

# Permanently Progressing?

## Building Secure Futures for Children in Scotland

### Annual Update: Spring 2022

In 2020, 14,458 children were 'looked after' in Scotland on 31st July, a rate of 139 children per 10,000 of the under 18 population.<sup>1</sup> Despite the numbers of children who are looked after, until recently there was limited research about their pathways through the Scottish care system, the balance of voluntary and compulsory placements, the routes taken and time to permanence (or impermanence), and what influences children's outcomes and wellbeing. Since 2014, the *Permanently Progressing?* study has been gathering information on all 1,836 children who became looked after at or away from home in Scotland when they were aged five or under in 2012-13. This longitudinal mixed methods research project is exploring children's progress at key life stages (early childhood, middle childhood and late adolescence/early adulthood).

Phase 1 (2014-18) explored children's pre-care experiences, pathways and early outcomes. It analysed administrative data, surveys of caregivers and social workers, interviews with caregivers, and play and talk sessions with children.

Phase 2 (2020-24) started in December 2020 and is revisiting the 1,836 cohort children in middle childhood (8+). Permanence includes 'being' legally secure, as well as 'feeling' secure, and Phase 2 draws on different forms of data (information about children and their lives) to map children's pathways to permanence (or impermanence), explore their experiences, wellbeing and outcomes, identify contact and connections with people who are important to them, and the supports they receive. Phase 2 is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and a philanthropic donor.

This annual update outlines key activities during the first year of Phase 2.

#### Research team recruited

The research team comprises researchers who were involved in Phase 1, as well as new faces. The team – Adele, Alison, Helen, Jade, Linda, Maggie – span Lancaster and Stirling universities, and Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland (AFA).

#### Establishment of an advisory board

Phase 1 benefitted from the support of an advisory board, and in Phase 2 we have been lucky to recruit a strong board with personal experience of adoption, research, policy and practice.

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1. Scottish Government 2021 available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2019-20/documents/> (Links to an external site)

## **Ethics approval**

The study has been approved by the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP) at the University of Stirling and Lancaster University Ethics Panel.

## **Website**

A dedicated website at Stirling has been set up <https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/> Reports and summaries from Phase 1, including the summary for children and accompanying audio report can be accessed via the website.

## **Access to administrative data**

The data we will analyse includes pseudonymised administrative data – Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS), Child Protection Statistics, and education data. The process of accessing administrative data has been complex and time consuming. Data access and linkage was agreed in December 2021 after a successful application to the Scottish Government Statistics Public Benefit and Privacy Panel. Data Sharing Agreements with the Scottish Government have been developed and are in place.

## **Recruitment of local authorities for survey and interview strands**

Chief Social Work Officers in all 32 local authorities were sent information about the study, with follow up emails and telephone calls. Recruitment ceased on 1st December and 27 local authorities are taking part. This is excellent news – thank you to all who have agreed to participate.

## **Survey of social workers and children’s carers and adoptive parents**

After feedback from our advisory board and critical friends in practice, the information sheet and questionnaire for social workers was approved by the Ethics Panels and is currently being sent out. As we do not have children’s names this is using their Social Work ID from CLAS. Questionnaires for caregivers are being developed and will go out in autumn 2022.

## **Interviews with children, carers, adoptive parents and parents whose child no longer lives with them**

Information sheets and interview schedules for children, carers, adoptive parents and birth parents have been designed and piloted with critical friends, people with relevant academic, practice and personal experience and have been approved by Ethics Panels. Our timeline for interviews is lengthy (2022-23) to ensure we are flexible and make it as easy as possible for children and adults to participate.

## **Funding secured**

In December 2021, a Project Report, a Methodological and Analytical Plan, and a Communications Plan was submitted to both funders, and there was a formal review by the Nuffield Foundation. Ongoing funding was confirmed in January 2022.

Dr Helen Whincup (Principal Investigator) February 2022

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