

# PLANNING AND SUPPORTING LONG-TERM FOSTER CARE

An investigation of the implementation in England of the first regulations and guidance on long-term foster care as a permanence option (2015)

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# Background to the long-term foster care 2015 regulations and guidance

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- Long-term foster care has been recognised as a legitimate permanence option in policy and practice since the 1980s.
- But long-term foster care regulations and guidance were not introduced until 2015.
- This was an important indicator of government support for long-term foster care as a permanence option, alongside their support for other options - reunification, kinship care, adoption and special guardianship.

# Long-term foster care regulations and guidance (2015)

- **Redefined permanence** –no requirement for ‘legal parental responsibility’
- **Defined long-term foster care** – as the child’s permanence plan
- **Required** Local authority practice for a long-term foster care placement
  - consult children, foster carers and birth parents
  - assess children's needs / foster carers’ parenting capacity to meet those needs prior to confirming a match - provide a support plan
  - record children in long–term foster care and report in the SSDA903 annual return to the Department for Education
- **Allowed** local authorities to reduce frequency in long-term foster care placements of
  - social work visits – statutory minimum 6 months
  - looked after children’s review meetings - annual meeting, 6-month review without meeting.

# Background for this UEA research study

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- UEA research since 1997 on long-term foster care - strengths and challenges.
- Following the introduction of the regulations and guidance in 2015, there was uncertainty about whether and how they were being implemented.
- Department for Education were unwilling to publish data on long-term foster care placements from the SSDA903 –concerns about local authority data quality e.g. some very high or very low numbers / rates.
- We were concerned that the opportunity to establish long-term foster care in procedures and practice may be lost. Funding was awarded by the Nuffield Foundation

# Research design: to investigate implementation and how long-term foster care was working

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1. **Analysis of the national data** for England on pathways and profiles of children in long-term foster care using CLA / SSSDA903 data (2009-18)
2. **Survey** of local authority (N=109, 74%) and IFA procedure and practice (N=18)
3. **Telephone research interviews** with 43 managers from a target sample of 30 local authorities with different profiles and procedural systems.

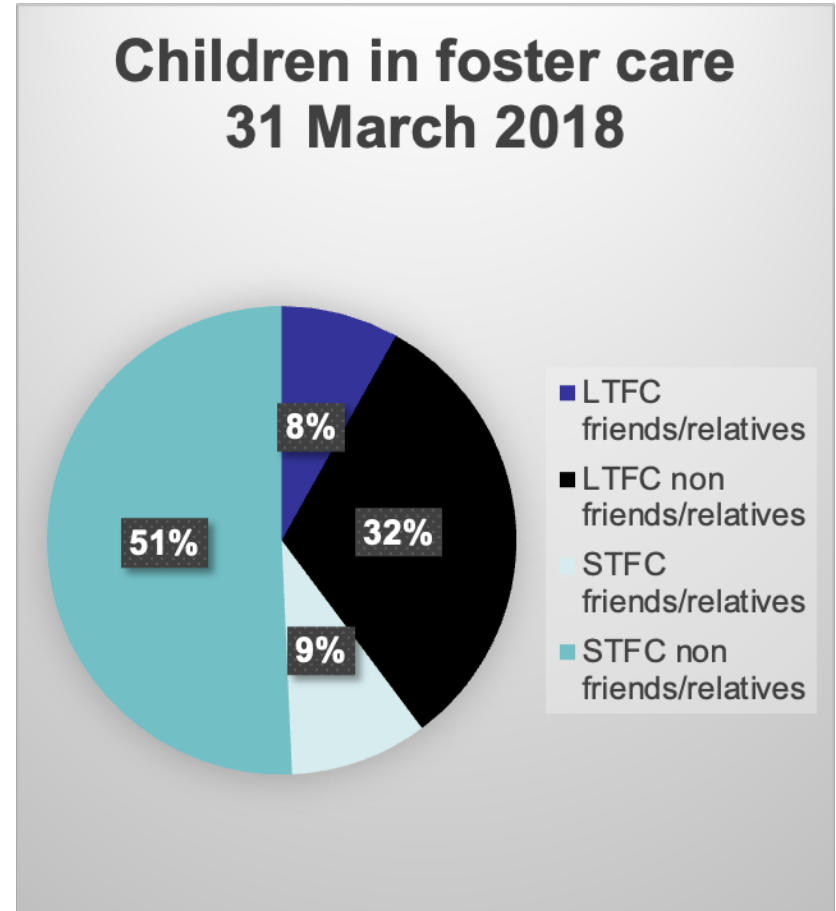
# Method: Analysing national statistics on looked after children, SSD 903

