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**YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS
FROM RESIDENTIAL TO
FOSTER CARE**

An evaluation of Norfolk County Council's
Enhanced Fostering Services

Kate Blake-Holmes, Laura L. Cook, Ruth Payne, Jennifer Coleman
and Michael Bushell

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YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS FROM RESIDENTIAL

TO FOSTER CARE

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Project team:	Dr Kate Blake-Holmes, Dr Laura L. Cook, Dr Ruth Payne, Jennifer Coleman and Michael Bushell

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS) is a specialist service within Norfolk County Council (NCC). It was established in 2019 to support young people who require an enhanced level of support to manage the transition from residential to foster care. The EFS supports young people, foster carers and associated professionals from the initial planning, through the transition and for a year following the move to ensure stability and consistency throughout the process.

Little is known about how young people experience the transition from residential to foster care. Existing research in this area focuses on young people's moves between foster placements, entry and exit from care and transitions for young children moving from foster care to adoption. However, little is known about the specific transition for older children and young people from residential care to foster care. This study addresses this gap by gathering the views of both young people and professionals about these moves as well as providing an evaluation of the EFS in supporting young people's journeys from residential to foster care.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

In late 2020, Norfolk County Council (NCC) commissioned UEA to undertake an independent evaluation of their Enhanced Fostering Service (EFS). The evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

- How do young people experience the transition from residential to foster care and what helps or hinders this transition?
- What are young people's views and experience of the EFS in supporting their transition from

residential care to a foster home?

- What are professionals' views and experiences of EFS in relation to the young people they support?
- What can we learn from these experiences to enhance support provided to young people and inform future service provision?

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The research team spoke to young people and a range of professionals about the transition from residential to foster care and the role of the EFS. This consisted of:

- Interviews with six young people who had made the transition from residential to foster care while supported by the EFS
- Interviews with nine foster carers who had a young person placed with them from residential care while supported by the EFS
- Interviews with four Independent Reviewing Officers who had overseen care planning for a young person supported by the EFS
- Two focus groups with residential workers who had supported a young person to make the transition to foster care while supported by the EFS
- A focus group with the EFS team to identify learning from the first eighteen months of service operation

KEY FINDINGS

Four key stages were identified within young people's journey from residential to foster care, these were: assessing readiness, matching, making the transition and settling into placement.

1. Assessing readiness

Many young people expressed a strong desire to leave residential care while others were worried about being ‘pushed out’ before they were ready. Professionals needed to carefully consider how to involve young people in conversations about potential moves while minimising the anxiety and destabilising effect of these discussions on their wellbeing. Professionals viewed a period of ‘settled behaviour’, strong relationships with residential workers and ability to manage unstructured time within the residential home as indicators that a young person might be ready to move to foster care. Professionals were also influenced by ideological preference for a ‘family life’ provided by foster care. The EFS played a key role in working with young people to understand and sensitively explore their individual needs and wishes.

2. Matching

While some foster carers were previously unknown to the young person, many had a prior professional connection with the young person (e.g. they were the young person’s residential worker or teacher). Young people expressed a sense of being valued, recognised and wanted as a result of being expressly chosen by their foster carer. While these placements were often strengthened by the pre-existing relationship, these matches were sometimes motivated by the carer feeling compelled to rescue the young person from residential care or ‘the system’ which could create challenges later on. The EFS played a role in the assessment of matches and acted as a point of continuity for young person preventing them being ‘left in limbo’ while a match was being explored.

3. Making the transition

There was typically a period of transition between the young person leaving residential care and moving into the foster placement. The transition process focused on the young person meeting other members of the foster family, including other young people in the foster home, relatives, friends and family pets. ‘Transition dinners’, shopping trips and beach outings helped foster carers to get to know the young person in different settings. Foster carers also needed to begin to establish boundaries and expectations. The EFS played a pivotal role in offering ad hoc, flexible

support during this period and regular review of the pace and progress of the transition.

4. Settling into placement

In this stage young people began to settle into their foster placement over the longer-term, establishing a sense of ‘home’, a secure base and a clearer sense of their future. Once settled into placement, young people often felt safe enough to begin to process difficult past experiences. The mentalization-based support provided by EFS helped foster carers to make sense of and manage challenging or ‘testing’ behaviours as the young person adjusted to their new home.

KEY RECOMENDATIONS

The research identified key implications for practice for each of the four stages:

Assessing readiness

- Many young people in residential care have experienced numerous moves, uncertainty and instability through the course of their lives. It is therefore important for professionals to consider the impact, timing and way of introducing the possibility of another move.
- It is important to challenge assumptions that foster care is preferable to residential care for all young people. For some young people residential care is a desirable option that should not be seen as second best.

Matching

- Matches with foster carers who are known to the young person carry an elevated level of significance for the young person and as such must be carefully managed. It is important to explore foster carers’ motivations for offering a placement for the young person and consider how the relationship may change.
- Residential staff have a unique understanding of young people’s everyday lives and needs, it is therefore important for them to be involved in the matching process and attend care planning meetings.
- How, when and by whom the young person is

told about a potential match requires careful consideration. For many young people, the moment they were told about their match was an important part of their story and a significant moment in their life.

Making the transition

- It is important to develop a 'getting to know you' transition plan which is co-created by the young person and their foster carer(s). A clear plan, which includes where will I be, when, with whom and for how long? can help young people manage the transition process. The 'getting to know you' plan should be regularly reviewed and adjusted depending on how the young person is finding the transition.
- The transition period is key for establishing the relationship between the foster carer and young person. Starting the transition process to foster care be unsettling for young people. During the transition period it is important for the residential unit and foster carers to work closely together and communicate regularly so that the young person can be supported across both settings.

Settling into placement

- Once settled into placement, young people often feel safe enough to begin to process difficult past experiences and may appear to regress to an earlier stage of development. They may need additional nurturing and foster carers are likely to need additional support and advice to help them to unpick the meaning of challenging behaviour, understand the young person's needs and avoid experiencing the behaviour as a rejection.
- Young people need to feel connected to the important people in their life. Plans to maintain relationships with birth family, relatives and workers and friends from the residential unit

should be an integral part of long-term care planning.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This research provided a timely opportunity to review the work of the EFS. Although a small-scale study, it provides an understanding of the experiences of young people who have made the transition from residential to foster care.

IMPACT

The research report and findings will be launched during the CRCF Autumn seminar programme. The seminar will be attended by a range of professionals involved in supporting young people's transitions including foster carers, social workers, IROs and residential workers. The recommendations from the research will inform Norfolk County Council's transformation of fostering services across the county.

FIND OUT MORE

Dr Kate Blake-Holmes - Kate.Blake-Holmes@uea.ac.uk

HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH BRIEFING

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CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

Acting Director: Dr Laura L. Cook

EMAIL crcf@uea.ac.uk

WEB www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families