. Had the infrastructure been set in advance, the transition to the new approach would have been smoother.

4.5   Wider challenges for fostering and adoption services

Aside from the issues surrounding council specific programmes, some interviewees mentioned more general challenges facing their fostering and adoption services. These related to increased demand for specific cohorts of looked-after children and social media.

Increased demand for specific cohorts of looked-after children

Several interviewees mentioned the difficulties in recruiting carers for mother and baby placements. In other areas, interviewees reported difficulties in recruiting a wide range of adoptive placements to fully meet the diverse needs of children awaiting a successful match.

Councils aimed to overcome these challenges by targeting recruitment strategies at specific communities where possible. Furthermore, this challenge was coupled with a desire to reduce delays in matching children with adopters.

Social media

One interviewee noted the impact of social media on looked-after and adoptive children and families. Social media has made it easier for birth parents and looked-after or adopted children to make contact without the protection of a formal scheme.

5   Future developments

This chapter briefly describes how councils would refine their approaches. It also reports their plans for the future and their views on the Action Plan for Adoption DfE (2012).

5.1   Refining councils' approaches and advice to others

The research team asked interviewees how, if at all, with hindsight they would have amended their approaches to fostering or adoption services. Although many interviewees found it difficult to comment, two common messages emerged. These related to having the time to develop a new programme of work and ensuring councillors know about fostering and adoption developments.

Interviewees regularly mentioned time as an important factor when developing a new programme or consortium. Some interviewees commented that they would have liked more time to develop, introduce and embed their approach. They felt that this would have reduced pressure and stress. Interviewees advised other councils to ensure that they set up new programmes of work at an appropriate pace.

A small number of lead members commented that lead members needed to know more about fostering and adoption. Some expressed a professional desire to know more while others wanted colleagues to have a more thorough understanding. One lead member commented that they wished they had greater awareness about their council's programme at an earlier stage. Two other members said they felt concerned that other councillors did not have sufficient knowledge of their collective responsibilities as corporate parents. Furthermore, some had insufficient knowledge about children's services more generally, particularly where lots of different programmes were running.

Advice to other councils

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give other councils thinking about restructuring their fostering or adoption services. Many interviewees were hesitant to give advice to other councils, particularly when their approach was still new or in development. However, the following advice was offered; this covers: the setting up of a new approach and being clear about its aims; working with stakeholders; and staff requirements.

Several councils said that although they felt their programme had worked for them it was important for each council to evaluate their own requirements through a thorough needs analysis exercise. Furthermore, interviewees advised that councils know their local market of looked-after children, carers and adopters. One service manager explained:

> Be very clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it … Don't do it just because someone might give you some money to do it, but because there is a real reason to do it.

Interviewees also highlighted the need to keep children's outcomes at the centre of any developments. Councils also noted the importance of offering explicit support carers and adopters.

> We can't lose sight of the fact that we are all here to ensure the right outcome for a child and we must not let process get in the way of that.
>
> Lead member

Several of the interviewees mentioned the importance of working with partner agencies. Specifically, this included education and health services and CAMHS. Interviewees noted the importance of having these services on board and engaged so collectively they could best support children's outcomes.

Many councils stressed the importance of having the right people involved in driving through change. Key personal characteristic included being engaged,

committed and offering continuity to a programme's introduction and development.

Finally, councils stated that where investment was needed, this would be secured upfront. One council said that they had insufficient budget to set up one part of a programme and so they have been fundraising by doing raffles and cake sales to supplement this. Collaborating with other councils was seen as a good way of driving down costs as they can share resources such as staff and training and it gives them more power in the market to set placement prices with IFAs.

5.2 Councils' approaches and future developments

For the councils that had recently introduced a new fostering and/or adoption approach, their future developments mainly related to continuing to develop and embed their new approach. For councils with more established programmes of work, they planned to expand their existing schemes of work often to different areas of the service or new cohorts of looked-after children.

At the centre of councils' plans for future development, was the ambition to achieve the best outcomes for its looked-after children. Councils remained committed to increasing placement choice and better matches between children and foster carers or adopters. They were also keen to ensure in-house providers met children's needs wherever appropriate. Placing children with in-house providers was considered less costly for the council. Furthermore, placing children locally was considered important for their well-being. It gave them familiar surroundings and maintained links to their background.

Moreover, councils sought to enhance multi-agency support and engagement in care plans. In particular, councils were keen to improve the educational outcomes and emotional health of its looked-after children. They were keen to work with schools and

CAMHS to make sure children received the support they needed. Some councils, for example, were focusing future developments on particular cohort groups of children. Some planned to expand services. Dudley Metropolitan Borough council, for example, hoped to develop the KEEP programme for foster carers with adolescents. This programme will start later in 2012. In the longer-term future, the council hopes to expand the programme to carers with children under age five. They have also started early discussions with Oregon Social Learning Centre to develop a similar support programme for adopters.

In some councils where programmes of support had been offered to carers, interviewees noted that evidence of change was not currently collected from children. One council in particular hoped to gather children's views on changes following their carers attendance at training events. The council felt this was an important gap that needed to be filled.

