

Evaluation of Birmingham City Council's¹ Step Down Programme

Report of the Findings September 2018

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¹ In April 2018 Birmingham City Council Children's Services became Birmingham Children's Trust

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Gillian Plumridge and Judy Sebba
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Executive Summary

The Step Down Programme is a partnership between Birmingham City Council and Core Assets which started in July 2014 to bring young people out of residential homes into foster placements. It is underpinned by a Social Impact Bond contract, funded by *Bridges Ventures*, a social investor who wants to make a difference for children and young people. The social investor pays the additional cost of the service on top of the element that Birmingham City Council can meet. Provided the young person stays in a placement for 52 weeks, the social investor receives a return for their investors through payments from the delivery organisation (Core Assets) who in turn receive them from Birmingham City Council (now Birmingham Children's Trust) to cover the cost of the service that they have funded.

At the end of April 2018, 33 placements had been made via the Step Down Programme (31 young people as two were placed twice). Thirteen placements were made in year one (Nov 2014 - Oct 2015), seven in year two (Nov 2015 - Oct 2016), eight in year three (Nov 2016 - Oct 2017) and five by April 2018 during year four (Nov 2017 - April 2018).

In April 2018, twelve young people had graduated and seven were in current Step Down placements (including one for whom the clock had restarted in a second placement). Eight placements had disrupted before week 14 when the first evaluation interviews are scheduled. Four placements had disrupted between week 14 and week 45 interviews and one placement had disrupted after the week 45 interview. One placement had ended before the 52 weeks because the young person moved on to planned semi-independence.

The data in this report is based on the analysis of the quantitative information collected by Core Assets within the service delivery and 213 interviews with young people, their carers, children's and supervising social workers and the mentors (or support worker when no mentor was appointed). Thirty interviews were held with foster carers, supervising social workers and children's social workers relating to 11 disrupted placements.

Main questions addressed in the evaluation

- What evidence if any, is there that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care? What positive stability and developmental progress can be seen for these young people?
- How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?
- What have been the most important factors that have facilitated and/or acted as barriers to this transition process?
- What recommendations can be made for the future development of the Programme?

Key Findings

There are compelling reasons for expecting that the quality of a young person's life might be significantly improved by the successful completion of the Step Down Programme (e.g. what we know about better educational outcomes from foster care compared to residential care). The findings from the evaluation are mixed but on balance, both the increased stability established for many of the young people and the cost savings, suggest that it should be regarded in the main, as a success.

Cost savings

An estimate of the cost savings achieved in the Step Down Programme over the first three and a half years is nearly £2m. The savings of a 52-week placement for each young person

that completes Step Down and does not return to residential care (during or after completion) is more than £50k per young person and further savings (included in the estimated £1.9m) have been made in relation to the six young people who have remained in placements for a year since graduating, and a seventh who is progressing towards a further year.

Benefits, including stability and developmental progress of the move from residential to foster care

On average, across the first four years and assuming current placements of less than 52 weeks are stable, a 64% (20:31) stability rate has been achieved across the 31 young people, treating restarts as stable. Excluding the seven whose placements had not yet reached 52 weeks lowers this stability percentage to 42%. There is evidence that most young people achieved greater stability than they experienced prior to the Programme as indicated by their previous trajectories. There were 22 young people who had been placed within the programme more than one year ago, and therefore could potentially have graduated. Of these 12 graduated and one moved into semi-independent living, giving a 60% rate for achieving positive outcomes. Other positive outcomes noted were:

- Young people were engaging in much higher level of activities than they were in their prior residential placements
- Only eight young people had any missing episodes recorded, a slightly lower level than that noted at baseline, though they increased in the twelfth month of the placements
- Attendance at school was generally high, higher than at baseline, with poor attendance recorded for only five young people
- Seven young people had been excluded from school, three of these for more than 10 days across episodes
- Only five offending incidences were recorded during Step Down involving four young people who were not the same four who had offended previously while in residential care.

There was no significant improvement in the SDQ scores, eight young people's scores improving overall while seven worsened and five stayed the same. In contrast, in the interviews, both foster carers and social workers reported reductions in anger and self-harm. Furthermore, on attitudes to school (the PASS measure), 11 young people improved overall and five worsened, while for the other 15 there were insufficient data. The PASS data suggested stronger attitudes to teachers and work ethic and weaker preparedness for learning and confidence in self as a learner

The young person's ownership of the placement decisions

- Young people were involved in planning their inductions into the Programme to varying degrees (from actively making plans to agreeing plans drawn up by others). The level of involvement did not appear to impact on the overall outcome of the placement.
- Young people were very positive about meeting potential carers but few had been offered more than one alternative.
- The role of young people in the progress meetings varied. In some cases, these were planned to accommodate young people but they were not always invited and it was not always clear how their views were represented.
- There was evidence of young people having ownership of decisions affecting their day-to-day lives and choosing to leave or remain in placement.

Factors that have facilitated and/or acted as barriers to this transition process

Introduction period

- The introductory period gave carers and young people the chance to make more informed decisions about the match and going ahead with the placement. It allowed carers to consider behaviour management strategies before the placement started and young people to move into placements feeling they were wanted.
- Receiving information verbally was valued highly and may have led to placements that would not have been agreed on paper. The most common complaint about written information was that it was out of date.
- Involving the mentor early was seen as valuable especially in providing continuity for the young person and reassuring them about their ownership of the planning phase.

Professional roles and support

- Placements were seen to be offering stability and a safe and consistent environment and young people reported feeling safe.
- Foster carers were seen to offer appropriate skills, and after the first year, to have more knowledge and understanding of the Programme. They were praised for their resilience and ability to manage very challenging behaviour.
- Newly approved carers have been used frequently and successfully. Success was linked to carers' attendance at Attune² groups and their ability to put training into practice.
- The role of the mentor in the ongoing placement is very important and often beneficial to the carer as well as the young person. This has obvious implications for placements where there is no mentor.
- The therapist role is also important, providing advice and reassurance to carers and helping the team develop a mutual understanding of the young person's behaviours.
- Carers felt well supported and this allowed them to cope with placements they might not have coped with as standard placements.

Professionals working together to provide shared solutions to problems

- Progress meetings were used differently across placements. Some teams used them much more proactively than others and this was linked to positive outcomes.
- Involvement of a consistent local authority social worker, who knew the child and ideally their family, was very helpful both in predicting when problems may occur and in identifying progress which allowed the team to praise the young person and build self-esteem.

Supporting the young person

- Young people were well supported in placements that offered stability and a safe and consistent environment. The support of the team allowed carers to demonstrate their tenacity to young people and some young people were reported to have remained in placement for longer than they had ever done previously.
- Having good relationships and feeling part of the family were linked to young people investing in their placements. Having the team around them contributed to young people

² Attunement is described as occurring when: *a caregiver is aware of his or her emotions and can also recognize how his or her child is feeling and conveys this awareness to the child. An attuned relationship is a prerequisite to the development of both security and empathy in the young child.* (Cameron & Maginn, 2008, p. 1158, cited in Caw with Sebba, 2013, p. 72, *Team Parenting*. London: JKP.)

feeling there were people who cared about them and wanted to see them succeed. Along with significantly increased participation in positive activities, these factors contributed to building self-esteem and resilience.

- Moving school in some cases had negative impact or occasionally as positive (if the school was seen to offer a fresh start) but being out of school was seen as problematic and potentially contributed to placement disruptions. Teams that worked proactively were able to positively influence young people's views about education.
- There was mostly good communication with schools and their attendance at progress meetings was seen as positive.

Conclusion

The response to the Programme from those interviewed whatever their role, was generally very positive. Stability of placements has, on average increased from when the young people were in residential care, 20 (64%) of the 31 young people to date remaining stable though this is reduced to 42% if the seven who have not yet reached 52 weeks are excluded and 60% of the 22 who graduated achieving positive outcomes. No carers have left the Programme though the local authority requested that one not be offered further placements. Young people are engaging in much higher level of activities than they were in their prior residential placements. The Programme was seen to offer individualised support to young people and to support carers well and thus to maintain placements that those interviewed believed would not have worked as standard placements. It is also possible that young people who appear 'hard to place' 'on paper' are being placed through the Step Down Programme. There is a strong message for fostering services about placement process, given how positive young people were about meeting their carers and moving into a placement through a carefully planned process in which they were involved.

Recommendations

During the planning stage

- Ensure the carer has sufficiently detailed information before meeting the young person.
- Ensure children's social workers are involved to ratify decisions including final agreement that the placement has been approved. This has improved, but is still too variable.
- Ensure young people understand the expectation to have a mentor, sustain mentors when placements restart, geography permitting.
- Improve school transport arrangements to ensure implementation at placement commencement.
- Reinstate the characteristics of the pre-placement planning into 'crisis' moves.

During the placement

- Therapist support for foster carers needs to be provided earlier.
- Schools need to be further engaged in providing support and collecting relevant data.
- Clarify the expectation for young people to complete the SDQ.
- Discuss PASS data at PEP/progress meetings to address issues of confidence in themselves as learners and understanding expectations (such as curricular demands).

Following the placement

- Agree on any ongoing support package well before the 52 weeks of placement is reached. This has improved over the period of the evaluation, but some carers interviewed most recently at 45 weeks, did not know what the future plan was or when they would be told.

Main report

Background

The Step Down Programme is a partnership between Birmingham City Council and Core Assets which started in July 2014 to bring young people out of residential homes into foster placements. It is underpinned by a Social Impact Bond contract, funded by *Bridges Ventures*, a social investor who wants to make a difference for children and young people. The social investor pays the additional cost of the service on top of the element that Birmingham City Council can meet. Provided the young person stays in a placement for 52 weeks, the social investor receives the payments from Birmingham City Council to cover the cost of service that they have funded and to generate a return for their investors.

Aims of Step Down

The Step Down Programme aims are defined by Core Assets as to help young people move from residential care to specialist foster care with the key outcome of placement stability for the young person after 52 weeks. The Programme involves a carefully planned matching process and high levels of support including planned respite care. It is delivered in four phases:

1. **Planning** **Matching and Planning processes**
(up to 6 weeks)

Aims to match the identified needs of the young person with the experience, skills and personal qualities of foster carers and to integrate the network of professionals around the young person.

2. **Stabilisation** **Fortnightly Progress meetings**
13 weeks

The young person's placement begins and he/she is helped to feel comfortable within their fostering family. Education, a personal development plan or employment has been identified, in close collaboration with the young person. Relationships and contact with family are sensitively mediated.

3. **Settlement** **Monthly Progress meetings**
13 weeks

Aims at providing warmth, reassurance and predictability to the young person. This phase is supported through the establishment of a coherent network of professionals.

4. **Maintenance** **Monthly Progress meetings**
26 weeks

Aims to continue to provide nurture and attuned care, meeting the needs and encouraging the aspirations of the young person and building the young person's emotional resilience.

Previous evidence suggests that young people in foster care achieve better outcomes than those in residential care³.

Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation aimed to investigate whether, and how, the project supports the young person in moving from a residential home to a stable foster care placement successfully for a minimum of a year. It also considered what works well and what works less well in making, stabilising and sustaining this move and what outcomes are achieved for young people.

This final report focuses on the three and a half years of the Programme (Nov 2014 – April 2018) completed to date.

The key evaluation questions addressed are:

- What evidence is there, if any, that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care? What positive stability and developmental progress can be seen for these young people?
- How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?
- What have been the most important factors that have facilitated and/or acted as barriers to this transition process?
- What recommendations can be made for the future development of the Programme?

Evaluation Design

The evaluation combines analysis of the quantitative data collected through the service delivery, with qualitative interview data.

Qualitative Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the young person and the foster carer (face to face) and with the child's social worker, the supervising social worker and the mentor (over the telephone) at around week 14 and around week 45 of the placements. When young people remained in placement, attempts were made to interview all of these people. Where placements disrupted, interviews took place with the foster carer and the two social workers only and were over the telephone.

Quantitative data

The following data collected by Birmingham City Council and Core Assets were used in the evaluation where the evaluators received it:

- Duration of placement
- Foster carer retention
- Incidents of absconding
- School attendance
- School exclusion
- Engagement in positive activities
- Offending behaviour

³ Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I., Higgins, A. (2015). *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Rees Centre, University of Oxford, University of Bristol.

- Ofsted Happiness Scale (dropped in 2nd year)
- Pupil Assessment of Self & School (PASS)
- School attainment and progress
- Behaviour and emotional wellbeing (as indicated through SDQ scores)

SDQ, Happiness Scale and PASS were completed during the Planning and Introduction stage to provide a baseline, and then termly (approx. every 4 months) during the placement. The others were assessed on an on-going basis and were retrospectively obtained for the 12 months prior to the referral date. These data were used by Core Assets to construct individual trajectories and overall Programme outcomes.

During the second year (Nov 2016 - Oct 2017) the Ofsted Happiness Scale was replaced by the young person completing the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire as the former proved to be too influenced by current thoughts and events.

Data Collection

This report is based on the data from 213 interviews relating to 32 (as one had not yet reached week 14) of the 33 placements made via the Step Down Programme, complemented by limited quantitative data from 31 young people.

Table 1 below summarises the data that has informed this report.

In the final year of the project, an additional 100 interviews were completed:

- 37 at week 14
- 16 at week 45
- 12 relating to young people whose placements had restarted (i.e. a repeat of either week 14 or week 45 interviews that had been undertaken previously)
- 20 with social workers and carers following disruptions
- 11 after 2 years in placement
- 4 with teachers in schools attended by the young people.

For any young person placed from the beginning of year 3, only week 14 data are available. One placement disrupted around week 45 so disruption interviews were undertaken, one restarted and the others had not yet reached week 45.

Table 1: Summary of data collection and analysis for evaluation – April 2018

Source of data	Data collected
Quantitative data	33 placements (31 young people) 12 placements graduated, 13 disrupted, one young person moved on to semi-independence in a planned way and 7 are current.
Interviews with YP	21 YP interviewed. (Only 2 YP chose not to participate - others disrupted before week 14 or had not yet reached week 14.) 9 of the 21 were interviewed only at week 14 (7 have not yet reached week 14, one disrupted before week 45 and one placement was too close to disruption to be interviewed). 4 of the young people participated in further interviews after 2 years.
Interviews with Child Social Workers	CSWs were interviewed for 21 of 24 placements that reached week 14. CSWs were interviewed for 11 of the 14 placements that reached week 45 interviews.
Interviews with Supervising Social Workers	Apart from one of the earliest placements that disrupted quickly, SSWs have been interviewed at all stages for all placements.
Interviews with Foster Carers	Apart from one of the earliest placements that disrupted quickly, foster carers have been interviewed at all stages for all placements.
Interviews with Mentors	Mentors were interviewed for 17 of the 24 YP who reached week 14. 5 YP did not have mentors. 2 mentors were not available for interview, but one of these was interviewed at week 45.
Disrupted placements	11 sets of disruption interviews (one placement disrupted after week 45 interviews had taken place, one of the earliest placements disrupted very quickly so no interviews) involving: 8 CSW 11 SSW 11 foster carers

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were triangulated with one another across respondents and with the secondary analysis of quantitative data (e.g. absconding behaviour, offending, school attendance and performance where made available to the evaluators) so that data could be cross-referenced and compared at both the individual level and across the group.

Ethics

Ethical clearance for the evaluation has been given by the University of Oxford and Birmingham City Council. Interviews were recorded where consent was given and recordings destroyed once transcribed. Information sheets and consent forms for young people, foster carers, mentors and social workers were given to interviewees beforehand and any questions invited. Where young people were placed under S.20 of the Children Act 1989 (i.e.

accommodated) a birth parent was also provided with an information sheet and asked to provide written consent.

The purpose of the study was explicitly stated to all participants from the outset and contact details of the research team provided. Any indication of distress would, with participants' agreement, prompt a referral to carers and/or social workers for further support, but this did not occur. Participants' right to withdraw at any time was made explicit. All possible steps were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for participants. Nothing was said or written that enabled any individual to be identified. All young people involved were told that anonymity would be breached only if the risk of serious harm to a young person emerged through what was witnessed or disclosed, in which case an agreed local authority manager would be informed.

All data were kept confidential including storing audio recordings on a secure university server; labelling participants with anonymised codes which were stored separately to other identifying details; and removing potentially identifying details in publicly disseminated materials (thus complying with the DPA/GDPR).

Previous Recommendations

The following recommendations from previous reports have been addressed fully or partially:

During the planning stage

- Continue and extend the involvement of the young people in the decision-making process and where there is a potential conflict due to high risk in being placed in or near the 'home' area, this needs full discussion with the young person.

Response: All young people have been involved in the plans for the introduction period. There has been wide variation between agreeing to plans and actively contributing to them, but all young people interviewed reported that they were happy with their involvement.

- Absence, leave and staff turnover need to be planned for, such that the planning and preparation phase is not compromised. It is crucial that someone in the local authority is always available in the early stages to agree the placement so that introductions can start promptly.

Response: More recently there has not been any suggestion that absence of local authority staff has caused any delay in placements being made, but the involvement of children's social workers, needed to ratify decisions including final agreement about the placement, is still variable.

- Promote opportunities for the verbal transfer of information during the planning stage and ensure the carer has all available information before meeting the young person.

Response: Generally, opportunities for verbal transfer of information have improved, with carers having opportunities to meet and talk with the child's social worker/residential staff.

- Make sure all practical details (e.g. school transport and passport applications) are agreed and actioned before a placement commences.

Response: *Improvements noted in more recent placements, though still been some recent issues with school transport.*

- Carefully consider requests for no mentor or support worker, ensuring the placing social worker is aware of the potential benefits of these roles.

Response: *All except three of the young people placed have had a mentor allocated to them. There were difficulties in providing mentors for two of these young people as they were placed away from the West Midlands. The third young person chose not to have a mentor and this was offered again at a later stage, but she still declined the offer.*

During the placement

- When there are changes of children's social worker within the duration of the Step Down placement, ensure the new social worker is well informed about the Programme.

Response: *There has been some improvement with wider awareness of the Programme amongst Birmingham Children's Trust social workers although an internal survey of social workers suggests that there is further progress to be made.*

- Continue to support newly approved carers to put training into practice, encourage them to attend Attune groups and make sure they feel able to ask for support.

Response: *Newly approved carers have reported that they felt supported, though as yet, have only been interviewed at week 14.*

- Provide an opportunity for mentors to feed back to the Programme Managers on the supervision that they receive

Response: *The new Programme Manager is implementing changes to induction, training and support for mentors.*

- Teams should consider whether they can use progress meetings more proactively, especially when placements are running more smoothly

Response: *Greater involvement of the new Programme Manager is leading to more proactivity and planning in progress meetings.*

- The support from the therapist is vital, especially for the foster carers and should be maintained.

Response: *This has been maintained but needs to be provided earlier in the placement.*

There are other recommendations that have not been addressed or fully addressed and these have been incorporated into our recommendations in this final overall report.

Main Findings

Placement and Placement Stability

At the end of April 2018, 33 placements had been made via the Step Down Programme (31 young people as two were placed twice). Thirteen placements were made in year one (Nov 2014 - Oct 2015), seven in year two (Nov 2015 - Oct 2016) eight in year three (Nov 2016 - Oct 2017) and five during year four (Nov 2017 - April 2018).

In April 2018, twelve young people had graduated and seven were in current Step Down placements (including one for whom the clock had restarted in a second placement). Eight placements disrupted before week 14 when the first evaluation interviews were scheduled. Four placements disrupted between week 14 and week 45 interviews and one placement disrupted after the week 45 interview. One placement ended before the 52 weeks because the young person moved on to planned semi-independence. This gives an overall stability rate (treating two restarts as stable and including the current seven that have not yet reached 52 weeks) of 64% (20:31). Excluding the seven who have not yet reached 52 weeks gives a stability rate of 42%.

Nine of the 12 young people who graduated did this from the carer with whom they were originally placed. There were 22 young people who had been placed within the programme more than one year ago, and therefore could potentially have graduated. Of the remaining 10, eight disrupted, one restarted in a new placement and then moved on to semi-independence in a planned way, and one was restarted and is still in placement. Thus, positive outcomes were achieved for 13 of the first 22 (60%) young people placed with Step Down, and one was still in placement due to a restart.

Five of the first 12 graduates were still placed with Core Assets' carers one year after graduation. Three of these five remained in their initial placement and two were with new carers. There are two young people currently in placement (between one and two years) who could bring this total up to six or seven. However as of April 2018, neither are with their original carers and their future is uncertain. One is currently in a respite placement within Core Assets and may be returning to their initial placement. The other is still in placement but on 'rolling notice' (the carer has given intent for the placement to end but is happy for the young person to stay longer than usual to ensure a positive, planned placement end). The other five placements ended between one and two years.

Characteristics of the young people and their placements

The 31 young people placed in Step Down include 20 females (two twice) and 11 males, strongly contrasting with the care population in general in which males outnumber females. Their age at placement ranged from 11 years and 7 months to 17 years 0 months with an average of 14.3 years. Of the 31 young people in 33 placements, 21 were described as White British; three were described as being of mixed ethnicity, three as Asian, two Romanian, and two Black Caribbean.

The young people placed had a variety of care histories. Whilst the majority had experienced multiple foster placements, some others had only been in the care system relatively recently, and one young person had never been in foster care before. Comments from interviews and

on referral forms suggested that some young people were only in a residential unit because there were no suitable foster placements available. Whilst we cannot be certain what was meant by 'suitable', three children's social workers volunteered that the young people they were responsible for should not have been in a residential placement and were placed there only because of a lack of foster placements and not because of the young person's behaviours. In these cases, it is possible that either the young person did not need a Step Down placement or that the need for a specialist placement may have arisen because of their responses to the time they had spent in residential care.

