

Evaluation of the Siblings Together Buddy Project Final Report March 2017

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...you can't underestimate how important that ongoing continuity to your relationships is, a sense of who you are and where you've come from (Buddy, Siblings Together Project)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)¹, placed a duty on local Authorities to accommodate siblings together in care, so far as is reasonably practicable and subject to welfare considerations. International policy similarly encourages the placement of siblings together. A recent survey in England² found that nearly half of sibling groups living in local authority care are separated from their siblings and over a third of children in care who have at least one sibling in care, are living with none of their siblings.

A review of the evidence recently undertaken by the Rees Centre³ concluded that sibling groups placed together experienced greater stability of placement. Older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with them, were found to be at particular risk of disruption and a poor sense of belonging in the foster family. Siblings placed together have a better chance of reunification with the birth family particularly when they enter care at a similar time to one another.

The Buddy Project

The Siblings Together Buddy project which began in 2013 is an innovative approach to reunite siblings separated through care and adoption. The project recruits and trains volunteers to become Buddies who support and encourage siblings to enjoy activities together on a monthly basis. Buddies facilitate sibling groups to have fun and participate in rewarding activities, develop stronger bonds, strengthening the sibling group and supporting each child and young person with the challenges they face. Siblings Together has developed a Handbook to support the project that describes the model and provides suggestions of activities. This evaluation report is of the second phase which began in Feb 2015 and was completed in December 2016.

Aims of the Evaluation

The Rees Centre undertook an independent evaluation of the project which assessed the impact of the Buddy Project on the young people, Buddies and those caring for the young people. In particular, the evaluation addressed:

- Changes in the well-being of the children and young people involved over the time in which they chose to participate
- Changes in the relationships between siblings and contact with the wider family
- Longer-term sustainability of the project including evidence that enables and persuades fostering providers and foster carers to establish similar provision.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted involving interviews with young people, Buddies, foster carers (and residential home managers) and social workers. Assessment of young people's sense of belonging and well-being was undertaken using items drawn from standardised scales. Documentary analysis was undertaken of the diaries completed by the

¹ Children and Young Persons Act (2008) London: The Stationery Office 11/2008

² Ashley, C. and Roth D. (2015) *What happens to siblings in the care system?* Oxford: Family Rights Group

³ Meakings, S., Sebba, J. and Luke, N. (2017) *What is known about the placement experiences and outcomes for siblings in foster care? An international literature review* Oxford: The Rees Centre

Buddies of each monthly meeting of the siblings. Eighteen young people, 15 foster carers, 12 Buddies and four social workers were interviewed. These data were supplemented by analysis of the assessments of young people's well-being and of the 39 diaries completed by the Buddies on the sibling meetings.

Conclusions

The Buddy Project succeeded in establishing meetings of variable regularity for 23 young people in care separated from some or all of their siblings, from 7 sibling groups across 6 local authorities. One further sibling group of eight children were referred to the Project in early 2016 but despite considerable time invested by the delivery team, the siblings did not meet up. There were 45 meetings in all during the period evaluated and 16 voluntary Buddies managed to support the young people in 66 different activities. Given the instability all of these young people had experienced, some severely so, and the geographical spread of the individuals in the groups, this is a major achievement in itself.

Changes in the well-being of the children and young people involved

With one possible exception, the evidence from the young people themselves, foster carers and Buddies suggests that the young people greatly enjoyed the contact with their siblings, in particular, not in the presence of social workers or foster carers monitoring their interactions. While for a few, the novel activities which they experienced in these meetings might have been a significant attraction, the main appeal was seeing their siblings, most displayed happiness while meeting them and did not want to part company. They also reported wanting more frequent contact and for longer. The high quality of the Buddies contributed to this.

Five young people's behaviour was reported to have significantly improved, the well-being of older teenagers was enhanced by the opportunity to discuss their futures, relationships, college and housing with not only their siblings but the Buddies, who were seen as impartial as not tied up with their legal care status. Evidence emerged of greater confidence, developing identity and sense of belonging to a family group.

Changes in the relationships between siblings and related contact with the wider family

The relationships between siblings improved significantly in most cases, in particular for those who were not experiencing regular contact outside the Project. In three cases, the relationships were reported to have improved dramatically. For the others, relationships became closer, more affectionate, supportive and a source of fun and laughter. There were times when the siblings supported one another through crises such as placement changes, bereavements or relationship problems. Acknowledging jointly experienced histories helped some of them to better develop their sense of identity as part of a family.

There was less evidence that the increased sibling contact affected their relationships with the wider family though improvements in confidence and behaviour were reported by some foster carers to be positively enhancing their home life.

Longer-term sustainability of the project

The benefits of bringing siblings together who are placed apart emerged from this evaluation. However, young people expressed disappointment in the groups that stopped meeting at the end of the Project and both they, and their foster carers voiced concerns over the need for longer-term continuity.

We did not undertake cost benefit analysis and this would be helpful in persuading others to consider running a similar service. The costs of the service are relatively low, it depending extensively on the voluntary nature of the Buddies, but the travel, activities allowance and coordination and training provided are all considerable. However, if greater stability of placements for young people and retention of foster carers could be demonstrated to be achieved, it will undoubtedly be cost effective.

Recommendations

Moving forward with this project, or for others rolling it out in other areas, there are a number of issues to be considered by the provider:

- **The expectations of those involved need to be stated clearly by the provider and restated at regular intervals.**

The provider needs to make clearer to foster carers and residential home managers how the Project operates, what the expectations will be on them for travel, accompanying young people to meeting points, pocket money requirements and how long the Project is likely to last. They might also be informed of the requirement for them to give feedback (whether to the provider or to an independent evaluator).

The recruitment and training of Buddies needs to cover expectations of them potentially to travel long distances, commit full days to the activities with travel and to plan activities. The provider might consider the suggestions made by Buddies in this evaluation that there be an on-line forum and on-going network for the Buddies and to ensure that they have access to the Handbook.

The provider needs to ensure (via the recruitment process) that young people understand, where they have capacity to do so, that the Buddies are volunteers, who have chosen to join the Project and that there is a limited budget for activities and refreshments.

- **The recruitment of young people**

Overall, the recruitment was slower than the original plan suggested with the usual challenges of placement breakdowns and slow responses from local authorities. Could recruitment be initially through foster carer organisations (e.g. The Fostering Network) and care leaver organisations (where older siblings still have younger siblings in care) and then involve the social worker once it is clear that the criteria are met?

- **Size and age range of sibling groups**

In two of the groups, the age range was wide leading to greater challenges in providing activities that were age appropriate and attractive to both the oldest and the youngest. However, the purpose of the meetings is to enable siblings to get together so that 'being together' is more important than the activity itself and the contexts selected for this should reflect that.

- **Budget**

The level of budget and contribution from local authorities may need further clarification in future programmes. Better use should be made of the Handbook produced by Siblings Together which lists activities that have been found successful and provides information of how to obtain vouchers that give discounts for those participating in the Project. Requiring Buddies to pay for activities up front and then claim their expenses back, might need reconsideration.

Main Report

Background

The Siblings Together charity aims to help young people in care to have contact with their siblings when placed apart from one another. They aim to help young people in care to have contact with their siblings in order to develop strong family bonds. They run summer camps, monthly activity days, a mentoring system, creative workshops and boating trips, all aimed at helping siblings to maintain contact and enjoy time together.