Reducing placement disruptions and breakdowns was also a crucial area of development for councils. While some councils are working to overcome these issues, others hoped to achieve this, in part, by increasing the availability of foster carer and adopter training. One council, for example, planned to roll out training to all new foster carers. Most councils wanted to offer foster carers therapeutic and attachment theory training. Some were looking to develop relationships with CAMHS to deliver such training.

Councils with newly established approaches hoped to further develop social worker engagement in programmes. Some interviewees also discussed the need for additional training for social workers around child psychology and attachment theory, something which is outlined in the government's Adoption Action Plan DfE (2012). The government hopes to encourage universities to add more child development, attachment theory and neuroscience content to social care degrees in the future. Another interviewee felt there was a need for social workers to learn to talk to carers without the excessive use of jargon.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter summaries the key messages arising from our research. It also outlines some recommendations for lead members.

6.1 Conclusion

Our research provides an overview of practice in fostering and adoption services across the country. This good practice report shows that the issues and challenges facing councils in this area appear to be similar. Generally, these relate to improving outcomes for children and enhancing provision whilst managing increased numbers of looked-after children and budget cuts. Moreover, councils' desired outcomes for their looked-after children are consistent. These relate to creating greater placement choice, improved placement matching; better placement stability and fewer disruptions and breakdowns. Furthermore, all councils are keen to find efficient ways of providing the most appropriate outcome for children and young people in their area.

Where our case-study councils differ related to the mechanisms by which they hope to achieve their aims. Some councils, for example, have adopted business model approaches to bring about improvements. Others are working in small or large consortia to share practice and create economies of scale to reduce costs.

Regardless of their approach, all councils were clear that any future changes to fostering and adoption services need to be made with children and young people at its core. Service improvements need to be focused on improving outcomes for looked-after children and enhancing service provision. Councils need to ensure effective and efficient ways of working to help achieve a cost-effective service but also offer support to children, carers and staff.

6.2 Recommendations

Our research shows that more needs to be done to improve councillors' awareness of the fostering and adoption agenda. All councillors should be aware of their council's responsibility as 'corporate parents'. Furthermore, lead members with responsibility for children's services should have a thorough and in-depth knowledge of their responsibilities. They should have an overview of the ways in which fostering and adoption services are working to improve children's outcomes and reduce costs for the council. Indeed, some of the fostering and adoption practices discussed in this report may be replicable to others areas of the council.

The LGA, councils' senior managers and service managers have a responsibility to support councillors and lead members to better understand their roles and knowledge of their children's services. Where councillors undertake a new portfolio, the LGA and council colleagues should be encouraged to support lead members to develop their knowledge of the area quickly.

Furthermore, in an era of local and national governments increasingly requiring evidence of impact and the value for money assessments, lead members and directors have a responsibility to find out the impact of service provision and its cost effectiveness. Councils could commission external bodies to evaluate their practice or develop their in-house expertise to demonstrate evidence of impact. Indeed, some of the case-study councils reported collecting and reporting impact to senior colleagues.

Further recommendations for council officers and service managers are outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 of the report.

Appendix Council case-study reports

A brief summary of each council's approach is outlined below:

Bournemouth Borough Council

The Access to Resources Team (ART) uses a business model to support social workers with placement matching and the administrative aspects of placing looked after children. This small team helps social workers find suitable placements, negotiates better prices and has made financial savings for the council.

Cambridgeshire County Council

Cambridgeshire County Council has recently commissioned Coram (a charitable organisation) to provide strategic leadership in: embedding best practice, including early permanence planning; work with the judiciary; and exploring the viability of establishing concurrent planning for children under two years.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

The Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP) programme is an evidence-based approach based on the principles of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). KEEP is a 16-week course supporting mainstream foster carers of 5-12 year olds. This has led to increased placement stability and reduced out of borough and residential placements, offering a saving for the council.

Norfolk County Council

To enhance and improve fostering provision, Norfolk County Council has taken a business model approach to introducing a number of programmes of change. These include: developing a dynamic purchasing system and introducing an intensive foster care programme for children with complex needs through partnerships with another council and a local charity.

The Independent Fostering Agencies Collaborative Project

A consortium of 11 councils in the south east of England collaboratively purchase foster care placements from the independent sector. Although only recently established, this approach is expected to achieve substantial cost savings and increase quality and choice of foster care placements.

Tri-Borough London Councils

Driven by a desire to improve quality, enhance collaborative working and create efficiency savings, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster have formed the first tri-borough for children's services in London. There is one Fostering and Adoption Service across the councils, split into four teams.

City of York Council

The Staying Put programme in the City of York is designed to enable young people and foster carers to extend their existing foster placements post 18 years, up to the age of 21 and to provide additional support for young people moving out of care.