Evidence that the young person has benefited from the move from residential to foster care.

Duration of placement

Table 2: Duration of the 33 placements made with Step Down

No of young people	Length of time in placement (weeks)
5	104 (2 years)
7 ¹	45-52
2 ²	14-45
10	14
9 ³	Less than 14

¹One placement disrupted between weeks 45 and 52. One young person moved to planned semi-independence.

²Four placements disrupted between weeks 14 and 45. Six young people are currently in placement.

³Eight placements disrupted before week 14. One young person in placement has not yet reached 14 weeks

Of the seven young people in placement in April 2018, six have remained in their initial placement. One young person had moved placement within Step Down and had the clock restarted.

Overall, young people in 27 of the 33 Step Down placements remained with one carer for the duration of their placement. In two of the six cases where moves were made, this was effectively to respite placements, following disruption of the initial placement, to comply with notice agreements and allow time for planning before the young person left Step Down provision completely. In four placements, young people made moves (between one and six times) but remained within the Step Down programme. One of these has graduated, one moved to planned semi-independence, one disrupted and one is still in placement. Two of the young people who were in Step Down placements after two years also made moves between one and two years.

Since the April 2017 report there has been a decrease in stability levels (70 → 64%) but the number in the cohort in placements is lower, so one disruption has a greater effect on the overall percentage.

Missing from care

There were 48 incidences of a young person going missing from their placement across the group but the average per month is less than half an episode with a significant rise in the twelfth month of the placement. All episodes occurred with only eight of the 31 young people and four were responsible for 73% of all incidences. Two young people had gone missing from care on 10 occasions, one had been missing nine times, one six times, three four times and one once. On average for each child, the levels of absconding are slightly lower compared to

the baseline taken from residential care but the numbers of young people involved are so small and individual variation so significant, that averages are very misleading.

Educational attendance

The average school attendance for the group is high and higher than the baseline taken from residential care. Some young people began attending school again after a period of not attending and two were not in school for some months after starting in the Programme. A third attended college rather than school. Attendance data at more than two timepoints are available for 19 young people. Of these, nine increased their attendance, only three from a baseline of less than 92% at baseline. Five young people continued from 100% baseline to attend 100% throughout the Programme (though not all these had completed 12 months). Two who decreased from 100% attendance dropped to 98% but a further three showed greater decreases in their attendance. The variation in levels of attendance is attributable to these five young people, making averages across the group unhelpful.

From the interviews it emerged that school has been a difficult issue for many of the young people, with difficulties most commonly relating to peer relationships but also to behaviour more generally. Often difficulties manifested themselves far more in school than at home with a feeling expressed in several placements that the young person was 'holding it together at home and letting it out at school' (interesting given foster carers scores on the SDQ were lower than those given by teachers – see below). Also, when life is difficult, school is 'the last thing on a young person's mind'. There have however been positives particularly in terms of young peoples' ambitions. In several placements, the young person had shown a shift in their understanding of education as being something with a purpose rather than school just being a place they have to go to. Young people had established aspirations since moving into their Step Down placements including wanting to go on to college or university.

Offending and exclusions

All these are, on average across the group and over the 12-month period, consistently very low. For the 25 young people for whom offending data were available, four young people had recorded offences at baseline from residential care. Only five offences were recorded in total during the Step Down Programme and the four young people who committed these were not those who had previous records at baseline.

Of the 24 young people for whom exclusion data were available, seven young people experienced fixed term exclusions of varying lengths as follows:

Table 3: Overall number and length of fixed term exclusions

Young Person	Total number of episodes	Total days excluded
1	1	2
2	1	3
3	2	4
4	2	8
5	3	28
6	3	42
7	4	14

Attitudes to Self and School (PASS)

There were data at a minimum of two timepoints for 16 young people on their self-recorded *Pupil Attitudes to Self and School* (a standardised measure of attitudes to school and learning). The scores of 11 young people showed overall improvement, two dramatically so. The scores of five worsened, two extensively so. For 15 young people, the data were incomplete, in a few cases due to the recency of entering the Programme and three young people refused to complete the assessment. Table 4 shows the numbers of young people whose scores improved or worsened on each of the nine factors in the PASS.

Table 4: Numbers of young people whose scores improved or worsened on each of the nine factors in the PASS

N=16	No. of young people whose scores improved	No. of young people whose scores worsened	No. of young people whose scores didn't change
Feelings about school	9	7	0
Perceived learning capacity	8	5	3
Self-regard as a learner	9	6	1
Preparedness for learning	8	6	2
Attitudes to teachers	10	4	2
General work ethic	12	3	1
Confidence in learning	8	6	2
Attitudes to attendance	9	5	2
Response to curriculum demands	6	5	5

While general work ethic and attitudes to teachers are high, their feelings about school, confidence and readiness to learn are lower. Given the histories of many of these young people, it is likely they have encountered school moves and low expectations, both of which might have reduced their confidence. These findings suggest that further discussion with the designated teachers for looked after children in the schools attended by young people in the Programme might be helpful. The PASS data collected could be discussed at the Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting with the carer and young person contributing their views in order to find effective ways forward.

Participation in positive activities and community integration

From the data on 28 young people about engagement in positive activities, the average number of positive activities per month per child significantly increased across the group over the Programme. The average number of activities per month per child at baseline was less than 0.5, this increased to 2-4 activities per month during the Programme peaking at months 3-6, with a slight decrease in months 9-12. Nine young people undertook more than five activities in at least several of the months in the Programme.

Most of the young people were involved in a wide variety of activities. Many reported new skills they had learnt and some reported happily that they had had the opportunity to try something they had never done and wanted to do - from activities like horse riding to having a sleepover with a friend. Most had been on a holiday and in addition to more specialised activities, had enjoyed more day-to-day activities such as meals out or visiting the cinema with their carers. Young people who were not interested in more formal clubs generally undertook a range of activities with their foster families, but there were two young people who despite the efforts of the team, were not interested in much other than being with peers or

boy/girlfriends. These young people also refused the offer of time with a support worker, thus missing that opportunity to try new activities. Two young people who were awaiting school placement following their start in the Programme, engaged in less activities.

SDQs

On average, across the 20 young people for whom SDQ scores are available at more than one timepoint, the foster carer SDQ scores are higher (worse) than those assigned by the school and the young people score themselves lowest (least problematic). Similarly, for the prosocial scale, the young people assign themselves higher scores (more positively) than either school staff or carers. This reflects the national comparative score patterns of self, school and carer for SDQs.

There are no significant improvements in SDQ scores on average across the 20 young people for whom data are available over time. Eight young people had lower overall scores over time in the Programme, suggesting improvements in behaviour, one person dramatically so. However, for seven overall scores got worse, for three of these dramatically so. Five showed no overall changes. For the remaining 11 there are as yet, no scores beyond their baseline scores.

Emotional wellbeing and resilience

Young people were most likely to report that the biggest change in them had been an improvement in managing their anger. For example, a young person talked about "smashing everything up" when in residential care, explaining that since being in the Step Down placement they felt frustrated rather than angry and "not like I want to break something or do something bad". Carers and social workers confirmed this, sometimes contrasting with the time in residential care when the young person demonstrated a lot more anger. In addition, in several placements, adults reported a reduction in self harm. Young people also often spoke about having an 'improved attitude' though this choice of phrase seemed likely to reflect something others had said to them. A mentor explained how they had seen young people become more relaxed as placements progressed and they realised they were genuinely cared about.

Other changes observed in young people included appearing calmer, happier, more relaxed, more confident, more optimistic about the future, and developing a sense of humour.

...he's developing coping mechanisms ...he's learning how to manage things ...he's becoming more decisive in what he wants (supervising social worker)

There was recognition of 'dips' during difficult times, which contributed to the view that one year is not long enough for the support offered through the Step Down Programme. Such dips were most commonly related to the young person working out feelings around their birth family, but were also attributed to a variety of other causes:

...because of becoming 17, she's realised, I've got independence coming ...she realises that one day she's going to be on her own, and she's going to have to deal with that. I think she's got a bit of anxiety around that, and seeing her brother, who's a care leaver and she sees how he struggles on a daily basis (foster carer)

Several young people were reported to have become healthier and/or to have lost excess weight and this also had a positive impact on emotional wellbeing.

He's changed his image a little bit, he's changed his hairstyle, and he just seems to be carrying himself ...he looks smart, and he's always doing his hair. So, he's gone from that little, plump lad that moved in, to a taller, smarter boy. He sort of holds his head up now, whereas before, he didn't. I mean, everybody says how different he is now, and I love it when they say that (foster carer)

It was especially encouraging to hear some young people who were able to talk positively about themselves and their achievements, for example a young person who had achieved some GCSEs despite having been at four different secondary schools:

So, thinking of the achievement there, I think I have done myself quite proud (young person)

I don't steal, I don't break things ...everyone says I've come a long way (young person)

I was a wreck when I first came here, still am a little bit, but I've changed ...I'm not that violent any more ...My attitude's changing slowly (young person)

Young people feeling safe

For young people placed since the beginning of year three, we have differentiated between feeling safe in the foster home and in the community more generally. All of the young people who were interviewed said they felt safe in their foster placements.

Yes, because there's nothing to worry about, and there's no drama. I can trust [carer] and all of that (young person)

Children's social workers were also confident that the young people they worked with felt safe in their placements. Some young people specifically said they felt safer than they did in residential care because, for example, 'you have to watch your back there' whilst others volunteered that they felt safe there too. Some suggested that they appreciated the boundaries and realised that things that they were not allowed to do were actually about being cared for and protected.

Not all young people felt safe in the community. This was usually to do with fear of family members or people they had known in the past, or people that they had previously antagonised with their behaviour. Sometimes carers and social workers acknowledged that these fears were founded but sometimes they felt that the young person overestimated them.

How far has the young person had ownership of the placement decisions?

Introduction Period

Most young people had instigated the move out of residential care into a foster placement though in three of the most recent placements, the child's social worker had instigated the move. One of these young people said he was 'not bothered' and another that she came around to the idea, but both of these were happy to have made the move with hindsight. Only one young person reported that while positive about his foster placement, he had liked living at the residential unit and had not wanted to move. His lack of enthusiasm did not seem to have impacted negatively on his placement where he had been for some months.

In terms of the introductory process, the involvement of the young person varied from agreeing plans made by others to being much more proactive in planning activities and timescales. The quote below represents the more proactive scenario:

...there was a skeleton plan and she was asked 'What do you think about this? What do you think about that?' She was given the opportunity to add her own part of the plan if she wanted to. She kind of took the position that we had a two-hour contact [then] we had a whole day and then she was given the choice of whether she wanted the next one to be overnight contact or whether she still wanted to just visit in the day (foster carer)

This difference does not appear to have impacted on overall outcomes but it suggests a difference in interpretation. In placements where young people had less proactive input, they were able to change plans if they asked to do so. A few young people were unhappy because they were not kept well informed about what was happening and consequently felt less positive about the whole experience. In one example, the young person had not been told that the mentor was coming to the residential unit to meet them, thereby damaging the initial building of this relationship. Very few young people were offered a choice of carers.