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- Analysis focused on children looked after **in foster care** in 4 financial years (2014/15 until 2017/18)
  - Data back to 2009/10 were used to detail child's history
  - Descriptive statistics on child characteristics and regression analysis used data primarily from 2017/18
- We explored CHILD, PLACEMENT and AGENCY factors
- Regression analyses estimated the impact of child, placement and agency factors of the chances of a child being coded in long-term foster care (versus short-term foster care)

# The use of long-term foster care in England

- During the study years, numbers of looked after children increased each year
- Number and % of children in long-term foster care declined from 48.5% (N=24,855) in 2015 to 39.7% (N=21,771) in 2018
- Children in long-term foster care are still a significant minority of the foster care population



# The characteristics of children in LTFC: gender, age and ethnicity

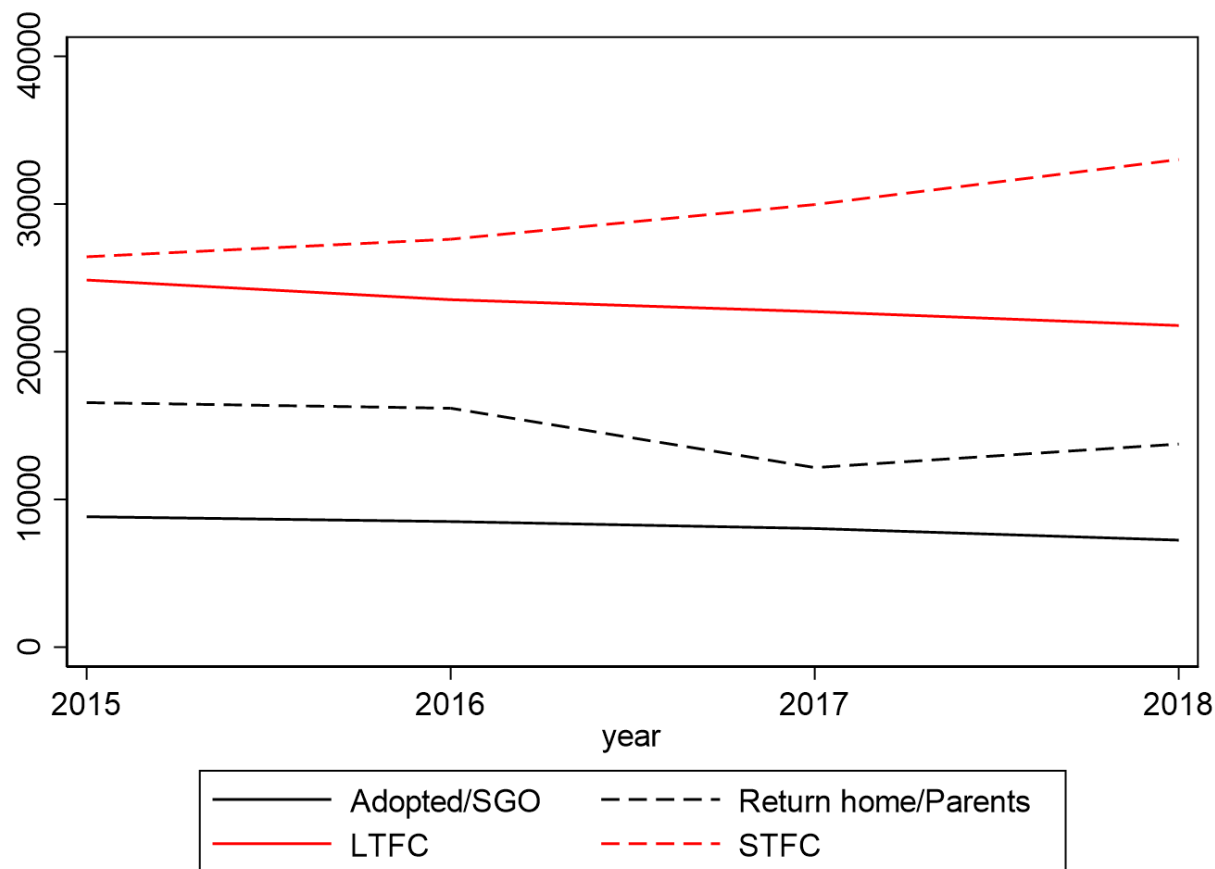
|  |               |             |
|--|---------------|-------------|
| <b>Male gender</b>   | <b>11,855</b> | <b>54.5</b> |
| <b>Age at end of care (*or start of long term foster care)</b> | <b>8.6*</b>   |             |
| <b>Ages 0-2 years</b>  | 1,365         | 6.3         |
| <b>Ages 3-5 years</b>  | 1,530         | 7.0         |
| <b>Ages 6-10 years</b>   | 6,820         | 31.3        |
| <b>Ages 11-15 years</b>  | 10,080        | 46.3        |
| <b>Ages 16-17 years</b>  | 1,975         | 9.1         |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>   |               |             |
| <b>White British</b>   | 16,675        | 76.6        |
| <b>White other</b>   | 920           | 4.2         |
| <b>Mixed ethnicity</b>   | 1,880         | 8.6         |
| <b>Asian</b>   | 720           | 3.3         |
| <b>Black</b>   | 1,135         | 5.2         |
| <b>Other</b>   | 365           | 1.7         |
| <b>Refused/no data</b>   | <10           | <10         |



