



Permanently Progressing?

Building secure futures for children: Phase 2 Middle Childhood

Findings from Birth Families

A core aim of child welfare policy and practice in Scotland is that children should experience stable, loving and permanent homes throughout their childhoods and into adulthood, and that decisions about permanence should be timely. For care experienced children in Scotland there are four routes to permanence: remaining with or being reunified to parents, with or after support (including a Compulsory Supervision Order at home); through a Permanence Order (PO); a Section 11/Kinship Care Order; and adoption. For most children, the preferred route to permanence is to remain with or return to their parents. However, some children in Scotland will grow up outside of their birth families.

On 31st July 2023, 12,206 children were looked after in Scotland (Scottish Government 2024).¹ Until relatively recently, despite the numbers of children and families involved, there were gaps in what we knew about children's pathways into and through the care system, the route and time to permanence, and what influences children's outcomes and wellbeing.

Since 2014, the longitudinal research study *Permanently Progressing?* has been addressing these gaps by gathering and analysing data on all 1,836 children who became looked after in Scotland in 2012-13 when aged five or under. It is tracking children's progress at key life stages (early childhood, middle childhood and late adolescence/early adulthood). Phase 1 (2014-18) reported in 2019, and reports and summaries are available on the study website: <https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/>

Phase 2 (2020-24)² drew on administrative data – Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) and education data, as well as surveys of children's social workers and caregivers, and interviews (with children, birth parents, kinship carers, foster carers, and adoptive parents). It paints a picture of children's lives and provides vital information for policy makers, practitioners, and children and their families.

Background

This briefing draws primarily on interviews with ten birth parents (nine mothers and one father) and focuses on their experiences including their connections with children who live apart from them, how decisions made about children were communicated, and what supports have, or would have been, been helpful. It also brings in data from interviews with 19 children and 34 caregivers, and questionnaires completed by 98 caregivers.

Language is important and we use the term birth parent to differentiate between birth and adoptive parents. However, birth parents referred to themselves as parents, without the prefix. Birth parents who participated generally referred to children as 'their children'. This reflects the biological and cultural belonging of children to their birth families, and birth parents' love for their children, but it does not necessarily reflect the legal status of children, and children may feel they 'belong' in more than one family.

All ten of the birth parents interviewed had one or more children growing up outside of their care with kin, foster or adoptive families or in residential childcare. Eight had experienced their children living apart from siblings, the remaining two had only one child each. Some birth parents who participated have one or more of their children growing up at home with them, or who returned to their care in later childhood. Some also have adult children, and two have become grandparents and are actively involved in their grandchildren's lives.

¹<https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2022-23-looked-after-children/pages/looked-after-children/>

² Reports and summaries for Phases 1 and 2 of the Permanently Progressing? study available at: <https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/>

Key findings

Children's pathways and permanence status (from birth parent interviews)

- Birth parents had not always had a clear explanation about the legal and permanence status of their children and lacked clarity years after decisions had been made about their children's futures.
- Not being sure where their children were, and whether they were safe and well, was painful for birth parents and made it impossible for them to offer other children in the family a coherent narrative or reassurance.

Children's experiences, wellbeing and outcomes (from birth parent interviews)

- Over half of birth parents reported that before their children became looked after away from home, they had not been able to meet their needs as well as they wanted to due to difficulties including physical or mental health problems, intra-familial violence and abuse, substance abuse, the impact of trauma, and a lack of resources.
- Birth parents had high aspirations for their children: they wanted them to be safe, happy, attend school and have friends. They had empathy for their children's position; for some this was a result of having been looked after away from home during their childhood.

Connections with children and support

(from interviews with birth parents, children and caregivers and caregivers questionnaire)

- All birth parents identified the need for specific support in relation to their separation from a child or children.
- Several birth parents were unclear about how arrangements for family time were decided, including why this had stopped.
- Kinship carers and parents are navigating complex relationships, and in some instances, parents disagreed with the decision to place children with wider kin.
- The most common form of contact between birth parents and adopted children is by 'letterbox'. Writing and receiving letters is emotionally hard for birth parents and adoptive parents but is an important connection. Given the significance of this connection for both families, it is an area where more specialist support is needed.
- Birth parents who had received consistent, skilled, encouraging support with 'letterbox' reported that this was helpful. Birth parents who did not have ongoing support with 'letterbox' found it difficult to sustain.
- Birth parents reported finding it more difficult to accept their child's adoption or manage 'letterbox' when the opportunity to meet adoptive parents had not been offered. Direct connection with adopters was experienced positively by birth parents, including one example of ongoing in-person contact with adopted children and their new family.

Changes in connections over time (from interviews with birth parents, children and caregivers)

- Half of birth parent participants had one or more child for whom they had retained parental rights and responsibilities, and who they had or were raising at home. Despite this, from the perspective of birth parents there appeared little room for change in the arrangements for connections with their child(ren) who were growing up outside the immediate family. Change in the birth family was not reflected through changes in connections with children.
- In contrast, from interviews with children and adoptive parents, while an absence of in-person family time between children and birth parents might appear stable and fixed, several children mentioned the possibility of future contact and nearly all adoptive parents considered children's future contact with their birth parents and other family members
- Three birth parents described unplanned increases to contact and/ or a gradual return of their older children to their care in their later teenage years. This experience was challenging for everyone due to a lack of support.