Placement Matching	The Access to Resources Team (ART) uses a business model to support social workers with placement matching and the administrative aspects of placing looked-after children. This small team helps social workers find suitable placements, negotiates better prices and has made financial savings for the council.
Type of authority:	Unitary
Established:	2009
Contact details:	Gill Bishop, Service Manager for Family Support and Placement Services, Gill.Bishop@Bournemouth.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

The ART[1] team adopts a procurement and commissioning model, deploying team members' expertise in two areas: placement finding or contracts management.

Placement finding

When a child is identified as needing a placement, ART colleagues with experience in social care, work with in-house and independent providers to develop a list of potential care plan options. Once a list of suitable placements is identified (usually two to three, even with short notice placements), the ART team gives the information to the child's social workers for their final decision on the care plan. For children with complex needs, a virtual team, comprising education, social care, health and other professionals working with the child, meet virtually to make the placement decision and decide the service funding arrangements. The ART team acts as the broker and intermediary service in these instances.

Contracts management

ART colleagues with expertise in contractual and financial management are responsible for taking the administrative burdens away from social workers. They negotiate competitive and consistent prices within and across agencies, set up contracts and frameworks and manage contract notification periods.

Monitoring and quality assurance process

The ART team also manages a rigorous monitoring and quality assurance process. It conducts gap analyses and provides trend data; collects placement and profile information on all looked-after children and uses this information to better plan and manage placements. Weekly meetings are held between ART, the in-house foster care team manager, Looked-after Children (LAC) manager and the residential care manager where all looked-after children are discussed. At the earliest opportunity, it also helps the team identify: where children or carers need additional support; where a placement looks unstable, and; where alternative provision may need to be found.

In addition, ART holds routine provider meetings and, where necessary, 'challenge' or 'disruption' meetings with carers, or Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), where provision is not to the desired standard or when a placement breaks down. Furthermore, regular reports are given to the council's senior management team.

Benefits of approach

Numerous benefits of the ART approach were reported which positively impacted on children, foster carers, social workers, team managers, and IFAs. Overall ART has helped to:

- improve the council's understanding of its looked-after children population and foster carers through its monitoring and data analyses

- enhance the choice of foster carers through in-house and independent provision

- ensure better placement planning and matching supported by weekly meetings

- improve placement stability, reduce placement disruptions and breakdowns

- reduce the pressure on social workers by taking away the need for them to find placements, thus enabling them to 'do social work'

- provide a more effective, consistent and efficient service between in-house and independent carers

- create an open, honest and transparent system for managing, supporting and developing in-house and independent foster carers supported by regular monitoring reports and meetings

- promote an environment of shared learning and improved standards as the council and IFA have learned from each other

- generate financial savings of around £300,000 over 15 months through better contract management, placement matching and reduced placement breakdowns.

Issues and challenges

Very few challenges of the ART approach were reported and where they were, they related to practical issues around individual children and families (such as placing large sibling groups or babies) rather than difficulties with the approach or its processes. One area of concern, however, related to some independent foster carers approaching the council about joining the council in-house team. Whilst, on the one hand, this could be seen as a positive, the council noted that it did not want to be seen to be 'poaching' independent carers, as the ART team

worked very hard at ensuring an open and transparent relationship between the council and IFAs.

The future

The team is likely to expand and develop into other areas in the future and the model is often discussed at service improvement meetings. As yet, there are no confirmed plans in place, but this could include, for example, the ART approach being used to support young people transferring from children's social care to adult services or supporting the council with care proceedings.

Advice for other councils

When asked what advice they would give to others councils thinking about adopting ART, interviewees said councils need to:

- ensure they know their local market

- be clear about the drivers for change

- assess whether ART will help resolve local issues

- ensure senior managers and social workers are committed

- learn from other councils that have adopted and refined the model

- have clear processes and policies and consider pooling budgets.

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1   Buckinghamshire County Council, West Sussex County Council, Sheffield City Council, Peterborough City Council and the London Boroughs of Enfield, Hackney, Lambeth and Tower Hamlets have also adopted an ART approach.

Concurrent Planning	Cambridgeshire County Council has recently commissioned Coram to provide strategic leadership in: embedding best practice, including early permanence planning; work with the judiciary; and exploring the viability of establishing concurrent planning for children aged under two. Coram is a charitable organisation which has run concurrent planning projects since 1999.
Type of authority:	County
Established:	Late 2011
Contact details:	Barbro Loader, Coram–Cambridgeshire Adoption Partnership Manager, Barbro.Loader@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

Working in partnership with Coram

The overall aim of the partnership between the council and Coram is to improve early permanency planning and reduce delays in achieving permanent placements for children.

Concurrent planning

The council is also exploring the viability of a **concurrent planning** process and has begun to recruit carers. Concurrent planning is a care option for children aged up to two years where a period of foster care is anticipated during the care proceedings and where adoption is expected to be the most likely outcome. Concurrent planning places children with foster parents who have also been approved as suitable adoptive parents ('concurrent carers') at the start of court proceedings.

