



# Lifelong Links Evaluation

---

Presentation for the Foster Care Transforming Lives Conference  
Edinburgh - 2019

Rees Centre & CELCIS

Presenters: Dr Mariela Neagu and Dr Louise Hill

Co-author: Dr Lisa Holmes



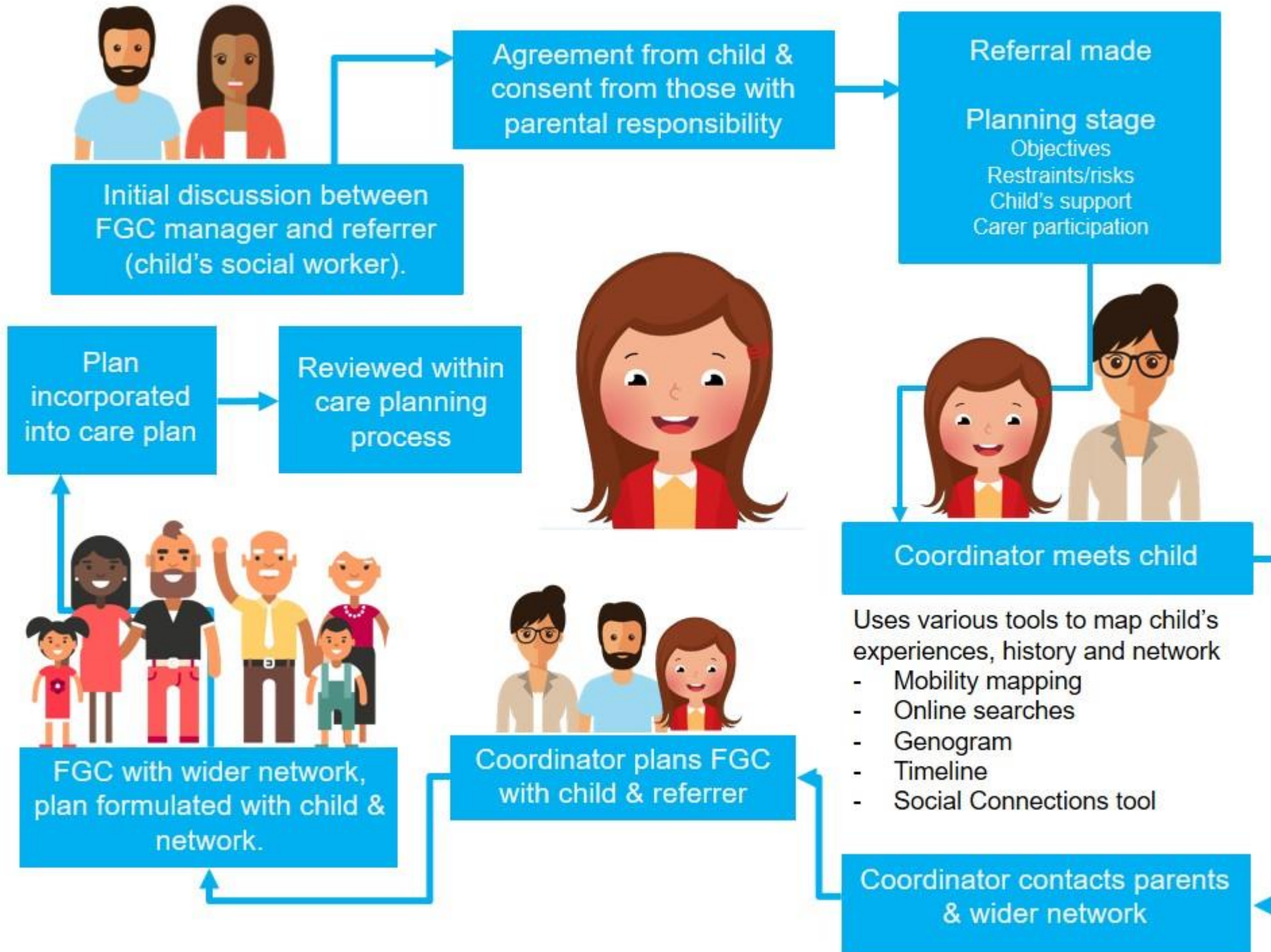
# Lifelong Links

## **Aim of Lifelong Links:**

*To create a lifelong support network for children and young people in the care system'*

The trial referral criteria is children aged under 16 who have been in care less than 3 years in England and 5 years in Scotland and where there is no plan for them to be adopted or to live within their family.





