Nuffield Foundation

Beyond contact:

Work with families of children placed away from home in four European countries

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Briefing paper

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About the project

This project was led by Dr Janet Boddy, Co-Director of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) at the University of Sussex.

CIRCY is an interdisciplinary, cross-university centre that brings together research, scholarship and expertise on childhood and youth. Its membership includes researchers from the social and life sciences, arts, humanities and professional fields including social work, law, education and health.

www.sussex.ac.uk/esw/circy

About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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Foreword from the Nuffield Foundation

There are 65,520 looked-after children in England, many of whom will return to their families, either permanently or temporarily. But even those children who don't return will remain in contact with their families in some capacity. 'Contact' is a deceptively simple term for the complex process of negotiating ongoing relationships, not only with a child's parents, but also siblings and extended networks, whether that is to support a return home or not.

This project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation last year, is an analysis of how four different European countries tackle this particular area of children's services, both in theory and in practice. Of course, the unique culture, and legal and professional framework of each country means that direct comparisons could be misleading. To avoid this, the research team's analysis seeks to stimulate discussion rather than evaluate different approaches.

As you might expect, they found both similarities and differences. Practitioners in all four countries described working with families of children in care as both a challenging and neglected area of practice. And the research team identified a fundamental ambivalence about working with parents, usually resulting from the potential risk to the child of family involvement.

An important difference is our expectation of the role of social workers, which is different in England to the other three countries included in the study. Children's services in France, the Netherlands and Denmark tend to be more multi-disciplinary than those in England - routinely including specialist professions, such as psychologists and family therapists, which are exceptional for English social care teams.

The research team also identify some interesting conceptual differences, such as the Danish framing of child-family contact as 'being together' (*samvær*), which emphasises parents' involvement in children's everyday lives and worlds. Indeed, one of their recommendations is that the English notion of 'contact' should expand to include discussion of *how* and *why* parents and other family members are involved in children's lives at different times. For example, if a return home is planned, then working with families might focus on maintaining relationships as well as addressing the problems that led to placement. For children who will not return home, the appropriate focus might be on how to support their connections with their extended birth family.

This briefing paper provides a summary of the findings, which are explained in more detail in the full report, available to download from www.nuffieldfoundation.org/beyond-contact. The research team has done an excellent job, and their findings are essential reading for anyone working in this challenging area of children's services.

Teresa Williams
Director of Social Research and Policy

Background

In England, placement within the looked-after system is not viewed as a desirable long term solution for most children, and policy has prioritised continued contact with parents, and swift return home, wherever possible. But this work is challenging, and there is a need to develop practice to support parental involvement in the lives of children while in the care system, and to work with families to support return home and to address the problems that contributed to care entry.

This briefing paper presents the main findings from a critical 'state of play' analysis of how these issues are tackled by children's services in Denmark, France and the Netherlands. Our objective was to identify areas for shared learning with the potential to inform policy and practice development in England. We analysed parallel country case studies involving triangulation of perspectives and sources within and between countries.

We draw on academic research, policy documents, and interviews with a small number of key professional stakeholders. We consider how, and why, different countries have tackled these difficult issues in children's services, examining both what policy says should happen, and what actually happens on the ground, in order to identify messages for English policy and practice.

Our findings are presented in more detail in the full report of the study, available to download from **www.nuffieldfoundation.org/beyond-contact**

Potential pathways through the care system

There are currently a variety of potential pathways through the care system for children who become looked-after:

- some children will make a permanent return to their birth parents, following a period in care;
- some will return home, only to re-enter care at a later date;
- others will experience planned shared care arrangements, including regular short-break care;
- some will live within the looked-after system through the remainder of their childhood, whether in residential placement, unrelated foster care or family and friends care; and
- a minority will experience legally permanent arrangements with other carers, through adoption, special guardianship orders and residence orders.

Of course these categories are not clear-cut. Only time will tell, for example, whether a 'permanent' return home really will be permanent, or whether the child might subsequently return to care. But the distinction between these potential pathways highlights the importance of considering the different contexts within which work with families may take place.

Why cross-national research?