Delays and working with the judiciary

At the start of the partnership, Coram analysed current processes and outputs in the adoption service. This identified that some delays in the system are related to the judicial process and confirmed the need to **work more closely with the judiciary**. To this end, the council has organised a meeting with members of the local judiciary[2], to discuss how to improve communication and collaboration and thereby reduce delays for children.

An adoption service manager, appointed jointly by the council and Coram, has a core role in driving improvements and the work with the judiciary. This post is funded by the council for the two-year duration of the programme of work. The manager and other senior adoption staff are involved from the early stages of permanence planning, and the manager chairs a permanency monitoring group comprising heads of service.

Benefits of approach

The partnership, and addressing the practicalities of concurrent planning, are in their infancy. The factors perceived to be crucial to embedding best practice include:

- utilising Coram's established adoption support framework

- having access to a dedicated concurrent planning team's expertise to complement the council's own practitioner teams

- involving senior managers at an early stage of permanency planning, so that they have an overview of all the children coming through the system and can better plan family-finding strategies.

Issues and challenges

The council reported few challenges in establishing the partnership. Where these were reported, they generally related to managing change. Through workshops with staff, the council made it clear that

Coram's role would be supportive and advisory only and that services would be kept in-house. This also gave the opportunity for the council to share learning about the pros and cons of concurrent planning.

The council faces some resource considerations in developing their approach. These will include the need for staff to liaise closely with Coram's concurrent planning team; running training sessions for council adoption personnel and contact supervisors; and the recruitment and proactive support of concurrent carers.

The future

The partnership is at an early stage of its planned two-year duration. Its continuation will depend on the results of an internal evaluation scheduled for 18 months into the agreement. Currently, the council is drawing on Coram's expertise to help establish its carer recruitment strategy.

Advice for other councils

The council had the following advice for other councils which may be considering providing actions to address delay including concurrent planning, and/or bringing in consultancy:

- Councils should consider whether concurrent planning is the right approach for their local communities and whether it will have the desired impact.

- Compared to traditional fostering and adoption routes, concurrent planning is a more complex way of working and, therefore, requires dedicated resources, particularly in supporting the carers.

- While a council could establish concurrent planning independently, external agencies can offer expertise and support. To make the relationship work, councils need to be open to ideas and new ways of working.

- A multi-disciplinary approach is essential; in particular, it is necessary to work closely with the courts.

- Senior management should initiate an honest dialogue with staff at all levels and at an early stage to clarify intentions around a potential partnership with a non-statutory agency, and should proactively seek to address any concerns quickly.

2   The meeting is to be jointly hosted by the council's leader and a High Court judge, and will include representatives of the local judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), and Children's Services.

Foster Carer Training	The Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP) programme is an evidence-based approach based on the principles of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). KEEP is a 16-week course supporting mainstream foster carers of 5-12 year olds. KEEP works to support foster carers to manage children's behaviour more effectively. This has led to increased placement stability and reduced out of borough and residential placements, offering a saving for the council.
Type of authority:	Metropolitan
Established:	2009
Contact details:	Jane Prashar, Head of services for children's resources. Jane.Prashar@dudley.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Supported and Trained

Building on their success with MTFC, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council was one of five councils successfully appointed by the government to pilot the KEEP programme[3] which began in 2009. KEEP provides foster carers with in-depth training over a 16-week programme. The groups of up to 12 carers meet every week for around two hours and the sessions are facilitated by KEEP trainers. KEEP is designed for mainstream foster carers rather than those dealing with the more complex cases that require MTFC. The KEEP programme runs over a shorter time span than MTFC, so it is more accessible. The training focuses on shaping children's behaviour by introducing rewards.

The fostering social work team make the majority of referrals to KEEP but the programme also incorporates family and friends carers. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council have four facilitators who run the training and one of them is now certified to be able to deliver KEEP without consultation from the training provider, Oregon. The council is currently working with their eighth KEEP group (roughly 80 carers in total through its lifetime) and their aim is for every carer they are working with to complete the programme. The KEEP programme is complementary to the work of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team and carers are often involved with both methods of support during their time as a carer.

Benefits of approach

There were numerous benefits of the KEEP programme which positively impacted on children, foster carers and the council. Overall KEEP has helped to:

- reduce children's problem behaviour which has reduced placement changes and increased placement stability which is beneficial for the child and also is cost-effective for the council

- keep children within the borough which prevents children being moved away from their roots and reduces costs for the council

- improve children's educational outcomes

- support foster carers to parent more therapeutically, understand the child's needs better and manage their behaviour more effectively

- create happy confident carers by bringing them together in a supportive environment and making them feel valued

- recruit additional carers to working in the council and increase retention.

Issues and challenges

As the KEEP programme is a defined evidence-based programme, the council have not experienced that many challenges. However, as the KEEP programme was developed in America, Dudley Metropolitan

Borough Council found some cultural differences but they were able to adapt this appropriately. In addition, as it is a 16-week programme it has been difficult to fit around school holidays without having a large break but the council have run overlapping groups to help with this.

