Permanently Progressing?

Building secure futures for children: Phase 2 Middle Childhood

A core aim of child welfare policy and practice in Scotland is that all children should experience stable, loving and permanent homes throughout their childhoods and into adulthood and that decisions about permanence should be timely. For care experienced children in Scotland, there are four routes to permanence: remaining with or being reunified to parents, with or after support (including a Compulsory Supervision Order at home); through a Permanence Order (PO); through a Section 11/Kinship Care Order; and adoption. For most children, the preferred route to permanence is to remain with or return to their parents.

On 31st July 2023, 12,206 children were looked after in Scotland (Scottish Government 2024).[1] Until relatively recently, despite the numbers of children and families involved, there were gaps in what we knew about children's pathways into and through the care system, the route and time to permanence, and what influences children's outcomes and wellbeing.

Since 2014, the longitudinal research study *Permanently Progressing?* has been addressing these gaps by gathering and analysing data on all 1,836 children who became looked after in Scotland in 2012-13 when aged five or under. It is tracking children's progress at key life stages (early childhood, middle childhood and late adolescence/early adulthood).

Phase 2 (2020-24)[2] drew on administrative data: Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) and education data surveys (of children's social workers and caregivers), and interviews (with children, birth parents, kinship carers, foster carers, and adoptive parents). It paints a picture of children's lives and provides vital information for policymakers, practitioners, and children and their families.

This briefing presents key findings from Phase 2 about children's experiences, timeframes to permanence or impermanence, connections with important people, and what supports have been, or would have been, helpful.

Key findings

Children's pathways and permanence status (from administrative data)

By the end of July 2022:

- most (79%) of the 1,836 children in our cohort were living in homes intended to provide permanence, but the average timeframe to permanence was over two and a half years.
- too many children – more than one in ten (12%) – were still (or again) in impermanent placements.
- many children had experienced instability – almost two thirds (64%) of children who had ever been looked after away from home had two or more placements. One in ten (10%) children had five or more.
- boys (13%) were more likely than girls (10%) to be in impermanent placements.
- children who experienced severe maltreatment were less likely to be living with parents, and more likely to be on a PO.

Decisions made early in children's lives are crucial. A combination of *how old children were when they first became looked after* and *the type of first placement* was associated with where they were living by 2022:

- children under a year old when they became looked after were more likely to be adopted.
- children aged four years and over when they became looked after were more likely to be living with parents or on a PO.
- children initially placed with relatives were more likely to be on a S11/KCO.
- Important information was missing from CLAS:
  - for 9% of children there was not enough detail in CLAS to say where they were living. These are 'Scotland's children' and we do not know where they are.
  - ethnicity was recorded as 'unknown' for 8% of children. This means the evidence base on how ethnicity influences outcomes is compromised.
- CLAS tells us whether children were adopted, but not whether an adoption has broken down.

Children's experiences, wellbeing and outcomes (from surveys, interviews and administrative data)

- Information on children's early lives was available from social workers for 727 children from our overall cohort. Before becoming looked after away from home, most children (91%) experienced maltreatment, and family life was challenging.
- Caregivers for 98 children completed a questionnaire. The information provided tells us:
  - The proportion of children who had emotional and behavioral problems, measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, is five times higher than seen in the general population of children, and almost double that in Phase 1.
  - More than one third (36%) of children have a long-standing illness, disability or health problems that affects their day-to-day activities.
  - Three in ten children (29%) have scores on the Relationship Problems Questionnaire indicating possible difficulties with relationships and attachments. This is higher (51%) for children with a long-standing illness, disability or health problem.

These findings give a sense of the level of ongoing support children and carers are likely to need.

- Children's wellbeing and sense of belonging is bolstered by ostensibly small acts of day-to-day care, affection and commitment from caregivers and those around them.
- School is a core part of children's lives and one of the main sources of support. Where schools get this right, it makes a big difference, and teachers bolstered children's sense of belonging, academic motivation, friendships and safety. However, some children and caregivers experienced a lack of flexible support and school was a place of anxiety and exclusion.
- There is an aspiration that the exclusion of care experienced children should end. While formal exclusion rates were low, informal exclusion was not unusual, affecting children and their caregivers.

Contact, connections and support (from survey and interview data)

- Almost half of the children whose caregivers completed a questionnaire have no contact with brothers or sisters they live apart from.
- The most common form of contact between adopted children and birth parents is by 'letterbox'. Writing and receiving letters is hard and is an area where more specialist support is needed.
- The demand for mental health support for children has increased, with some children experiencing lengthy delays.
- More foster carers, than kinship carers and adoptive parents, receive support from social workers, which may include making arrangements for family time.
- More kinship carers receive support from social workers than seen in Phase 1, but overall, they continue to receive lower levels of support than adoptive parents and foster carers.
- Kinship carers are navigating relationships with parents and other family members across formal and informal boundaries. This can be challenging, and their support needs may differ from other caregivers.
- Caregivers differentiate between social work support which is primarily instructive with generalised advice and that which is 'relational', with the former not experienced as helpful.
- Sensitive and empathic support for birth parents in relation to the loss of their child(ren) via child welfare processes can make a real difference to the lives of birth parents (and their families) and needs to be prioritised.