Cross-national research offers fresh perspectives on existing challenges, and with this in mind, our aim was to prompt reflection and stimulate discussion. We purposely selected the countries to provide complementary case studies – differences in legal and professional frameworks, as well as in culture and demography, mean that direct comparisons could be misleading. As such, we did not seek to evaluate or compare the effectiveness of family-focused work across countries. In each country, we conducted a critical analysis based on documentary reviews of potentially relevant academic, 'grey' and policy literature, supplemented by perspectives gathered from six stakeholder interviews with key experts in the field (policy advisers, academics, and service providers). Consultative seminars involving a wider invited group of expert stakeholders in each country enabled us to provide an additional layer of 'check and challenge'.

Key findings

Work with families of children placed away from home was described as a difficult and neglected area of practice in all four of the study countries, and the research highlighted concerns in other countries that will be familiar for a UK reader. Nonetheless, the country reviews and stakeholder interviews also illuminated examples of well-developed and effective practice in all four countries. While such examples cannot be seen as representative of all practice in a country, they highlight the potential to learn from experiences elsewhere in Europe.

Populations of looked-after children

In England and Wales, the term 'looked-after' is applied to children and young people who are looked-after by a local authority, as defined under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989.[1] This can include children who live apart from their birth parents as well as those who are 'looked-after' but 'placed with parents' (five per cent of those in the English care system). Most children in England who live apart from their birth parents are not within the looked-after system; many live with family and friends but are not looked-after, while others have left the looked-after system through pathways to legal permanence including adoption, special guardianship and residence orders. Almost 2000 others live in youth custody settings.[2] Our research focuses on looked-after children in placements away from their birth parents rather than encompassing all children and young people who live away from their birth parents.

Populations of looked-after children (LAC)[3] vary considerably across the four countries in the study (see **Table 1**). The Netherlands and Denmark have the highest rates of children in placements, with rates of over 100 per 10,000 children under 18 years. The rate in France is 93 per 10,000 young people under 18 years of age. England has the lowest rate of looked-after children (56 per 10,000) overall, and the highest proportion of children in foster care. However, figures vary between countries for several reasons, and need interpreting with caution:

- The most recent available data refer to different years, and placement patterns may vary over time. Numbers of looked-after children in England, for example, have increased by more than 7,000 since 2009, to over 67,000 in 2012.
- In Denmark, France and the Netherlands, care populations include young people who are counted within youth custody statistics in England rather than in LAC datasets.
- Adoption is used far less in Denmark, France and the Netherlands than it is in England. In Denmark and the Netherlands, most adoptions are from overseas, or 'partner' adoptions by step-parents. In France too, more than 90 per cent of adoptions are from overseas. In all three countries, domestic adoptions are very rare, and this means that children who would be adopted within the English care system are counted in LAC statistics, even when in a permanent or long-term placement.
- Differences in care statistics between England and other European countries may also be partly ascribed to greater instability in the English care system, but lack of comparable data makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

In addition, comparing care populations across countries is further complicated by the differing legal frameworks and patterns of child placement – for example, in relation to emphasis on adoption or swift return home – that form a key part of the context for work with families of looked-after children.

In all four countries, policy states that parents should continue to be involved in care planning and in children's lives when they are placed away from home. The extent to which parental involvement is legally mandated depends on the extent of delegation of parental authority when a child is placed away from home. In Denmark, France

1. Source (accessed 28 February 2013): www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/part/III/crossheading/duties-of-local-authorities-in-relation-to-childrenlooked-after-by-them
2. Source (accessed 28 February 2013): www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/statistics/youth-justice/yjb-stats-2011-12.pdf
3. The term 'looked-after' is not used in the other study countries, but for simplicity, it will be used to refer to children in the care system in all countries throughout this report.

TABLE 1: CHILDREN PLACED IN OUT OF HOME CARE[4]				
	France	Denmark	Netherlands	England
Total country population (m)	64.7	5.6	16.7	63.2
Looked after children (LAC)	133,671	12,565	40,450	65,520
Rate of LAC per 10,000 under 18 years	93	104	114	56
% of LAC in foster care	53%	51%	54%	74%
% of LAC in residential care[5]	39%	40%	46%	9%
% of LAC placements involving whole or partial delegation of parental authority	2.5%[6]	12%	20%	71%[7]

and the Netherlands, parents retain a higher degree of parental authority when a child is placed away from home than is the case in England – either because the country makes less use of legally enforced placements (Denmark and the Netherlands), or because judicial mandate does not entail delegation of parental authority to the state (France). In all four countries, however, the research showed that the policy rhetoric of family involvement was not so easily achieved in practice.