The young people we spoke to were universally positive about the idea of meeting potential carers and their comments suggested that they had understood that they had some choice and control over their move:

I would say [to a young person offered Step Down] 'Well do go and see them, like I did with [carers], if you don't feel too comfortable ask for that extra, maybe ask for a sleepover, and if you feel comfortable then move in, if you don't then just tell someone' (young person)

Some suggested this was the way foster placements should always be made:

Find that placement for them and then once you've found it, tell them that you're in a process. Tell them everything and just go for little respites. That's how you move. You don't straight away move them into a family that they don't know. You need to give them that communication (young person)

When we interviewed teams in placements where there were difficulties (usually following a disruption or a move), a common factor was that the young person had not engaged with any support (e.g. mentor, support worker or therapist). These young people needed to know in the pre-placement phase that mentors and support workers are part of the placement to which they are agreeing and to understand what to expect.

During the placement

The young person's involvement once in placement varied and was not always easy to manage. Sometimes, progress meetings were arranged at a time or place that the young person could not attend. However, as the Programme progressed more foster carers and some social workers have expressed unease about young people being involved in these meetings. Whilst acknowledging the importance of them having a voice, their presence was seen to make planning difficult and to increase stress and anxiety for the young person.

At the other extreme some young people were reported to want to lead 'normal lives' and not be constantly reminded that they are looked-after children by attending meetings and

filling in forms (for the collection of quantitative data). This was seen to be the reason why two young people chose not to engage with this evaluation. Confidence that the views of these young people are represented has increased throughout the evaluation. Children's social workers, foster carers and mentors all felt they represented their views, and mentors pointed out, that even if they did not attend progress meetings there were other ways in which young people could be involved (including attending part of the meeting) or their views communicated. The young people interviewed were always aware of when progress meetings took place. All understood that their placement was part of the Programme and most had a good understanding of what this entailed.

There were many examples of young people exercising choice in their lives more generally. These included decisions about involvement with therapy, respite and family contact. Young people had made it known when they wanted to leave a placement and indeed, when they initially wanted this, but then changed their mind. Young people who had support workers spoke very positively about them and were clearly given choices about which activities they would like to undertake, but not all had support workers and in some instances the support worker role was used for transport to school or therapy rather than doing activities.

Cost savings

Within the wider context of improving outcomes in times of austerity, cost savings are very important. Table 5 shows the cost savings for 30 young people in the Step Down Programme, the 31st young person's placement disrupted too early for this calculation to be meaningful. With the exception of one young person who was in lower than average cost residential care previously, the savings from a 52-week placement for each young person that completed Step Down and did not return to residential care (during or after completion) was over £50,000. For the six young people who were still in placement 12 months after their 'graduation' and the one young person who had remained in placement for nine months after graduation by April 2018 (final data collection), cost savings ranged from £73,000 to £205,000 for the total period since starting in Step Down. Overall, the Step Down Programme had saved nearly £2m by April 2018.

Table 5: Cost savings on the Step Down Placements

	No. of weeks of time in placement up to Apr 18	Weekly cost in residential	Overall cost in residential	Overall costs in Step Down	Cost savings
YP1	104	2,836.00	294,944.00	181792.00	113,152.00
YP2	104	2,453.62	255,176.48	181792.00	73,384.48
YP3	104	2,836.00	294,944.00	181792.00	113,152.00
YP4	104	2,836.00	294,944.00	181792.00	113,152.00
YP5	104	2,453.62	255,176.48	181792.00	73,384.48
YP6	104	2,836.00	294,944.00	181792.00	113,152.00
YP7	92	3,977.47	365,927.24	160816.00	205,111.24
YP8	52	2,836.00	147,472.00	90896.00	56,576.00
YP9	52	2,798.00	145,496.00	90896.00	54,600.00
YP10	52	2,300.00	119,600.00	90896.00	28,704.00
YP11	52	2,836.00	147,472.00	90896.00	56,576.00
YP12	52	2,836.00	147,472.00	90896.00	56,576.00
YP13	45	2,586.00	116,370.00	53550.00	62,820.00
YP14	45	2,836.00	127,620.00	53550.00	74,070.00
YP15	38	2,836.00	107,768.00	45220.00	62,548.00
YP16	37	5,500.00	203,500.00	44030.00	159,470.00
YP17	33	4,000.00	132,000.00	39270.00	92,730.00
YP18	31	2,800.00	86,800.00	36890.00	49,910.00
YP19	30	2,534.00	76,020.00	35700.00	40,320.00
YP20	30	3,100.00	93,000.00	35700.00	57,300.00
YP21	27	2,500.00	67,500.00	32130.00	35,370.00
YP22	25	2,836.00	70,900.00	29750.00	41,150.00
YP23	19	2,836.00	53,884.00	22610.00	31,274.00
YP24	13	2,836.00	36,868.00	15470.00	21,398.00
YP25	13	4,995.00	64,935.00	15470.00	49,465.00
YP26	12	2,579.49	30,953.88	14280.00	16,673.88
YP27	9	2,900.00	26,100.00	10710.00	15,390.00
YP28	7	2,738.00	19,166.00	8330.00	10,836.00
YP29	6	2,836.00	17,016.00	7140.00	9,876.00
YP30	5	2,836.00	14,180.00	5950.00	8,230.00
TOTALS			£4,108,149.08	£2,211,798.00	£1,896,351.08

Factors that have supported and/or provided barriers to this transition process

Introduction Period

Throughout the evaluation, interviewees were very positive about the introductory period. Supervising social workers were very clear about their role but some children's social workers were less involved than others and sometimes did not turn up when they were expected.

Although the involvement of the residential unit is outside of the control of the Step Down programme, it is worth mentioning how much this differs. There is nothing to link this directly to the outcomes of placements, but interviewees did feel it was beneficial when residential staff supported the young person's move, for example by helping them to prepare and coming with them to initial meetings. In contrast, some carers felt that residential staff were unnecessarily negative about the young person or being actively unhelpful.

Getting to know each other

The main benefit of the introductory period was the chance for carers and young people to get to know each other. This was seen as particularly important to young people who had previously experienced a lot of emergency moves where they had been placed with any available carers. Many carers and young people reported that once they had first met they built their relationship by phoning and texting each other as well as through subsequent meetings and young people began moving their belongings into their new home. This contributed to carers feeling better prepared, in particular in relation to behaviour management strategies, before the placement started. Young people said they felt less anxious and as if they were wanted. This was sometimes supported by carers giving welcome cards or small gifts that were personal to the young person:

The staff at the children's home told them I really like horses so they got me this Horse & Rider magazine when they first met me and I really enjoyed that, so I knew this was going to be a good placement (young person)

All participants felt that the introductory period also allowed more informed decisions about the match and the placement. All the young people interviewed said they felt confident to have said if they felt the placement was not right but some of the carers said that once they had met the young person, they would not have felt able to not go ahead.

Flexibility

Interviewees valued the flexibility in the length of the introduction period. Shorter introduction periods were usually in response to young people's wishes, but if they were for other reasons (e.g. to move before the start of term) it was always with the agreement of the young person and all professionals involved. Interviewees in some of the placements that disrupted reported that introduction periods were shorter than usual. However, some successful placements followed shorter introductory periods and these were carefully managed, especially in terms of agreement over it being the right time for the placement to go ahead.

Receiving information about the young person

Throughout the programme, information received has been variable across placements in terms of quantity, and particularly quality. In some placements all parties were entirely happy with the information received. Where there were complaints, the biggest was receiving information that was out-of-date, but there were also inaccuracies and sometimes

information was felt to be superficial. When additional information was sent or came to light after placements had started, this caused carers alarm. Foster carers felt they had been party to everything shared with Core Assets but there were a few instances where they felt information had been deliberately withheld, either by the local authority or the residential unit.

In several placements, missing information related to education and this had quite profound consequences, for example carers trying to enrol a young person in a mainstream school and being told by the school that this was inappropriate when they obtained information the carer had not seen. This resulted in considerable delay while a more appropriate educational placement was sought. Young people being out of school was noted elsewhere to contribute to placement disruptions.

The strongest message to emerge is the value placed on receiving verbal information both from residential units and children's social workers. Interviewees, particularly foster carers and mentors, felt that this provided a much fairer and more accurate picture of the young person. Written information tended to be less up-to-date and to focus on negative events without giving any feel of the time scale that they spanned. In some cases, successful placements were made on the basis of face-to-face discussions with carers who reported that they may not have agreed to the placement on the basis of just the written information provided. Thus, the Programme appears to promote the placement of young people who appear difficult to place 'on paper'.

Matching

Interviewees were generally positive about matching and felt that the process had contributed to positive placements. In more recent placements, when asked about what made a good match, carers tended to talk about a lack of anything they were concerned about, rather than identifying positives. Children's social workers noted that matching was done more carefully within Step Down than with standard placements.

I think the advantage there's been with it being a Step Down placement, is that there was a real thought and consideration into the carers, and it wasn't necessarily, let's just take a placement, because we need to take a placement. These are foster carers that know they're going to be dealing with a young person that's got potential difficulties, but are willing to accept that and work with that (children's social worker)

There was, however, evidence from the interviews that, in a very few cases placements other than those requested in the referral had been offered, and these were linked to placement disruptions.

In the third year of the Step Down Programme, young people's profiles were introduced. These were designed to be completed by the young person with the mentor and then shown to potential carers. Carers responded positively to these, and young people saw them as a way of representing themselves more fairly than others might have done.

Involvement of professionals

In a few cases, the introductory phase was not well coordinated, usually reflecting the difficulties in getting professionals together. The professional most likely to be 'missing' at this stage was the child's social worker which supervising social workers suggested was common to standard placements. Supervising social workers expressed particular concern when children's social workers were not at the final pre-placement meeting and thus not able to

give final approval to the placement, which they felt created difficulties later on if things went wrong.

Initially, the role of the therapist varied, sometimes they were involved in supporting the carer before the young person moved in, in other cases not until after the young person was placed. When therapists were involved early, this gave carers the chance to discuss and plan for behaviour management strategies. For placements made in years three and four, therapists were not put in place until several weeks after the placement had started. Supervising social workers suggested that this reflected a change of policy. In some placements there were difficulties very early, which sometimes led to disruption and carers felt they would have benefitted from the support of the therapist at this early stage.

Role of mentors in the introductory phase

More recently most young people had met their mentor at least once before they moved into their placement which was an improvement on the previous more variable practice. When mentors met young people earlier this was seen as beneficial as it allowed them to develop their relationship and reassure the young person about their ownership of the process.