Implications for policy and practice

The study drew on administrative data, surveys and interviews to paint a picture of children's lives ten years after they became looked after in 2012-13 aged five and under. We found that careful decision making is crucial as the choices made early in children's lives influence where and with whom children will grow up. Practitioners and others involved in decision making processes need to be well supported.

By 2022, most of the 1,836 children were living in homes where it is anticipated they will remain until adulthood. However, for most permanence took over two years, and 12% of children were still, or were again, in impermanent placements. Given the existing guidance on timely permanence both findings will be of concern to policy makers, practitioners, children and their families, and need to be a focus for change.

The Promise (Independent Care Review, 2020) reaffirmed that children should live with their brothers and sisters, and where this is not possible, local authorities have a duty to maintain connections. This duty is set out in Section 13 Children (Scotland) Act 2020. Almost half of the 98 children whose caregivers completed a questionnaire have no contact with brothers and sisters they live apart from. While not underestimating the sensitivity needed to maintain or renew connections, the fact that so many children do not have any form of contact with their siblings is stark.

Information from the caregiver survey indicates that the proportion of children with emotional and behavioral problems (measured using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) is five times higher than in the general population of children. This highlights the level of ongoing support they and their caregivers (kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents) will continue to need.

Whole family support was a priority area in Plan 21-24 (the promise, 2021), however the processes and emotions involved in accessing and using support can be complex. Kinship carers in particular were involved in navigating complicated relationships with parents and other family members. Children, caregivers and birth parents valued support from social workers, teachers, health professionals which was relational and empathic. Support which was instructive and not attuned to the complexities of children's and adults' lives was not helpful.

The birth parents we interviewed were all in the (unusual) position of having received support following the loss of their child(ren) through child welfare processes. Sensitive, empathic support in relation to separation can make a real difference and needs to be offered to all birth parents.

Across Phase 1 and Phase 2, we found that children's wellbeing and sense of belonging is bolstered by ostensibly small acts of day-to-day care, affection and commitment by caregivers and others, and these need to be valued and supported by policy makers and practitioners.

Given children's ages and stages, school was important for them and their caregivers. For some children, school was a place of belonging, and the support provided made a tangible difference to families during times of crisis. For others, school included 'informal' exclusions and responses which were not as flexible as children needed. The role of Virtual School Head Teachers will be important, but as they were not mentioned in interviews or surveys, their existence needs to be communicated to children, families and practitioners as a priority.

Administrative data is information about children's lives. There are important details missing from CLAS, including on ethnicity, where 9% of children were living, and whether adoptions have sustained. To monitor adoption breakdown, one solution would be for CLAS to record whether children had previously been adopted before becoming looked after away from home.

The processes involved in accessing and linking administrative data are complex and time consuming, and some data (child protection and education) was not ready in time for us to analyse. If administrative data is to be used effectively the services which support and enable safe and secure access need to be better resourced.

Study

The study explores whether and how permanence has been achieved for the cohort of 1,836 children. The study is a longitudinal one and uses mixed methods. Information on children's pathways and permanence status over time is primarily drawn from analysis of Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS). CLAS tells us where children are, their legal status and what changed or remained the same by 2022, but it doesn't tell us about their day-to-day experiences or those of their families. As permanence involves 'feeling' secure as well as 'being' legally secure, Phase 2 explores children's experiences through interviews with children aged nine to fifteen years (n=19), caregivers (n=34) and birth parents (n=10). We also drew on information from surveys of social workers (for up to 727 children*) and caregivers (n=98). Education administrative data (Pupil Census) was used to consider children's additional support needs and school exclusions.

*Researchers collected information from social workers on the backgrounds and maltreatment histories of 727 children (379 in Phase 1 and 348 in Phase 2). Information on plans, permanence, placement changes and contact with birth family for 338 children in Phase 2, those who were not in a permanence placement at the end of Phase 1 or had experienced a change in placement/legal status since then was also recorded. Full details of the research questions and the methodology are available in the final report.

About this research

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Reports and summaries for *the Permanently Progressing?* Phase 1 (2014-18) study are available at https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/

The final report and summaries for Phase 2 (2020-24) can be accessed by scanning our QR code:

If citing this research, please refer to *Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children: Phase 2 Middle Childhood*.

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