



Acknowledgements

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

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Acknowledgements (continued)

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

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

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

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

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

This briefing paper provides a summary of the findings, which are explained in more detail in the full report, available



Work with families

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

Looked-after children in England and Wales

In England and Wales, the term 'looked-after' is applied to children and young people who are looked-after by a local authority, as defined under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989.¹ This can include children who live apart from their birth parents as well as those who are 'looked-after' but 'placed with parents' (five per cent of those in the English care system). Most children in England who live apart from their birth parents are not within the looked-after system; many live with family and friends but are not looked-after, while others have left the looked-after system through pathways to legal permanence including adoption, special guardianship and residence orders. Almost 2000 others live in youth custody settings.² Our research focuses on looked-after children in placements away from their birth parents rather than encompassing all children and young people who live away from their birth parents.

Populations of looked-after children (LAC)³ vary considerably across the four countries in the study (see

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

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

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

For families where direct involvement is appropriate, the Danish concept of '*samvær*'

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

Return to family or placement?

Many children who are looked-after in England return to live with their parents – the largest group of those who cease to be looked-after as children (37 per cent). Many go home from placement within a relatively short time: 45 per cent of those who ceased to be looked-after in 2012 had been

Conclusions

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

- Policy in all four countries – including England – makes reference to work with families when children are in care, but policy frameworks say little about how parent and family involvement might be achieved in practice. This situation was changing in Denmark, France and the Netherlands, where recent legislation has placed increased emphasis on birth parent involvement, and accompanying guidance addresses family involvement.
- The research highlighted a fundamental ambivalence about work with parents, tied to concern about the potential risks and problems of parent and family involvement, given the difficulties that can lead a child to be placed in care. In child protection focused systems, 'best interests' can become equated with keeping the child safe. Once that is achieved, pressure on social services teams is relieved and work with parents and families can cease to be a priority.
- Many stakeholders cautioned that children's rights and needs (and best interests) should not be supplanted by a focus on parents' rights – although it was equally noted that the two are not necessarily in conflict.

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

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