The Children and Young Persons Act (2008)⁴, placed a duty on local Authorities to accommodate siblings together in care, so far as is reasonably practicable and subject to welfare considerations. International policy similarly encourages the placement of siblings together. The Office of the Guardian for Children and Young Peoples in South Australia states that siblings should be placed together whenever possible, and where separated, their contact should be facilitated. In the US, federal policy introduced in 2008⁵, states that 'reasonable' efforts must be made for siblings to be placed in the same foster placement and frequent contact should be arranged for those not placed together, unless contrary to their wellbeing. Despite these legislative requirements, a recent survey in England⁷ found that nearly half of sibling groups living in local authority care are separated from their siblings and over a third of children in care who have at least one sibling in care, are living with none of their siblings.

Research⁸ suggests that placing siblings together helps them to develop strong family bonds and achieve an independent life supported by their sibling relationships. A review of the evidence recently undertaken by the Rees Centre⁹ concluded that sibling groups placed together experienced greater stability of placement, although not all the studies that considered stability demonstrated this. Older children separated from siblings, after having been in placement with them, were found to be at particular risk of disruption and a poor sense of belonging in the foster family. Siblings placed together have a better chance of reunification with the birth family particularly when they enter care at a similar time to one another. Reunification of those placed together is also quicker.

The Buddy Project

The Siblings Together Buddy project is an innovative approach to re-unite siblings separated through care and adoption which started in 2013. The project recruits and trains volunteers to become Buddies who support and encourage siblings to enjoy activities together on a monthly basis. Siblings Together has developed a Handbook to support the project that describes the model and provides suggestions of activities. Buddies facilitate sibling groups to have fun and participate in rewarding activities. They aim to improve communication and

⁴ Children and Young Persons Act (2008) London: The Stationery Office 11/2008

⁵ Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People. (2012) 2011-12 annual report. Adelaide: Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People. Available: <http://www.gcyp.sa.gov.au/2012/11/annual-report-2011-12/>

⁶ Wojciak, A. (2016) 'It's complicated.' Exploring the meaning of sibling relationships of youth in foster care. *Child and Family Social Work*, doi:10.1111/cfs.12345.

⁷ Ashley, C. and Roth D. (2015) *What happens to siblings in the care system?* Oxford: Family Rights Group

⁸ Hegar, R.L. & Rosenthal, J.A., (2011) Foster children placed with or separated from siblings: Outcomes based on a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(7), pp.1245–1253.

⁹ Meakings, S., Sebba, J. and Luke, N. (2017) *What is known about the placement experiences and outcomes for siblings in foster care? An international literature review* Oxford: The Rees Centre

relationships between siblings in order to develop stronger bonds and help nurture a relationship for life, strengthening the sibling group and supporting each child and young person with the challenges they face.

The first phase of the project Aug 2013 – Dec 2014 focused on the Bristol area and involved two sibling groups – one of three sisters and the other a brother and sister. The evaluation for this phase was reported in 2015 and a summary of that evaluation is included in Appendix 3. The second phase began in Feb 2015 and final interviews were completed in December 2016. This evaluation of this phase is the focus of this report.

Aims of the Buddy Project

The main aims of the Buddy Project included:

- strengthening the sibling group by keeping them connected through regular contact
- developing the family bonds
- increasing the sense of belonging and relationships between siblings

The longer-term aim is for local authorities to take on responsibility for this beyond the minimum statutorily required contact.

Aims of the Evaluation

The Rees Centre undertook an independent evaluation of the project which assessed the impact of the Buddy Project on the young people, Buddies and those caring for the young people. It also explored the capacity for longer term sustainability. In particular, the evaluation addressed:

- Changes in the well-being of the children and young people involved over the time in which they chose to participate
- Changes in the relationships between siblings and related contact with the wider family
- Longer-term sustainability of the project including evidence that enables and persuades fostering providers and foster carers to establish similar provision.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted involving interviews with young people, Buddies, foster carers (and two residential home managers) and social workers. Interviews of the carers and residential home managers were done by phone by an experienced foster carer trained by the Rees Centre in interviewing. The interviews with young people were undertaken by two care experienced young people trained in interviewing. The Buddy and social worker interviews were undertaken by three researchers, one of whom was care experienced. In addition, assessment of young people's sense of belonging and well-being was undertaken using items drawn from standardised scales though these did not yield much useable data as responses given appeared random. See Appendix 1 for the interview schedule and assessment used with young people. Documentary analysis was undertaken of the diaries completed by the buddies of each monthly meeting of the siblings. An anonymised completed diary is given in Appendix 2.

The data collected are summarised in Table 1. Where possible, two interviews of each person were undertaken in order to provide some perspectives on changes over time. This was particularly successful with the foster carers who were able to report on significant

changes they had observed in the young people but were appropriately cautious about attributing these exclusively to the Buddy Project. However, due to placement changes, contact with the project being lost in the case of six young people, and carers or social workers refusing access or strongly advising us not to interview young people due to sensitive circumstances, we were unable to secure two interviews with all the young people who participated. Some Buddies were no longer available at the end of the project. Children’s social workers were particularly hard to interview both because of rapid turnover and because in general, they did not wish to participate in the evaluation. However, the first interviews undertaken with Buddies and young people were after several meetings of the siblings as agreed with the providers, and have thus provided a rich dataset for the analysis.

Table 1: Summary of the data collected

Data collected	Number of participants	Total number collected¹
Interviews with young people	18	22
Scales on belonging and well-being. Circles activity ²	18	22
Interviews with foster carers	15 ³	29
Interviews with Buddies	12	18
Interviews with social workers	4	4
Analysis of meeting diaries	Covered 23 young people 16 Buddies	39 diaries

¹Some participants were interviewed twice

²The interview schedule and activities are in Appendix 1

³Two participants were managers of residential homes

Three siblings aged 6 or under were not interviewed, though the circles activity was completed with them. The other siblings, carers and Buddies in those groups were interviewed.

Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance was given by the University of Oxford ethics committee. All researchers having contact with young people had current DBS clearance. Information sheets about the project were provided to young people, foster carers, Buddies and social workers and consent forms completed prior to interview. The purpose of the evaluation and their right to withdraw at any time was explicitly stated to all participants from the outset. Social workers and foster carers were both asked to give consent to the young people participating in interviews. Any indication of distress during an interview (which did not occur) would have been referred to the project managers for further support. Young people were informed that any disclosure of information suggesting harm to themselves or others would be reported to the social worker. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured and all data are stored on a secure university server; labelling participants with anonymised codes which are stored separately to other identifying details; and removing potentially identifying details in publicly disseminated materials (thus complying with the Data Protection Act).

Key Findings

The project participants

Twenty-three young people from seven sibling groups across six local authorities were supported by 16 Buddies. One further sibling group of eight children were referred to the Project in early 2016. However, after extensive investment by the delivery team to set up their engagement, the foster carers declined involvement and the social workers were unable to offer further support. Hence, they did not meet up. The 23 young people had 14 foster carers, six of whom fostered more than one of the siblings at the start of the project. Two young people were in residential care/special school when they started the project. In five of the seven sibling groups, some pairs of siblings lived together within a larger group who were placed apart. Table 2 provides the characteristic of the young people.

