

# Step-Down Program Evaluation

## Report of the Preliminary Findings January 2017

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## Executive Summary

As at the 1 December 2016, 20 placements had been made via the Step-Down Programme (19 young people as one was placed twice). 13 placements were made in year one (Nov 2014-Oct 2015) and seven in year two (Nov 2015- Oct 2016).

Eight had graduated and six were in current Step Down placements (including two for whom the clock had restarted due to moves within the second six months of their placement). Five placements disrupted before week 14 interviews. One placement disrupted after week 14 interviews.

The data in this report is based on the analysis of the quantitative information collected by Core Assets within the service delivery and 112 interviews with young people, their carers, children's and supervising social workers and the mentors (or support worker when no mentor was appointed). Interviews following placement disruptions were held only with foster carers and social workers.

### Main questions addressed in the evaluation

- What evidence if any, is there that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care? What positive stability and developmental progress can be seen for these young people?
- How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?
- What have been the most important factors that have supported and/or provided barriers to this transition process?
- What recommendations can be made for the future development of the Programme?

### Key Findings

There are compelling reasons for suggesting that the quality of a young person's life might be significantly improved by the successful completion of the Step Down programme (e.g. what we know about better educational outcomes from foster care). Within the wider context of improving outcomes, cost savings are also important. A tentative estimate of the cost savings of a 52-week placement for each young person that completes Step Down and does not return to residential care (during or after completion) is in the order of more than £35k per young person, with this typically doubling in the year after. Thus, across the placements to date, we can expect there to have been a saving of over £0.5m whilst the young people have been in the scheme and a similar amount after graduation to date. However, a fully independent, cost benefit analysis is needed to confirm figures.

#### **What evidence if any, is there that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care? What positive stability and developmental progress can be seen for these young people?**

On average across the first two years, a 70% stability rate has been achieved across the 20 placements (19 young people). There is evidence that most young people achieved greater stability than they experienced prior to the programme as indicated by their previous trajectories. There is some evidence of improved school attendance and strong evidence that the frequency of engagement in positive activities increases markedly immediately after starting though is not always maintained at the initial high level.

### **How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?**

- Young people were involved in planning their inductions to various degrees (from actively making plans to agreeing plans drawn up by others). The level of involvement did not appear to impact on the overall outcome of the placement.
- Young people were very positive about meeting potential carers but few had been offered more than one alternative.
- The role of young people in the progress meetings varied. In some cases, these were planned to accommodate young people but they were not always invited and it was not always clear how their views were represented.
- There was evidence of young people having ownership of decisions affecting their day-to-day lives and choosing to leave or remain in placement.

### **What have been the most important factors that have supported and/or provided barriers to this transition process?**

#### ***Introduction period***

- The introductory period gave carers and young people the chance to make more informed decisions about the match and going ahead with the placement. It allowed carers to consider behaviour management strategies before the placement started and young people to move into placements feeling they were wanted.
- Receiving information verbally was valued highly and may have led to placements that would not have been agreed on paper. The most common complaint about written information was that it was out of date.
- Involving the mentor early was seen as valuable especially in providing continuity for the young person and reassuring them about their ownership of the planning phase but the role of the mentor at this stage has varied and has not always been well understood by other members of the team.
- Professionals suggested with hindsight, that it is important to have all practical issues (e.g. school transport, obtaining of a passport) sorted out before the placement commences.

#### ***Professional roles and support***

- Placements were seen to be offering stability and a safe and consistent environment and young people reported feeling safe.
- Carers were seen to offer appropriate skills, and more recently to have more knowledge and understanding of the programme. They were praised for their resilience and ability to manage very challenging behaviour. With the exception of emergency moves, any concerns about carers' skill levels were expressed after placements had disrupted, (either internally or externally).
- Newly approved carers have been used frequently and successfully. Success was linked to carers' attendance at Attune<sup>1</sup> groups and ability to put training into practice.
- The role of the mentor in the ongoing placement is very important and often beneficial to the carer as well as the young person. This has obvious implications for placements where there is no mentor.

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<sup>1</sup> Attunement is described as occurring when: *a caregiver is not only aware of his or her emotions, but can also recognize how his or her child is feeling and can convey this awareness to the child. An attuned relationship is a prerequisite to the development of both security and empathy in the young child.* (Cameron & Maginn, 2008, p. 1158, cited in Caw with Sebba, 2013, p. 72, *Team Parenting*. London: JKP.)

- The therapist role is also important, providing advice and reassurance to carers and helping the team develop a mutual understanding of the young person's behaviours.
- Carers felt well supported and this allowed them to cope with placements they might not have coped with as standard placements.

#### ***Professionals working together to provide shared solutions to problems***

- Progress meetings were used differently across placements. Some teams used them much more proactively than others and this was linked to positive outcomes.
- Involvement of a consistent local authority social worker who knew the child and ideally their family, was very helpful both in predicting when problems may occur and in identifying progress which allowed the team to praise the young person and build self-esteem.

#### ***Supporting the young person***

- Young people were well supported in placements that offered stability and a safe and consistent environment. The support of the team allowed carers to demonstrate their tenacity to young people and some young people were reported to have remained in placement for longer than they had ever done previously.
- Having good relationships and feeling part of the family were linked to young people investing in their placements. Having the team around them could contribute to young people feeling there were people who cared about them and wanted to see them succeed. Along with participation in positive activities, these contributed to building self-esteem and resilience.
- Moving school could have positive (if the school was seen to more closely meet the young person's needs or to offer a fresh start) or negative impacts but being out of school was seen as problematic and potentially contributing to placement disruptions. Teams that worked proactively were able to positively influence young peoples' views about education.
- There was good communication with schools and their attendance at progress meetings was seen as positive.

#### **What recommendations can be made for future development of the Programme?**

##### ***During the planning stage***

- It is crucial that someone in the local authority is always available in the early stages to agree the placement so that introductions can start promptly.
- Promote opportunities for the verbal transfer of information during the planning stage and ensure the carer has all available information before meeting the young person.
- Make sure all practical details (e.g. school transport and passport applications) are agreed and actioned before a placement commences.
- Carefully consider requests for no mentor or support worker, ensuring the placing social work is aware of the potential benefits of these roles. Where there is initial agreement for no mentor or support worker this could be reviewed at a later date.

##### ***During the placement***

- When there are moves of placement within the Step Down Programme ensure that new carers are fully informed about the programme.
- When there are changes of Children's Social Worker within the duration of the Step Down Placement ensure the new Social Worker is well informed about the programme.
- Continue to support newly approved carers to put training into practice, encourage them to attend Attune groups and make sure they feel able to ask for support.

- Make sure the understanding of the mentor role is consistent amongst all professionals involved, especially in terms of their involvement in progress meetings.
- Provide an opportunity for mentors to feedback to the programme managers on the supervision that they receive.
- Consideration should be given as to how schools might become more engaged both in collecting the data and providing support.
- Clear guidance is needed about the involvement of young people in progress meetings, including about how their views are represented if they are not present.
- Teams should consider whether they can use progress meetings more proactively, especially when placements are running more smoothly.

#### ***Following the placement***

- Agree any ongoing support package well before the 52 weeks of placement is reached.

#### **Conclusion**

The response to the programme from interviewees of all designations was generally very positive. Stability of placements has, on average increased, 70% of the 20 placements to date remaining stable though one of these only began three months ago. Young people are engaging in much higher level of activities than they were in their prior residential placements. The programme was seen to offer individualised support to young people and to support carers well and thus to maintain placements that interviewees believed would not have worked as standard placements. It is also possible that young people who appear 'hard to place' 'on paper' are being placed through the Step Down programme. There is a strong message for fostering services in general about how positive young people were about meeting their carers and moving into a placement in a gradual way.

## Main report

### Aims of Step-Down

The Step-Down project aims are defined by Core Assets as to help young people move from residential care to specialist foster care with the key outcome of placement stability for the young person after 52 weeks. The Programme involves a carefully planned matching process and high levels of support including planned respite care. It is delivered in four phases:

1. Planning (up to 6 weeks) Matching and Planning processes

Aims to match the identified needs of the young person with the experience, skills and personal qualities of foster carers and to integrate the network of professionals around the young person.

2. Stabilisation 13 weeks Fortnightly Progress meetings

The young person is helped to feel comfortable within their fostering family. Education, personal development plan or employment has been identified, in close collaboration with the young person. Relationships and contact with family are sensitively mediated.