...he doesn't have to move in with these people. He doesn't have to go for tea or anything like that if he doesn't want to. I wanted him to know that he has quite a bit of control in this situation (mentor)

Meeting early also provided the young person with the continuity that was lacking in the other areas of their lives given they were moving home and often school as well. Young people appeared to understand the role of the mentor at this stage:

He said he was there for me, he was only there for me. He's nothing to do with the social workers, he's just part of the Step Down Programme, and he's there for me (young person)

In some cases, mentors felt isolated from other professionals at this stage and would have valued more contact with the rest of the team. Sometimes, they had difficulty obtaining relevant information about the young person. Local authority social workers were not always aware of the role and actions of the mentors.

Importance of detailed planning

In several placements, there were issues with waiting for documents (especially passports which meant that holidays had to be cancelled or young people missed family holidays and were placed in respite) or transport for school not being arranged. Having a clear agreement about arrangements for getting to school seems to have been a particular difficulty and even in very recent placements, there are cases where the understanding of the local authority and the carer/Core Assets staff had differed, and this resulted in one party feeling that the other has gone back on their word.

Professional roles and support

The provision of appropriately skilled and trained foster carers to deliver the programme

Interviewees and most significantly children's social workers, were very happy with the level of skill offered by foster carers. Carers felt well prepared for Step Down placements. Those with whom young people were initially placed had a good understanding of the programme, but there was still a need to make sure new carers are well informed about Step Down when young people move within the programme. In just a few cases children's social workers expressed concern about carers' experiences and skills, especially in relation to caring for teenagers. Usually this related to placements that had disrupted (either within the programme or completely) and was from a position of hindsight.

Newly approved carers have been used frequently within the Programme and despite surprise and reservation shown by some children's social workers this has on the whole proved successful. Five of the twelve placements that have graduated were placed with newly approved carers, (in one case they had some respite experience) and one other carer had had only one previous placement.

A few children's social workers felt that new carers were not what they were promised in terms of experience:

They're new carers, as well and, from my understanding, the carers that we're having for the Step Down arrangement, they're supposed to be experienced. So, I was quite surprised... now that we've put all the support in place, don't get me wrong, it has worked out. But, if they were experienced, then some of the difficulties they were experiencing with [young person] would have been minimised, because they would already have the strategies and experience to sort out those issues. (children's social worker)

Most social workers, even if they had expressed initial disquiet, felt that in practice, the balance of newly approved carers' enthusiasm and fresh approach and the extra support received, had to date produced effective carers for the Programme:

He's got a very good connection with them, and I think that's very important, that these people who're part of this Step Down have really gone into it, and for their first one, as well...having to meet the foster carers first time, that was a huge reassurance when I met them, because you do get a gut reaction, and I thought, these are going to be absolutely brilliant with him... (children's social worker)

The success of newly approved carers was linked to their ability to put training into practice, and attendance at the Attune (therapeutic) training Programme. In some cases, they had been specifically identified as potential Step Down carers because of other relevant experience, such as working in the fields of mental health or child sexual exploitation. Newly approved carers recognised that they faced extra difficulties, in particular not knowing what to expect and what was 'normal' but they also felt they had benefited from the extra support the Programme offered. Some however, had been reluctant to ask for help and support so professionals need to ensure that this is offered to them proactively.

A couple of the newly approved carer who were initially positive about Step Down, later said that with hindsight, it may not have been such a good idea and wished they had started their fostering careers with a standard placement.

Social workers were also positive about more experienced carers, suggesting they were particularly resilient, not 'fazed' by self-harming or other mental health difficulties and able to manage very challenging behaviour. However, they were occasionally seen as lacking the level of confidence that might be expected or lacking understanding regarding the causes behind behaviour and needing more support with this.

The provision of training specific to Step Down varied over time and there was a gap where no specific training was offered. A new training session has recently been developed and early responses to this from carers have been positive though they felt that carers should always undertake this before taking a Step Down placement.

The role of the mentor in ongoing placements

Where mentors were involved they were seen as a very important part of the placement. Young people were reported (directly and indirectly) to have formed good relationships with them and to enjoy seeing them. Carers and social workers suggested that as well as having shared experiences of care, the mentor role worked well because it offered the young person someone who understood them but was not a 'professional' leading to a more relaxed relationship in which young people felt able to discuss issues they might not discuss with others.

...you get professionals come in and speak to you and they're like 'Oh, I know what you've gone through. I know what it feels like'. But actually, they don't know what you've gone through or nothing. I'm sure every foster kid, every person in care can agree with me on that ...but with [mentor], he actually does because he was a foster child. He was in a foster placement. So, you can connect to [mentor]. (young person)

Main roles of mentors reported in interviews to support young people:

- Helping young people understand their behaviour
- Offering reassurance to young people to understand their feelings and emotions, that these are 'normal' and that they will change as they grow older
- Helping young people to understand their feelings about their birth family and sometimes to envision a future where these might be different
- Helping resolve any issues young people have in their placements
- Presenting a role model in terms of having care experience and achieving success in various ways that the young people might not envision for themselves (e.g. jobs, higher education, positive relationships, being parents)
- Advocating for young people e.g. in relation to education and sometimes issues at school where some young people did not appear to be well understood
- Encouraging young people to try new experiences.

Some carers suggested that mentors had a wider role in representing the views of young people. In meetings they spoke 'as if they were the young person':

[Mentor] came to the last progress meeting and I found that a huge ...it was almost like having [name of young person] in the room, but that's somebody in there that's been right through that system, and probably still going through it, in a way, himself, but with real lived experience ...I find him quite valuable in speaking for [young

person], if there's things, like regarding contact with his parents and things like that – I think it's important to hear [mentor's] view... (foster carer)

During the evaluation, mentors tended to talk in more depth and detail about young people's emotional health and resilience than other interviewees, which may suggest a deeper insight in this respect and thus further support for the role. However, there needs to be caution to ensure the role is not seen by young people as replacing therapy. Whilst mentors themselves say they are not therapists and have at times expressed concern about how they would cope if the young person broke down, for example, when talking about family, a small number of young people, when asked about counselling/ therapy have said they do not need anyone else to talk to as they have a mentor.

Mentors were also seen in many placements as having an important supportive role for carers. Sometimes they worked with carers and young people together, mediating to sort out difficulties or misunderstandings, and they could offer carers strategies for managing particular behaviours. In a few placements, carers or children's social workers felt that mentors had 'overstepped the mark' in some way, for example spreading information without ascertaining its accuracy and appearing to think their view held more weight than those of others. Such opinions however are a small part of a very positive picture overall.

In the early stages of the evaluation, there was concern about the high number of young people who did not have a mentor, but this now appears to have been addressed. There were some difficulties in providing mentors for the first two young people placed in year three as they were placed away from the West Midlands. However, all except one of the remaining 11 young people placed since the beginning of year three had a mentor allocated to them. This one young person chose not to have a mentor and this was offered again at a later stage but she still declined the offer.

Throughout the evaluation the involvement of the mentor in the overall team has varied between placements. More recently, they appear to attend more progress meetings or at least to have a chance to inform these, but there are still some children's social workers who do not have a clear understanding of their role. In a few placements where there have been difficulties early on, carers suggested that the young person would have benefitted from seeing their mentor sooner. Given the co-existing view that young people need time to settle in and not to meet too many new people at once, this suggests that their relationship with mentors might be better established before they move into the placement.

In the earlier stages of the evaluation, mentors reported in interviews that the supervision offered to them had been very helpful but the style had varied over the course of the Programme. Some said they had found therapeutic supervision very helpful when offered. Providers reported subsequently that a reflective practice approach would be provided by a qualified social worker in supervision. More recently, there have been further changes in management and new mentors have been recruited. These mentors are being given group supervision by a 'senior mentor' as well as the Programme Manager, which does not appear to include therapeutic supervision. Mentors reported that changes were currently being made in terms of induction, training and support for them.

The role of therapy

The role of the therapist was seen as very important and carers felt supported by them. Carers suggested that they offered emotional support and reassurance as well as potential strategies. They often had more time than supervising social workers and were responsive to carers,

talking with them out-of-hours and coming to the placement when needed. Carers especially valued the idea that the therapist was there if they needed them, and several talked about not thinking they needed them initially, but then finding them invaluable at particularly difficult times.

...she'd often say, 'just tell me how you feel', and it would help so much for me, that I could ...I didn't have to be professional; I could just say to her, 'I just feel scared', and she would just give me strategies for situations (foster carer)

Therapists also had a role in helping the team develop a mutual understanding of the young person's emotional distress and consequent behaviours, as well as advising particular members of the team in how to tackle specific issues. This allowed the team to work with the young person in a consistent way that was also appropriate to their individual needs.

...[therapist] can guide me and I've asked him for different support in different areas with [young person] ...she used to tell a lot of lies and she'd say one thing to me as a support worker, and one to [foster carer] and then we got together and the therapist would tell us why she was doing that (support worker)

Support for carers

Carers generally felt very well supported, particularly by Core Assets staff and therapists. Some suggested they had found the child's social worker unsupportive, usually because they were not actively involved or easy to get hold of, but in a couple of cases carers felt they had been actively antagonistic. Feeling well supported allowed carers to cope with placements that they might not have coped with as standard placements.

I think the needs were too great for us just to manage it. I think, if it was just us with [young person], we would've struggled. The support really made a difference (foster carer)

Several carers initially felt the support would be too much but soon came to value it.

Initially I thought we don't need that much support ...as time progressed we realised we won't be able to cope without support, especially in this particular placement. This type of placement support is mandatory, definitely mandatory... (foster carer)

Carers who genuinely did not need the levels of support on offer valued the flexibility and knowledge that the support would be there promptly for them if they needed it. However, in some placements carers found the set stages (timescales) of reducing support did not suit them and they would have preferred to have the most intense support at times to suit the needs of the particular child.

Support was offered by individuals and the team as a whole and carers felt they were part of a team. Reassurance from others, the chance to 'let off steam' and readily available support and advice helped them to provide a consistent care environment and the crucial stability. Reassurance also allayed 'panic' which some carers felt might have led to a disruption in the placement.

Some carers were not happy about the level of support worker time (variable across placements) put into the placement, because if this was lacking it meant they lost potential respite time. A particular concern of carers living further from Birmingham/Bromsgrove was that travel time to get to the placement was counted as part of the support worker's

allocated hours. A few carers felt the financial support for Step Down placements needed to be greater. Three carers volunteered that the extra money they received was spent entirely on the young person because of high transport costs or the level of expensive activities they were involved with.

Professionals working together to provide shared solutions to problems

Role of meetings

Progress meetings were usually seen as important or 'fundamental' to the placement. Initially not all views were positive but more recently they have become almost exclusively positive. Meetings have always been seen as a chance to pool information and 'complete the jigsaw', minimise the chances of the young person 'playing people off against each other' and provide the carer with a chance to 'offload' and receive reassurance. In some placements they were used more proactively for planning and considering how to work as a team with the young person. Meetings have been described as having a preventative role and also provide a chance for a group of professionals to reflect on a young person's progress and then make decisions, for example about whether they are ready for life-story work.

