

Permanently Progressing?

Building secure futures for children in Scotland

Children looked after away from home aged five and under in Scotland: experiences, pathways and outcomes

Insights for policymakers and practitioners

Statistics from 2018 (Scottish Government 2019) show that 14,738 children were looked after in Scotland (at 31st July 2018). Many children who become looked after away from home will return to their parents, but for some the decision is taken to permanently place them with kinship carers, long-term foster carers or adoptive parents

Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland is the first study in Scotland to investigate decision making, permanence, progress, outcomes and belonging for all children who became 'looked after' in 2012-2013 when they were aged five and under (n=1,836). Of those 1,836 children, 1,355 were looked after away from home, and 481 were looked after at home. The study included analysis of data from questionnaires completed by social workers, carers or adoptive parents, interviews and focus groups with decision-makers, interviews with carers and adoptive parents, and 'play and talk' sessions with children.

This briefing paper summarises key findings on the histories, progress and outcomes for a sample of the 1,355 children three to four years after they became looked after away from home. It draws on three sources of information: social worker survey data for 433 children, caregiver survey data for 166 children, and the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS). It investigates the association between patterns of maltreatment, placement status, and children's subsequent wellbeing, offering insights for policymakers and practitioners.

Key findings

- The children in this sample experienced significant levels of maltreatment before becoming looked after away from home. There is no evidence to demonstrate that the threshold to accommodate children aged five and under is low.
- Alcohol and substance misuse, mental health difficulties and domestic violence frequently contributed to compromised parenting capacity. This was often within a context of multiple family difficulties.
- Neglect was a significant feature of the childhood experiences of parents of children on an adoption pathway.
- Key predictors of children's later permanence status included disability, experience of maltreatment, the age at which they became looked after, and the childhood experiences of their parents.
- Three to four years after becoming looked after away from home, children were reported to have rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties two to three times greater than their peers.
- Children who were accommodated and placed with carers and adoptive parents earlier, and who remained there, were generally doing better at school and had more friends.
- Levels of support for children in kinship care, foster care, and with adoptive parents varied, with kinship carers and the children in their care receiving less support.



What does the research tell us about children becoming looked after?

Half of the 433 children in the social worker survey (220, 51%) were under one year old when they first became looked after away from home, including one third (139, 32%) under six weeks old. One in five (89, 21%) were less than seven days old. It is important to understand more about the circumstances in which children become looked after at, or soon after, birth, including the significance of pre-birth assessments.

Half of the children entered care under Section 25 Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (known as 'voluntary accommodation').

Abuse and neglect were the most common factors precipitating children becoming looked after away from home. Social workers reported that 89% of the children had directly experienced abuse or neglect, and two thirds had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment. This was usually in the context of long-standing and complex family difficulties. For 29% of children, an older sibling had previously been accommodated.

The three factors which commonly compromised parenting capacity were substance misuse, mental health problems and domestic violence. Around three quarters (73%) of families were affected by at least two of these, while for 39% of children there were concerns about all three.

Poverty and housing problems were commonly reported, consistent with wider research demonstrating a correlation between social and economic disadvantage and likelihood of becoming looked after.

According to social workers, significant numbers of parents brought their own histories of maltreatment, with a high proportion of mothers having experienced abuse (40%) or neglect (45%), and one quarter having been looked after away from home. Almost one fifth (17%) of fathers had experienced abuse, 24% had experienced neglect, and 14% had been looked after away from home. These rates were higher for birth parents (60% mothers and 33 % fathers) of children who were on an adoption pathway (adopted or placed for adoption).

Subsequent to their children becoming looked after away from home, a range of services were offered to parents including support from a social worker (97%), help or advice with housing problems (80%), support from drug and alcohol services (61%), and mental health support (59%). For some families, there were gaps in the provision of specific support.

What does the research tell us about decision making and permanence?

Legislation and guidance sets out expectations that children should return home unless it is unsafe for them to do so. Overall, 119 children (out of 433) had been reunified with parents at some stage, but not all remained at home. Factors influencing reunification were parental motivation to resume care, a reduction in risks, and tangible improvements in circumstances.

Levels and severity of maltreatment were lower for children who were reunified to parents, although 72% of children who returned home had experienced maltreatment. In these cases, ongoing support and monitoring is likely to be necessary to ensure children's wellbeing and safety. Where it was decided that children could not return home, this was due to continuing concerns about poor parenting, unacceptable levels of risk of abuse or neglect, and parents not making or sustaining the changes needed.