3. Settlement 13 weeks Monthly Progress meetings

Aims at providing warmth, reassurance and predictability to the young person. This phase is supported through the establishment of a coherent network of professionals.

4. Maintenance 26 weeks Monthly Progress meetings

Aims to continue to provide nurture and attuned care, meeting the needs and encouraging the aspirations of the young person and building the young person's emotional resilience.

Prior evidence suggests that young people in foster care achieve better outcomes than those in residential care<sup>2</sup>. For the local authority, there is a considerable potential cost saving compared to residential care estimated to be in the order of £35k per young person completing the programme and double this in the following year.

### Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation aims to investigate, whether and how the project supports the young person in moving from a residential home to a stable foster care placement successfully for a minimum of a year. It also considers what works well and what works less well in making, stabilising and sustaining this move and what outcomes are achieved for young people.

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<sup>2</sup> Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I., Higgins, A. (2015). *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Rees Centre, University of Oxford, University of Bristol.

The main focus of this report is on the second year of the Programme. Eighteen of the 20 placements made so far were in placement at some point during year two. The key evaluation questions addressed are:

- What evidence if any, is there that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care? What positive stability and developmental progress can be seen for these young people?
- How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?
- What have been the most important factors that have supported and/or provided barriers to this transition process?
- What recommendations can be made for the future development of the Programme?

## **Evaluation Design**

The evaluation combines analysis of the quantitative data collected through the service delivery, with qualitative interview data.

### **Qualitative Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the young person and the foster carer (face to face) and with the child's social worker, the supervising social worker and the mentor (over the telephone) at around week 14 and around week 45 of the placements. When young people remained in placement, attempts were made to interview all of these people. Where placements disrupted, interviews took place with the foster carer and the two social workers only and were over the telephone.

### **Quantitative data**

The intention was to collect the following data to the evaluation team:

- Duration of placement
- Foster carer retention – Data not yet provided
- Incidents of absconding
- School attendance
- School exclusion
- Positive activities
- Offending behaviour
- Ofsted Happiness Scale (dropped in 2<sup>nd</sup> year)
- Pupil Assessment of Self & School (PASS)
- School attainment and progress – Data not yet provided
- Behaviour and emotional wellbeing (as indicated through SDQ scores)

SDQ, Happiness Scale and PASS are undertaken during the Planning and Introduction stage to provide a baseline, and then termly (approx. every 4 months) during the placement. The others will be assessed on an on-going basis and will be retrospectively obtained for 12 months prior to the referral date. These data will be used by the Rees Centre to construct individual trajectories and overall programme outcomes. The social return on investment will be assessed for the final report.

During the second year (Nov 2016 -Nov 2017) the Ofsted Happiness Scale was replaced by the young person completing the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire as the former proved to be too influenced by current thoughts and events.



## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were triangulated with one another across respondents and with the secondary analysis of quantitative data (e.g. absconding behaviour, offending, school attendance and performance) whereby data could be cross-referenced and compared at both the individual level and across the group.

## Ethics

Ethical clearance for the evaluation has been given by the University of Oxford and Birmingham City Council. Interviews were recorded where consent was given and recordings destroyed once transcribed. Information sheets and consent forms for young people, foster carers and social workers were given to interviewees beforehand and any questions invited. Where young people were placed under S.20 of the Children Act 1989 (i.e. accommodated) a parent was also provided with an information sheet and asked to provide written consent.

The purpose of the study was explicitly stated to all participants from the outset and contact details of the research team provided. Any indication of distress would, with participants' agreement, prompt a referral to carers and/or social workers for further support, but this has not been necessary to date. Participants' right to withdraw at any time was made explicit. All possible steps have been taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for participants. Nothing is said or written that enables any local authority or individual to be identified. All young people involved were told that anonymity would be breached only if the risk of serious harm to a young person emerged through what was witnessed or disclosed, in which case an agreed local authority manager would be informed.

All data are kept confidential including storing audio recordings on a secure university server; labelling participants with anonymised codes which are stored separately to other identifying details; and removing potentially identifying details in publicly disseminated materials (thus complying with the DPA).

## Previous Recommendations

Progress in these is described briefly below but all are discussed in more detail in the relevant sections of the report.

1. Continue and extend the involvement of the young people in the decision-making process and where there is a potential conflict due to high risk in being placed in or near the 'home' area, this needs full discussion with the young person.

All young people have been involved in plans for the introduction period but there was wide variation between agreeing to plans and actively contributing to them. In year two, there have not been any new placements made outside the West Midlands. No issues were raised about young people being too far from their families; the main issue has been having to change school.

2. Absence, leave and staff turnover need to be planned for, such that the planning and preparation phase is not compromised and subsequent support to both young person and carer is maintained.

There were still some difficulties in recent placements with delays in the planning phase being caused by staff absence and this was reported to cause distress to young people. It is crucial that someone in the local authority is always available in the early stages to agree the placement so that introductions can start promptly.

3. Ensure that the information provided to foster carers prior to the placement is sufficiently detailed.

The provision of information has continued to be variable, with the biggest issue being information that is out of date, but there is some suggestion that it has improved very recently.

4. The support from the therapist is vital, especially for the foster carers and should be maintained. Similarly, regular Team Parenting Meetings are fundamental to the success of the programme.

Therapists have continued to have a valuable role in supporting the foster carer and often in advising the team. Progress meetings have been used differently across placements with some working more pro-actively than others.

5. The local authority social workers need to be more closely involved with the other professionals to ensure that the young person feels adequately supported.

There continues to be concern about frequent changes in local authority social workers and about them not being fully involved in placements, but there are also some accounts of children's social workers contributing very positively to the team.

## **Main Findings**

As at the 1 December 2016, 20 placements had been made via the Step-Down Programme (19 young people as one was placed twice). 13 placements were made in year one (Nov 2014-Oct 2015) and seven in year two (Nov 2015- Oct 2016).

Eight young people had graduated (seven from the carer they were originally placed with) and six were in current Step Down placements (including two for whom the clock had restarted due to moves within the second six months of their placement). Five placements disrupted before week 14 interviews and one after week 14 interviews.

This report is based on the data from 112 interviews relating to 19 (as one had not yet reached week 14) of the 20 placements made via the Step Down programme, complemented by quantitative data from 19 young people.

### Week 14 interviews

Fourteen young people had reached week 14 of their placement. Thus, week 14 interviews are based on a potential of 14 interviews of each type of interviewee – young person, carer, supervising social worker, children's social worker and mentor.

### Week 45 interviews

Ten young people had reached week 45 of their placement. For one of the placements that subsequently restarted 'placement disruption' interviews were undertaken at week 45, based on the information given to the evaluation team at the time. Thus, week 45 interviews are based on a potential of 10 interviews for foster carers and social workers and nine interviews for young people and mentors.

### Interviews for disrupted Placements

Five placements disrupted before week 14 and interviews were carried out with the foster carer and supervising social workers for four of these and the children's social worker for three. One placement disrupted after week 14 and interviews have so far been undertaken with the foster carer and children's social worker. (This disruption occurred during the writing of the report and the supervising social worker was not available for interview at short notice.)

The following table summarises the data that has informed this report:

**Table 1: Summary of data collection and analysis for evaluation – December 2016**

Source of data	Data collected	Comment
Quantitative data	20 placements (19 young people) 8 placements graduated, 6 disrupted and 6 are current	
Interviews with YP	10 YP interviews at week 14	3 YP chose not to participate in the interview 1 parent withheld permission for their child to be interviewed
	6 YP interviews at week 45	2 YP chose not to participate 1 placement was very volatile at the time the interviewer visited and it was not felt helpful to interview the YP
Interviews with Child Social Worker	10 CSW interviews at week 14,	4 CSW could not be reached
	8 CSW interviews at week 45	1 CSW could not be reached 1 CSW had left and been replaced twice so the current CSW knew nothing about the placement
Interviews with Supervising Social Worker	14 SSW interviews at week 14	
	10 SSW interviews at week 45	
Interviews with Foster Carer	14 Foster Carer interviews at week 14	
	10 Foster Carer interviews at week 45	
Interviews with Mentor	9 Mentor interviews (2 of which were support workers)	The mentor for 1 YP was on maternity leave 4 YP had no mentor allocated

	8 Mentor interviews at week 45 (2 of which were support workers)	2 YP had no mentor allocated
Disrupted placements	4 CSW 4 SSW 5 foster carers	

### Characteristics of the young people and their placements

The 20 placements made since late 2014 include 11 females (one twice) and 9 males, contrasting slightly with the care population in general in which males outnumber females. Their age at placement ranged from 11 years and 9 months to 15 years and 6 months with an average of just under 14 years and modes of 13 and 14 years. Of the 19 young people in 20 placements, 12 were White British, 3 were described as being of mixed ethnicity and the remaining 4 were either Romanian, Black Caribbean or Asian.

