



“This whole concept is as wonderful as it is impactful. The actual meeting has been a lovely overwhelming tonic! Great idea!

Grandparent

Lifelong Links
Impact report July 2020

**Lifelong
Links**®



FAMILY RIGHTS GROUP
Keeping children safe in their families

1. The independent evaluations of Lifelong Links

Lifelong Links is a new approach, developed by Family Rights Group, which aims to build lasting support networks for children and young people in care.

A three year trial¹ of Lifelong Links in 12 English local authorities ended in March 2020. It is being evaluated by the Rees Centre, University of Oxford with the evaluation report due in November 2020.

Lifelong Links is continuing in England thanks to funding from the Department for Education's Innovation Unit; The KPMG Foundation; The Dulverton Trust and The Rayne Foundation. Lifelong Links is being rolled out, so that by the end of March 2021, 20 English local authorities will be offering Lifelong Links. Moreover, the Lifelong Links offer in those authorities is being extended beyond children who fitted the trial criteria, to other children in care and care leavers.

In Scotland, a trial² of Lifelong Links in five authorities is being evaluated by CELCIS, University of Strathclyde. The trial criteria are: children who are aged under 16 years old, have been in care for under three years (or five in Scotland) and there are no plans for them to live within their family or be adopted.

The independent evaluations will explore the impact of Lifelong Links on children and young people and examine whether Lifelong Links leads to a statistically significant improvement in outcomes compared with a comparator group. It will examine whether it:

- increases the number of supportive, lasting relationships for children in care;
- reduces the number of placement breakdowns;
- improves emotional and mental wellbeing;
- improves educational engagement and attainment;
- reduces incidents of running away;
- reduces harmful and risky behaviours including substance misuse, self-harm and criminal activity; and
- improves long term outcomes for children leaving care including an increase in training and employment and reduces the likelihood of their own child being removed.

The evaluators will primarily measure impact but also include process and output indicators and seek the perspectives of all involved including: children and young people, carers, family members, Lifelong Links practitioners, social workers, senior managers and Family Rights Group staff. There will also be a cost benefit analysis as part of the English evaluation.

The Rees Centre evaluation, led by Dr Lisa Holmes, will present their evaluation in Autumn 2020 whilst the CELCIS evaluation, led by Dr Robert Porter, will present their evaluation in Spring 2023.

¹ Funded by the Department for Education Innovative Programme.

² Funded by KPMG Foundation, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, RS MacDonald Charitable Trust and The Robertson Trust

2. Summary of the impact of Lifelong Links

2.1 What we know to date

The following summarises what we know to date about:

- The impact Lifelong Links has had on children, young people, families and other network members.
- How the Lifelong Links trial has influenced local authorities' policies, practices and culture.

It is drawn from a range of data sources including questionnaires completed by those who have participated in Lifelong Links, local authority monitoring reports, Practice Summaries completed by Lifelong Links coordinators about each child receiving a Lifelong Links service, case studies and emerging findings by the Rees Centre evaluation team.

INCREASE IN FAMILY & FRIENDS CONNECTIONS

7 Average number of connections a child has at the start of Lifelong Links.

26 Average number of connections a child has after.



Source: based on data submitted by local authorities in England and Scotland via the connections tracker of 182 children.

Lifelong Links is rebuilding relationships and reconnecting children and young people in care with loved ones.

England

753 children and young people in total who are, or have received a Lifelong Links service since April 2017.

600 of whom met the trial criteria (under 16, in care for less than three years and no plan to return home or be adopted).

Scotland

223 children and young people in total who are, or have received a Lifelong Links service since April 2017.

137 of whom met the trial criteria (under 16, in care for less than five years and no plan to return home or be adopted).

England and Scotland combined

254 Lifelong Links family group conferences have been held.

354 Lifelong Links plans have been created.

3 age of the youngest child to have taken part in Lifelong Links.

101 age of the oldest person to be reconnected with a young person, through Lifelong Links.

187 Lifelong Links coordinators trained.

2.2 What do children and young people want to achieve through Lifelong Links?

At the beginning of the Lifelong Links process, the independent Lifelong Links coordinator asks the child or young person what they'd like to achieve. This is now recorded in a revised version of the Practice Summary which was circulated in July 2019. 90 have been completed and analysed so far.