# Evaluation Methods

Mixed methods, quasi-experimental design:

- Child level data (based on national administrative children's social care and education data), including historic data being provided by the local authorities
- Focus groups with professionals
- Interviews with children and young people, carers and professionals
- Development and use of the Social Connections Tool
- Local area case studies
- Secondary analysis of data collected and collated by Family Rights Group

# Lifelong Links: Identity in Children's Social Care

- Entry into care means many children lose their relationships. Care can interfere with their identity formation and their sense of belonging
- Children often lose key elements of their identity such as the continuity of their interpretative background, their distinctiveness and self-esteem (Breakwell, 1986)
- One of the English Care Inquiry (2013) findings is that permanence for children means security, stability and a strong sense of stability and belonging
- Lifelong Links has dedicated coordinators and has been piloted in English and Scottish local authorities with a Family Group Conference /Family Decision Making service
- Preliminary English findings indicate how professionals, foster carers and young people responded to Lifelong Links and the impact on children and young people

# Impact on children and young people

- Children in a range of placements (residential care; foster care; secure care; adoption – following adoption breakdown) participated
- The process is child led at all stages and needs to be supported by the child's carers
- Lifelong Links has the potential to impact positively on the lives of children in care and their sense of self, wellbeing and self-esteem:
  - children feel listened to on matters important to them that the social worker may not have had the time to address
  - contribute to young people's identity and their agency
  - support them to build their own narratives; support them to 'achieve closure' or to understand genetic heritage (important to explain specific health conditions in some cases)
  - address their needs to build safe connections for the future
  - restore broken relationships safely and discover new family members and people they identify as important in their lives (including former carers or other professionals)

# English Child Level Data (baseline analysis)

- The cohort size included in our interim analysis includes 1547 young people: 1274 eligible for Lifelong Links and 273 in receipt of Lifelong Links (based on data returned to the evaluation team up to Sept 2018)
- Children and young people were on average aged just over 12 (range 5 to 18); 72% White British; 60% male; 7% unaccompanied asylum seekers
- 6% of the children and young people who have been offered Lifelong Links have declined to participate and for a further 12% participation was declined by adults on their behalf
- of the 273 children and young people who received, or are receiving Lifelong Links, 15% withdrew from Lifelong Links prior to completion
- The average time to complete Lifelong Links was 6 and a half months, ranging from 1 to 14 months

# Social Connections Tool (baseline analysis)

The following are based on 61 completed SCTs in England:

- On average, young people nominated 9 people who were important in their lives
- Siblings were most likely to be nominated as important people in the lives of the children and young people (nominated by 64% of the young people), followed by foster carers and biological mothers
- Over 75% of the children and young people said they would probably or definitely turn to these people for emotional support, for advice and to socialize
- Considerably lower were respondents' ratings for availability of practical and advocacy support



# Social Connections Tool (baseline analysis)

The following are based on 61 completed SCTs:

- Less than 1% said they could definitely trust the people most important to them
- 8% felt their nominees would probably or definitely let them down
- Approximately 90% reported having enough people across all support domains
- However, more than 1 in 10 young people reported not having enough people to turn to for advocacy support (14%), for practical support (12%), to socialise with (13%) and for positive feedback (13%)

# Emerging findings and responses from interviews and focus groups (practitioners)

- There is an overarching enthusiasm and commitment to Lifelong Links and its perceived potential to improve outcomes for children and young people in care:

*'[I]t has transformed my practice. It's transformed the questions I ask people. The way I supervise. The way I think about my own practice and it's really made me respectfully challenge Social Services' decision.'*

*'I think it can really revolutionise the way we work with looked after children ... I think all the years that I've been working in social work really it's probably been the easiest one to persuade people to do because their reaction is we should be doing this anyway.'*

- Variation in social workers' responses with some practitioners raised concerns about the possibility of unsettling behaviour as a consequence of Lifelong Links, and the potentially negative impact this might have on placement stability.