The young people placed had a variety of care histories. Whilst the majority had experienced multiple foster placements, others had only been in the care system relatively recently and/or were only placed in residential units because no foster placements were available. This includes one young person who had never been in a foster placement before.

### Evidence that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care.

#### Duration of placement

**Table 2: Duration of placements for the 19 young people in Step Down**

No of young people	Length of time in placement (months)
9 <sup>1</sup>	12
5 <sup>2</sup>	5-8
5 <sup>3</sup>	3

<sup>1</sup> One young person reached 12 months just as this report was being written

<sup>2</sup> One young person disrupted and went into residential care after 7 months

<sup>3</sup> Four young people disrupted by 3 months, 3 of these went into residential care and one went missing.

Of the 6 young people in placements in December 2016, 4 young people had been in the same placement, one had two placement moves and one six moves. Since the year one report there has been a slight decrease in stability levels but the cohort in placements is lower.

**Missing from care:** The average missing from care episodes across the group is less than half an episode per month but there is an increase in the twelfth month of the placement. Two young people had gone missing from care on 10 occasions, one had been missing six times, two four times, one twice and four once. On average across the group for the 12-month period, the levels of absconding are low compared to the baseline taken from residential care but there is significant individual variation with nine young people having no incidences and four only one.

**School Attendance:** The average school attendance for the group across the 12-month period is high. The average level is higher than the baseline taken from residential care. The variation in levels of attendance is attributable to five young people, since the other 14 attended 100% (not including authorised absences) throughout the 12 months.

**Exclusions, offending and reprimands:** All these are on average across the group and over the 12-month period, consistently very low. Three young people committed one offence and one young person two offences. Of the 18 young people for which exclusion data were available, five young people experienced any fixed-term exclusions, four of these ranging from two to six occurrences and one experiencing 42 incidents. There was a slight increase in exclusions in month 12 of the programme, but older children have higher exclusion levels nationally so this is to be expected.

**Positive Activities:** The average number of positive activities per month per child significantly increased on average across the group over the 12 months though with a slight decrease in months 9-12. Of the 19 young people, nine averaged around five positive activities per month, another nine two to three activities per month and one averaged only one activity per month. The level of activity is far higher than the average baseline from residential care.

**Attitudes to Education (PASS):** Across the group on average, Pupil Attitudes to Self and School scores did not show improvement over the year. However, these averages mark large individual differences. Seven young people made some improvement one significantly so. Four young people's scores got worse over the year and two showed little difference. There were missing data on the others. This suggests consideration might be needed of how to get the schools more engaged in both collecting the data and providing appropriate support.

**SDQs:** On average across the 19 young people, the staff/carer SDQ scores are higher (worse) than those assigned by the school and the young person scores themselves lowest (least problematic). Similarly, for the prosocial scale the young people assign themselves higher scores (more positively) than either school staff or carers. This reflects the national comparative score patterns of self, school and carer for SDQs. There are no significant improvements on average with both the young people and the carers scoring difficulties as having got worse by term 3.

These averaged data mask some important individual differences. One young person gets worse scores on everything over the year. Another improves on everything but only in school. Two young people improve on the emotional scale only in both settings – home and school. Two improve on conduct only across both settings and one of these improves in their peer relationships but only in school (which might reflect differences in opportunities across settings). These data are worthy of further scrutiny in the final report. It is possible that some young people settle quicker at either home or school and this is reflected in their scores.

### ***Educational attendance and progress***

On average across the group, school attendance improved following transition from residential to foster care. Some young people in who started in year one began attending school again after a period of not attending. School has been a difficult issue for many of the young people, with difficulties most commonly relating to peer relationships but also to behaviour more generally. Often difficulties manifested far more in school than at home with a feeling expressed in several placements that the young person was "holding it together at home and letting it out at school" Also when life is difficult, school is "the last thing on a young person's mind". There have however been positives particularly in terms of young peoples' ambitions. In several placements, the young person had shown a shift in their understanding of education as being something with a purpose rather than school just being a place they have to go to. Young people had established aspirations since moving into their Step Down placements including wanting to go on to college or university.

### ***Participation in positive events and community integration***

Young people were involved in a wide variety of activities. Many reported new skills they had learnt and some reported happily that they had had the opportunity to try something they had never done and wanted to do - from activities like horse riding to simply having a sleepover with a friend. Most had been on a holiday and in addition to more specialised activities, had enjoyed more day-to-day activities such as meals out or visiting the cinema with their carers.

Most of the young people were reported to struggle with peer relationships and this was often still the case at week 45. There was broad acknowledgement that the reasons behind this were often complex and entrenched and not something that could necessarily be overcome quickly. Where appropriate, carers and support workers had supported young people to join clubs or teams and when this was not ideal they had sometimes undertaken activities where they were alongside other young people but with more limited interaction. Young people were praised for their interactions in activity-based situations even if this only meant listening to and responding to an instructor.

### ***Emotional wellbeing and resilience***

In several placements, adults reported a reduction in self harm, but young people themselves were most likely to say the biggest change in them had been an improvement in managing their anger. For example, a young person talked about "smashing everything up" when in residential care, explaining that since in the Step Down placement they felt frustrated rather than angry and "not like I want to break something or do something bad". Carers and social workers agreed with this, sometimes contrasting with the time in residential care when the young person demonstrated a lot more anger. Other changes observed in young people included appearing calmer, happier, more relaxed, more confident and developing a sense of humour.

*...and when we had her last LAC review, and the Chairperson said she couldn't get over the change, you know, even her face, how much more relaxed (foster carer)*

*...he's developing coping mechanisms... he's learning how to manage things...he's becoming more decisive in what he wants (supervising social worker)*

*I have seen a change in his mood. When I go to see him he has a happy face (children's social worker)*

Several young people were reported to have become healthier and/or to have lost excess weight and this also had a positive impact on emotional wellbeing.

*He's changed his image a little bit, he's changed his hairstyle, and he just seems to be carrying himself ... he looks smart, and he's always doing his hair. So, he's gone from that little, plump lad that moved in, to a taller, smarter boy. He sort of holds his head up now, whereas before, he didn't. I mean, everybody says how different he is now, and I love it when they say that (foster carer)*

It was especially encouraging to hear some young people who were able to talk positively about themselves and their achievements, for example a young person who had achieved some GCSEs despite having been at four different secondary schools:

*So, thinking of the achievement there, I think I have done myself quite proud (young person)*

*I don't steal, I don't break things...everyone says I've come a long way (young person)*

*I was a wreck when I first came here, still am a little bit, but I've changed...I'm not that violent any more...My attitude's changing slowly (young person)*

### **Young people feeling safe**

All of the young people who were interviewed said they felt safe although there was not a universal interpretation of the question and some talked about the area they lived in rather than the placement.

Some specifically said they felt safer than they did in residential care because, for example, "you have to watch your back there" whilst other volunteered that they felt safe there too. Some suggested that they appreciated the boundaries and realised that things they were not allowed to do were actually about being cared for and protected.

Whilst significant progress was identified for some young people, others were reported to have achieved little more than settling in the 52 weeks of placement. Given some of the past experiences of these young people, it is important to acknowledge this as an achievement in itself. In such cases, there were suggestions that young people might benefit in their second year of placement from some of the support they had not been able to utilise in year one.

*I think that's very much who she is. In a year, you're not going to undo behaviours that are that entrenched... we're just starting, now that we've built up the attachment, and it's took a year, we're just putting the therapy in and trying to make her a bit more independent and not so needy. So, the work still needs to continue. The SIBS program is due to finish (supervising social worker)*

## **How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?**

### **Introduction Period**

Most young people had actively told their social worker they wanted to be in a foster placement or at least to move out of residential care, so they were in effect the instigator of the plan.