Table 2: Characteristics of the young people

Sibling Groups	Number and sex of siblings in group	Ages at start of Project	Placements	Other siblings not in project
LA 1	3 girls	16, 14, 11	Foster care – 2 together then all 3 at end	Older siblings, details unknown
LA 2	3 girls	16, 14, 11	Foster care separate	2 older brothers
LA 3 – Group 1	4, 2 boys, 2 girls	11, 9, 6, 5,	Foster care – boys together, girls together	One older brother, 2 older sisters
LA 3 – Group 2	4 girls	18, 14, 12, 9	Foster care – 2 girls together	2 older brothers
LA 4	2, one boy, one girl	Twins, 14	One foster care, one residential	5 older siblings
LA 5	4, 2 boys, 2 girls	12, 8, 6, 5	Foster care - 2 boys together	Older siblings, details unknown
LA 6	3, 2 boys, one girl	14, 12, 10	Foster care – one boy and girl together at start	

Six of the seven sibling groups had other siblings, totalling at least six siblings in three of the groups, but half-siblings and sons and daughters of the foster carers who were also referred to as ‘sisters’ and brothers’ make a precise definition of siblings challenging (see Meakings et al. 2017 for a discussion of this). These additional siblings were mostly much older, did not live with those in the Project and were not participating in the Project. Reference was sometimes made by one older sibling in the Project to meeting up with another older sibling at other times and this sometimes upset the younger siblings who had no contact with these older siblings.

Contact between siblings

The Project aimed to provide sibling groups with monthly contact over a 12-month period. The challenges in recruiting the young people through the social workers, placement disruption and long-term commitment of suitable volunteer Buddies led to inevitable variation in the pattern of provision. Three groups stopped meeting after less than a year though the other four continued for much longer than a year. Table 3 summarises the provision of monthly meetings.

Table 3: Monthly meetings, frequency, duration and timescale

Sibling Groups	No of siblings in project	Period of sibling meetings	Number of meetings	Typical duration of meeting (in hours)	Average return travel time
LA 1	3	July 15-Feb 16	4	5	Unknown
LA 2	3	June 15-Sept 16	7	2.4	55 mins
LA 3 – Group 1	4	May 15-Aug 16	8	3.75	1.7 hours
LA 3 – Group 2	4	Sept 15-May 16	6	3.25	1.7 hours
LA 4	2	Apr 15-Nov 15	3	3.8	4.6 hours
LA 5	4	Feb 15-May 16	7	2.9	1 hour
LA 6	3	Feb 15-Sept16	10	3.5	1 hour

Forty-five meetings were held over the period of the evaluation (some groups have continued to meet), for which 39 diary sheets were completed. Significant gaps occurred between meetings in some groups. LA3, Group 1 had three gaps of 2-3 months without meetings and LAs 2 and 4 had a 5-month gap between their fifth and sixth and between the second and third meeting respectively. Both these gaps were over the summer months and coincided with placement and/or Buddy changes, family events and other commitments of foster carers. The siblings reported missing one another when these gaps occurred and the Buddies confirmed this in the diaries for example:

Children clearly had missed being with each other. They hugged when they met and held hands when crossing the road. Boys were always looking out for girls and made sure they were always safe. The children were all supportive of one another throughout the activity and encouraged each other to take part in all the activities. When waiting for the bus on our return, [name] was showing [brother] how to dance and they had a dance off at the bus stop which they all enjoyed and laughed at. (Diary, meeting 6, LA5)

Six pairs of siblings from five sibling groups were living together at the start of the Project but all the young people reported that the contact they had with siblings with whom they were not living, was much greater when they first came into care (e.g. several times a week) but by the start of the Project, they had much less contact (some once a month, others a few times a year). They all liked the opportunity the Project had provided to see their siblings more often and commented that it was better organised than their previous supervised contact.

Almost all the young people commented negatively on the fact that their previous contact with their siblings had taken place in a contact centre with 'officials' observing them and writing notes, for example two young people commented:

We saw each other at the contact centre – it has games and stuff in it. We did not go out, we just used to sit down and eat and drink... I didn't like the contact centre. It was boring and we were just stuck in each other's faces and a lady would sit and watch us and write stuff down. I hated it. (YP3, LA3, Group 2)

And

I don't like the fact that there's someone in there watching you and writing. It makes you think that everything you're doing is wrong. I used to be really paranoid when I was a child... sometimes our contacts are really small. It'd be nice if you were allowed to go out to the park or something. (YP1, LA4)

They contrasted these experiences with the contact that they had through the Project:

It's fun seeing them [siblings] and doing all different stuff. I would change nothing [about the Project] I like it all... because when I came into foster care I didn't see them but now I do see them a lot. I think it's sad and I was upset... [but now I feel] happy. (YP1, LA2)

Young people also said that the length of contact had increased from that experienced before they were involved in the Project. However, when asked what could be better about the Project, many wanted the frequency and duration of contact to increase further, for example one YP suggested:

My last contact was at the park with my brothers. We went boat paddling, it was really fun and we all enjoyed it. [But] I would make sure we would have more than two hours as it isn't enough time. We shouldn't have a time limit. It seems like a 'project' if you do that, all formal, like 'contact' and not normal. We should [also] have more frequent meet ups, like every week...(YP3, LA6)

This suggests a possible discrepancy in expectations which is further discussed. Most meetings were attended by all siblings but at six of the 45 meetings, one sibling, usually an older one was missing, and siblings present sometimes expressed disappointment about not seeing a missing sibling. One Buddy commented that once she became involved, she picked the young people up in her car and that had markedly improved their attendance.

There were also comments in the Buddies' interviews and diaries about foster carers changing the arrangements at the last minute or cancelling, but these were rare. There was one isolated incident of a young person commenting on how a Buddy hadn't shown up and that this had messed up their plans but in general, everyone put themselves out to make the meetings happen, with Buddies and foster carers often involved in extensive travel.

Activities undertaken at the meetings

Table 4: Frequency of activities undertaken at monthly meetings (more than one activity logged for each meeting)

Activity	Number of times mentioned in diaries
Going to the park/adventure playground	14
McDonalds/Pizza/restaurant	8
Bowling	7
Picnic	6
Swimming	5
Cinema	4
Ice skating	3
Museums e.g. Natural History, Horniman, HMS Belfast, Maritime	4
Pedalos	2
Soft play	2
Laser Quest	2
Pottery/Pottery painting	2

Sixty-six activities were listed in the 39 diary sheets received. As shown in Table 4, the most popular, was going to the park which was often part of a meeting included to enable siblings to eat a packed lunch, minimising the additional costs of eating out, though restaurants (budget ones) were listed as the second most popular activity. This might reflect the recognition by Buddies, commented on in their interviews, that the siblings needed time to talk, laugh and what several described as ‘chill’ together. Activities reported only once each included badminton, wildlife park, aquarium, library, fire station, Emirates cable car, and the beach (one young person lives near the coast).

Many of the young people talked about doing exciting activities like pottery making, soft play, laser quest, swimming, bowling or ice skating. A couple of them said they only ever went to the park which was boring (though the diary sheets suggest that one group went to a park three times and the others not more than twice).