The nature of work with families

The English literature indicates a relative dearth of attention to work with families *after* children are placed in care, in contrast to the substantial literature on work that aims to prevent the need for placement, and increasing recognition of the need for support when children return home after being placed. Discussions of work with families in both academic and policy literature are largely focused on 'contact', in line with local authority duties under the Children Act 1989.

A consistent theme to emerge from the English stakeholder interviews was that 'contact' is insufficiently conceptualised – or prioritised – as an area of social work practice, and that this is problematic in terms of meeting child needs, whether or not the plan involves return home. A related concern, highlighted particularly in England and France, was the elision of 'contact' with assessment of parents.

Lack of attention to wider family relationships – with siblings and extended networks – was a matter for concern across all four countries, whilst stakeholders also emphasised that relationships in the child's network could be a valuable resource for the future, if well supported. Examples of proactive work to enable maintenance of sibling and network relationships included use of Family Group Conferencing, and work by specialist professionals including family therapists and pedagogues to support network involvement in children's everyday lives in placement.

In order to move beyond 'contact' as the focus of work with birth families, it is useful to differentiate between different *forms* of work, and different *aims* for work. Our research revealed distinctions between degrees of parental (or family) involvement in the lives of looked after children, including:

- information provision, for example, sharing school or medical reports for the child;
- involvement in decisions about the life of the child, such as curriculum choices or permission for activities such as overnight stays; and
- direct involvement in the day-to-day life of the child, for example, participation in aspects of daily life such as meals and joint activities, or accompanying the child to medical appointments.

4. Table 1 shows the most recent available data at the time of the research. For the Netherlands, this is 2009; for France and Denmark it is 2010; and for England, the figures are those from the year ending 31 March 2011. Sources: Statbank Denmark www.statbank.dk/; Statistics Netherlands www.cbs.nl; Maineaud 2012; Borderies and Trespeux 2012; DfE www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001084/index.shtml
5. The percentage of children accommodated in residential or foster care may not sum to 100% in cases where statistics include young people in other forms of care (e.g. placement with parents in England).
6. This figure relates to placements involving formal retraction of parental authority; approximately 90% of placements are made with judicial authorisation, but without retraction of parental authority.
7. In England, this includes Care Orders and Placement Orders.

Keeping parents informed, even when they cannot be directly involved, was seen as particularly important given that children were sometimes placed at some distance from their birth families. The research highlighted ways of enabling parents to be 'part-time' parents, including a Dutch intervention programme called 'Parent Support for Role Differentiation'.[8]

Even when direct contact may not be appropriate, the cross-country review indicated a need to address the child's *psychological* needs, in terms of their relationships with family, and to find the best ways of addressing involvement for each individual child.

For families where direct involvement is appropriate, the Danish concept of '*samvær*' – 'being together' – provides a useful conceptualisation of contact. Examples of *samvær* included shared meals, watching TV together, and overnight visits to residential institutions, and similar examples were given in the Netherlands. *Samvær* activities often took place where the child was living.

Barriers and facilitators: '*the big challenge is how you make a good relationship*'

Our research highlighted a perceived tension between adult and child needs, with a corresponding uncertainty that involvement of parents is truly in the child's best interests, and this was seen as a barrier to work with birth parents and families. One consequence of these concerns – noted in all four countries – is that parents and wider family networks are often distanced from the child following placement, and support for parents, including support to address the difficulties that led to placement, is reduced or even removed. Interviewees across countries cautioned that attention to the child's existing family relationships should not be in tension with meeting child needs.

Across countries, timing was seen as key in enabling parental involvement. It was widely argued that parents (and family networks) need to be actively involved from the outset in care planning and placement choice, based on a partnership focused on the child's best interests. Effective family involvement was seen as likely to depend on this early work. In England, pressures on social workers and an adversarial child care system were said to pose a barrier to the development of effective parent involvement.

In France, Denmark and the Netherlands, strengths-focused and resource-orientated approaches were said to be helpful in identifying how parental (or family) involvement can be managed in the best interests of the child, by enabling parents to maintain aspects of the parental role that have been managed well.

Across Denmark, France and the Netherlands, the involvement of birth families was seen as less challenging when children lived in residential institutions than if they were placed in foster care. Residential institutions account for a much larger proportion of care provision in these three countries than in England. They also have more differentiated models of residential placement; residential care is less likely to be viewed as a last resort option than in England, but rather is seen as a specialist intervention for young people whose needs cannot be met in family placements.