In terms of the practicalities of the introduction period the involvement of the young person varied from agreeing plans made by others to being much more proactive in planning activities and timescales. The quote below represents the more proactive scenario:

*...there was a skeleton plan and she was asked 'What do you think about this? What do you think about that?' She was given the opportunity to add her own part of the plan if she wanted to. She kind of took the position that we had a two-hour contact [then] we had a whole day and then she was given the choice of whether she wanted the next one to be overnight contact or whether she still wanted to just visit in the day (foster carer)*

This difference does not appear to have impacted on overall outcomes but it suggests a difference in interpretation. In placements where young people had less proactive input they

were able to change plans if they asked to and there is no suggestion that any young person was involved in any way they were not happy about.

Very few young people were offered a choice of carers (only one young person reported that they had visited another carer and chosen from two options).

Concern was expressed about a small number of young people who were so keen to move in that adults felt they were "agreeing to anything". Social workers were very aware of this and tried to caution young people accordingly, but this was not always successful for example in a case where a young person had not 'heard' that the move would mean he had to change school, even though his social worker was certain he had been told.

The young people we spoke to were universally positive about the idea of meeting potential carers and their comments suggested that they had understood that they had choice and control over their move:

*I would say [to a young person offered Step Down] "Well do go and see them, like I did with [carers], if you don't feel too comfortable ask for that extra, maybe ask for a sleepover, and if you feel comfortable then move in, if you don't then just tell someone" (young person)*

Some suggested this was the way foster placements should always be made:

*Find that placement for them and then once you found it, tell them that you're in a process. Tell them everything and just go for little respites. That's how you move. You don't straight away move them into a family that they don't know. You need to give them that communication (young person)*

### ***During the placement***

The young person's involvement once in placement also varied. Some young people attended their progress meetings (for the whole or part of the time) and others did not. Sometimes it was their choice but sometimes they were not invited to attend or it was not practical for them to do so because the meeting had been arranged at a time or place to enable particular professionals to attend. Whilst recognising that decisions need to be made on an individual basis there did not seem to be a universal understanding of what would be ideal, for example professionals in some placements seemed surprised at the idea that the young person might attend.

When young people did attend progress meetings, views about the benefits of this varied. It was seen by some to give them a sense of control and others (sometimes in the same placement) as being overwhelming and unhelpful for them. Attending sometimes or for part of the meeting was generally felt to be the most useful option but did depend on practicalities such as the location of the meeting.

*It's her choice, really. We leave it open, and we leave the door open so that she can come and go as she pleases. In the beginning, she didn't really come in...Then, slowly she started coming in for bits of it, and I think the last one, she did stay in for practically all of it...I think the house has been the right place to have it...but if there's been stuff particularly that we don't want her to hear us talking about, we've tended to hold the meeting just slightly before she's due back from school so that we can get that out the way before she comes back. (supervising social worker)*



When young people did not attend progress meetings, or did not feel comfortable to express their views it was not always clear how these were considered in meetings. Mentors saw it as their responsibility to ascertain young people's ongoing views about their placement but did not explicitly say they reported these back to the progress meetings. Additionally, not all young people had a mentor and not all mentors attended or consistently attended progress meetings.

Children's social workers frequently said it was their role to review the young person's happiness in the placement but this varied and some young people had periods of not having an allocated social worker (or their social worker being off sick for a long period).

In other respects, there were many examples of young people exercising choice. These included decisions about involvement with therapy, respite and family contact. Young people had made it known when they wanted to leave a placement and indeed when they initially wanted this but then changed their mind. Young people who had support workers spoke very positively about them and were clearly given choices about which activities they would like to undertake, but not all had support workers and in some placements or at some times the support worker role was used for transport to school or therapy rather than doing activities. Where support workers or mentors were not appointed there was no suggestion that young people had had any part in this decision.

## Factors that have supported and/or provided barriers to this transition process

### ***Introduction Period***

**Getting to know each other:** All interviewees were positive about the benefits of the introductory period, the main one being the chance for carers and young people to get to know each other and make more informed decisions about the match and going ahead with the placement. This was seen as particularly important to young people who had previously experienced a lot of emergency moves where they had been placed with whatever carers were available.

Carers had a chance to consider behaviour management strategies before the placement started and there were reports that young people moved into placements feeling they were wanted. This was sometimes supported by carers giving welcome cards or small gifts that were personal to the young person:

*The staff at the children's home told them I really like horses so they got me this Horse & Rider magazine when they first met me and I really enjoyed that, so I knew this was going to be a good placement (young person)*

**Flexibility:** Interviewees valued the flexibility in the length of the introduction period. Shorter introduction periods were usually responding to young people's wishes, but if they were for other reasons (e.g. to move before the start of term) it was always with the agreement of the young person and all professionals involved. There was no suggestion that a shorter introduction period impacted negatively on a placement as long as it was well managed.

**Receiving information about the young person:** Information received was variable across placements in terms of quantity, and particularly quality. The biggest complaint was receiving information that was out-of-date, but there were also inaccuracies and sometimes

information was perceived as arriving too late. There is a very tentative suggestion that there have been improvements with the most recent placements but this is something that requires further monitoring. Foster carers felt they had been party to everything shared with Core Assets.

The strongest message is the value placed on receiving verbal information both from residential units and children's social workers. Interviewees, particularly foster carers and mentors felt that this provided a much fairer and more accurate picture of the young person. As well as being less up-to-date, written information tended to focus on negative events without giving any feel of the time they spanned. In some cases, successful placements were made on the basis of face-to-face discussions with carers who reported that they may not have agreed to the placement on the basis of just the written information provided. Thus, the programme appears to promote the placement of young people who appear difficult to place 'on paper'.

Some carers felt that fuller information should have been provided before they met the young person as they were then placed in a dilemma of feeling very guilty if they decided not to go ahead. Given the comments above about positive placements being made on the strength of verbal information, this adds weight to the importance of sharing information face-to-face at the earliest stages, before the young person hears about the potential placement.

**Matching:** Interviewees were generally positive about matching and felt that the process had contributed to positive placements. There was evidence from the interviews that different placements had in a very few cases been offered to those requested in the referral. In one case where the young person's first placement within the programme disrupted, the local authority social worker questioned the match (in terms of the carers' relevant experience and skills) but was with hindsight. One placement had been made in an emergency. The young person was unhappy about the location but the match itself was seen as positive.

**Involvement of professionals:** In a few cases the introductory phase was not as well coordinated as it could have been and this was usually the result of difficulties in getting professionals together. Breakdowns in communication resulted in a young person being shown a carer's profile before they had agreed to this, and another young person accidentally seeing potential carers at a LAC review. The professional most likely to be 'missing' at this stage was the child's social worker. There were often reasons for this, such as long term sickness, but it could result in delay and in one case the placing social worker not being aware that the placement was part of the Step Down programme until the young person was placed. Supervising social workers suggested this experience was common to standard placements and identified that in a sense it was less of an issue for Step Down placements as therapy and other support was already agreed.

The role of the therapist varied, sometimes they were involved in supporting the carer before the young person moved in, or had at least met them at meetings, in other cases they were not identified until after the young person was placed. When therapists were involved early, this gave carers the chance to discuss and plan for behaviour management strategies.

**Role of mentors in the introductory phase:** This varied with some meeting the young person several weeks before their move into the placement and some not meeting them until they were placed. When mentors met young people earlier this was seen as beneficial as it allowed them to develop their relationship and reassure the young person about their ownership of the process.

*...he doesn't have to move in with these people. He doesn't have to go for tea or anything like that if he doesn't want to. I wanted him to know that he has quite a bit of control in this situation (mentor)*

Meeting early also provided the young person with continuity. This was important as young people were often changing school at the same times as moving from a residential unit to their foster placement and those who had limited family contact were particularly identified as having no one they knew to talk to about these moves or even with whom to share their pleasure.

In some cases, mentors felt isolated from other professionals at this stage and would have valued more contact with the rest of the team. Local authority social workers were not always aware of the role and actions of the mentors.

**Importance of detailed planning:** In several placements, there were issues with waiting for documents (especially passports which meant that holidays had to be cancelled or young people missing family holidays and placed in respite) or transport for school not being arranged. With hindsight, interviewees stressed the importance of making sure these issues were sorted out before the final agreement to the placement.