The diaries indicated that the young people talked about recent holidays, sports, TV, school, friends, boyfriends, where they live, their foster carers, other siblings not in the Project and step-parents. Significant discussion time at each meeting focused upon what they should do at their next meeting. Older siblings seemed to appreciate the opportunities that the meetings gave them to discuss their personal future plans (e.g. college, housing and budgeting), often with support from the Buddies especially on finance. Some ‘painful’ discussions took place such as those about placement disruptions, their birth parents, being moved away from each other and how good it would be to be back together. One Buddy reported that one girl had said ‘how angry she was with her mum, wouldn’t forgive her because she didn’t look after them and keep the home nice, so they were separated’ (Diary, Meeting 5, LA3).

The young people interviewed all really appreciated seeing their siblings and said it had been helpful to get a chance to talk. One commented:

...we get to all get together and have a laugh, and tell jokes. The best times have been when we went swimming and when we celebrated my belated birthday. (YP3, LA3, Group 1)

There were examples of occasional arguments and even a few ‘fights’ but these were mostly low-key bickering and resolved amicably by the Buddies.

Buddies

The sixteen Buddies included 14 women and two men. Of the 12 interviewed, 8 had worked with children before, two as a social worker (one of whom was also care experienced), one as a therapist, one as a counsellor and the others in a range of roles. Two had grown up in care and been separated from siblings themselves and five were currently students undertaking social work, psychology or other degrees.

Reasons for becoming a Buddy

They gave a range of reasons for deciding to volunteer on the programme from wanting something interesting to do, to seeing it as a very worthwhile and important activity. Having experienced a number of meetings, half of them reported that they were themselves benefitting from the experience, for example getting extensive satisfaction from seeing the relationships develop and in one case through increasing her confidence to take children out:

I always wanted to be the person taking young people out ...Often I see people doing it with groups of people and I thought I'd like to do it, but lacked the confidence ...but because this was a small group and I had the support of the other Buddies (at the time there were three of us for four young people), it was fine and I really enjoyed it. (B3, LA3, Group 2)

Some Buddies suggested that they had not been aware of what a big commitment they were making for a whole year. They felt that the expectations on them were enormous from both the young people and the provider:

there's a lot of expectations on us, we are left alone to get on with it... I can think of one example, when they had to change Buddies, I just got an email saying 'see what you think' like I was supposed to interview her or something, I don't know if it is just me because they know ...my experience, but it's a lot of expectations when you have your own lives to lead. (B1, LA6)

One had expected the activities to be every six weeks and several had not realised the Buddy's role in identifying and planning the activity with the siblings. Another suggested that the provider should book 6 months of meetings in advance so that the demands on making arrangements would be reduced.

Training and support for Buddies

The training provided by Family Action was universally well received by the Buddies. Several people spoke very positively indeed about it, including those with professional training in the area, one of these noting that it was a ‘relationships-based approach’ which was as needed. Several mentioned the input on what to do if faced with challenging behaviour and some had experienced this and felt able to address it.

The Buddies were also universally positive about the support being provided from Family Action, staff being named frequently as having provided ‘fantastic support’ whenever needed. One noted that there was no formal supervision as such (though the Handbook suggests that Buddies will be supervised) but that the Buddies could always approach the project manager. One Buddy commented:

Well we've got quite a lot of support from Family Action, the two main contacts I speak to are [name] and [name] and they're fantastic and they're always at the other end of the phone or

quick to respond to emails, any queries I have had they've just been fantastic about it. (B2, LA6)

Effectiveness of Buddies

In general, the young people spoke positively about the Buddies. What they really liked about them was that they were cool, they would ask them what activities they wanted to do and they would join in and have fun with them, rather than sitting to the side observing. Two young people had been let down once by their Buddy which had made them feel negatively towards them. Foster carers were really positive about the Buddies, for example one noted:

Buddies have been absolutely fantastic. [name of child] has bonded with them really quite quickly because they have been very engaging... very child focused and I am very impressed with the way they handle [child's] learning difficulties (FC2, LA2)

There were two areas that emerged that might merit further consideration in planning longer-term sustainability of the Project. During the evaluation, five Buddies left and were replaced by others. Most Buddies stressed the importance of their relationship with the other Buddies in their group. The training had provided the initial opportunity to get to know the other Buddy(s) but when a Buddy changed they were straight into the next meeting without that time to familiarise themselves with each other. One Buddy suggested that the Buddies should continue to meet up as a network, maybe with an ongoing on-line forum so that they could discuss problems and share information about activities. This might enhance the capacity to relocate Buddies to another sibling group where necessary (as happened twice in the evaluation period) by giving them a better overview.

The other issue that emerged was around the need to prepare Buddies for managing the young people's expectations. The young people often wanted to meet more often, for longer or to undertake more expensive activities beyond the budget (e.g. theme parks) – these issues are returned to elsewhere. One Buddy described the hostility when the visit had come to the end but the siblings wanted to spend longer together. From the Buddies perspective, the young people appeared oblivious to the fact that they were volunteers with limited time and budget though some of the older ones certainly developed a better understanding of the financial constraints as the project developed.

Impact of the project on the young people

All of the Buddies and all but three foster carers (two in the same group) described the meetings as being of significant benefit to the young people involved. Two of the foster carers that were negative considered that the age gap within the sibling group was too large to benefit the four children in that group undertaking the same activity (further discussed below). They also noted that this group met up regularly anyway outside the Project and indeed all attend the same school, so there was little added value to gain from the Project. In two other groups (LA1 and LA4) the issue of the siblings having regular contact outside the project was raised by the carers, in one case because the placement changed and the siblings were effectively all together (though one living locally independently) and in the other because they were all together every weekend.

One carer appeared not to understand the nature of the Project stating '...get them to hope that they will be able to see their families thereafter and it's not going to happen. It's a very senseless project'. As there is no evidence from any source of the Project misleading young people, it must be assumed that this person got the wrong impression and needed better information.

The other foster carers suggested evidence of increased confidence, sociability and involvement with benefits from increased support from their siblings and stronger development of their identity. The young people were similarly positive. Many foster carers reported on how much the young people had enjoyed the contact and how they looked forward to it and talked about it afterwards so positively:

When he comes back you can see in his face he's just so happy and he always mentions their names, their birthdays and what they do. I think it's really, really helping them.
(FC2, LA3, Group 1)

One foster carer noted that it had been highly beneficial as the young person she cares for has a special need and at the beginning was always really excited and sometimes would act out but is now much calmer. Like others she was really worried about what would happen now that it had ended:

I think when the Buddy contact has been cancelled she has been very, very upset. Because she's got learning disabilities, she finds it very difficult to understand why it's not going to happen [now that it has ended] or why everybody isn't there. (FC3, LA2)

There were lots of comments about how now that it had ended (for some groups) the contact would drop off again:

They're [the Buddies] really cool... [and] I find it really good. It's fun... they arrange to take us out... we do have fun but me and my brother, it's like, now we'll miss each other... I really enjoy it, it's good. (YP1, LA4)

Overwhelmingly, the young people and foster carers were clear about the benefits the Project had achieved for the young people. The following sections reflect the main themes that emerged from the accounts of this impact from those interviewed.

Significance of meeting without foster carers or social workers

The young people themselves reported welcoming the opportunity to meet without their foster carers or social workers (as had been the case for most through supervised contact with birth families). They wanted contact with their siblings to be separate from the contact they have with their birth parents. They reported that Buddies were more relaxed than foster carers or social workers and often joined in the activity, though two Buddies reported that they thought it important to keep out of the activity and let the siblings interact without them (typically they might sit at another nearby table in the café to give the siblings some 'privacy'). One Buddy encapsulated what many said when she suggested that the young people:

...were really well, really positive. There is clearly a bond there between them all. They were very natural, a total transformation for them 'cos one child has more difficulties and was so different when we met with the carers. (B1, LA6)

And another noted that:

I think this works because you're removed from their map of official people, we're not professionals so it helps build the relationship (B1, LA6).