There are higher levels of professional qualification among residential care staff in France, Denmark and the Netherlands than in England, and approaches to work with families need to be seen in this context. Family focused work was seen as less challenging in residential care, compared to foster care, in part because of the work of professional teams in residential care services, but also because of the differences in private space in institutional and family care contexts. Examples of foster carers hosting contact were given in all countries, but in England and France this was unusual, and in all countries it could be difficult.

Professional roles

Stakeholders in all countries consistently emphasised that professionals needed to be pro-active in ensuring that parents are kept informed and involved.

In both Denmark and the Netherlands, parents of a child placed away from home are entitled in law to have a dedicated support worker. The research raised some questions about the extent to which these roles are actually offered to, or taken up by, parents, but also highlighted evidence that such support was helpful to parents when it was used.

To varying degrees across countries, foster carers and residential care workers were expected to take a role in supporting children's contact with their birth families. Direct work with families was also carried out by social workers or other dedicated staff.

In France, Denmark and the Netherlands specialist professionals were qualified to Bachelor or Masters level

8. Haans, G., Robbroeckx, L., & Hoogeduin, J. (2009). *Method: parental guidance with role differentiation*. Amsterdam: SWP (in Dutch).

in fields such as family therapy, psychology, and pedagogy.[9] To recognise the importance of work with families when children are placed away from home, we must pay attention to the theoretical knowledge, training and skills needed for this complex area of practice.

Work towards return home

Many children who are looked-after in England return to live with their parents – the largest group of those who cease to be looked-after as children (37 per cent). Many go home from placement within a relatively short time: 45 per cent of those who ceased to be looked-after in 2012 had been in the system for less than a year, and 32 per cent for less than six months.[10] However, there is evidence that proactive case management and work with parents plays a major role in the success or failure of reunification.[11] Comparative data on return home were not available, but across the countries included in our study, work towards reunification included:

- Intensive family support, alongside a placement and/or for a period following the end of a placement, played a significant role in work to support return home in Denmark, France and the Netherlands.

- In England, Denmark and the Netherlands, work towards return home was also supported through use of standardised programmes of intervention, including Multi Systemic Therapy (MST), Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), Functional Family Therapy (FFT), and Parent Management Training. Echoing UK evidence,[12] our research also indicated a need for differentiated approaches: looked after children and their families are a highly heterogeneous group, and one size does not fit all.

- In Denmark and the Netherlands, specialist interventions for young people and their families were often linked to placement in residential care and supported by a professionalised residential care workforce including pedagogues and family therapists, in accordance with a conceptualisation of residential care as a specialist intervention for young people whose needs cannot be met in family placements. Programmatic interventions were not described in France.

- Access to adult services – including specialist mental health, learning disability, and substance misuse services – was seen as important for work with families of looked-after children in all countries in the study. However, this was noted as a challenging area of practice by several participants in England, in part because birth parents might not meet service thresholds for adult services, even when the family meets thresholds for access to children's social care.

- In Denmark, France and the Netherlands, part-time care arrangements – often alongside intensive family support – were used to support the process of return home while maintaining continuity and a tapered ending to the child's placement.

9. Social pedagogy in Denmark; orthopedagogy in the Netherlands; and *éducation spécialisée* in France.

10. Comparable data not available for all the study countries. Source: Department for Education (2012), Children Looked After By Local Authorities: www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england-including-adoption

11. See, for example, Farmer E. and Lutman E. (2010) *Case management and outcomes for neglected children returned to their parents: a five year follow-up study*. DCSF-RB214. London: Department for Education.

12. Biehal N., Dixon J., Parry E., Sinclair I. et al (2012) *The Care Placements Evaluation (CaPE): Evaluation of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for adolescents* (MTFC-A). DFE Research Report 194. London: DFE Biehal N., Dixon J., Parry E., Sinclair I. et al (2012) The Care Placements Evaluation (CaPE): Evaluation of Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care for adolescents (MTFC-A). DFE Research Report 194. London: DFE.

Conclusions

Across the four countries, work with families of children in care was consistently described as a challenging and neglected area of work.

- Policy in all four countries – including England – makes reference to work with families when children are in care, but policy frameworks say little about **how parent and family involvement might be achieved in practice.** This situation was changing in Denmark, France and the Netherlands, where recent legislation has placed increased emphasis on birth parent involvement, and accompanying guidance addresses family involvement.