The most recent Programme Manager for Step Down has been mentioned frequently by all types of interviewee, both in relation to attending and often chairing progress meetings and in terms of increased involvement generally. This has been beneficial in terms of providing consistency between placements and a link between placements and Birmingham social workers and managers. Supervising social workers have said they feel better supported:

She's [programme manager] attended all of the ones I've been to so far and, she leads them as well, so she makes sure everything is going to plan, everyone is doing what they're doing. We can review all the support in place, and make sure that [young person] and [foster carer] are getting everything they're entitled to ...this is quite new to all of us there, so [Programme Manager] is the one with the experience and knowledge of it, which is really good ...she's there to make sure we're not missing anything... (supervising social worker)

The practicalities of progress meetings and working together

In some placements, there was concern about too many people being involved and this being confusing for the young person or making it difficult to keep everyone up to date. In a few placements, there were some differences of opinion about how to address specific issues with young people which had caused some difficulties for carers. The placements where professionals appeared to be working best together suggest that these concerns can be mitigated by clear leadership and ensuring clear goals. In some placements, there was a belief that as a therapeutic placement, the meetings would be led by the therapists. In others, professionals shared leadership or were not sure who should be leading. More recently the new Programme Manager has been chairing most meetings and this has been received positively.

The role of the children's social worker in the team

Throughout the evaluation there have been concerns about frequent changes in local authority social workers and about them not being fully involved in progress meetings and other aspects of the placements. However, there were also some very positive accounts of children's social workers contributing effectively to the team. Children's social workers found it difficult to attend meetings for placements that were further away and there were suggestions that technology such as video linking or dial in by phone could be used to ensure that they could be involved.

Overall, awareness about Step Down amongst children's social workers has increased as the Programme has progressed according to the interviewees. Often, they reported that their manager or other members of the team had told them about it, so it appears to be more generally known about. However, there was still a huge difference between social workers in terms of their overall understanding of Step Down and their commitment to the placement. Furthermore, a recent internal survey in Birmingham Children's Trust suggests that this awareness of Step Down is not widespread.

Children's social workers explained that if they were involved in a crisis with another case or were called to court this had to take priority over a progress meeting. Whilst this is understandable occasionally it does not explain the overall range of differences in social worker involvement. In addition, some young people faced many changes in social workers and periods without a social worker. This could have quite serious consequences. For example, it was reported that young people missed out on life-story work and that the main focus of a care plan (to obtain a care order for a young person who was accommodated under S.20 of the Children's Act) was never achieved.

When social workers had known a young person for a long time this was seen as particularly beneficial as they were able to predict when problems might occur in placements and help the team prepare for these. They also identified positive changes which allowed the team to praise the young person for these. Knowing the child's birth family well was also beneficial in helping the team help the child to contextualise their emotions and feelings.

Young people sometimes faced a change of social worker soon after their Step Down placement began or even during the introduction phase. This was because their case was transferred from an assessment team to a longer term team. This meant the Step Down team (and ultimately the young person) missed out on all the benefits of a social worker with long term knowledge of the child and family.

Supporting the young person

Level of support

Interviewees felt that the young people were well supported. Team members felt that working together proactively helped them understand and respond to the young person's needs:

Because all the professionals involved see her in different settings, we're learning from each other how to support her ...I've learned from the family therapist but we've also learned from the mentor how she's responded to certain situations and what makes her angry, what helps her... (children's social worker)

Some children's social workers explained how the level of support around the young person allowed them to make mistakes and then be supported to make 'the right' decisions. In some placements, especially at times when everything was going smoothly, the level of support could seem too high. Young people want to be part of a family and not feel singled out, which Step Down placements can do more than standard placements. Generally, this was not seen to be a major issue. The young person may opt not to come to progress meetings and with agreement from the team, support (such as support worker time) can be reduced. However, there is some feeling that young people may miss out on potential opportunities.

In recent placements, more use has been made of support workers, although this is sometimes for transport to school. Where young people feel there is too much support, carers have sometimes questioned why there needs to be a mentor and a support worker. They understand the specific role of the mentor but feel that if they took the young person out more, they could combine both roles.

Establishment of safe, consistent and secure environment

Placements were clearly seen to be offering stability and a safe and consistent environment. Local authority social workers for some young people commented that the length of the Step Down placement had exceeded any of their previous placements. This was attributed to good relationships but perhaps most importantly to the support of the team which allowed the foster carer to demonstrate that they did not intend to give up on the young person.

...even though [young person] has been trying to sabotage it, this is where I'm saying where things are so good ...[carer] has stood like a rock ...hey; I know what you're doing, right. I'm still here to support you. And no matter what you try and do to me, it's not going to work because I'm still here to help you (children's social worker)

All of the young people said they were happy in their placements. When asked what the best thing about living there was replies included:

The fact that you have respect and you don't get treated like rubbish, because I believe in having a relationship with someone you have to show them respect to gain respect, like

And

I don't know. The best thing of living here is living here

Some young people were reported to have bonded swiftly with carers and to have settled quickly. In other cases, this took more time but all the young people who were in placement at week 45 were reported to have settled well.

Building young peoples' resilience

Throughout the evaluation, there have been cases where work to build self-esteem and emotional resilience is largely attributed to carers, mentors and support workers. As the programme has progressed, there has been more evidence of teams working together to address emotional issues and build young people's resilience. 'Dips' in emotional health were mentioned frequently and children's social workers, as well as supervising social workers and mentors, talked about the value of frequent communication and particularly progress meetings, in recognising, supporting and addressing difficulties as reported in the following examples:

...his issues have kind of come out over the last couple of months. He became a lot more anxious and fidgety and when he spoke about his family, he would become quite angry ...so we're just trying to help him through that really, helping him build self-confidence ...I'm focusing on, helping him to understand how to maintain positive relationships and what they look like ...it's all under control now (mentor)

...the area that we were discussing in regards to wellbeing was her mental health and around her self-awareness, her identity ...with settling more, she's got high anxieties

...I took her out, the support worker took her out and I think the mentor, took her out at some point and everybody agreed that there was a slight change and she just doesn't seem herself. With having those meetings, we were able to grab it right away ...It's working really well. She's happy. She's growing in all of her areas, school, socially. She's growing in confidence basically... (supervising social worker)

We've noticed a dip in mental health but I think because, obviously, we're having our regular communication and progress meetings, we've been able to come up with an action plan of what we can try and put in place to support that... (child's social worker)

The main way in which carers were seen to be contributing to young peoples' emotional wellbeing was by making them feel included as part of the family and by giving them time and attention. Building good relationships in this way was linked to young people investing in their placements:

Say like when I was in the home I just can't be bothered. I used to be naughty every day at school. But here I do try. I try for [carers] (young person)

Participation in positive activities, both with foster families and with support workers was strongly linked to improving self-esteem because it gave young people opportunities to succeed and to have others acknowledge their achievements.

She listens to instruction and follows it and then she gets praise for that and thinks tall and she walks tall when she gets off the horse. It really does build her self-esteem.... we're on the settlement phase ... we've chosen to keep this horse riding on because I think it's good for her self-esteem (support worker)

When young people were described as seeming happier this was sometimes linked to the fact that they had a variety of people they could talk to. Similarly, there were suggestions that one of the reasons the Programme works well is because young people realise that they have a whole team of people around them who care about them and want to see them do well.

Support workers and mentors worked directly with young people to help them choose friends who might have a more positive impact on their lives and to help them understand how to maintain friendships. They discussed with young people appropriate behaviour in various social situations and reported progress as a result of this. These changes were also linked to increased self-esteem.

There has been wide variation in practice in terms of life story work. There are a few very good examples of the team working together to provide this, following discussion at progress meetings. Usually this has involved the children's social worker with direct or indirect support from the therapist. However there have been more cases where there has been no life story work and often this has been identified as needed. In some cases, the young person has not agreed to it, or has initially agreed but then not been willing to participate, but in others the need for it has been agreed but there was no progress in providing it. When the need for life story work has been raised but it has not been actioned, foster carers or supervising social workers said, for example, that the young person 'does not know why they are in care' and it is therefore 'hard for them to move on'.

Education and school

In April 2017, just over half of the young people had moved schools when they moved into their Step Down placement. For the 12 placements made in the last year, only three involved moving school. In these three, the young person moved away from or back to the Midlands, so a change of school was inevitable. There was one other young person who started a new school when he moved into his placement because he had not been attending school whilst at the residential unit. All of the young people who did move school faced some delay before they got a school place. Because more young people have remained at their existing school there have been more reports of long journeys to school. This has been problematic for young people because they have no school friends living close to them. It has also caused some disagreements about ongoing responsibility for transporting young people to school, and long journeys to school were reported to be very tiring, though the benefits of continuity in the same school may outweigh these disadvantages.

School has been a difficult issue for many of the young people throughout the evaluation. In some placements, the team has worked successfully to promote the young person's engagement in school. This has been achieved, for example, by involving school staff in discussions exploring why young people did not want to attend school or had difficulties with particular aspects of school life. In other cases, therapists or mentors have helped young people to manage peer relationships better which has made school easier for them. In some placements, the team has worked to help the young person to understand the value of education rather than seeing school as a place you have to attend. One such young person told the researcher in the week 45 interview that school was 'much better' than last year, that she liked it more and that was because *'I know that if I don't start behaving now, I'm not going to get a job, end of'*.

In the majority of cases, school staff were seen as being supportive of placements and good at communicating with foster carers. However, there were cases where interviewees felt that school staff, including those within special provision, really did not understand the young person and their needs, and they were, for example, being sent home or excluded for issues that school staff could have addressed in other ways.

School staff did not always attend progress meetings but when they did so this was viewed as very helpful because they 'provided another piece of the jigsaw' in the overall understanding of the young person. This was especially important in placements where the young person behaved very differently in school and at home. A chance for school staff to meet the therapist was also seen as beneficial. In some placements, the progress meetings were held in school to allow someone from school to attend.

When young people were not at school (or were offered limited provision) this caused problems as even with the involvement of support staff, they had long hours unoccupied. This was reported as likely to have contributed to some placement disruptions. Not being in school also meant that some young people had no peer relationships and being at home so much put a strain on relationships with carers. The Education Liaison Officer was involved with some placements. They helped to find appropriate education provision and also advocated for young people in terms of their rights to receive support or sit exams or to make sure they were given work at an appropriate level. They could also deliver tutoring or oversee support workers delivering this.

Interviews with school staff

In year 3, we began asking young people if we could talk to a member of school staff whom they nominated. We did this at week 14 in four cases. (Three other young people gave permission. In one school the teacher has not yet been reached, in the other two, staff agreed to interviews but were repeatedly unavailable at the agreed times.)

We interviewed a member of staff in three mainstream and one special school. In three cases the young person already attended the school before they moved into their Step Down placement. These three young people all had stable placements in school and excellent attendance rates (before and after placement) and each interviewee suggested that school had provided consistency and a 'safe haven' for them. The young person who had recently re-started attending school was having issues with attendance at the time of the interview. In both the schools where we were unable to reach the nominated teacher, the young person's school placement was less stable and subsequently broke down.