### ***Professional roles and support***

#### **The provision of appropriately skilled and trained foster carers to deliver the programme:**

In almost all cases, interviewees and most significantly children's social workers, were very happy with the level of skill offered by foster carers. Carers felt well prepared for Step Down placements and in more recent placements they seemed to have more knowledge and understanding of the programme. In a just a few cases where placements had disrupted (either within the programme or completely), children's social workers expressed concern about carers' experiences and skills, especially in relation to caring for teenagers. But this was from a position of hindsight, these social workers or their colleagues had made informed decisions about placing the young person with the carers in the first place except in one case where a young person moved to a newly approved carer within the Step Down programme in an emergency situation.

Newly approved carers have been used frequently within the programme and despite surprise and reservation shown by some children's social workers this has on the whole proved successful. Three of the eight placements that have graduated were placed with newly approved carers. (In one case they had some respite experience.)

Social workers often expressed initial disquiet about newly approved carers but felt that in practice, the balance of their enthusiasm and fresh approach and the extra support received, had to date produced effective carers for the programme. The success of newly approved carers was linked to their ability to put training into practice, and attendance at the Attune (therapeutic) training programme was mentioned as being especially beneficial. Some newly approved foster carers interviewed suggested that as yet, they had not received much overall training.

Newly approved carers recognised that they faced extra difficulties, in particular not knowing what to expect and what was 'normal' but they also felt they had benefited from the extra

support the programme offered. Some however, had been reluctant to ask for help and support so professionals need to ensure that this is offered to them proactively.

*I probably would've said no, initially ... [but] with this SIBs package you get all the support. So, for a new carer they can have additional supervision, they can have a support worker, they can have an education worker. They can have the lot, if they need it. So, in some ways there's huge benefits ... they can learn and gain experience as they go along, really. So, I think it's about keeping an open mind... (Supervising social worker)*

*I think, sometimes when you have new carers, they might have a new perspective on things, although some people can see it as a negative, I saw that as quite a positive...a new way of thinking and a new way of doing things as well, so that appealed to me (children's social worker)*

Social workers were also positive about more experienced carers, suggesting they were particularly resilient, not 'fazed' by self-harming or other mental health difficulties and able to manage very challenging behaviour. However, they were occasionally seen as lacking understanding regarding the causes behind behaviour and needing more support with this.

**The role of the mentor in ongoing placements:** Where mentors were involved they were seen as a very important part of the placement. Young people were reported (directly and indirectly) to have formed good relationships with them and to enjoy seeing them. Carers and social workers suggested that as well as having shared experiences of care, the mentor role worked well because it offered the young person someone who understood them but was not a social worker or therapist thus the relationship was more relaxed and young people felt able to discuss issues they might not discuss with others.

*... you probably never quite feel what they feel but that's why [mentor] is so brilliant because she does and she can sit next to her and say look I do understand what's happening but you need to move forward (foster carer)*

Mentors helped young people directly, for example by helping them understand their behaviour and their feelings about their family and by sharing experiences. However, they were also seen in several placements as having an important supportive role for carers. Sometimes they worked with carers and young people together, mediating to sort out difficulties or misunderstandings, and they could offer carers strategies for managing particular behaviours. A young person said her mentor was 'very' important to her and a carer commented that the mentor 'always knew what to say to' the young person.

This very positive picture has implications for the placements where a mentor was not allocated, (six of the 14 young people who reached week 14). Often, it was the local authority who had made this decision but in addition to the general benefits of the mentor role there are suggestions that some of these specific young people might have benefitted from having a mentor, either because the carer felt they were missing out or because they expressed a wish for such support themselves:

*I would like to know more about sort of like a person that is living on their own, someone who has moved out of care and is independently living. I would like to ask them so many questions. How did you do it? You know? I have so many questions at the minute because I am getting to that time where I will be a care leaver soon... It's*

*different asking from a social worker to someone who has had experience. So, I'd really like to ask someone who has moved out of care and is living in their own accommodation... (young person)*

The involvement of the mentor in the overall team varied between placements, sometimes they were very involved but in others they felt more isolated, for example not being invited to progress meetings. This made it difficult for them to work towards shared goals.

Mentors reported in interviews that the supervision offered to them had been very helpful but the style had varied over the course of the programme. Some said they had found therapeutic supervision very helpful when this was offered. The providers subsequently informed us that they had changed provision to see if a reflective practise approach would increase engagement by the mentors and that subsequently it was a qualified social worker who undertook the supervision of mentors.

There was a suggestion that mentors had become more involved and more valued over this second year, but also that there were differences between working for placements within the different provider agencies (i.e. FCA, ACS or Fostering People).

**The role of therapy:** The role of the therapist was also seen as very important and carers felt supported by them. Carers suggested that they offered emotional support and reassurance as well as potential strategies. They often had more time than supervising social workers and were responsive to carers, talking with them out-of-hours and coming to the placement when needed.

*...she'd often say, 'Just tell me how you feel', and it would help so much for me, that I could... I didn't have to be professional; I could just say to her, 'I just feel scared', and she would just give me strategies for situations (foster carer)*

Therapists also had a role in helping the team develop a mutual understanding of the young person's emotional distress and consequent behaviours, as well as advising particular members of the team in how to tackle specific issues. This allowed the team to work with the young person in a consistent way that was also appropriate to their individual needs.

*...[therapist] can guide me and I've asked him for different support in different areas with [young person] ...she used to tell a lot of lies and she'd say one thing to me as a support worker, and one to [foster carer] and then we got together and the therapist would tell us why she was doing that (support worker)*

Again, the perceived importance of the role of the therapist has implications for the few placements where therapists were not involved.

**Support for carers:** Carers felt very well supported and this allowed them to cope with placements that they might not have coped with as standard placements.

*I think the needs were too great for us just to manage it. I think, if it was just us with [young person], we would've struggled. The support really made a difference (foster carer)*

*I've had fantastic support...I don't think it would have lasted as long without the support you get (foster carer)*

Several carers initially felt the support would be too much but soon came to value it.

*Initially I thought we don't need that much support...as time progressed we realised we won't be able to cope without support, especially in this particular placement. This type of placement support is mandatory, definitely mandatory... (foster carer)*

Carers who genuinely did not need the levels of support on offer valued the flexibility and knowledge that whilst they could agree, for example, to have supervision less often, the support would be there promptly for them if they needed it. However, in some placements carers found the set stages of reducing support did not suit them and they would have preferred to have the most intense support at times to suit the needs of the particular child.

Support was offered by individuals and the team as a whole and carers felt they were part of a team. Reassurance from others, the chance to 'let off steam' and readily available support and advice helped them to provide a consistent care environment and the crucial stability. Reassurance also allayed 'panic' which some carers felt might have led to a disruption in placement.

### ***Professionals working together to provide shared solutions to problems***

**Role of meetings:** Progress meetings were usually seen as important or 'fundamental' to the placement, but not all views were positive. Meetings were used very differently across placements. At a minimum, they provided a chance to pool information and 'complete the jigsaw', minimise the chances of the young person 'playing people off against each other' and provide the carer with a chance to 'offload' and receive reassurance. In some cases, it did not seem to go beyond this, whilst in others a lot more proactive work took place and this could be linked to positive outcomes. This is illustrated in two case examples:

<b>Examples of the way progress meetings were perceived and used</b>
<p>Case one: Meetings were described as quite long and 'we just discuss what's going on and what support is needed'</p> <p>In response to being asked if meetings were useful the foster carer said "I guess because you can get things off your chest mainly"</p> <p>The children's social worker felt the meetings dragged on and did not achieve anything. They just shared information: <i>...it doesn't come out to me that there's certain aims and objectives, tasks and outcomes... the rest of the professionals, I'm not clear on what their tasks are doing for [young person]...</i></p>
<p>Case two: The children's social worker felt that everyone communicated well. Team members reported that together they were considering how to build the young person's resilience. They agreed strategies and each person's role in this. The therapists had helped other team members understand the causes of certain behaviours. The therapist and social worker provided advice to the support worker on how to deal with specific issues and also how to develop the young person in terms of their social interactions and making friends. Professionals discussed in the meeting how best to help school understand the young person better and manage and respond to her more fairly. The child's social worker</p>

explained how this would usually be solely her role and how she appreciated the support with it.