- The research highlighted **a fundamental ambivalence about work with parents**, tied to concern about the potential risks and problems of parent and family involvement, given the difficulties that can lead a child to be placed in care. In child protection focused systems, 'best interests' can become equated with keeping the child safe. Once that is achieved, pressure on social services teams is relieved and work with parents and families can cease to be a priority.

- Many stakeholders cautioned that **children's rights and needs (and best interests) should not be supplanted by a focus on parents' rights** – although it was equally noted that the two are not necessarily in conflict.

The importance of family-focused work was widely agreed, and similar reasons were highlighted by stakeholders across countries.

- Many children who become looked after will **return to birth parents or birth families** in childhood or as care leavers; respondents emphasised that parents do not cease to be parents when a child enters care.

- Family means much more than parenting. Just as kin networks are an important resource in preventing placement, or in accommodating children within the birth family, **positive relationships within the wider family were seen as a critical resource** for children who cannot live with their birth parents – in childhood, and into adulthood.

- **Relationships remain psychologically present for children and parents,** even if face-to-face contact is precluded in the child's best interests. Our research indicated that work with looked-after children needs to take those psychological relationships into account.

- **The growth of social media** means that it is likely to become increasingly difficult to regulate children's contact with family members.

- In countries (including Denmark, France and the Netherlands) where parents formally retain a higher degree of parental responsibility, this appeared to be related to a higher expectation of parental involvement in (or agreement with) decision-making and children's everyday lives. This is not to say that work with parents is unproblematic, but **the expectation that parental involvement is necessary** may be an important first step in establishing this as an explicit area of practice.

Policy and service frameworks varied across countries, but key themes emerged in factors that were seen to facilitate family involvement in children's lives while in care:

- In Denmark and the Netherlands, **early involvement** was highlighted as important in establishing constructive relationships between parents and family members and professionals, by involving parents and other family members in contributing to care planning and (where possible) to decisions about where a child should be placed.

- **Support for parents in coming to terms with role differentiation,** parenting 'at a distance' or as a part-time parent, was also emphasised in Denmark, France and the Netherlands, and respondents in these countries highlighted resource – and partnership-oriented approaches that could help to determine which aspects of the parenting role should be maintained.

- The Danish framing of **child-family contact as 'being together'** (samvær) contrasted with conceptualisations of 'contact' in the English literature, highlighting an emphasis on **family involvement in children's everyday lives and everyday worlds.**

- Service providers in all three continental European countries included **specialist professionals such as psychologists and family therapists** – roles which remain exceptional within English social care teams.

Intervention to address the problems that led to placement, and to support work towards return home, was seen as a key focus for work with families in all four countries. This work included:

- **Intensive family support**, alongside a placement and/or for a period following the end of a placement.
- **Standardised interventions** that are already being used in England (e.g. MST, MTFC).
- **Family-centred residential care**, including structured programmes involving intervention with children and birth families.
- **Part-time care arrangements** – often alongside intensive family support – were used to support the process of return home whilst maintaining continuity and a tapered ending to the child's placement.

Work with families of looked-after children is a complex, challenging and neglected area of practice in all four countries in our study. However, as befits the study's focus on learning from well-developed practice, our findings indicate the potential value of going beyond a focus on 'contact' – a focus which dominates the English language literature – to articulate the purpose of contact, and distinguish between different aims and approaches to family involvement, and think about how and why parents and other family members are involved in children's lives at different times and in different circumstances:

- For children for whom the plan is return home, work with families should be concerned with maintaining involvement and relationships in everyday life, as well as effectively addressing the problems that contributed to placement, in order to reduce the likelihood that a child will need to be accommodated again.
- For children who will not return home, there is nonetheless a need to recognise the importance of kin networks as part of their past, present and future identities – the sense of 'close-knit selves' that characterises family. This entails recognising and supporting the connections between the 'multiple families' in children's lives, and so it will often be appropriate to maintain birth family involvement, including sibling, birth parent and extended kin relationships.
- Occasionally contact with birth family members may not be appropriate, and work should focus on building alternative relationship networks for the child.
- For all children who are looked-after away from their birth parents, whether or not the plan includes return home, there is a need to support children and their birth families in addressing separation, attachment and loss. Children must be supported to achieve a sense of belonging and identity that addresses the complex, dynamic and varied meanings of 'family' that they have experienced while in care, and through into adulthood.

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