“Can you find my sister?”

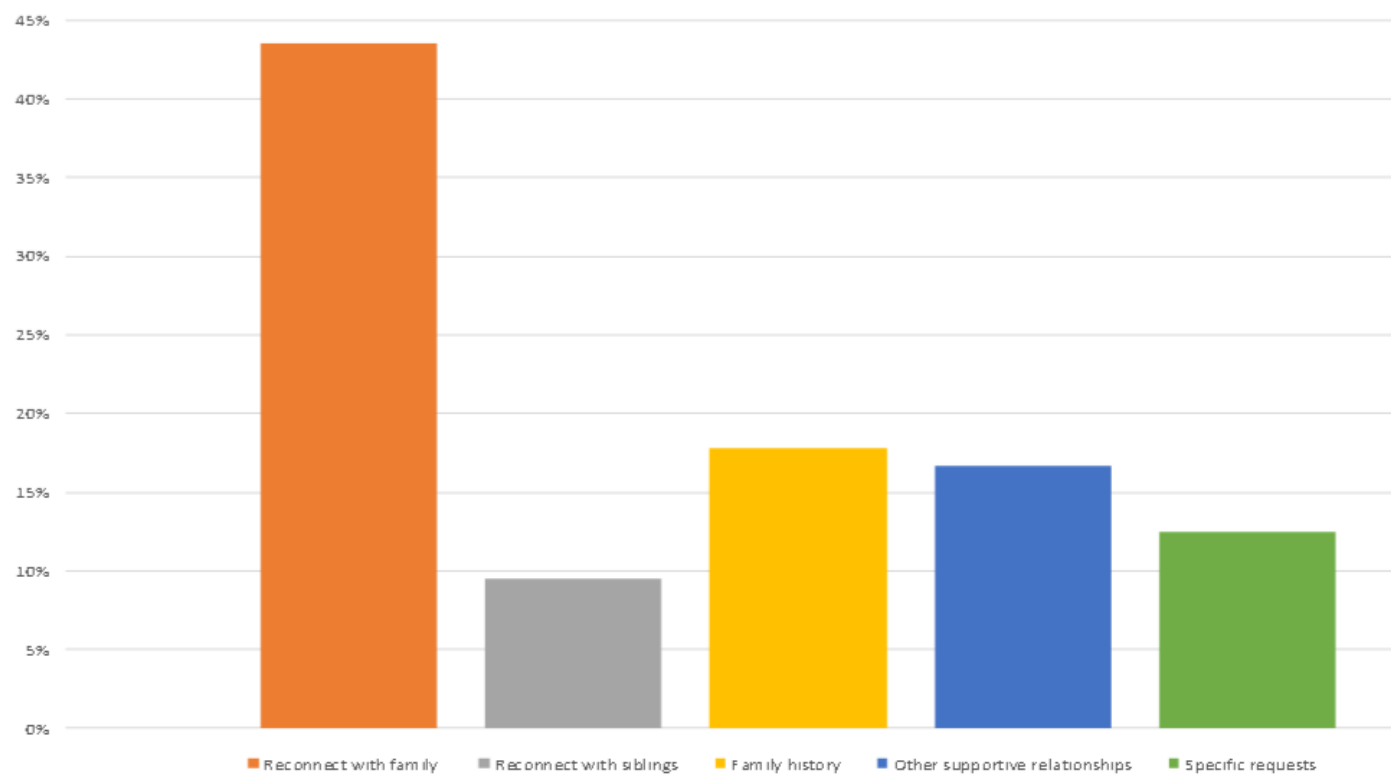
“I want to have support for when I leave care”

“I'd like to get Christmas cards like my foster brothers and sisters do”

“I want to find my dad”



Breakdown of objectives set by young people



The 90 children had 267 objectives they wanted Lifelong Links to deliver, 228 of them were met.

- 82% of objectives about reconnecting the young person with their wider family networks were met.
- 93% of objectives about seeing carers, former professionals and other important people including old school friends and godparents, were met.
- 63% of objectives where children asked about meeting their fathers or finding out more about them, were met.
- Almost one fifth of children wanted to find out more about their family history and where they came from. One Lifelong Links coordinator was able to trace one young person's family tree back to the 1850's.
- 12% of objectives were specific requests which were important to the young person, such as a photograph of themselves with their siblings, to know all the places they had lived, a plan for when they left care or to receive birthday and Christmas cards. 79% of the time the Lifelong Links coordinator was successful.