# Emerging findings and responses from interviews and focus groups

- Reconnecting with family members or other significant people or discovering family members they were not aware of (and family members who were not aware of them)

I think it's about an emotional belonging, somewhere to say that this is my family or part of my family or ... so actually ... because I think the risk for our children is, they become separated from ... even though they might go back to some roots ... they're not necessarily emotionally linked to those roots. And it's ... is it not healthy that we all have ... we all need to belong somewhere. So it's a sense of belonging, I think, and actually helping that young person to belong.

- In some cases, closed adoption prevented sibling contact sought by children in Lifelong Links

# Emerging findings and responses from interviews and focus groups (practitioners)

- Restorative role: reunions with family members, step-parents, grandparents, siblings, family friends, neighbours, previous foster carers, teachers, social workers)

*Lifelong Links practitioner:* 'It's also things like it's a 'Pink Hippo', nobody understood 'Pink Hippo'. 'Pink Hippo' meant something, I didn't know what it meant, he just said "Pink hippo," I said "Words, just give me words," he put 'Pink Hippo' down. Pink Hippo was trauma, I wrote Pink Hippo down, had a laugh about it. The foster carer didn't know, but as soon as I spoke to [fem name], she said, "That was his nursery school'. That's easy, so whenever she talked about Pink Hippo with him, it was his nursery school ... No one else is ever going to say those words, 'Pink Hippo' or know his favourite song. It's sort of the little things, isn't it? So I think they're very important jigsaw puzzles.

*Interviewer:* Puzzles of their identity?

*Lifelong Links practitioner:* Yes, and it seems to strengthen rather than traumatise them, that someone knows it.'

# Foster Carers: emerging findings and responses from interviews and focus groups

- Some foster carers (especially those with less experience) expressed concerns about the possibility of meeting with the birth family, although this was sometimes mitigated by positive experiences at meetings; Experienced foster carers were more positive about Lifelong Links
- In some cases, the meeting strengthened relationships between the child and foster carers or foster carers and birth family members and most children had the foster carers' support when they felt nervous before the meeting

# Foster Carers: emerging findings and responses from interviews and focus groups

‘I think it puts a lot of people off because bringing up somebody else’s child is a massive responsibility and I think sometimes that’s how people think. If you ask my view over the last 20 years, originally, when we started fostering I maybe thought it was maybe not a good idea to meet family members but after 18 years I think it’s probably the best thing that happens.’ (*Experienced foster carer*)

‘He’s done nothing wrong but it’s just, it’s embellished that, and I feel that at home now, he’s walking around Lording it about and again I’ve lost that, yeah there’s a bit of jealousy there as well I have to say, it hurts that you’re at home doing it all and there to pick up the pieces so it’s just brought a lot of feelings to the surface which I didn’t think I had really. I just wish I had maybe would have read more about it instead of relying on other people. I should have got myself more in tune with it.’ (*Foster carer on the Lifelong Links’ impact on their foster child*)

# Lifelong Links – Young People’s Response

- Most children and young people responded positively to participating in Lifelong Links and were very engaged in completing the tools (genograms, mobility mapping)
- Not engaging, withdrawing or postponing occurred if the young people did not wish to revisit their past due to trauma or due to upcoming exams or when foster carers were reluctant about their engagement
- Several young people said that Lifelong Links should be offered to all children in care