The time from children becoming accommodated to the decision being made to pursue permanence away from parents ranged from less than a month to over five years. Overall, 43% of decisions were made within six months and three quarters (74%) within one year. For nearly half (48%) of those who became looked after away from home as newborns (less than seven days old) the decision to pursue permanence away from parents was made within three months, compared with just 13% of those not looked after at or soon after birth. This suggests that the period pre-birth is important in terms of assessment and decision making.

Social workers reported a number of difficulties and delays in achieving permanence for children, including difficulties in finding suitable placements for a sibling group, children's disability or health needs, and the level of contact with the birth family required. Other difficulties related to staff changes or workloads; court and Children's Hearing processes; birth parents contesting proceedings or contact arrangements; assessments of potential kinship carers; and breakdowns in children's previous placements.

What does the research tell us about children's wellbeing and relationships?

Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), children had scores indicating likely emotional and behavioural problems at a rate two to three times that in the general population of children. Overall, 28% of the 166 children in the caregiver survey had scores indicating likely difficulties, three to four years after they became looked after away from home. This was similar regardless of children's permanence status (aside from problems with peers, which were more likely for children looked after away from home). Children who entered their current placement when they were over three years old were more likely to have SDQ scores indicating likely difficulties than children who were under one when they came to their current caregiver.

A standardised measure of relationship and attachment problems was used (the Relationship Problems Questionnaire). Children with scores of seven or more are likely to have relationship or attachment problems (Minnis et al, 2013). Overall, one quarter (25%) of children had RPQ scores indicating likely relationship and attachment problems. This was higher for children who were looked after away from home (37%), and lower for those with kinship carers (Section 11) (21%), or on an adoption pathway (18%). Children who were younger when they became looked after away from home were less likely to have scores indicating possible problems.

The level of contact children had with their birth family, including siblings, and also with previous carers differed according to their legal status.

Although CLAS indicated that 7% of children had a disability, just under one third of caregivers reported that children had long-standing illness, disabilities or health conditions, although this varied according to where children were living. The proportion of children who had additional support needs (ASN) or were being assessed was low (22%), particularly as legislation and guidance identifies that looked after children are assumed to have ASN.

What does the research tell us about advice and support to carers, adoptive parents and children?

The level of information received by carers when children were first placed with them varied, as did the support provided to children and their caregivers. Carers of children looked after away from home were more likely to report insufficient information at the point children were placed with them, particularly in relation to actual or potential special needs. Conversely, kinship carers and adoptive parents were generally happy with the information provided. Kinship carers may have had first-hand knowledge, and by the time children were placed with adoptive families, a detailed assessment would have been completed. The importance of information being explained clearly and in detail was highlighted, so that caregivers could understand how children's early experiences might affect their behaviour and development.

There were differences in the sources of support received by children and their caregivers. Carers of children looked after away from home were more likely to have support from formal services, whereas adoptive parents were more likely to be supported by family or friends. Kinship carers received lower levels of both formal and informal support.

The levels of support provided to children also varied. Although 28% of all children had SDQ scores indicating likely emotional and behavioural problems, and one quarter had scores indicating possible difficulties with attachments and relationships, children looked after away from home received more support from formal services, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Approximately one quarter of all children received support for speech and language difficulties.



Implications for policy and practice

- There is no evidence that the threshold for accommodating children aged five and under is low, or should be raised.
- Data suggests that national strategies for addressing issues of parental substance misuse, mental ill health and domestic abuse are having an insufficient effect.
- There is a need to address poverty and poor housing.
- Guidance on pre-birth assessments, and the support offered to parents before and after birth, should be reviewed.
- The finding that neglect featured in the childhood of many parents is important. A core aspect of effective early intervention is to provide proactive, sensitive, reparative support to parents whose history includes neglect.
- Three to four years after accommodation, children's levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties were around two to three times those expected in the general population. This has implications for the levels of support and services that may be required by looked after children and their caregivers, but also by those who have left care.
- Timely intervention, and secure relationships are important in providing children with the best possible environment to overcome difficulties.
- Given the differences in support used by caregivers and children, strategies should be put in place to ensure that support is accessible to all carers and children in their care.

About this research

This briefing is based on research undertaken by:

- Dr Linda Cusworth, Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, Lancaster University
- Professor Nina Biehal, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York
- Dr Helen Whincup, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Maggie Grant, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling
- Dr Alison Hennessy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling

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Contact

Dr Helen Whincup

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Stirling

✉ helen.whincup@stir.ac.uk

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