"This is a role that, as a social worker, I would have love to have done. Other work and responsibilities have to take precedent unfortunately."

Social worker of a young person.

2.3 Outcomes for children and young people who have taken part in Lifelong Links.

The Practice Summaries submitted in relation to the 90 children asked the Lifelong Links coordinators to set out what outcomes had been achieved as a result of Lifelong Links.

- Lifelong Links had resulted in relationships being repaired for just under half of the young people. One boy, for example, thought his older brother had abandoned him, but it transpired the brother was in prison, is now released and they are seeing each other again.
- Relationships have been rebuilt with former foster carers, including where the placement had broken down in very difficult circumstances.
- Three quarters of young people now have family, friends and other supportive adults who have made a long term commitment to them. To be in their life now and when they leave the care system.
- Over 85% now have direct contact with family, friends and other supportive adults (including former teachers and foster carers). This contact was not taking place before but is now part of the child or young person's care plan.
- Two thirds of children and young people have an increased knowledge of their family history and over 80% have an increased sense of identity and belonging.

"This is fantastic idea. I've had an amazing time with him today and look forward to spending more time in the future."

Young person's aunt



The above graphic was produced by Hertfordshire County council to illustrate just some of the offers were made to children and young people, by their new support network, as part of Lifelong Links.

2.4 Children and young people's views

25 young people have completed a questionnaire following their Lifelong Links family group conference where a plan was made by them and their network. They were asked to rate various statements from 1 to 5 (1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree). This is some of their feedback:

Overall thoughts	Average Rating
I was kept informed throughout the process and my views were listened to.	4.9
I feel that I will have more people to help me with important decisions and issues.	4.7
The process helped me talk about what I want and need.	4.7
The plan is clear about what will take place (when/where/how) going forward.	4.8

All children reported that they:

- agreed to take part in Lifelong Links.
- were asked who they'd like to be involved.
- were glad that they had Lifelong Links.

2.5 Views of relatives and other members of the child's support network

Following the child's Lifelong Links family group conferences, members of the child's network including family members, relatives, friends and current or former foster carers are now asked to complete a questionnaire. 191 questionnaires have been submitted by the English authorities and all are overwhelmingly positive, for example:

Overall thoughts	Average Rating
When Lifelong Links was explained to me I thought it was a good idea.	4.7
I feel I have a clear role to help/support the young person.	4.6
The plan going forward is clear.	4.6

This work has made a huge difference to the young person. He has re-established a relationship with his half sibling which he struggled to do before.