# The characteristics of children in LTFC: legal status, reason in care, placement provider

| Legal Status         |        |      |
|----------------------|--------|------|
| Care order           | 19,370 | 89.0 |
| Voluntary            | 1,945  | 8.9  |
| Reason in care (CIN) |        |      |
| Child Abuse          | 14,690 | 67.5 |
| Disabled Child       | 400    | 1.8  |
| Parental disability  | 745    | 3.4  |
| Family Acute Stress  | 1,710  | 7.9  |
| Family Dysfunction   | 3,145  | 14.4 |
| Child Behaviour      | 175    | 0.8  |
| Absent Parents       | 880    | 4.0  |
| Placement agency     |        |      |
| Local Authority      | 14,380 | 66.1 |

# The use of long-term foster care compared with other permanence options



# The characteristics of children by their permanency route

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- Similarities to adoption and special guardianship in terms of numbers, gender and ethnicity.
- Compared to children who were adopted/in special guardianship, children in long-term foster care were older (8.6 years vs 4 years).
- Reunified children had a higher mean age (10.4), more likely to be male, black or minority ethnicity.
- Children in LTFC had the greatest number of children in the age group 11-15 (46.3%) with 77.6% of children being aged 6-15.

# The characteristics of children in long-term foster care: summary

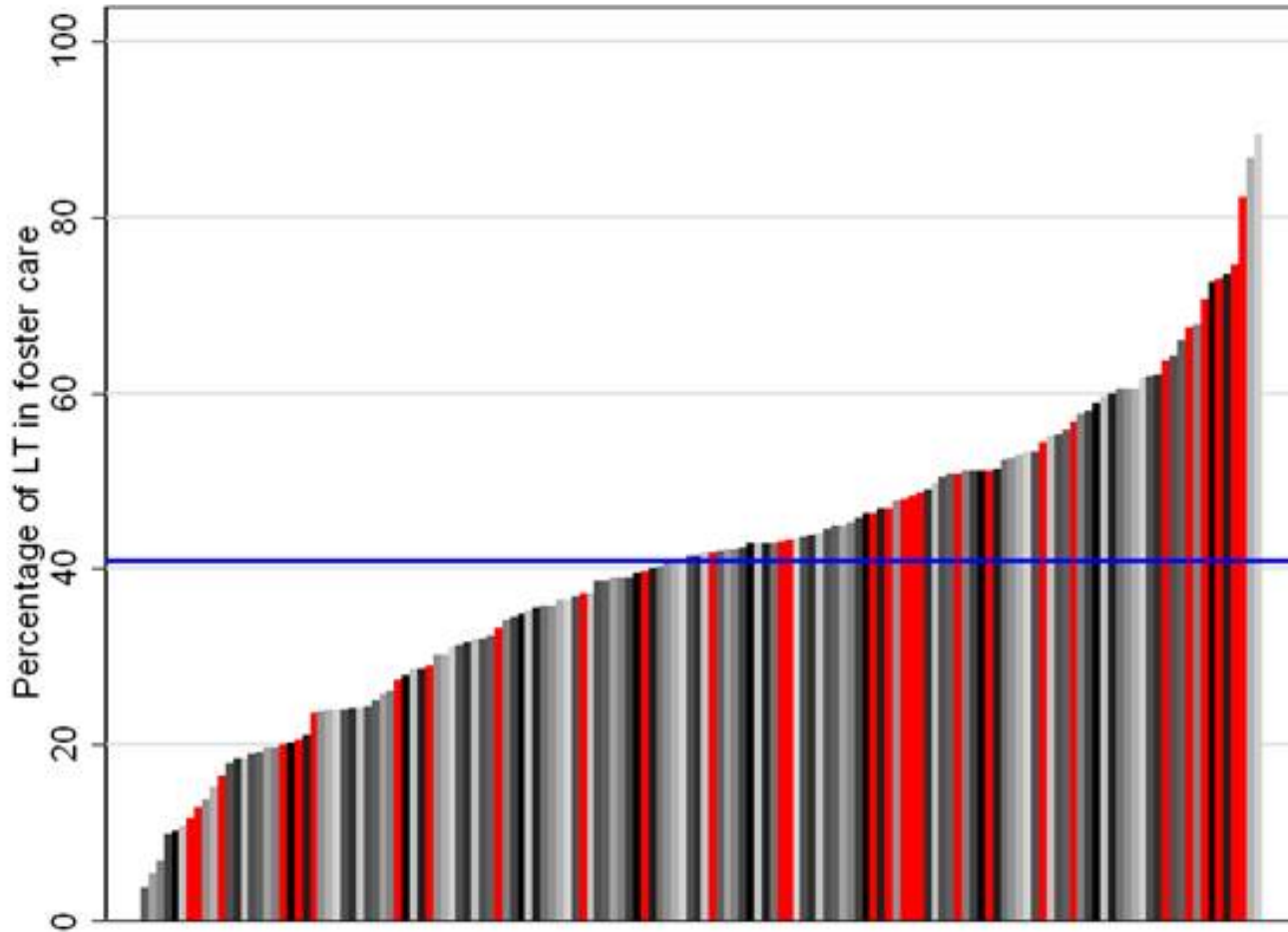
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- Nationally, long-term foster care is used for a wide-range of children but mainly for White British children in middle childhood on a care order who entered care due to child abuse.
- Long-term foster care is the main permanency option for children who, due to their age, are unlikely to be adopted/leave care on a special guardianship order and who who cannot return to parents,
- Additionally, we found differences in the use of and profiles of children in LTFC with friends or relatives compared to children in LTFC with non-friends or relatives.