In the three schools that young people had attended before their move to a Step Down placements, school interviewees were very positive about progress since the move. In two cases, progress was attributed to the move and the third described an acceleration of progress already being made as part of growing up and in response to school strategies. Young people were reported to have made progress in terms of their emotional state, attitude, behaviour and peer relationships, and in two cases were reported as looking better presented. Two of the three young people who had experienced school exclusions before starting Step Down had none since they had moved into their placement. Progress was attributed to young people feeling settled and accepted as part of a family, being able to have more 'normal' relationships and particularly to the good relationships between foster carers and schools.

...she's become a lot more resilient and, therefore, I think has a better relationship with her peers ...before, she was probably quite isolated in her friendship group, but I think that has widened since the placement ...in her world, she sees it she can have a phone, she's allowed to meet friends after school (school interview)

I think what she knows now is, there's a real strong partnership between school and home, which maybe wasn't there before... (school interview)

It was too early to measure academic progress since the placement, but school interviewees talked about increased confidence and focus and working better, and in some cases felt that improved academic progress would show in future assessments.

...our PEP meetings have moved back towards education, and academic learning, and attitudes to learning, and those type of things. Whereas, before, they were largely based around how we could manage her behaviour, and that's been a significant shift... (school interview)

She's talking about a future again, university perhaps and careers, whereas before, all of that had, sort of, gone. So, we're very pleased with where we are... (school interview)

In all schools it was reported that young people had a variety of people they could approach for support of any kind. Pupil Premium Plus money was spent on extra tuition, sessions with a school counsellor, equipment (e.g. a kindle) and support for extracurricular activities (Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and residential school trips).

Some interviewees were not aware that the young person's placement was part of Step Down or any special arrangement and only one had a full understanding of this. He attended progress meetings and found them to be a useful platform for discussing progress and plans. Although schools had not generally been very involved with the Step Down programme directly, interviewees were very positive about the carers and their relationships with school. Given that three of these carers were very new carers it is possible that the overall support for them and the placement (e.g. mentors talking to young people about school and friendships) has impacted, albeit less directly on the young person's school placement.

The influence of the one year target on the Programme

Five of the 12 young people who have graduated were still with Core Assets a year later and only three of these with their original carer. We do not have data beyond the year after graduation point. This rate of attrition combined with qualitative findings suggests that for many young people one year of the support provided by the Step Down Programme is insufficient in establishing longer term stability and sustainability. Ideally, the programme could be offered for longer, but at least there needs to be an agreement that enough support will be available to sustain the placement for the young person and the carer and to ensure that the benefits of the financial investment are maximised.

Additionally, there was a strong view amongst carers that it is particularly unhelpful to have all support removed at once. Continuing beyond one year would allow support to be phased out more gradually. Carers have also complained that although support is officially offered for the full year of Step Down, it was often not organised straightaway and thus only began several months into the placement. Carers put forward a strong argument for receiving this support, for example of a mentor or a therapist, for a year from whatever date it starts and that any gaps in support are also made up after the end of the Step Down year.

The following factors have been identified as potentially impacting on the continuation of placements after the initial 52 weeks have been reached:

- Carers concern about losing support. In most cases, a continued package of support, although usually at a lower level, was negotiated but it is possible that carers' concerns about this may impact on their perceived abilities to continue with the placement. If this is the case, it presents an argument for agreeing ongoing support at an earlier stage:

...after the first year these people go away, a year's no time at all. It takes a year for [young person], for any child and family to get to know each other, to work out what works and what doesn't. [Young person] wasn't ready for a lot of it before, all the therapy⁴, and now she is ready (foster carer)

- The difficulty of caring for young people with very challenging behaviour may not reduce much in the space of one year and there was a suggestion that carers may not be willing to continue at a lower rate of pay and this was especially relevant where they were approved for more than one placement but felt unable to foster another child alongside the Step Down placement. However, the Children's Trust's position is that higher rates of pay continue post-graduation and that many have other placements alongside them.

⁴ Direct therapy for the young people is not included in the Programme so it is possible this reference was to a mentor or support worker.

- There was some suggestion, particularly from children's social workers, that disruption around a year into the placement may be related to attachment issues. At this time, the young person may show more challenging behaviour either because they feel more comfortable or because this is the time when they may be faced with therapy or life story work:

I think he's become more challenging. He's testing. He's testing the boundaries...he's developing ...I'd say he's being part of the family, where he fits in with the family. So, yes, it's normal behaviour to me (children's social worker at week 45 interview)

- Interviewees in some placements suggested that the placement would not have lasted as long as it did (or had done so far) without the support of Step Down. In such cases, disruption at, or soon after 52 weeks, may be seen as a positive achievement.

Learning from placements where young people remained with Core Assets a year after graduation

Five young people were still in placement with Core Assets a year after graduation. Three of these were with their original carer, and for two of these the young person placed via Step Down was their first full time (i.e. not respite) placement. In each of these three cases, success was attributed to the good match and or relationship between the carer(s) and the young person and this was linked to the initial introductory period and the chance to get to know each other before the young person moved in. In some cases, success was also linked to the investment of all parties, particularly the children's social worker.

At the time they had been in placement for two years, these young people were aged between 15 years and 16.6 years. They demonstrated various difficulties and challenges and achieving two years is certainly not linked to the young person demonstrating less difficult behaviour or needing less support than others.

Ongoing support following graduation

The support provided during the second year varied across placements. Some placements continued to have progress meetings (although at a reduced rate and with fewer people present), some carers continued to receive the support of a therapist, and some continued to receive an enhanced fee for all or part of the year. Three of the young people had never had a mentor. Of the two who had, one continued to receive this support and one had a small amount of phone contact with their mentor during the second year but no face-to-face support. Some continued to receive time with their support worker.

The ongoing support package did not seem to relate to the perceived difficulty or challenges associated with the placements, but to a combination of successful (or not) negotiating with Birmingham City Council for continued extra funding, the individual decisions of supervising social workers (e.g. to carry on having progress meetings although there was no funding attached) and to responses to changes in circumstances (e.g. not replacing a therapist who left).

Looking back over their whole experience, carers were positive about the Step Down programme and the support they and the young person had received in this year after

graduation, although some reported that they had been expecting more support, particularly in relation to support worker time and support with education.

Carers felt strongly that support should be reduced gradually (both in terms of reducing each type of support and of not ending all types of support at the same time). When young people's relationships with various workers ended there should be 'proper endings'. All carers and supervising social workers that were interviewed agreed that support should not just end at graduation and views varied from suggesting that some support continue for a certain length of time to the idea that the whole Programme needs to be for two years:

These Step Down placements are amazing, but a year isn't enough ...The first year was bad, the second year got horrendous, so it goes to show that 12 months isn't anywhere near enough time to make a difference ...with future Step Down placements, I don't think a year, I think even two years, we've just scratched the surface now. ...after that first year we'd only just got [young person's] trust, and that's 12 months of really, really sticking with her... 12 months is a ridiculous time frame (foster carer)

At week 45, the supervising social worker for this placement had reported that the young person had achieved little more than settling into the placement, and said:

I think that's very much who she is. In a year, you're not going to undo behaviours that are that entrenched ...we're just starting, now that we've built up the attachment, and it's took a year, we're just putting the therapy⁵ in and trying to make her a bit more independent and not so needy. So, the work still needs to continue. The SIBS Programme is due to finish (supervising social worker)

Progress for young people

All of the young people had made significant progress during the second year, but they had very different starting points, so were in very different situations by the end of the year. For example, some were now making appropriate and lasting friendships and others were noted to still have a lot of difficulty in this respect. Whilst some had good relationships with carers from the start, others built on these during the second year, linked to them realising that they had pushed all the boundaries, but the carers were still there.

Improvements in emotional health were noted, but carers were still concerned. All of the carers expressed concern about the young people's future. Even though they were settled and had made huge progress, there were many things to achieve before they reached 18 years and could live independently, and they were still seen as emotionally vulnerable. Where young people had not been ready to engage in therapy or life story work, there was some suggestion that learning practical independence skills and 'people skills' and focusing on education and planning for work, were now the priority and it was in fact 'too late' to address these more emotional issues.

Examples of achievements afforded by a second year in Step Down

- Building on previous progress in terms of confidence and independence and becoming calmer (less reactive to difficulties)

⁵ See previous footnote regarding therapy for the young people

- Building relationships with the birth family or making a decision to end contact with certain family members
- Reduction in anxiety
- Achieving an identity
- Building more appropriate friendships and making 'better choices' about friendships
- Reduction in episodes of absconding and criminal activity
- Cessation of self-harm
- A healthier lifestyle (losing weight, more exercise, improved hygiene, looking healthy and happy)
- Learning to regulate emotions and manage feelings (especially anger)
- Feeling happier and better about themselves
- Self-reporting positive changes in attitude
- Moving up sets/achieving better grades in school
- Better engagement with, and behaviour in school
- Plans for the future including going to college
- Feeling safe in their placements but not necessarily in their communities (usually related to the potential impacts of their own behaviour and relationships)
- Sustained involvement in positive activities both with foster family and as an individual (e.g. voluntary work at stables, involvement in sport, after school clubs, Duke of Edinburgh award)

The following views expressed represent how young people feel about the whole two years in placement:

YP 1

I don't go out being a dick head and I make the right choices with who my friends are ...I haven't gone missing, and I hopefully won't go missing...

When reporting these changes, this young person said she felt 'worlds better' about herself.

YP2

I would have to say; when I first came here I was a difficult person to be. Like, I was swearing, cutting, doing all sorts, got in trouble with the police... (now) I'm not gobby; I'm not selfish. I haven't got a big attitude on me anymore...

...before, I didn't really care. I was so cheeky. I was so rude; I was still swearing a lot. So, I was quite an aggressive, really annoying kid, but now I've changed. I'll get onto whatever [carer] says for me to do. If she says no, I understand it. If I lie to her, I get in trouble, but I haven't lied to her for six or seven months

This young person said she used to think 'a lot of bad things' about herself ('I used to think I was a slag'). This has changed now and she feels better about herself.

Learning from placements that disrupted

By the end of March 2018, 13 placements had disrupted. Two young people whose placements disrupted were placed with Step Down for a second time and in both cases the placements disrupted again. Thus, disruptions occurred for 11 young people (two twice). It

is important to note that whilst the placements for both the young people who were placed with Step Down a second time disrupted, those involved with these placements felt, with hindsight, that it had been right to offer these young people a second chance and that for both of them it had been the only realistic alternative to them returning to residential care. In terms of measuring the success rate of Step Down, these second chances have not been helpful but they do appear to have represented good child-centred practice.

In some of the more recent placements there was disagreement about whether the placement should have ended. Either the children's social worker felt the carer and Core Assets had given up too easily or the foster carer felt there should have been more effort made by the children's social worker to support the placement and be more actively involved in efforts to save it.