Key findings

Connections between brothers and sisters

(from interviews with birth parents, children and caregivers, and caregivers questionnaire)

- Almost half of the children whose caregivers completed a questionnaire have no contact with brothers or sisters they live apart from.
- Birth parents and caregivers identified that it was difficult to explain to children why they lived apart from siblings.
- Birth parents wanted children who remained at home or returned to their care later in childhood to be able to see their brothers and sisters.
- Birth parents found it painful when their children in foster care had become estranged from their brothers and sisters due to difficulties in arranging family time or digital contact. Even when contact was specified in a legal order, the conditions were not always observed.
- Birth parents discussed how the trauma and loss associated with being permanently separated from a brother or sister had impacted on the wellbeing and mental health of another child in the family.
- Despite 'siblings' of adopted children and adults being eligible for support from an adoption service under the provisions of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 S.1 (3)(f) birth families were not aware of this and reported that there was no support available to brothers and sisters in their local authority.

Support for birth parents and working relationships (from birth parent interviews)

- All birth parents who participated were receiving specialist support in relation to the loss of their child or children through child welfare processes. This makes our research sample unusual, as many birth family members in Scotland will receive little or no support in relation to this experience.
- Birth parents are not a homogenous group: different individuals and their families have different support needs.
- All birth parents who participated could identify a worker or service who had made a significant difference to their wellbeing and enhanced their lives.
- Practitioners working in adoption and fostering social work teams were important to half of the birth parents. The 'stickability' of social workers in this role was particularly appreciated by families.
- Birth parents' relationships to social workers in child welfare and protection roles was more ambivalent. Two participants stated that a social worker in this role had literally saved their lives. However, others described fraught working relationships with social workers. Most had felt disrespected by their child(ren)'s social workers at least once during the time they were involved. Birth parents valued honesty, compassion, and being given their place in planning for their child.

Study

This briefing draws primarily on research interviews with ten birth parents (one father and nine mothers) undertaken between 2023 and 2024. This is the first time that birth parents have participated in the *Permanently Progressing?* research study. We want to thank the ten birth parents who took part in interviews for sharing their perspectives, which have enriched the research.

The study explores whether and how permanence has been achieved for the cohort of 1,836 children. The study is a longitudinal one and uses mixed methods. Information on children's pathways and permanence status over time is primarily drawn from analysis of Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS). CLAS tells us where children are, their legal status and what changed or remained the same by 2022, but it doesn't tell us about their day-to-day experiences or those of their families. As permanence involves 'feeling' secure as well as 'being' legally secure, Phase 2 explores children's experiences through interviews with children aged nine to fifteen years (n=19), caregivers (n=34) and birth parents (n=10).

The study also drew on information from surveys of social workers (for up to 727 children) and caregivers (n=98). Education administrative data (Pupil Census) was used to consider children's additional support needs and school exclusions. Full details of the research questions and the methodology are available in the final report.

Implications for policy and practice

- All birth parents require a full understanding of key decisions that are made in relation to their children, including decisions about connections and family time, and the legal status of their children. Having contact with a practitioner who can answer questions about this over time facilitates understanding and promotes healing for birth families.
- The Promise (ICR 2020) reaffirmed that children should live with their brothers and sisters, and where this is not possible, local authorities have a duty to maintain connections. This duty is set out in Section 13 Children (Scotland) Act 2020. Almost half of the 98 children whose caregivers completed a questionnaire have no contact with brothers and sisters they live apart from. While not underestimating the sensitivity needed to maintain or renew connections, the fact that so many children do not have any form of contact with their siblings is stark.
- The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 confers an eligibility for support on birth parents and the brothers and sisters of adopted children, as well as wider family members affected by the adoption. This right is not well understood by birth families or observed by local authorities. This needs to change.
- Whole family support was a priority area in Plan 21-24 (2021), however the processes and emotions involved in accessing and using support can be complex. Children, caregivers and birth parents valued support from social workers, teachers and health professionals which was relational and empathic. Support which was instructive and not attuned to the complexities of children's and adults' lives was not helpful.
- The birth parents we interviewed were all in the (unusual) position of having received support following the loss of their child(ren) through child welfare processes. Sensitive, empathic support in relation to separation can make a real difference and needs to be offered to all birth parents.
- More flexible planning and support for children's connections with birth family members, that reflects changes over time, could be of significant benefit to children, young people, their caregivers, and to birth parents and brothers and sisters. There were concerning examples of unplanned changes in young adulthood, that had not been scaffolded to help rebuild relationships which had been fractured.

About this research

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Reports and summaries for *the Permanently Progressing?* Phase 1 (2014-18) study are available at <https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/>



The final report and summaries for Phase 2 (2020-24) are also accessible by scanning QR code:



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