

# THE DISRUPTION OF ADOPTION AND PERMANENT FOSTER PLACEMENTS

A Scottish Perspective

## PRACTICE BRIEFING 1: THE STUDY



University of Dundee

### INTRODUCTION

To better understand the factors that contribute to adoption and permanent placement disruption, and how we can better support permanent placements and disruption processes, the Adoption and Fostering Alliance (Scotland) and the University of Dundee undertook research in 2021 reviewing minutes and reports of 58 permanent placement disruption meetings from 12 Scottish local authorities. This series of practice briefings sets out the findings and key messages from the research.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The unplanned ending of a permanent placement is one of the most difficult experiences that can occur in fostering and adoption. The emotional impact for children and their families is far reaching, and for the professionals involved there are often significant and complex issues to manage. Recent research from other countries, including other parts of the UK, has investigated the extent of breakdowns in permanent placements and explored the experiences of children and families (Selwyn et al, 2014, Bombach et al, 2018). No comparable research has been conducted in Scotland to date. Although the exact number of adoption disruptions per year in Scotland is not clear, research from England and Wales suggests rates vary between 2 – 11% (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014; Wijedasa and Selwyn, 2015), which would be between 10 and 52 adoption disruptions per year in Scotland. Figures for Permanence Orders, or children placed permanently via other orders, are not known.

### RESEARCH AIMS

In this project, we aimed to:

- better understand the reasons for the disruption of permanent placements in Scotland.
- understand how disruptions are supported and managed in practice.
- identify what can be learnt from previous disruptions to help avoid future disruptions.
- highlight approaches to managing disruptions that are supportive and constructive while tackling difficult issues honestly.

### HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

The study reviewed the minutes of 58 disruption meetings of 73 children and young people, including 62 children and young people in foster placements and 11 children in adoption placements. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Dundee. Appropriate steps were taken to protect all those involved by anonymising the minutes and reports before they were shared with the researchers.

A key consideration was the different definitions of permanence. The research team recognised that even if a placement was not labelled as permanent, for those involved it may be considered or experienced as such. We know from previous research that there can be differences between objective and official permanence, and subjective or 'felt' permanence (Biehal, 2014). Thus, our review included long-term 'felt' permanent placements as well as cases where a permanent legal order or adoption order had been granted and those where the legal process to secure a Permanence Order was on-going.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### Patterns to Disruption

Overall, a pattern of four different kinds of disruptions emerged:

- 1. Adoption** Children were younger and disruptions happened relatively quickly, often during the first weeks and months of the placement.
- 2. The disruption of foster placements of children aged 6-13 years** due to escalating anger and violence, often directed at carers. These disruptions pose questions around how children and carers can be supported.
- 3. Teenage disruptions**, which reflected questions around identity and belonging, and how to respond to or support birth family contact, particularly online communication.
- 4. Disruptions related to concerns about care** provided by carers/adopters.

## SPECIFIC POINTS TO NOTE

- Rarely was ethnicity recorded or considered in the disruption review process.
- Abuse and neglect were the most common reasons for reception into accommodation; consequently, children often came to permanent placements with complex support needs.
- Children had often experienced frequent moves in care, had spent considerable amounts of time in care before moving to their current placement, and some had experienced previous placement disruptions.
- Often, introductions to permanent families were rushed or cut short, with little attention given to supporting the children and young people to manage the process of saying goodbye to former carers/families.
- Permanent carers/adopters often reported not having been provided with adequate information on the child's needs prior to, or during, placement.
- At times recommendations in the assessments had not been acted on including actions relating to life story work or further preparation of the child, additional training/support for prospective adopters/carers and recommendations about matching.
- Nearly half of the children had experienced difficulties associated with birth family contact. This was closely linked to the disruption of placements for teenagers.
- Often no or limited life story work had been undertaken to help children understand and make sense of their life experiences.
- Allegations made by the child or young person in respect of their carer(s) was identified as a contributing factor in the disruption in over 20% of foster placements.
- For around one third of children and young people, reports included a statement of additional support needs, in addition to many more reports where carers/adopters suspected additional support needs.
- Changes in social workers were reported to impact on the sharing of information about histories and the needs of children and carers/adopters. Additionally, such changes also impacted on the quality of relationships that were formed with children/young people or carers/adopters.

## KEY THEMES

The following key themes were identified:

- i) the importance of considering the whole life-course of the child/young person
- ii) ambiguities around the helpfulness of resilience as a concept to guide decision-making.
- iii) the question of what support is the 'right' kind of support, i.e. what support do children/young people and carers/adopters need?
- iv) The importance of not losing sight of the child or young person and their experiences amidst the disruption process, of involving children and young people in the process, and of recognising the strengths of placements and reflecting on what had worked well.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Documentary analysis enabled us to reflect on the 'voices' that were present or absent in those minutes, however we did not directly gather data from children and young people, carers, adopters, social workers or others directly affected by the disruptions.
- The substantial difference in the number of adoption and foster placements made it difficult to compare the two, beyond basic descriptions.
- The format, content and quality of the minutes and reports varied greatly across our sample. Some included more than 10 pages of detailed information and narrative, while some summarised the review as bullet points over 2 pages.
- Due to the way some minutes had been anonymised, our data set included a high amount of missing information.

## HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

For more information or a copy of the full study, contact:

Tim Armstrong, [t.armstrong@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:t.armstrong@dundee.ac.uk) or  
Maggie Grant, [margaret.grant@afascotland.com](mailto:margaret.grant@afascotland.com)