The 'main' reason given for disruptions was unique to each individual placement but there were factors that were cited frequently:

- The influence of peer group, often previous acquaintances from the looked-after system, which led to behaviours that made it impossible to keep the young person safe
- Young person going missing from the placement and consequent concerns about their safety
- Mental health concerns that the carer and supervising social worker had not expected because they were either not previously known about or under reported in initial information about the young person

These three factors were not necessarily linked to the Step Down Programme but a number of potentially contributing factors that are linked to the Programme can be identified which are now discussed.

Ensuring suitability of young person for Step Down Programme

Amongst the disrupted placements, there are examples of social workers believing young people were ready to move out of residential units when the staff there did not believe they were, and a suggestion that the residential unit was regulating a young person's behaviour so that although they appeared ready to move to foster care, they had not learnt to regulate their behaviour themselves. Such cases were sometimes linked to a lack of commitment from the young people themselves to move into Step Down. There were also suggestions that some young people 'played the system' presenting themselves differently during the introductory period and the 'real them' emerging quickly after the placement. This is linked to carers not having enough information, particularly about the causes of previous disruptions. In several cases, interviewees suggested that difficulties that were apparent during the introduction phase were 'brushed under the carpet' and with hindsight they needed further consideration and for the introduction period to be extended or a decision made that the placement should not go ahead.

Information and matching

Supervising social workers for some of the placements did not feel they had been given sufficient information about young peoples' presenting difficulties, and this related particularly to mental health difficulties. Sometimes supervising social workers questioned whether matches would have been made if full information had been available at this stage. Gaps in information were sometimes attributed to residential units being economical with

the truth. The supervising social workers involved were determined to ensure they had full information if they were involved with Step Down placement again.

In two of the more recent placements there was not a clear enough understanding between the children's social worker and the foster carer and their expectations for the placements were not the same. In a couple of the placements that disrupted specific requests made in referrals (for example for a single carer or a couple) were not met and with hindsight interviewees questioned whether this was a mistake.

Introductory period

In several of the placements that disrupted, the introductory period was shorter than six weeks. Whilst this has also been the case for some placements that have been more successful, there were some specific issues that could have been addressed if it had been longer. In some placements not having a school place, or a plan for how the young person could travel to school before they moved into their placement was seen as contributing to the disruption.

The young person's experience of residential care

In placements that disrupted, carers often talked about the difficulty of the young person's history of institutionalisation. This could relate to the difficulties of settling into an environment where things were shared when young people were used to having labelled possessions that no one else was allowed to touch, but most commonly related to young people being used to being entertained and taken on frequent outings so that carers felt they had very unrealistic expectations of family life.

Perceptions about collecting data

As the evaluation has progressed there have been more negative comments from foster carers, supervising social workers and young people about the collection of quantitative data. Carers often did not know why they were completing forms, and supervising social workers were often unhappy about what was measured. Some suggested that the choice of 'what' was measured suggested an assumption that all young people who come out of residential units abscond, offend etc. They felt that this was unfair to young people who had never done these things and did not represent progress in other areas such as decreased anxiety or increased independence skills and in such cases it was seen as a pointless exercise.

Young people were not happy about completing the forms and sometimes about the nature of them:

...they could really improve the forms, though. They're rubbish ...they look like someone's just literally written a question and then copied and pasted it for all the questions ...You've got a question, and then you've got the option, which is sometimes, never, and always, for a start, there needs to be one that's in between, in between both, because you can't be just sometimes, or just never, or just always (young person)

Moving within Step Down

Although those working on Step Down considered placement moves within the programme not to be disruptions, the children's social workers interviewed did not agree with this

view. The contract actually states that if there is a move, the LA's authorised representative will determine if this constitutes a break in the 52 weeks. However, the plan for a young person who moves placement to keep their mentor and support worker was not adhered to for most moves, and only very recently has the first young person moved and kept contact with a mentor throughout. Additionally, when young people have moved placement within the Step Down Programme, they have not had opportunities to meet their carers and have a phased move (as usually the move is being made in a crisis situation).

Conclusion

Overall

The Step Down Programme recruits young people with very diverse needs, some of whom exhibit the most challenging behaviours. Overall, in this context, the 64% stability rate (or 44% if the placements that had not yet reached 52 weeks by April 2018 are excluded), nearly £2m cost savings and positive feedback from young people and foster carers are strong indicators of success. There are of course exceptions and for the 11 young people whose placements disrupted, some (but not all as some have moved to potentially positive alternatives such as staying with a relative or semi-independence) will be likely to experience fewer positive outcomes. Although some of the placements that were perceived as most challenging disrupted, there has also been success for young people whose behaviour was described as most challenging, including one of the young people still in their initial placement after two years.

Cost savings

An estimate of the cost savings achieved in the Step Down Programme over the first three and a half years is nearly £2m. The savings of a 52-week placement for each young person that completes Step Down and does not return to residential care (during or after completion) is more than £50k per young person and further savings have been made in relation to the six young people who have remained in placements for a year since graduating, and a seventh who is progressing towards a further year. Some costs of additional therapies for foster carers may not have been considered in these calculations, but the methodology used was conservatively applied to allow for this.

Stability

Of the 31 young people who had had Step Down placements by April 2018, 20 have remained in the placement (though not all as yet for 52 weeks) giving a 64% stability rate or 42% if the seven who have not reached 52 weeks are excluded. No carers have left the scheme, though one has not been given further placements and in 25 of the 33 placements made in the Programme, the young person has thus far remained with the same carer throughout the placement. The Programme was reported to offer high quality individualised support to young people and carers and thus maintain placements that interviewees believed would not have worked as standard placements.

Other outcomes

The response to the Programme from interviewees of all designations was generally very positive. Other positive outcomes noted were:

- Young people were engaging in much higher level of activities than they were in their prior residential placements

- Only eight young people had any missing episodes recorded, a slightly lower level than that noted at baseline, though they increased in the twelfth month of the placements
- Attendance at school was generally high, higher than at baseline, with poor attendance recorded for only five young people
- Seven young people had been excluded from school, three of these for more than 10 days across episodes
- Only five offending incidences were recorded during Step Down involving four young people who were not the same four who had offended previously while in residential care.

There was no significant improvement in the SDQ scores, eight young people's scores improving overall while seven worsened and five stayed the same during their involvement with the Programme. In contrast, in the interviews, both foster carers and social workers reported reductions in anger and self-harm. Furthermore, on attitudes to school (the PASS measure), 11 young people improved overall and five worsened, while for the other 15 there were insufficient data. The PASS data suggested stronger attitudes to teachers and work ethic and weaker preparedness for learning and confidence in self as a learner. More problems were reported in interviews to be at school than at home, in particular focusing on peer relationships, though the SDQ scores given by teachers were more positive (lower) than those given by foster carers.

What facilitated effective placements?

The main facilitators contributing to successful placements were the prolonged and detailed planning and introductory period, mentors, progress meetings and therapy support for carers. Young people were very positive about meeting their carers and moving into a placement through a planned, gradual process. Interviewees were universally positive about the introduction period and it is clearly beneficial, but carers should always feel that it is acceptable (and in the long run preferable to a placement breakdown) to decide against the placement going ahead. Similarly, any difficulties that come to light during this period need to be carefully considered by all involved in terms of deciding whether it is best for the placement to go ahead.

Mentors were regarded as very effective. However, not all young people had mentors and there were difficulties with continuity when a placement disrupted and continuity could not be guaranteed given geographical considerations. In the last year, a better understanding of the role of the mentor has developed amongst other professionals and they have been given improved support.

Progress meetings made an important contribution to ensuring that all those involved came together to express their views and any issues could be addressed promptly before they escalated. The role of therapists was reported to be particularly important in supporting the foster carers and there was concern that in a few cases therapist support had not been allocated early enough.

What were the key barriers?

A number of factors were described as barriers by those interviewed and a few of these appear to have contributed, though cannot be confirmed as responsible for, placement disruptions. These include the foster carer being given insufficient or inaccurate information, young people refusing to have a mentor, lack of detailed planning of placements undertaken

at crisis points and lack of forward planning for the young person after 52 weeks in Step Down. All of these have been partially addressed since the earlier evaluation report, but need to be attended to further.

The need for the potential foster carer to have reliable and full information as early as possible and for this to continue once the placement had been confirmed was regarded as critical to the success of placements. Foster carers understood the need for confidentiality but felt that crucial incidents from the young person's past were sometimes deliberately or accidentally omitted from the information they received. The foster carer sometimes felt that the child's social worker was insufficiently involved throughout the Step Down placement. A careful balance is needed between respecting the young person's rights to a fresh start and respecting the foster carer's rights to know as much as possible about the young person they are agreeing to foster.

Young people refusing a mentor or not having been allocated one for whatever reason, was viewed as a barrier to progress in particular on emotional and well-being issues. While three young people who graduated had never had a mentor, only one of those still in placement did not have a mentor as she had refused one. While respecting the young person's wishes, the expectation that they have a mentor and the mentor's role need to be clear expectations from the outset.

The importance of the prolonged planning period in facilitating successful placements is conversely a barrier in relation to responses to disruption, in which a new placement may be made rapidly in a crisis without the careful and considered planning characteristic of first Step Down placements. This was raised by a number of interviewees and while challenging needs to be addressed.

Being out of school was reported by foster carers and social workers to have very negative consequences. Around a half of all Step Down placements involved changing schools. This often led to an initial period out of school, which meant little or no peer contact, gaps in learning opportunities and challenges for foster carers in keeping the young person occupied safely.

A major recommendation from the earlier evaluation report concerned the anxieties, in some cases reflected in deteriorating behaviour of the young person, associated with the impending end of the Step Down placement. This has been addressed to a great extent with better planning of what happens post-52 weeks, less dramatic removal of all support at the same time and consideration of changes in support rather than total withdrawal. However, the additional interviews conducted with those who had remained in placements for a year following graduation and their foster carers, reveals that further consideration will need to be given to this. Some guarantee of continued support is needed in many cases if progress is to continue. Foster carers with placements approaching graduation (at 45 weeks) had not all been engaged in discussions about what was to happen next.

Recommendations

During the planning stage

- Ensure the carer has sufficiently detailed information before meeting the young person.
- Ensure children's social workers are involved to ratify decisions including final agreement that the placement has been approved. This has improved, but is still too variable.

- Ensure young people understand the expectation to have a mentor, sustain mentors when placements restart, geography permitting.
- Improve school transport arrangements to ensure implementation at placement commencement.
- Reinstate the characteristics of the pre-placement planning into 'crisis' moves.

During the placement

- Therapist support for foster carers needs to be provided earlier.
- Schools need to be further engaged in providing support and collecting relevant data.
- Clarify the expectation for young people to complete the SDQ.
- Discuss PASS data at PEP/progress meetings to address issues of confidence in themselves as learners and understanding expectations (such as curricular demands).

Following the placement

Agree on any ongoing support package well before the 52 weeks of placement is reached. This has improved over the period of the evaluation, but some carers interviewed most recently at 45 weeks, did not know what the future plan was or when they would be told.