Foster carers also noted the importance of the contact being without them present. One summarised this as:

Well immediately they spend that time together rather than the carers coming together ... without the supervision of the carers I think that is really the best thing, and seeing her siblings and just having fun with her siblings. (FC1, LA2)

The social worker thought it was really important that they meet without the social workers or foster carers so it is a 'neutral' environment. The young people themselves with two exceptions, did not trust their social workers as they felt that they were not really listened to by them. Overall, social workers, carers and the young people felt that meeting without the carers and social workers gave the young people an important degree of independence.

Friendship, love and support developing between siblings

The young people generally reported positive developments in their relationships. One girl suggested that she would seek out an older brother (not in the Project) if she wanted support but most others provided evidence of improved relationships with the siblings in the Project for example:

[The best thing about the Project is] getting on with my younger sister because... I used to hate her once but now we get on. (YP1, LA3, Group 2)

They suggested that they were arguing less, fighting less, missing each other in between meetings and being able to talk to each other more about things. Some of them talked about having phone contact in between the meetings as well.

Overall, Buddies were very positive about how much the siblings enjoyed seeing each other and most of the diaries noted that the low point was the siblings having to part at the end of the meeting. One Buddy reflected many others when she described the sibling group as 'when they're together, they come alive, they're very active but they don't want to interact with their Buddies at all, just each other'. Three Buddies noted that at first, the siblings had found the early meetings hard, sometimes because their needs were so different which was usually related to disparity in ages and in others because of initial shyness or painful histories. But they noted how significantly this had changed over time, observing them 'having a laugh together' and really enjoying their meeting.

...it's all sort of happy and positive and if there's any sort of family issues it's not there when you're out ...they support each other which is really nice ...when we went ice skating they helped each other round the ice rink ...they often have a hug in the car on the way back when they're sat in the back seat together... they kinda get some quality time together. (B2, LA1)

Several Buddies noted the love and affection openly expressed between siblings, with lots of hugging, holding hands and telling each other they loved them. Several Buddies noted the opportunities that had developed over the project for the siblings to offer support to one another, especially at challenging times. For example, seven young people experienced a change in placement during the year, one of these had three moves and another moved far away from their siblings. One sibling group experienced the death of a birth parent. At these times, the Buddies noted the siblings providing one another with additional support.

The diaries provided strong evidence of older siblings taking responsibility for the younger ones during the meetings. Buddies noted the importance of them being caring but not necessarily taking full responsibility for them all the time at the expense of, for example, talking to a similar-aged sibling. The older siblings commented in their interviews that the Project reduced the stress for the older siblings because the Buddy would look after the children that were liable to run off, or display challenging behaviour. This enabled them not

only to interact with other siblings in a relaxed manner, but also to have a healthier relationship with the younger sibling with less resentment of one another.

Improved relationships with other family/foster carers

Some young people were reported by their foster carers to have developed better relationships with the foster family and others outside the sibling group though attribution of this to the Project remains tentative. One foster carer noted:

...during other contacts outside of Buddies relationships have definitely improved and she feels a lot more comfortable with herself being with her sisters out in public and not worrying about what people think. (FC2, LA2)

Several Buddies observed improvements in behaviour which seemed to have been carried over into their other relationships and one carer commented on the opportunity that the meetings gave her for discussion with the young person.

The foster carers were honest in noting the space that the Project created in their caring role that enabled them to get other things done, one commented for example: ‘...to be honest also from my point of view... it allows me a couple of hours to get myself sorted out and get things done...’ (FC2, LA3, Group 1)

Identity

The interviews with young people explored their sense of belonging and whether this changed over the period of the Project. Four young people who had previously stated that they like to be left alone when they are upset suggested in their follow up well-being assessment that they would always like someone to cheer her up if sad. They also reported an increase in feeling as if they belong and are always listened to. Some also indicated that their friends and family look after them and that they have someone with whom to do fun things. These reflections might suggest that there is an improved sense of seeking support from others which might be linked to the Project.

Crucially, the meetings with their siblings contributed to a sense of well-being through creating a history with their siblings:

The Buddy scheme is fun because we meet my brothers [and] my sisters, and we get to spend time together and go on trips. We have been bike riding, aquarium, to [the] park, pottery making... I made a bowl. I can put stuff in it now and it reminds me of going to pottery together. (YP1, LA5)

And

The best thing about my last contact [with my siblings] was being able to see them and spend time with them – it was fun. We went to the park, it was my brother’s birthday, and we went paddling which is something we used to do with our mum. (YP1, LA6)

A few Buddies (mainly those with relevant professional experience), noted the ways in which the meetings provided an opportunity for the siblings to reflect on those histories, in particular their jointly-experienced histories and the contribution that this made to strengthening their identity:

...they have a really clear sense of narrative about who they are and I feel like often it’s the incidental conversations that help the girls make sense of who they are... when you have a kind of traumatic history in your past and your sense of continuity gets interrupted by the circumstances around you... it’s just so important for them to have some continuity and to be able to revisit things and talk about memories they have. That very often comes up “well do

you remember when we did this” or “do you remember when mum did that” ...I feel like you can’t underestimate how important that ongoing continuity to your relationships is, a sense of who you are and where you’ve come from, to me is just fundamental as to why this project is important. (B2, LA2)

This sometimes led to discussions between siblings about who is in their family and on one occasion two younger siblings asking the Buddies if they were part of their family:

The children talked about what life was like when they all lived together, with [2 names] particularly remembering this and reminding the [other siblings] of when they helped get them ready, do their hair etc. This led to [two younger siblings] being confused with who exactly is part of their family: they asked the [Buddies] if we are family too, to which we replied that we are friends. (Diary, Meeting 4, LA3, Group 1)

Challenges

Activities

Many of the Buddies noted the challenges of coming up with ideas for possible activities that weren’t too expensive (e.g. theme parks, paintballing) but were attractive to the young people. They seemed unaware of the availability of the Handbook that lists activities. Those supporting sibling groups with a larger age range found this particularly challenging.

Initially they didn’t seem to know each other very well and they hadn’t seen each other for a while and it got better. It’s tricky because we’ve got one 9 and then the eldest one is 18, so it was a bit tricky to find things they all wanted to do, with the older one and the young one, but they generally got on quite well and their behaviour was pretty good really. A few challenges from a couple of them at times, but apart from that, it’s pretty good. (B3, LA3, Group 2)

The foster carers in this same group confirmed the difficulties in trying to cater for such a wide age range:

No, I don’t, I don’t think she’s benefitted and she has said that she doesn’t want to go anymore. She was bored, to be honest because she’s 18, younger one is 10. She just gets bored with what they do (FC1, LA4, Group 2)

Three Buddies commented that it was less about the activity and more about them having quality time together. Several noted that the cinema was a good example of an activity that stopped them interacting and was not therefore seen as suitable, though four groups tried it once before coming to this conclusion.