The future

The council are involved in piloting a training programme for adopters called ADOPT based on the principles of KEEP which will be rolled out in the autumn across four boroughs of the Black Country. Dudley, Walsall, Wolverhampton and Sandwell will be working together as a consortium to pilot the programme. This particular programme has been commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) and the national implementation team from Oregon social learning centre. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council have also supported these three other boroughs to develop their own KEEP programmes which will be starting in spring/summer 2012. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council are also expanding their KEEP programmes within Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council to work with 3-6 year olds and adolescents so that all age groups are covered.

Advice for other councils

When asked what advice they would give to other councils thinking about adopting KEEP, interviewees said councils need to:

- recruit the right people, from carers to social workers, with wide experience and the enthusiasm towards the KEEP model

- ensure staff trained to deliver the programme will stick to the consistency and continuity of the programme

- ensure that social workers are highly skilled and experienced for this work, particularly in the areas of attachment, child development and brain science and they must be able to communicate at the right level for the carer rather than using jargon

- build on existing good practice rather than changing everything

- make sure that KEEP is embedded in the fostering team and not an 'add-on' within staff training and development or through CAMHS provision

- integrate fostering and adoption services across the different council agencies so that they can work together.

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3   London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, Oxfordshire County Council, Solihull Council and West Sussex County Council were also part of the pilot programme for KEEP. For international research on KEEP please see http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/artcles/PMC2676450/

Commissioning	To enhance and improve fostering provision, Norfolk County Council has taken a business model approach to introducing a number of programmes of change. These include: developing a dynamic purchasing system and introducing an intensive foster care programme for children with complex needs through partnerships with another council and local charity.
Type of authority:	County
Established:	Late 2011
Contact details:	Justin Rolph, Strategy and Commissioning Manager for Corporate Parenting, Justin.Rolph@norfolk.gov.uk

Overview of the approaches

In 2011 Norfolk County Council sought to increase in-house fostering placements and reduce out of county and residential care placements. This was in response to a decline in the availability of in-house foster placements and a series of financial cuts. To this end, Norfolk County Council introduced two new main initiatives: developing a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) and introducing an intensive foster care programme.

A Dynamic Purchasing System

The DPS is an **electronic process for setting up and maintaining a list of foster care providers**. The aim of introducing the DPS was to rate Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) on a league table based on quality and cost. IFAs are scored on their recruitment of new foster carers and Ofsted ratings for placement stability. Driven by a desire to be at the top of the league table, this has encouraged IFAs to recruit more suitable foster carers and drive up standards. Since introducing this system, the council has gone from regularly using around six IFAs, to 15 approved providers, which has seen an increase in foster carers with placement availability.

Commissioning complex placements

Secondly, Norfolk County Council took a decision to focus on providing 'mainstream' placements in-house but to commission complex placements through an 'intensive foster care' programme. This is currently being developed using the efficiency savings made through the introduction of the DPS and is being targeted at 11-16 year olds. The intensive foster care programme will have two main projects starting in the autumn 2012: firstly, a partnership with a charity called Break and secondly, working with Suffolk council, providing Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). Both programmes will support foster carers of children with complex needs.

Break is a local charity that helps vulnerable children and young adults. Its support services including short break provision, mental health support, training and mentoring. Break, working with the council, will train eight foster carers specifically to be therapeutic foster carers. MTFC is an international evidence-based approach which gives special attention to young people with more complex needs but who do not require residential care. Through the programme, and supported by the national MTFC team, foster carers receive training in social learning theories and behaviour management.

Benefits of approach

Numerous benefits of introducing the DPS were reported. These include:

- offering greater placement choice for children with a range of different needs

- increasing foster carers by 117 per cent

- reducing residential and out of county placements helps children maintain links with their community, as appropriate and creates financial savings

- saving an average of £5000 for each looked-after child through changes to external block commissioning.

In addition, potential benefits of working with Break and adopting an MTFC approach were reported. These include:

- the MTFC programme focuses on children's specific needs which will help improve their life chances, educational outcomes and family relationships

- foster carer numbers increasing as a result of enhanced recruitment strategies and packages of support, reducing the need for residential placements

- council staff will develop new skills (including social learning techniques) which will improve social service provision for children and foster carers

- Norfolk County Council will share learning by working with another council and local charity and gain support from the national MTFC team.

Issues and challenges

Few issues and challenges of the approaches were reported. Those reported related to:

- the MTFC programme having a long lead-in time, however, that meant the council had time to thoroughly plan, prepare and introduce the changes to staff

- staffing problems, including organisational restructures, maternity leave and sickness

- ensuring foster carers, especially those with children with the most complex needs, are well supported within current financial budgets.

The future

Norfolk County Council has a clear commissioning plan for the next three years which frames their work. This includes enhanced and regular monitoring and evaluation procedures. The DPS, for example, will be updated quarterly and will provide information on which IFAs are most often commissioned. In addition, there are plans to conduct a review of foster carers to see if they are being utilised in the most efficient way. Finally, Norfolk County Council is also looking to expand provision within the intensive foster care programme.