Young person's foster carer

3. How Lifelong Links has supported practice improvements in local authorities

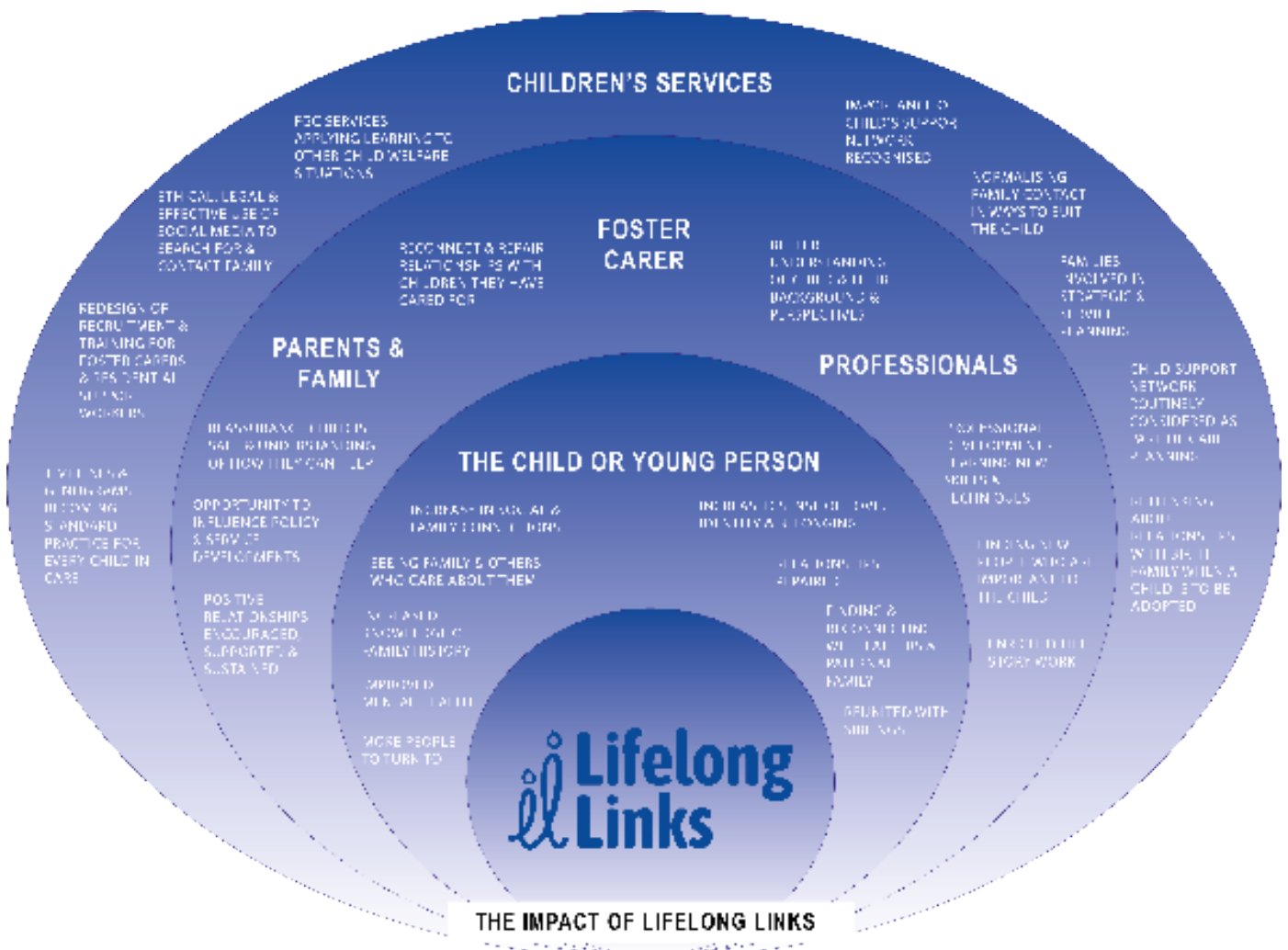
The following reflects some of the practice changes that have taken place in the local authorities that have been attributed to the trial of Lifelong Links.

- Local authorities were strongly encouraged by Family Rights Group to include young people, parents and foster carers on their local planning implementation group. This exposed, in a number of authorities, the lack of any existing forum for parents whose children are involved within the child welfare system. This has led to Family Rights Group's parents' panel being invited by a number of trial authorities, to help them set up a family forum. For example, Hertfordshire is now supporting such a forum with parents involved in influencing strategic decision making, including reviewing how child protection conferences are run.
- Kent has included training on Lifelong Links when working with foster carers in a variety of forums, including support and focus groups, as well as some local training forums. There are future plans to incorporate this within Kent's core training offer.
- Local authorities have been encouraged to use advanced software e.g. Genopro to create detailed genograms of each child experiencing Lifelong Links. In Kent, this is now available across the authority to all social workers who can use it routinely for all children in, or at risk of, entering care.
- In some authorities, it has led to senior managers reviewing the way that contact arrangements between children and their relatives are made, including whether or not they have to be supervised and whether it is organised in a way that children feel comfortable with and at ease. In some cases, Lifelong Links has highlighted unnecessary restrictions placed on teenagers' relationships with family members, which haven't changed since they were first taken into care as children. In some situations supervision of contact is now taking place with the foster carer present rather than an unfamiliar supervisor, which hopefully enables a much more relaxed environment.
- In a number of authorities practitioners are beginning to have discussions about how to ensure that family group conferences, held prior to the child entering care, can be used to identify and support relationships between the child and family and friends who care about them even if they cannot live with them. Too often the presumption was that contact with family and friends needed to be restricted or broken in order to help the child feel secure in their permanent foster care or residential placement.
- In one authority a senior manager reports that Lifelong Links has shifted thinking so that some children now have plans around sustained birth family contact when decisions are being made about adoption, which is a considerable departure from previous practice. Continuing birth family contact, where safe, is now supported by practitioners as part of adopters' assessment and training sessions.