The young person was seen to have developed skills and confidence in various activities and to have built relationships with all members of the team.

There had been a reduction in self harm.

In the week 45 interview, the young person said she was good at school work and that she would not have said that a year ago.

To some extent, the way progress meetings were used responded to the level of difficulties the young person presented. However, the way meetings were being used in some placements clearly suggests that others (where there were suggestions that there was not much to discuss or do when things were going well) could consider building more proactively on the good times as well as reacting to crises and more difficult times.

**The practicalities of progress meetings and working together:** In some placements, there was concern about too many people being involved and this being confusing for the young person or making it difficult to keep everyone up to date. In a few placements, there were some differences of opinion about how to address specific issues with young people which had caused some difficulties for carers. The placements where professionals appeared to be working best together suggest that these concerns can be mitigated by clear leadership and ensuring clear goals. (In some placements there was a belief that as a therapeutic placement, the meetings would be led by the therapists. In others, professionals shared leadership or were not sure who should be leading.)

There continued to be concerns about frequent changes in local authority social workers and about them not being fully involved in progress meetings and other aspects of the placements. However, there were also some very positive accounts of children's social workers contributing effectively to the team. Distance of placements from Birmingham did not seem to be a factor and it appeared that having a 'long distance' placement may have encouraged social workers to be more diligent about making 4-6 weekly visits. When social workers had known a child for a long time this was seen as particularly beneficial as they were able to predict when problems might occur in placements and help the team prepare for these. They were also in the best position to identify positive changes which allowed the team to praise the young person for these. Knowing the child's family well was also beneficial in helping the team help the child to put their emotions and feelings in context.

Social workers who had taken over cases during the placement had not always been informed about Step Down and their role in it. New social workers felt they had to initially focus on getting to know the young person and because they did not have the relationship necessary to start direct work such as life story work, this sometimes caused delays.

### ***Supporting the young person***

**Level of support:** All interviewees felt the young people were well supported with none identifying anything missing from this. In the placements where team members were working proactively with each other, they felt this helped them understand and respond to the young person's needs

*Because all the professionals involved see her in different settings, we're learning from each other how to support her...I've learned from the family therapist but we've also*

*learned from the mentor how she's responded to certain situations and what makes her angry, what helps her...(children's social worker)*

Some local authority social workers explained how the level of support around the young person allowed them to make mistakes and then be supported to make 'the right' decisions.

**Establishment of safe, consistent and secure environment:** Placements were clearly seen to be offering stability and a safe and consistent environment. Local authority social workers for some young people commented that the length of the Step Down placement had exceeded any of their previous placements. This was attributed to some extent to good relationships (which suggests good matching), but perhaps most importantly to the support of the team which allowed the foster carer to demonstrate that they did not intend to give up on the young person.

*...even though [young person] has been trying to sabotage it, this is where I'm saying where things are so good... [carer] has stood like a rock... hey, I know what you're doing, right. I'm still here to support you. And no matter what you try and do to me, it's not going to work because I'm still here to help you. (children's social worker)*

All of the young people said they were happy in their placements. When asked what the best thing about living there was replies included:

*Everything... it's just really nice*

And

*I don't know. The best thing of living here is living here*

Some young people were reported to have bonded swiftly with carers and to have settled quickly. In other cases, this took more time but all the young people who were in placement at week 45 were reported to have settled well.

**Building Young Peoples' resilience:** In some placements teams, had been actively working together to build young people's resilience. In others, such work was attributed to carers and mentors or support workers and not explicitly related to the team parenting approach. It is possible, especially given the number of new carers involved, that the wider team and team meetings were more influential but carers not making the links and supervising social workers under reporting their contribution.

The main way in which carers were seen to be contributing to young peoples' emotional wellbeing was by making them feel included as part of the family and by giving them time and attention. Building good relationships in this way was linked to young people investing in their placements:

*Say like when I was in the home I just can't be bothered. I used to be naughty every day at school. But here I do try. I try for [carers] (young person)*

Participation in positive activities, both with foster families and with support workers was strongly linked to improving self-esteem because it gave young people opportunities to succeed and to have others acknowledge their achievements.



*She listens to instruction and follows it and then she gets praise for that and thinks tall and she walks tall when she gets off the horse. It really does build her self-esteem.... we're on the settlement phase ... we've chosen to keep this horse riding on because I think it's good for her self-esteem (support worker)*

When young people were described as seeming happier this was sometimes linked to the fact that they had a variety of people they could talk to. Similarly, there were suggestions that one of the reasons the programme works well is because young people realise that they have a whole team of people around them who care about them and want to see them do well.

Support workers and mentors worked directly with young people to help them choose friends who might have a more positive impact on their lives and to help them understand how to maintain friendships. They discussed with young people appropriate behaviour in various social situations and reported progress as a result of this. These changes were also linked to increased self-esteem.

**Education and school:** Just over half of the young people moved schools when they moved into their Step Down placement but there is no overall picture in terms of the impact of this. Some young people (and the team around them) had hoped that a change of school would provide a fresh start but in fact the same difficulties as before quickly became apparent. In some cases, school moves were positive because the young person was now seen as being 'in the right school' for them. When young people had not moved school, this could also be problematic because of the long journey to school and because they had no school friends living close to them.

School was a difficult issue for many of the young people. In some placements, the team had worked successfully to promote the young person's engagement in school and help them to understand the value of education rather than seeing school as a place you have to attend. One such young person told the researcher in the week 45 interview that school was 'much better' than last year, that she liked it more and that was because *I know that if I don't start behaving now, I'm not going to get a job, end of.*

In the majority of cases, school staff were seen as being supportive of placements and good at communicating with foster carers. School staff did not always attend progress meetings but when they did this was viewed as very helpful because they 'provided another piece of the jigsaw' in the overall understanding of the young person. This was especially important in placements where the young person behaved very differently in school and at home. A chance for school staff to meet the therapist was also seen as beneficial. In some placements, the progress meetings were held in school to allow someone from school to attend.

When young people were not at school, this caused problems as even with the involvement of support staff, they had long hours unoccupied. This was seen as likely to have contributed to some placement disruptions.

Different views emerged from the interviews of the role of the Education Liaison Officer. This might have reflected intentional flexibility or some uncertainty about respective roles that might be worth clarifying. When the Education Liaison Officer was involved with placements, they helped to find appropriate education provision and advocated for young people in terms of their rights to receive support or sit exams or to make sure they were given work at an appropriate level.

**The influence of the one year target on the programme:** On 1<sup>st</sup> December 2016, less than half of the young people who had graduated at week 52 were still with the carers from whom they had graduated. Some of these placements looked vulnerable at the week 45 interviews but others reported a high degree of stability at this stage and there were suggestions that placements would become permanent.

This rate of attrition suggests that the 52-week target may have been problematic. Ostensibly, the reasons for the disruptions (internally or externally) were all different but there were some suggestions of underlying factors that might impact on the continuation of placements after the year has been reached:

- Carers concern about losing support. In reality it appeared that in most cases, a continued package of support was negotiated but it is possible that carers' concerns about this may impact on their perceived abilities to continue with the placement. If this is the case, it presents an argument for agreeing ongoing support at an earlier stage.

*...after the first year these people go away, a year's no time at all. It takes a year for [young person], for any child and family to get to know each other, to work out what works and what doesn't. [Young person] wasn't ready for a lot of it before, all the therapy, and now she is ready (foster carer)*

- The difficulty of caring for young people with very challenging behaviour may not reduce much in the space of one year and there was suggestion that carers may not be willing to continue at a lower rate of pay and this was especially relevant if they were approved for more than one placement but felt unable to foster another child alongside the Step Down placement. (There were however carers who were very willing to do this.)
- There was some suggestion, particularly from children's social workers, that disruption around a year into the placement may be related to attachment issues. At this time, the young person may show more challenging behaviour either because they feel more comfortable or because this is the time when they may be faced with therapy or life story work.

*I think he's become more challenging. He's testing. He's testing the boundaries...he's developing ... I'd say he's being part of the family, where he fits in with the family. So, yes, it's normal behaviour to me (children's social worker at week 45 interview)*

- Interviewees in many placements suggested that the placement would not have lasted as long as it did (or had done so far) without the support of Step Down. In such cases, disruption at, or soon after 52 weeks, may be seen as a positive achievement.