Advice for other councils

When asked what advice they would give to other councils thinking about restructuring their fostering services, interviewees said councils might like to consider:

- assessing local needs and developing an appropriate programme of change

- if considering adopting a DPS model to develop capacity of foster carers, councils should have a clear commissioning plan

- employing a skilled procurement team who can help with legal processes and a skilled project manager

- developing relationships with partner agencies and other councils to share services and practice whilst ensuring that terms of reference and lines of accountability are agreed

- ensuring model fidelity for the MTFC programme, accessing support from the MTFC team.

Consortium Approach	A consortium of 11 councils in the south east of England collaboratively purchase foster care placements from the independent sector. Although only recently established, this approach is expected to achieve substantial cost savings and increase quality and choice of foster care placements.
Type of authority:	Unitary
Established:	April 2012
Contact details:	Sam Ray, Safeguarding Commissioning sam.ray@southampton.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

Eleven councils comprising Southampton City Council, Hampshire County Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Surrey County Council, Slough Borough Council, Reading Borough Council, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council took the proactive decision to design and implement a collaborative approach to independent foster agency (IFA) procurement.

Reducing cost and improving quality

The ambition of the collaborative approach is to reduce the cost and improve the quality of independent foster care placements. The councils generally use in-house foster care arrangements which tend to be more competitively priced and locally sited, but have used IFA provision to meet a recent rise in demand for placements.

Sharing roles and responsibilities

Around two years ago, the consortium started with five councils. An additional six joined in late 2011. Across the **11 councils**, the approach has been fully consultative with one council taking a lead role on individual elements of the project. Southampton City Council led on procurement, Oxfordshire County Council managed communication and Hampshire County Council developed the specification, for example. Although one council led a specific work stream, all councils were involved in offering feedback and finalising policy and procedures.

Commissioning

In terms of commissioning, the consortium invited IFAs to tender for a placement on the framework. Successful IFAs have been placed on to three frameworks: general placements, parent and child placements, and placements for disabled children. Each framework has a ranked distribution list of all of the providers, which are arranged into two or three tiers on the basis of quality and cost. As all IFAs have an Ofsted rating of good or above, 80 per cent of the mark for the second stage of the tender process was based on cost.

When a placement is needed and to prevent delay, referrals are sent to providers across all tiers. Where tier one placements are identified as being suitable, these are considered above lower tier providers. The aim is to incentivise IFAs to give the best price and improve quality, led by a desire to be in the top tier of a framework.

Management and monitoring

The consortium appointed a project manager to ensure that the model runs smoothly. The project manager acts as both a point of contact for providers and the councils, sharing information and looking for trends and issues in performance.

The approach is supported by thorough monitoring arrangements. These include: providers completing and submitting a quarterly standardised electronic monitoring form; annual meetings between providers and councils; and regular monitoring visits to placements. Providers' performance is measured through a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) and provider forums have been set up to share good

practice. Monitoring processes are succinct and only information that the councils will use to measure performance is collected.

Benefits of the approach

The new approach has increased the quality and choice of foster care placements, fostered collaboration between councils and providers, and promoted workforce development. Specific benefits of the approach include:

- developing councils' and providers' understanding of what 'good' care placements look like, managing expectations, and managing placements to ensure that they improve outcomes for young people

- providing a more transparent commissioning approach and improved relationship between the councils and providers due to having a clearer set of rules of engagement

- increasing opportunities for councils and providers to share effective practice through participating in development, review and monitoring processes

- facilitating communication between partners. Providers welcomed meeting with council officers in person and having a named contact person in the consortium

- streamlining collaborative working through using shared quality monitoring processes

The new approach is expected to generate an average saving across the consortium of 5.4 per cent in the first year.

Issues and challenges

An element of competition between providers in councils and agencies was reported. The new approach has helped to reduce this and build more constructive relationships, but the competition is still apparent. Finalising the approach to the procurement process between all 11 councils was also identified as

a challenge, particularly around agreeing legal documentation and the time commitment required.

The future

Over the coming months, the consortium will refine the monitoring processes and finalise the information-sharing protocol. Discussions are underway to expand the model in other areas of work, such as the residential care sector. The possibility of including other councils in the collaborative procurement model is also being considered, but they will be unable to join until the model has been running for three years. At that point, the consortium will evaluate the model and determine its future size and format.

Advice for other councils

Interviewees would give the following advice to other councils considering implementing a similar collaborative model for procuring foster care placements:

- Consider the budget and the local market, what influences them, and how they might change over time. This can be achieved through conducting a thorough, succinct and timely needs analysis.

- Appointing a project manager to lead the collaborative model and provide a main point of contact can save time and money in the long term.

- Raise staff awareness of the rationale for change, and promote the benefits, to prevent misunderstanding when developing and implementing such models.

- Build an open and honest business relationship with IFAs.

- Ensure that all tendering documentation is clearly worded and contains all of the necessary information. Queries arising from unclear documentation can lead to delays in implementing practice changes.