- Glasgow, as a result of their Family Support Strategy and experience of Lifelong Links, has developed with Family Rights Group a new training programme for workers in children's residential homes. The aim of this training is that workers will have increased confidence to work alongside Lifelong Links coordinators to support young people to develop and sustain contact with people who are important to them. The training will maximise the flexibility of the model - ensuring that it continues to be led by the young person and that residential workers, and all of the team around the young person are consistent in their approach to supporting them to develop or sustain lifelong relationships.
- In North Yorkshire the Director of Children's Services said that the implementation of a Lifelong Links service has directly led to social workers recognising the importance of the child's support network from the point they begin any involvement with a child and their family.
- Some of the search tools that form part of Lifelong Links, such as mobility mapping are now being used by FGC coordinators for children on the edge of care. Glasgow and Edinburgh report that social workers frequently request the Lifelong Links team to undertake extended network searches, including on-line research and compiling of a genogram to assist with life story work or to inform permanency and adoption decisions.

"To have somebody committed to spending time with her, going through her entire life timeline, helping her make sense of it and being able to talk about it was hugely beneficial for her as are the new links"

Lifelong Links coordinator



4. Case Studies

The following illustrative case studies are taken from monitoring reports from local authorities involved in the trial of Lifelong Link. **All names have been changed.**

Heather and Sarah

Before Lifelong Links: Heather and Sarah were in the care of their mother until the ages of 11 and 9 respectively. Sarah has significant learning difficulties and was (at the time of coming into care) described by the foster carer as functioning at a much younger age than nine years. Heather and Sarah were very close to their mother, Helen and maternal family however they became disconnected from them and their sister Natasha when they came into care. Heather and Sarah had minimal contact with their father and paternal family prior to being placed in foster care and no contact at all once in care.



When Heather and Sarah came into care they were placed with foster carers, Abbie and Tom. Although it was arranged for Sarah and Heather to see their mother, Helen often did not attend, leaving Sarah and Heather disappointed, sad and bereft.

As a result of Lifelong Links: Heather and Sarah now have a lasting support plan in place that includes visits to family and other ways they can remain in touch. They now see their father who visits them with the supervision of their foster carers.

Heather has described an increased sense of identity and belonging with her family. Heather noted “*we are natural here [in foster care] but our actual selves are who we are with our family.*” Through the process, Heather discovered interests and hobbies she has in common with family members that can be shared going forward.

“This process has shown them that there are no great barriers between foster family life and birth family life. Heather specifically feels more heard and supported...It is a huge success story. I found the process seamless and supportive, a lot more than I thought it could be. It was very child centred. I thought Sarah would be overwhelmed and not understand. It was a success for them both.”

Heather’s social worker

Eric

Before Lifelong Links: Eric was living in a foster placement over 200 miles from his home, following a placement breakdown. He did not know who his father was as he had been told different things. He hadn't seen his mother in three years and had no connections to his extended family or his past.

"Before I had no contact for 16 years with my dad's family at all. Now I can ring up and go round for a cup of tea and it's like I've always known them"

Eric

As a result of Lifelong Links: As a result of Eric's Lifelong Links family group conference, Eric moved back to his home town after successfully completing his GCSEs. He now lives with a former foster carer, has contact with his mother and is supported by former respite carers. After a review meeting, Eric has met his father and all of his paternal family and now regularly goes around to see them e.g. helping his grandparents on the allotment. His father comes over to Eric's home for tea and sometimes dinner. Eric also found out that his 'family name' did not belong to anyone in his family, but was his mother's former foster carer's name. He has now changed this to his father's family name and is building his own identity with his maternal and paternal family and friends.

"My life has changed for the good since Lifelong Links have been involved, the worker that helped me was a lovely woman named Sam and she helped me develop my family tree and guided me the right way to get in contact with family I haven't seen in 14 years. I am now frequently talking to my family and spending some quality time with them."

Comment from young person who was interviewed