Engagement of the siblings in planning the activities

All the Buddies reported that the siblings chose the activities and most of the young people and foster carers confirmed this. The young people talked about how their Buddies listened to what they wanted to do:

We get to pick what we do... they’ll ask us what kind of things we want to do... with it being nice weather recently, they’ve taken us to [name] park and we’ve gone on like the boats, the bikes and stuff. I think next time we’re going to [name of another park] and then when it starts getting cold we’re going to do like ice skating and stuff. (YP3, LA2)

However, two young people suggested that they should be able to do other activities and they should be asked what they want to do, implying that they weren't always influencing the decision. Most young people reported that even if they couldn't do what they wanted (e.g. theme park), the Buddy would make other suggestions and let the young people choose – so the young people felt that they had more control over the meetings. Buddies noted that they sometimes had to suggest things to do or remind the siblings of the budget limitations when doing so. The Buddies noted that thinking about and discussing the activity sometimes contributed to its success.

Resources

The Siblings Together charity received funding which was paid to Family Action; equivalent to £50 per session specifically for the meetings, in addition to which Family Action invoiced the local authority a further £20 per child per meeting, to ensure that each session was funded adequately. However, all but two of the Buddies reported that this didn't go far if they included food and drinks too, especially in London. This led most to make sure that the young people brought a packed lunch, try and take picnics to the park though in bad weather their options were more limited. The few who were students also found the need to layout the expenses and then claim it back, problematic. Most groups went to parks and adventure playgrounds on one meeting in order to use two meetings' budget on a later one, including in one case a theme park. One of the two Buddies who thought the funding was adequate suggested that it was a good experience for the young people to learn to budget tightly and the other suggested:

I haven't found we needed much, we went to the park and we already had footballs. Travel is covered, claim it back through supervisor (B1, LA2)

The other resource often commented on by the Buddies was time. Three of the young people lived a considerable distance outside London with mileages between siblings in these groups being 30, 33 and 85. The 30-mile trip takes nearly two hours as it involves crossing London and three buses and the 85-mile trip involves the Buddies and one sibling in a potential seven-hour round trip (see Table 3) as they have to go by trains and other means.

The Buddies noted that the young people complained about the travel time and that this was a huge commitment for the Buddies, while balancing this with the benefits to the young people and concluding that it was worth it. Some foster carers were also required to commit significant time to the meetings – one described how it put pressure on the whole family to try and work around the contact. The child had a 4-hour round trip and it was down to the foster carer to take her to her sister's foster placement - and then the Buddy picked her up from there.

Relationships with foster carers/residential homes

The meeting arrangements often depended on the reliability of those in the caring role to agree to the arrangements and then stick to them. Considering the enormous challenge of getting these young people together from such diverse situations across in some cases, long distances, shows just how effective the Project was in general. One carer was obstructive towards the Buddy and a small number of others were not always reliable on timings or arrangements which sometimes led to carefully constructed plans, in particular where significant travel was involved, having to be changed.

One foster carer suggested it would be most helpful to get feedback from the Buddies on how the meeting had gone. Another was concerned that the discussion between the siblings

focused on past birth family events that the child in her care was too young to remember and might be upsetting her. A third carer was worried that comparisons about money between the siblings might lead to unrealistic expectations:

They share information money-wise, and this kind of thing, and they compare things. That is a bit challenging. He has got that, I want that, and he gets that sort of money and why don't we get that money? (FC2, LA6)

Most of these challenges were overcome and many Buddies and foster carers established effective ways of getting it to work. Furthermore, it was clear that Buddies knew they could draw on support from Family Action at any time.

Conclusions

The Buddy Project succeeded in establishing meetings of variable regularity for 23 young people in care separated from some or all of their siblings, from 7 sibling groups across 6 local authorities. There were 45 meetings in all during the period evaluated and 16 voluntary Buddies managed to support the young people in 66 different activities. Given the instability all of these young people had experienced, some severely so, and the geographical spread of the individuals in the groups, this is a major achievement in itself. The evaluation considered three outcomes:

Changes in the well-being of the children and young people involved

With one possible exception, the evidence from the young people themselves, foster carers and Buddies suggests that the young people greatly enjoyed the contact with their siblings, in particular, not in the presence of social workers or foster carers monitoring their interactions. While for a few, the novel activities which they experienced in these meetings might have been a significant attraction, the main appeal was seeing their siblings, most displayed happiness while meeting them and did not want to part company. They also reported wanting more frequent contact and for longer. The high quality of the Buddies contributed to this.

There were five individuals whose behaviour was reported to have significantly improved, for example, becoming calmer. For the older siblings, their well-being was enhanced by the opportunity to discuss their futures, relationships, college and housing with not only their siblings, but the Buddies who were seen as impartial as not tied up with their legal care status. For other children, there was evidence of greater confidence and developing identity which is addressed in the next point.

Changes in the relationships between siblings and related contact with the wider family

The relationships between siblings improved significantly in most cases, in particular for those who were not experiencing regular contact outside the Project. There were three sibling groups in which one sibling had a history of 'not getting on' with either one or more of the others. In all three cases, the relationships were reported to have improved dramatically. For the others, relationships became closer, more affectionate, supportive and a source of fun and laughter.

There were times when the siblings supported one another through crises such as placement changes, bereavements or relationship problems. There was discussion of both

positive and negative incidences in their past and while one foster carer was understandably concerned about whether a younger sibling would find this disturbing, for the older ones this might have been critical in assisting closure. Acknowledging these jointly experienced histories also helped some of them to better develop their sense of identity as part of a family.

There was less evidence that the increased sibling contact affected their relationships with the wider family though improvements in confidence and behaviour were reported by some foster carers to be positively enhancing their home life. Given the number of placement changes during the Project, the expectation that the Project could impact on wider family relationships was probably unrealistic in this timeframe.

Longer-term sustainability of the project

There is good evidence from this evaluation of the benefits and potential benefits of bringing siblings together who are placed apart. However, young people expressed disappointment in the groups who stopped meeting and both they and their foster carers voiced concerns over the need for longer-term continuity.

We did not undertake cost benefit analysis and this would be helpful in persuading others to consider running a similar service. The costs of the service are relatively low, it depending extensively on the voluntary nature of the Buddies, but the travel, activities allowance and coordination and training provided are all considerable. However, if the gains could be demonstrated in the long run in terms of achieving greater stability of placements for young people and maybe even enhanced retention of foster carers, it will undoubtedly be cost effective.

Recommendations

Moving forward with this project or for others rolling it out in other areas, there are a number of issues to be considered by the provider:

- The expectations of those involved need to be stated clearly by the provider and restated at regular intervals.

The provider needs to make clear to foster carers and residential home managers how the Project operates, what the expectations will be on them for travel, accompanying young people to meeting points, pocket money requirements and how long the Project is likely to last. They might also be informed of the requirement for them to give feedback (whether to the provider or to an independent evaluator).

The recruitment and training of Buddies needs to cover expectations of them to potentially travel long distances, commit full days to the activities with travel and plan activities. The provider might consider the suggestions made by Buddies in this evaluation that there be an on-line forum and on-going network for the Buddies and that they are given access to the Handbook.

The provider needs to ensure (via the recruitment process) that young people understand, where they have capacity to do so, that the Buddies are volunteers, who have chosen to join the Project and that there is a limited budget for activities and refreshments.