Consortium Approach	Driven by a desire to improve quality, enhance collaborative working and create efficiency savings, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster have formed the first tri-borough for children's services in London. There is one Fostering and Adoption Service across the councils which is split into four teams.
Type of authority:	London Councils
Established:	2012
Contact details:	Sally Pillay, Service Manager for Fostering and Adoption Services, sally.pillay@lbhf.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

The Tri-Borough Fostering and Adoption Service's priority is to find permanent placements for all children in their care. It aims to:

- place all children with in-house foster carers
- increase the pool of prospective adopters and reduce the time children spend waiting for a permanent placement
- enhance placement choice and better matching of needs for all its looked-after children
- prevent post placement breakdown or disruption through support for carers, adopters and children

Reducing competition for carer recruitment

Instead of competing for the same carers and having different arrangements with providers, the merged service enables the Tri-borough service to use economies of scale to develop and improve practice. The service comprises four teams: Recruitment and Assessment; Duty and Placement; Connected Persons; and Permanence and Post-order. Each team has a manager and dedicated team that specialises in its given area.

Recruitment and Assessment Team

A dedicated Recruitment and Assessment Team works with potential foster carers and adopters from an initial enquiry through to approval. They target recruitment at specific types of carers as determined by local need. This team aims to increase the pool of carers and adopters and create better placement matches.

Duty and Placement Team

The Duty and Placement Team offers dedicated support, training and supervision to carers. They work hard to retain carers and provide stable placements.

Connected Persons Teams

In the three councils, the Connected Persons Teams were small and undertook a range of Family and Friends work. The merged team consolidates the remit of the Connected Persons work into one service whereby the team undertakes all assessments, supervision and support of approved Connected Persons Carers. The team is also involved in the Family Court Proceedings Pilot which aims to reduce the timescale for concluding care proceeding to six months.

Permanence and Post-order Team

The Permanence and Post-order Team has two key responsibilities. The Permanence Team has the remit for special guardianship, long-term fostering, residence orders and adoption. When a child is identified as probably not being able to return home, all locality teams refer or consult with the Permanence Team at this early stage. The team supports with parallel planning to reduce delay in achieving permanence for looked-after children. The team also helps birth parents whose children are being adopted or being placed in special guardianship. The Post-order Team provides support for adoptions and special guardianship support plans; for adopted adults; access to records; intermediary services and events and support seminars for adoptive families.

Benefits of approach

Anticipated benefits of the approach include:

- an enhanced pool of foster carers and adopters which will support better placement matching, improved placement stability and fewer placement breakdowns leading to better outcomes for children and carers

- a single enhanced referral and assessment procedure which improves the process for social workers, carers and children and enables earlier, faster and better planning discussions with permanence teams

- improved training and support for foster carers and adopters, including specialist support for kinship (or 'connected') carers

- social workers providing a more consistent and quicker response as a result of having a wider pool of carers

- shared learning between the councils for both strategic and operational staff

- financial savings through a reduced reliance on independent providers.

The concept of a shared service has been aided and supported by local political leaders and enhanced by the appointment of a single Director of Family Services for the three councils. Another factor that helped to facilitate change was ensuring staff had an opportunity to participate in the design of service improvement plans. Consultation and participation work-stream groups were set up to support this. These enabled staff to share ideas about similarities and differences in practice and culture and collectively take the best aspects of each council's practice forward in the new plans. For example, one council has a well-established and excellent Family Group Conference practice which is now being shared as a model across the tri-borough service.

Issues and challenges

Minor issues and challenges of the approach were noted. Generally these related to reorganisational issues, such as combining three councils' ways of working, cultures and practices into one approach. To help overcome this challenge, the differences between the councils were acknowledged at the outset. Staff consultations also helped to share information, manage expectations and provide staff with an opportunity to actively contribute their views. Despite these efforts, managers had to support staff through uncertain times to ensure staff remained motivated and service delivery and performance were not lost as a consequence of the changes. Furthermore, difficulties and delays in setting up the infrastructure (IT and phone systems) proved challenging in ensuring the team had access to appropriate information and systems to deliver the service.

The future

The tri-borough service plans to enhance the progress and developments achieved to date by ensuring that staff and carers remain committed and feel supported. Additionally the service hopes to ensure that staff who carried out generic social worker roles previously, maintain their skills, knowledge and relationships in their new specialist roles. There are plans to promote and develop working with partners, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and virtual schools, across the councils. Furthermore, the service is currently looking at developing their quality assurance systems and looking at creative ways to seek service user feedback.

Advice for other councils

When asked what advice they would give to other councils thinking about adopting a shared service approach, interviewees said councils need to:

- carry out a thorough needs analysis to ascertain where local needs are not being met and consider a suitable approach to meet these

- at the outset, dedicate sufficient time for discussions between the different councils; this will help develop the approach and establish strong foundations from which to build

- provide time to consult with strategic managers, frontline staff and carers

- ensure partners, such as CAMHS and virtual schools, are involved in early conversation and take them on the journey too

- ensure the infrastructure (finance systems, IT and telephones) is discussed and understood early; furthermore, ensure that it is in place and working before merging services, practice and co-locating teams.