## Learning from placements that disrupted

Four placements disrupted during this second year of the programme. The 'main' reasons given for the disruption of each placement are unique to the individual placements and not related to the Stepdown programme per se. They include:

- A combination of the young person having their own agenda (to get back to the Birmingham area) and meeting up with previous acquaintances from the looked-after

system which contributed to behaviours that left the carer unable to keep the young person safe.

- The local authority social worker keeping the place at the residential unit open for a young person who had only said they wanted to 'try' a foster placement. (Whilst acknowledging that this gave the young person control, the supervising social worker also felt that this is what ultimately caused the disruption.)
- A young person continuing to attend a school attached to their residential unit and being placed close to the residential unit so that contact with peers there was maintained both at school and socially. Ultimately, the young person wanted to return to the residential unit.
- A young person who only wanted to be with their birth family. The overall opinion was that the placement was sabotaged by the family and the young person's relationship with them (e.g. continually on the phone to them). Again, towards the end of the placement the young person was asking to return to the residential unit.
- A young person with complex and challenging behaviour who badly wanted the opportunity of Step Down was not able, in the event, to behave in a way that would maintain the placement. (This raises issues for programmes like Step Down that have time defined targets – this young person was offered an opportunity from which they partially benefitted even though the chances of meeting the target were unlikely.)

Aside from the identified 'main' reasons for disruptions a number of potential contributory factors can be identified:

#### **Ensuring suitability of young person for Step Down programme**

- In one case where Step Down was the social worker's idea, he felt the young person's behaviours had settled during her time at the residential unit, but staff there felt she was not ready to move. The foster carer was concerned at the point of placement that there was no real commitment to it from the young person.
- A suggestion that the residential unit was regulating a young person's behaviour so that although they appeared ready to move to foster care, they had not learnt to regulate their behaviour themselves.
- In a case where one of the main reasons for the location of the placement was to facilitate family contact, parents said they wanted no further contact during the introductory phase. The supervising social worker questioned whether the planned placement should have continued at this point and was unsure how aware the young person was of the parents' decision. (There is an argument that the location provided opportunity to build bridges but there is nothing to suggest this was attempted and the young person visited parents in an unplanned way which caused distress and was seen to be a contributing factor to the instability within the placement. likely factor in the instability within the placement).
- In at least two cases, the close relationship with family and ensuing issues regarding loyalty were seen as making a foster placement very difficult, but this was also the case in at least one successful placement.

#### **Information and Matching**

- A match was agreed by core assets on the basis of the initial referral, but the supervising social worker questioned whether this match would have been made in the light of information received subsequently. In this placement, the residential unit was not represented at meetings and the carer did not receive verbal information from them -which is highlighted elsewhere as being particularly important:

*...we got it [subsequent information] because we went and sat and read files...and if I ever work on a SIBs placement again, I will do that prior to matching. (supervising social worker)*

- A young person was placed with a single carer despite the referral asking for a couple. There were good reasons for this, and as acknowledged by interviewees, no placement is ever going to match all requirements, but with hindsight social workers did question whether this might have been a mistake and the carer felt the placement would have been less likely to disrupt if she had had a partner in the house.

#### **Making sure all practicalities are in place before the young person moves into placement**

- For one young person not having an education placement or mentor in place were seen as contributory factors. Having a lot of spare time allowed the young person to get involved in the activities that led to the disruption of the placement. The need to address progress with these issues also became the main focus of early meetings. The children's social worker (who had had other experiences of the Step Down programme) said that this is the one thing she would criticise in the programme.

*For me, I would want everything in place. I don't think I'd consider it again, or I wouldn't really be overly happy about it if they were going to move without having an education placement to go to (children's social worker)*

- In two placements, there was no mentor present in the introductory phase and in one there was no mentor at all. This is not unique to disrupted placements but the role of the mentor was identified as helpful in the wider evaluation.

#### **Difficulties when the team is not present**

- During a difficult week before one of the disruptions, the therapist and support worker were on annual leave, the local authority social work had left and not been replaced and no mentor had been appointed - so there was no 'team' beyond the carers and supervising social worker.

#### **Other comments**

- In four of these placements social workers and foster carers commented that young people were bored and missed the activity and excitement of the residential unit (but such comments were also made about some very successful placements).
- All carers felt well supported at the time of the disruption but one was not offered any further support following this and felt this would have been helpful, for her and her family. Those who did receive this support felt it was very beneficial.
- None of the carers felt unhappy about taking Step Down Placements again, but one wanted a break first and one felt the need to gain further fostering experience and undertake more training first.
- The two children's social workers who were interviewed would use the Step Down programme again.
- The local authority social worker for the young person whose placement disrupted after week 14 interviews still felt that the young person had benefited from the placement and identified some positive changes in relationships with others.

## Conclusion

The response to the programme from interviewees of all designations was generally very positive. Stability of placements has, on average increased, 70% of the 20 placements to date remaining stable though one of these only began three months ago. Young people are engaging in much higher level of activities than they were in their prior residential placements. The programme was seen to offer individualised support to young people and to support carers well and thus to maintain placements that interviewees believed would not have worked as standard placements. It is also possible that young people who appear 'hard to place' 'on paper' are being placed through the Step Down programme. There is a strong message for fostering services in general about how positive young people were about meeting their carers and moving into a placement in a gradual way.

## Recommendations

### During the planning stage

- It is crucial that someone in the local authority is always available in the early stages to agree the placement so that introductions can start promptly.
- Promote opportunities for the verbal transfer of information during the planning stage and ensure the carer has all available information before meeting the young person.
- Make sure all practical details (e.g. school transport and passport applications) are agreed and actioned before a placement commences.
- Carefully consider requests for no mentor or support worker, ensuring the placing social work is aware of the potential benefits of these roles. Where there is initial agreement for no mentor or support worker this could be reviewed at a later date.

### During the placement

- When there are moves of placement within the Step Down Programme ensure that new carers are fully informed about the programme.
- When there are changes of Children's Social Worker within the duration of the Step Down Placement ensure the new Social Worker is well informed about the programme.
- Continue to support newly approved carers to put training into practice, encourage them to attend Attune groups and make sure they feel able to ask for support.
- Make sure the understanding of the mentor role is consistent amongst all professionals involved, especially in terms of their involvement in progress meetings.
- Provide an opportunity for mentors to feedback to the programme managers on the supervision that they receive.
- Consideration should be given as to how schools might become more engaged both in collecting the data and providing support.
- Clear guidance is needed about the involvement of young people in progress meetings, including about how their views are represented if they are not present.
- Teams should consider whether they can use progress meetings more proactively, especially when placements are running more smoothly.

### **Following the placement**

- Agree any ongoing support package well before the 52 weeks of placement is reached.

### **Additional points relating to the evaluation process**

- The evaluation team needs to try to draw out more explicit links between team work and outcomes.

The following three case studies combine data from different individuals in order to meet the ethical requirements of anonymity agreed with the young people who are participating.

## Case Study: Young Person One

### **Brief Background**

Young Person One was aged 13 on placement. She had been in a residential placement for about six months before entering the Step Down programme. She had been in several foster placements previously but was placed in a residential unit primarily because there were no suitable foster placements for her at the time. Although she demonstrated quite difficult behaviour, she felt out of place there suggesting that other young people were 'badly behaved' and influencing her. Her general behaviour could be very challenging but her main difficulties were in education where she struggled to maintain peer relationships and thus to cope at school.

### **Matching and Transition to foster care**

This young person was offered alternative carers and was able to visit both and make a choice. Subsequently she felt that she was informed rather than consulted about plans during the introductory phase. She complained about this and was given the opportunity to change any plans that she wished to.

The young person and carers felt they had 'clicked' when they first met and all were very happy with the match. The foster carers were experienced and fully aware of the Step Down programme and their role in it.

### **Placement**

Young Person One remained in her placement for just over a year and then moved to an alternative Core Assets placement.

### **Team Parenting**

By week 45, Young Person One had had three local authority social workers. The second social worker was not very well engaged with the placement and rarely attended progress meetings. There were difficulties getting hold of her and she was never able to make any suggested dates. Eventually, the supervising social worker decided to just set a date that others could make and the local authority social worker could either attend or send apologies, and suggested this was a learning point for her for future placements.