# Long term foster care with friends/relatives

- The proportion of children in long term foster care with friends/relatives grew slightly over the 4 years (from 18.6-20.3% of all long term fostered children).
- Friends/relatives had proportionally more girls (49.2% vs. 44.6%) and White British children (79.7% vs. 75.8%).
- Children were younger: mean age at start of LTFC (6.5 compared to 9.2) with 32.6% aged 0-5 and only 5.6% aged 16-17.
- Almost all placement providers with friends/relatives were local authority (99.1% vs. 57.6%).
- A lower proportion of elevated SDQ scores.

# National interagency variation in the use of long-term foster care (1)



# National interagency variation in the use of long-term foster care (2)

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Our regression analysis found that

- The strongest predictor of whether a child was placed in long-term foster care was not the child's characteristics, but rather whether a local authority was a low, medium or high user of long-term foster care.
- Children in local authorities that were high users of long-term foster care were 38.5% more likely to be in long-term foster care, taking account of all the other variables included in the analysis.

# Themes from survey and interview data (1) Impact of the long-term foster care regulations and guidance

- Majority of local authorities reported positive impact of the regulations and guidance
  - Higher profile for long-term foster care as a permanence option
    - change in culture
  - More robust procedures for matching and tracking
  - Cautious response to reductions in social work visits/review meetings
- But varied patterns of impact
  - For some authorities, regulations and guidance confirmed /reinforced existing good practice – rigorous / but also child-centred
  - For others, changes were welcomed but challenges remained in making more robust procedures child centred/could be too rigid
  - For others, more reluctance to engage with/accept long-term foster care as a permanence option/use procedures (often low numbers).



# Comments on the impact of the long-term foster care regulations and guidance

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## Positive comments e.g.

- ‘The regulations and guidance gave a clear route for legitimately accepting long-term foster care as an accepted route to permanence, but making sure that it is not taken lightly.’

## Concerns e.g.

- Whether long-term foster care could be recommended – as it was a ‘statutory intervention’ through childhood /risk of stigma /less stable than ‘legal permanence’
- Also concerns about availability of long-term foster carers

# Themes from survey and interview data

## (2) Definitions & factors in long-term foster care

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### Messages to children

- ‘The message we try to give to the child is that this is going to be your family ...the place where you’re going to stay and the people you’re going to live with until you’re grown up’.
- ‘That’s what permanence is, it is being part of the family’

### Expectations of foster carers

- ‘Staying Put if appropriate, but certainly staying as a member of the family, being there to support first jobs, university, Christmas, birthday as appropriate...They might not live with you at 19, 20, but you would want to remain connected as a very significant person in this young person's life.’