- **The recruitment of young people**

Overall, the recruitment was slower than the original plan suggested with the usual challenges of placement breakdowns and slow responses from local authorities. Perhaps recruitment be initially through foster carer organisations (e.g. The Fostering Network) and care leaver organisations (where older siblings still have younger siblings in care) and then involve the social worker once it is clear that the criteria are met.

- **Size and age range of sibling groups**

In two of the groups the age range was wide leading to greater challenges in providing activities that were age appropriate and attractive to both the oldest and the youngest. However, the purpose of the meetings is to enable siblings to get together so that 'being together' is more important than the activity itself and the contexts selected for this should reflect that.

- **Budget**

The level of budget and contribution from local authorities may need further clarification given the inflated prices of activities in London. Better use should be made of the Handbook produced by Siblings Together which lists activities that have been found successful and provides information of how to obtain vouchers that give discounts for those participating in the Project. Requiring Buddies to pay for activities up front and then claim their expenses back, might need reconsideration.

APPENDIX 1: YOUNG PEOPLE'S INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

REES CENTRE
Research in Fostering and Education
University of Oxford Department of Education



Buddy Project Evaluation: Young People's Interview Schedule

Name:

Introduction

I would like to ask you some questions about the Buddy project. There are no right or wrong answers. This is just to get your views on how things are going.

REDO CIRCLES EXERCISE FIRST – SEE ATTACHED

We have a circle here, which places you at the centre.

Write significant people (relationship to CYP not name) each on blank card so interviewee can move them around on the circle until final placement – then write on and attach to completed interview schedule.

ABOUT THE MEETINGS WITH YOUR SIBLINGS

How often have you been seeing your sibling(s)?

What were the good things about these meetings?

What was not good about it?

Is there anything you would like to have changed about the meetings you have had with your siblings?

Can you tell me about particular activities you did with them that you enjoyed?

And ones that you did not enjoy?

Do you think seeing them has helped you in any way? If so, can you tell me about it?

Will you be carrying on seeing them? If so, are you getting any help with this e.g. money, social worker or carer organising meetings, etc.

ABOUT YOUR SENSE OF BELONGING

The question includes five statements about how some children/young people feel.

Can you say how much you feel this way?	Always	Some-times	Never	Why you rated it this way
I have family and friends that 'look after' me				
I feel like I don't belong				
Others listen to me				
I would like someone to cheer me up when I get sad				
I have someone to do fun things with				

ABOUT YOUR WELL-BEING

Please say how happy you are with the following areas of your life by circling a number between 0 and 10 where 0 is 'Very Unhappy' and 10 is 'Very happy' - whichever best describes how you feel.

How happy are you with:

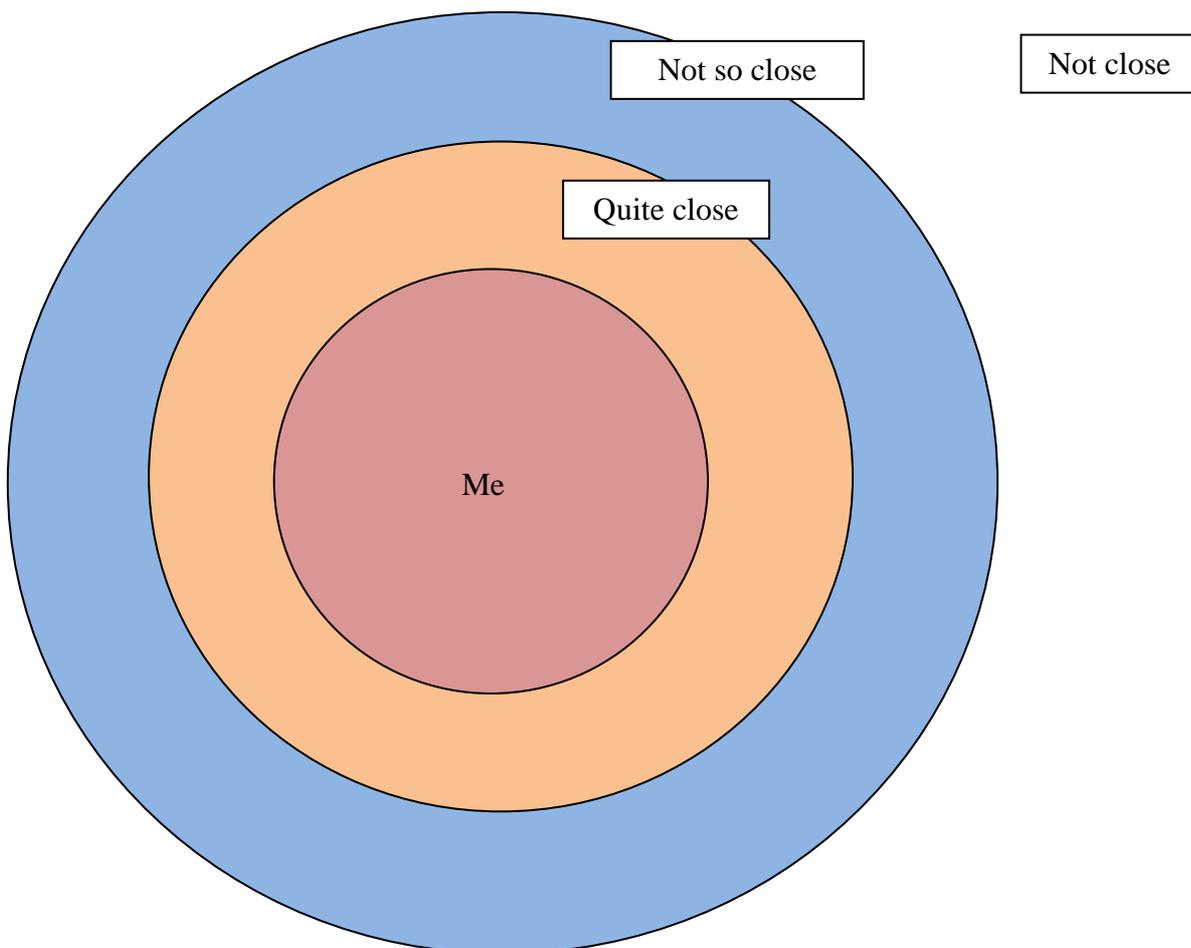
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Very happy
a) Your health	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
b) Your appearance (how you look)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
c) The way you use your time (hobbies etc)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
d) Your future (what might happen to you later in life - NA to younger children?)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
e) Your family	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
f) Your friends	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
g) The home you live in	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
h) Your carers	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	n/a
i) The things you have (money [older children only?] and things you own)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
j) Your school	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
k) Your local area	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
l) How much you get to choose things/activities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
m) How safe you feel	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

CIRCLE ACTIVITY

ID CODE.....

This will help us get an idea of the people in your life at the moment.

- I would like you to think of the people in your life (e.g. you have a relationship with) and place them in one of the circles depending on how close you feel to them.
- Write their names and their relationship to you (e.g. social worker, ex carer, cousin etc) on pieces of paper.
- Put those you feel really close to in the circle nearest to 'me'
- Put those you don't feel close to at all outside of the circle.
- By close we mean that you feel that they are important and you feel you can rely on them to help and support you.



APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE EXTRACT FROM COMPLETED DIARY OF MEETING

Diary Sheet	
Your name	
[Names of Buddies]	
Please tell us about this time with your young person...	
<p>Activities We took the children swimming at [name of place] leisure centre. As the session finished about 1 we also had lunch upstairs in the café then went to the soft play until half 3.</p>	
<p>Discussions The children talked about what life was like when they all lived together, with the girls particularly remembering this and reminding the boys of when they helped get them ready, do their hair etc. This led to boys being confused with who exactly is part of their family: they asked [Buddy] and I if we are family too, to which we replied that we are friends. [Names of young people] also sometimes refer to [Name of foster carer] as mum. [Names of young people] mentioned visiting an auntie in Jamaica, which is where they had swum in the sea before.</p>	
<p>Describe interaction between siblings The children all seemed to be happy to see each other and excited to go swimming. Apart from some minor splashing, they all behaved well in the pool even though it was a bit cold! During the soft play, [Name of one sibling] sulked for a while because [other sibling] got given free ice cream (from the waitress) and she didn't. She sat down in the corner with us rather than playing in the soft play. When it came to leave, it was difficult to get [Names of two siblings] to come out of the soft play so we could leave.</p>	
<p>High points The children all said they had fun and were looking forward to the next visit.</p>	
<p>Plans and approximate date of next visit February (not confirmed which date yet) The children asked if we could go for sushi next time so we will try and do this.</p>	

APPENDIX 3: REPORT ON PHASE 1 IN BRISTOL

There were two sibling groups in Phase 1 of the project.

Group 1 had three siblings, one of whom was living independently, one in residential care and one in a foster family. Group 2 is two siblings both with foster carers though one moved into semi-independent living in October 2014. Group 1 met 16 times Aug 2013 – Dec 2014. Group 2 met five times Sept 2014 – Jan 2015.

Findings from Group 1

At the start of the project the young people were least happy (on the well-being scale) about their family and most happy about their carers, the way they spend time and in one case the school. Unfortunately, all three of the siblings refused to be interviewed at the end of the project (they refused to make themselves available so perhaps it should be seen as not a priority rather than a rejection as such). The carer of one of the siblings thought that the sibling she fostered had benefitted significantly from the project. The sibling discussed with the carer where they went and what they had to eat. The young person that she fostered had become more confident in her interactions with her siblings (one has special needs and she described the other as bossy). The carer described the Buddy as: ‘...such a lovely lady and she’s such a good match...’ (important to acknowledge that in Bristol it was ‘Allies’ that were the Buddies).

Two social workers were positive about the project, one particularly so. She felt it had gone really well and that the siblings meeting in the presence of people who did not have statutory responsibility for the young people made a huge difference in allowing them to interact more naturally and not focus so much on life decisions. Previously the siblings had only met formally through the children’s services and had struggled to agree what activity to do and with only one social worker attending, the support was insufficient. When the project began, the oldest sibling dominated at first and reported knowledge about the family to the other two and the ‘Allies’ didn’t step on it but once the social worker flagged it up it was addressed. The young person with whom she works has grown up a lot in all aspects and the project has helped her to manage her family relationships.

Two of the social workers and one of the carers gave conflicting accounts of contact between the three siblings since the project ended. According to the social worker for one of the young people in Group 1, the group stopped meeting in December 2014, as there are no resources for them to continue meeting. However, the carer of one of the siblings reported that two of them meet weekly (managed by this carer according to the other social worker) and speak on the phone and that the young person that she fostered is in touch regularly with both of her sisters. She thinks that the other two siblings meet up sometimes but that the one in residential care behaves badly in public so the other two find it difficult. No one suggested that all three siblings meet together. One sibling visits the oldest sibling in her flat.

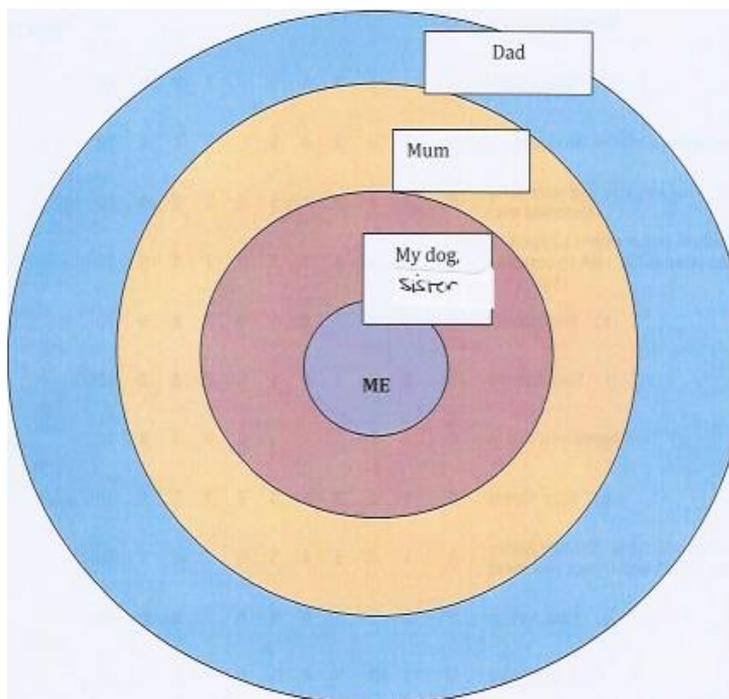
Findings from Group 2

One of the young people suggested that he saw his sibling six times during the year (though we only have records of four meetings plus one more that we were told took place) and really enjoyed it ‘Me and X get to have a laugh and mess around – play fight, run around, joke’ and went on to suggest that..., she gives good advice and she’s my real family it feels more normal...’. He said he would have liked the meetings to be more frequent and longer.

One of the young people left foster care in October 2014 to start living independently.

According to the foster carer, the siblings didn't see more of each other than prior to the project (when they had met with a social worker) but because the meetings were planned and they knew that they would definitely happen, they were less stressed about their relationship. The young person she cared for did not discuss the meetings with her. The carer of the other young person verified that they didn't meet as often as intended as the other sibling often cancelled. This carer reported that the person she fostered did talk to her about the meetings. Since the project has ended they have seen each other a couple of times but she described one incident in which the other sibling kept him waiting in the park for an hour. This carer thought the project was a waste of time because the young person found it very difficult to cope with his sister cancelling. Also, the Buddy disappeared off to live in New York without letting the young person know and this caused a major upset: *what seems like a little let down for these kids is another kick in the sore teeth* (carer).

Despite this carer's somewhat negative view of the project (or the Allie scheme with which she seemed to have confused it), one of the siblings definitely felt it had helped in improving the previously fractious relationship with his sister. In the interview at the end of the project his scores on the well-being scale had increased significantly, in particular on how happy he was with his family, where his score increased from 5 to 10. When asked about the people in his life that he feels close to, his sister had moved into the centre one and a half concentric circles.



Overall conclusions from Bristol

While there was a mixed picture, on balance the sisters in Group 1 seem to have gained both in terms of confidence in their interactions with each other and in their management of family relationships more widely. In Group 2, while the foster carer and social worker had some reservations, one of the young people was clear that he enjoyed seeing his sister and wanted to see more of her (perhaps not reciprocated given the frequency with which she cancelled their arrangements). His perceived well-being increased significantly. In both groups, there was evidence of the importance of meeting with people not associated with statutory services. Some ongoing contact between siblings in both groups in Bristol is continuing beyond the end of the project.