Extended Care	The Staying Put programme in the City of York is designed to enable young people and foster carers to extend their existing foster placements post-18 up to the age of 21 and to provide additional support for young people moving out of care.
Type of authority:	Unitary
Established:	2008
Contact details:	Mary McKelvey, Service manager, Family Placement Team. Mary.McKelvey@york.gov.uk

Overview of the approach

The City of York Council was one of eleven councils to be part of the Staying Put pilot programme[4] which began in 2008. The government's funding for Staying Put ran for three years and the City of York Council has continued to fund the programme by incorporating it into their budget.

A family-based approach

Each pilot council was able to develop their own Staying Put programme and the City of York Council chose to take a family-based approach, consulting with foster carers and young people. This meant that foster carers continued to receive payments directly from the council, rather than young people receiving the money themselves in the form of benefits. This prevented the foster carer role becoming more like a landlord and ensured that the young person was still treated as a member of the family.

Consultation with carers and young people

Through the consultation with young people and foster carers they also developed an information pack about Staying Put which was on a memory stick. This gave the young people a chance to find out about the programme at their own pace. Young people were visited by their accommodation officer and link worker where they were able to discuss if they were interested in joining the Staying Put programme. During Staying Put, young people receive regular reviews. When they have decided to leave the placement they also have an exit interview.

National evaluation

Staying Put was evaluated by The Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, in collaboration with the National Care Advisory Service (NCAS) in a report published in 2012[5] and the findings showed that the percentage of young people in full-time education at 19 was double for those who had stayed put in comparison with those who had not been part of the scheme.

Benefits of approach

There were numerous benefits of the Staying Put programme reported which positively impacted on children, foster carers and the council. Overall Staying Put in York has helped to:

- give young people more stability and support, as well as flexibility and choice in their lives

- prevent young people becoming homeless after leaving a placement at 18

- improve life chances and educational outcomes for young people including supporting more young people to go to college, university or into employment

- give young people the time to make decisions about their future and plan where to live

- ensure that carers can support the young person as part of their foster family until they are able to be fully independent

- save the government from paying out benefits for these young people in most cases.

Issues and challenges

Staying Put had received positive feedback from both young people, foster carers and the council. However, a few challenges were identified as follows:

- there may need to be a renegotiation of roles for the foster carer and young person as they move into adulthood

- calculating a payment system for Staying Put was complex with the need to ensure payments remained in budget, were sustainable and were reasonable

- Staying Put has meant that some foster carers who would have been available for a new placement when the young person left home are not taking on new placements (however, the council has used Staying Put funding to appoint a 0.5 full time equivalent post to support recruitment of new carers).

The future

The council are planning on continuing to run the Staying Put programme. In addition, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have been asked by the council to examine provision for children on the edge of care and services for young people leaving care, so services in these areas may be further developed in the future.

Advice for other councils

When asked what advice they would give to other councils thinking about adopting the Staying Put model interviewees said councils need to:

- keep the model simple and avoid involving the benefits system where possible

- consult with a council that has already implemented Staying Put to get advice

- consult with family placement staff and foster carers to gain their perspectives before implementation.

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4   Devon, Dorset, Hertfordshire, Hillingdon, Lincolnshire, Nottingham City, North Tyneside, Reading and Warwickshire were also part of the Staying Put pilot from July 2008–March 2011.

5   Please see https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-RR191 for more details.
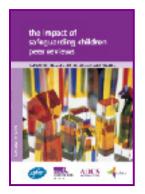
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Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/
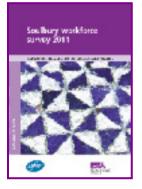
The impact of safeguarding children peer reviews

The safeguarding peer review approach appears to be suitably flexible to allow authorities in intervention and those who are not, to achieve a successful outcome. This qualitative study included telephone interviews with LA officers, councillors and staff from partner organisations. The report explores the impact of peer reviews for LAs in intervention.

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This study explores the ways in which young people with SEN access and engage in alternative provision. Based on interviews with young people and staff from five local authority areas it explores the interface of alternative provision and SEN and illustrates effective features in commissioning, delivery and monitoring of alternative provision for this group of learners.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/APSN02

Soulbury workforce survey 2011

The findings from the Soulbury Workforce Survey 2011 show the current pay levels, recruitment and retention issues and characteristics of the workforce, which includes education improvement professionals, education psychologists and young people's/community service managers. The picture presented largely reflects the budgetary changes, workforce restructures and other demands on local authorities over the last two years.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/SCWS01

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LGA research report

Across England, councils with their partner organisations are looking at ways in which they can provide high quality and timely foster care and adoption services whilst managing increased numbers of looked after children and budget cuts. This good practice report outlines seven councils' models of fostering and adoption practice.

It presents the views of councillors, council officers and partner agencies' on:

• the different models of working

• their benefits and challenges

• the actual or anticipated impact of their work.

The authors also offer recommendations for councillors and council officers.