# Long-term foster care's place in the range of permanence options- challenges

- Hierarchy of permanence options?
  - need to assess / rule out other options before a long-term foster care plan i.e. birth family options - reunification, kinship care, special guardianship - considered first.
  - Adoption often considered next for young children in care proceedings.
- Does this need to make long-term foster care seem like a 'lesser' value / 'default' permanence option?
- Key factors in the choice of permanence option: e.g. age, sibling groups, behaviour difficulties arising from experience of trauma
- Permanence /matching in existing and new foster placements

# Themes from the survey and interview data

## (3) Care planning and matching procedures

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- Procedures for planning, matching, recording long-term foster care
  - Consulting children, carers and birth family
  - Role of reviews and panels in planning / confirming a match – majority of local authorities use a range of meetings / panels. Who attends each? Who recommends /decides?
  - Role of senior manager / decision maker in planning / matching
  - Celebrations/certificates/letters – specific to each child?

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- Is there rigour but also flexibility / child-centred sensitivity in procedures?
- Which children are confirmed / coded as long-term foster care for the DfE submission?

# Themes from the survey and interview data:

## (4) flexibility to reduce social work visiting

- Benefits: flexibility in frequency can normalise a child's family life?
- Majority of LAs in CLA manager survey (73%) reduced visits for some / generally few children in long-term foster care
- BUT most mentioned reducing from 6 weekly to 12 weekly - 2015 guidance (3.233/4) is confusing on statutory minimums.
  - 'Formally agreed as a permanent placement which is intended to last until the child is 18' – minimum 3 months
  - 'long-term foster placement' – minimum 6 months, with the agreement of the child (being of sufficient age / understanding)
- Concerns about reducing frequency: safeguarding, relationships
- Need to focus on improving social work visits / contacts in long-term foster care

## (4) Flexibility to reduce frequency of looked after children review meetings

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- 45% LAs said they had implemented a reduction (IRO survey), but often in a very limited way
- IRO manager comment was fairly typical
  - ‘Where there’s agreement that it’s in the child’s interests there is a light touch review at six monthly points and then they meet annually...but that’s a small number’.
- IROs reported that a review without a meeting can be more work, through requiring multiple face-to-face meetings.
- Need to identify good practice in both reviews with meetings and those without.

# Themes from the survey and interview data

## (5) Data recording and management

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- Varied ways of working / levels of confidence in the data within local authorities
- Recording long-term foster care - when and by whom?
- Software systems- data on long-term foster care placements not always accessible to service managers

**Key** was shared ownership of the data between data managers and social work managers – but also practitioners.

# Links between high, medium and low long-term foster care rates and other factors?

## Findings from the 30 sample authorities

- Planning and matching procedures (e.g. permanence planning meetings) were found in high, medium and low tertile authorities- no clear link between rates and any ONE aspect of procedure.
- However, a COMBINATION of factors may make a difference e.g. negative attitudes and culture towards long-term foster care, lack of trust in matching and uncertain recording practices did seem to be associated with authorities with very low rates.
- Authorities with very high rates – could be good practice, but may be recording foster placements as long-term after a year without required assessment and matching.
- Local authorities with the same %/ rates at all levels may have very different quality of practice.



# Summary of positive results from the survey and interviews

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- The long-term foster care regulations and guidance (2015) do appear to have
  - raised the profile of long-term foster care as a permanence option
  - generated greater focus on systems and practice in care planning, tracking, matching, support planning and recording
  - introduced the possibility of a more flexible approach to frequency of social work visits and CLA review meetings – which may have spurred on thinking about the quality of both.

# But some challenges remain for long-term foster care policy and practice

## Key recommendations – at local and national level

- Maintaining long-term foster care as a positive option alongside reunification, kinship care, adoption and special guardianship
- Ensuring resources are available e.g. giving children's social workers skills, time, supervision; recruiting and supporting foster carers; supporting birth families; mental health / education support
- Achieving care planning and matching procedures that are rigorous, but also sensitive to individual children's needs, views and experience into adulthood – and involve foster carers and birth families.
- Value continuity of relationships of all kinds in childhood and into adulthood

# Social work decisions can be key turning points when a foster family becomes a family for life

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- They were just brilliant, they turned me right round... Without them I wouldn't have the life I have now.' (Melanie: age 15 at placement / age 25 at interview for Schofield research in 1999)
- Melanie is now 47 - a loving mother and grandmother – and still regularly and closely in touch with her foster family, as she has been for the last 30 years.