Despite not attending progress meetings, this social worker still made decisions, for example about whether the young person could stay with friends. Both the supervising social worker and the foster carer felt the child's social worker was too rigid and underestimated the carers' ability to make their own decisions. They felt that this social worker did not really understand the programme.

Young Person One attended her progress meetings but her (third) social worker did not feel this had been very productive for her, suggesting there were too many professionals firing questions at her including the discussion of relationships and safe sex.

### **Education**

School was the area where there were consistently most difficulties for Young Person One. She did not make much progress throughout the year in terms of maintaining peer relationships but she did make some achievements academically and most importantly, she began to consider her future and make plans for further study.

**Emotional needs**

The team worked well together in terms of meeting emotional needs and making sure that the carers were well equipped to cope with self-harm. Some progress was identified but this was hampered by upsets from the young person's birth family. Young Person One identified that she felt calmer and felt very safe and secure in her placement. Whilst progress in emotional wellbeing was identified, there was also acknowledgement that one year was a short time and that much of the year had been spent creating stability for the young person.

**Support for carers**

The carers felt well supported by their social worker, the therapist and the mentor and support worker. As well as working with the young person, the mentor provided a useful sounding board for the carers.

**Summary**

This is an example of a successful placement where the young person felt she had been listened to and where experienced carers were able to cope with very challenging behaviour, especially at school and with peers. The 'weak link' was the local authority social worker and although this caused some tensions and practical difficulties, the rest of the team was able to cope with this and ensure the success of the placement.



## Case Study: Young Person Two

### **Brief Background**

Young Person Two was aged 12 years on placement. His social worker described him as having very complex needs and he had had multiple placement disruptions previously. He had been in a residential unit for about a year, although it was initially intended to provide a short-term placement following the disruption of a foster care placement where the young person had been for several years.

### **Matching and Transition to foster care**

The foster carers were newly approved and this was their first placement. Their assessor had discussed the placement of children from residential care with them during their Form F assessment, and the carers had expressed an interest in the programme because of all the extra support offered. Two young people were considered for placement and the supervising social worker shared both of the referrals with the carers and obtained any further information needed to answer their questions. The supervising social worker felt that although newly approved, the carers had very relevant life and work experiences and that the introduction period went so smoothly because the carers were 'easy to work with'.

### **Placement**

Young Person Two graduated from Step Down and remains with his carers.

The supervising social worker felt that these newly approved carers coped well because they attended a lot of training and the Attune group and carer support groups. The carers felt they had 'been lucky' with their placement compared to some of the difficulties they had heard about during training and said how useful the training and Attune group had been and how they had had the opportunity to discuss possible strategies with other carers.

### **Team Parenting**

The team worked well together but saw meetings as mostly for information sharing and they appeared to react to current issues rather than planning proactively. For example, Life story work was reported to be imminent at both week 14 and week 45 interviews. Young Person Two did not have a mentor or support workers (at the request of the local authority) so it was not clear how his views were represented. The foster carers felt he was missing out on having someone outside of the family to talk to.

### **Education**

One of the main difficulties for this young person was the fact that transport arrangements for school were not arranged before placement. The young person used a taxi to get to school and there was no agreement about who would fund this. For many months, the carers paid for it but resented this as they felt it effectively negated the extra income they received for the Step Down placement. Eventually, an agreement was reached where the carers paid for part of the costs, but the placing social worker said she had learnt a lesson about making sure such things were sorted out at the placement stage.

The school was engaged with the placement and communicated well with the carer. Teachers informed the supervising social worker that the young person was regularly handing in homework which is something he had not done when at the residential unit. The child's social worker also reported that school staff said the move from residential to the Step Down placement appeared to go smoothly with no negative impacts on the young person's

behaviour or achievement at school. Initially, the school were not able to attend progress meetings due the timing of them but the team moved the meetings to after school time and held some at the school to accommodate their attendance.

### **Emotional needs**

When at the residential unit, Young Person Two was not interested in hygiene and when he arrived at the placement would not shower and did not change his clothes. The carers worked very hard on this and reported progress at the week 14 interview and further progress by week 45.

Young Person Two has been supported by the therapist, particularly in terms of his peer relationships. Professionals felt that he might not accept the idea of seeing the therapist so they introduced the therapist gradually, with her coming to the home to see the carer and 'having a cup of tea' with the carers and young person together so that by the time it was suggested, he knew the therapist and was happy to see her himself.

### **Support for carers**

The carer reported that she initially did not see the need for support from the therapist but within a few weeks she was very relieved to have someone to talk to about the placement.

The carer recognised some issues relating to her lack of experience. In particular, she recognised that she had been naive in letting the young person out to play without considering the possible consequences. Attending the Attune group had helped her to realise that contrary to her nature, she would not be able to 'fix everything' immediately.

She was also reticent in contacting and prompting the social worker to organise contact with birth parents, as she had promised to do, feeling this was not her place. With more experience, she might have been more pro-active in advocating for the young person.

### **Summary**

This case illustrates the potential difficulties and advantages for new carers fostering as part of the Step Down programme. In this case, the carers had very relevant life experience and although there were some issues that might not have arisen with more experienced carers the placement was successful. The placement was very well supported by the supervising social worker and therapist but there were issues a mentor or support worker might have helped with, if they had been appointed.

## Case Study: Young Person Three

### **Brief Background**

Young Person Three was aged 15 on placement. She had been looked after since she was very young and was described as very complex, with very challenging behaviour and at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Her family was well known to Birmingham Children's Services and her father described as dangerous.

### **Matching and Transition to foster care**

Young Person Three has been moved three times within the programme and by the week 45 interviews was with her fourth carer. Her first placement appeared to be a good match. She was placed with carers who had some experience with teenagers and it was in the desired location. It was also a single placement which was considered important as this young person had struggled with sharing attention in a residential environment. She was fully involved in the planning stage and ready to move. Moves following this were all made at short notice and the young person did not have the opportunity to meet with subsequent carers before moving in with them.

### **Placement**

The first placement went well for a couple of months but then Young Person Three started to push boundaries and stay away from the placement until the carers reached the point where they felt they could not keep her safe. The local authority social worker praised the level of support provided to this placement but questioned the carers' experience and skills to contain the young person and manage her behaviour. Whilst acknowledging that no one can know what could have happened, she felt that more experienced carers might have handled the behaviour more appropriately. The young person was then in a respite placement for a matter of weeks before moving to another Step Down placement. This time, the location of the placement was seen as the main difficulty. This placement was too close to the young person's family and former friends and she went missing a number of times and was considered to be at high risk of CSE. The decision to move the young person was made by the professionals on the grounds of maintaining her safety. Young Person Three was moved to a fourth placement where she appeared to settle well and the clock was restarted on her placement.

### **Team Parenting**

By the time Young Person Three was in her fourth foster placement she had had three social workers. They had all been involved with her placement and attended team meetings but there was nobody with an overall knowledge and understanding of her. Monthly team meetings were seen by all involved as being very helpful and the team was consistently reported as being supportive and working well together.

### **Education**

Education for this young person was disrupted by her frequent moves but also she did not like school and was frequently excluded. Eventually, she built a relationship with a support worker who offered support when she was not in school but this was difficult and she initially refused to engage with the support worker at all. At the time of interviews Young Person Three had just started at a new alternative education provision. This had been a little shaky as she felt she would not be able to make friends with the other young people there but she was conscious that she was behind in her education and was expressing some commitment to attending.

**Emotional needs**

It was difficult to meet this young person's emotional needs as she was frequently missing from placement and refused to engage with the therapist or other professionals. When interviewed, the young person did not feel she had changed at all since leaving residential care. However, the supervising social worker felt she had built a good relationship with carer three, based on a shared sense of humour and had begun to trust her. Both social workers felt that despite the number of moves, Young Person Three was happier and more relaxed.

**Support for carer**

Carers one and three felt well supported. (Carer two, a respite carer was not interviewed and carer four has not yet been interviewed.)

**Summary**

This is a case that has proved more difficult and a number of possible causes for this are raised. However, this young person who is identified as having very complex difficulties and behaviours is still being cared for within the Step Down programme 17 months after her initial placement and the high level of teamwork appears to have been an important factor in this. This case illustrates how difficult it is to keep young people safe from CSE. Young Person Three was placed both away from and within the area where family and previous contacts lived but neither were fully successful in protecting her.