‘I was shocked. I just didn't realise how big my life was I suppose. And I was just really shocked, and it really amazed me, to see how many ... how much [name Lifelong Links practitioner] actually found out about me. I was just like ... before I was just like, well I don't know that much about my life, and now I'm just like ... it's just really clear now. And I'm just happy that I found the places where I used to live because then I actually know what happened in my life obviously.’ (Young person participating in Lifelong Links)

# Evaluation in Scotland

- Evaluation on different timelines – five year mixed method longitudinal study with three local authorities using the same methodology. Committed reflective learning evaluation approach.
- Child-level data collection phase one almost completed
- Challenges in different national data returns and some variety in local authority systems
- Fieldwork underway in three sites– focus groups with social workers, foster carers, Lifelong Links co-ordinators, interviews with children and young people about to begin
- Challenges with Data Sharing Agreements & Research Governance have been overcome
- Excellent collaboration with local areas, Family Rights Group & Rees Centre
- Watch this space for early findings...



# Emerging recommendations for policy and practice

- It is important to maintain Lifelong Links as a separate service to ensure continuity and consistency of the approach
- The separation of Lifelong Links as part of the Family Group Conference service has been identified as an implementation facilitator
- The eligibility criteria of the Lifelong Links trial have been questioned in some of the local authorities
- Lifelong Links has the potential to support children in care by removing some of the challenges that being in care posed to their identity formation
- It confirms that entering care is focused on/limited to the mother-child relationship, losing sight of positive relationships the child had experienced prior to entering care
- Lifelong Links appears to positively impact on practice and motivation of the workforce
- It opened channels of communication that had been regarded as inaccessible by both family members and professionals (e.g. former foster carers, social workers, teachers)
- Data complexities associated with the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) have the potential to hinder Lifelong Links

## Concluding remarks

- Continuity and commitment of Lifelong Links coordinator appreciated by young people
- Data from the interviews and focus groups suggests that bringing together birth family members and/or other significant adults helped children and young people to feel that their care experience was not disconnected from their life experience before care
- A positive unintended outcome was children and young people's reconnection with previous carers

## Concluding remarks

- English data collected from the baseline interviews and focus groups suggests that there is a strong practice endorsement for the rationale of Lifelong Links among managers, practitioners and some foster carers (particularly experienced foster carers), described as ‘what we should be doing anyway’
- An awareness of the young people’s need for identity, support networks and prevention of unsafe relationships when they leave care were cited as the main drivers for practitioners to support Lifelong Links

# Selective bibliography

- Baumeister, R. (1986). *Identity - Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Breakwell, G. (1986). *Copying with Threatened Identities*. London & New York: Methuen.
- Erikson, H. E. (1963). *Childhood and Society* (Second). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ferguson, L. (2016). “ Could an Increased Focus on Identity Development in the Provision of Children ’ s Services Help Shape Positive Outcomes for Care Leavers ?” A Literature Review “ Could an Increased Focus on Identity Development in the Provision of Children ’ s Services . *Child Care in Practice*, 24(1), 76–91.
- Grotevant, H. D., & Von Korff, L. (2012). Adoptive Identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luicks, & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*. New York Heidelberg Dordrecht London: Springer.
- Jenkins, R. (2008). *Social Identity* (Third). London & New York: Routledge.
- Neagu, M., & Sebba, J. (2019). Who do they think they are: Making sense of self in residential care, foster care, and adoption. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 105(April), 104449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104449>

# Thank you!

Evaluation team contact details:

[mariela.neagu@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:mariela.neagu@education.ox.ac.uk)

[lisa.holmes@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lisa.holmes@education.ox.ac.uk)

[louise.hill@strath.ac.uk](mailto:louise.hill@strath.ac.uk)

[nadine.fowler@strath.ac.uk](mailto:nadine.fowler@strath.ac.uk)

Twitter:

@MarielaNeagu

@drlouisehill

@LisaHolmes\_Rees

@celcistweets

@ReesCentre