



## Supporting long-term foster care placements in the independent sector – Evaluation Summary

### Background

Match Foster Care (Match) is a small independent fostering provider (IFP) in the West Midlands. Based on their experience of providing long-term placements to various Local Authorities (LAs), Match identified a range of problematic issues, especially regarding decision making and resources, relating to the young people and the foster carers who were caring for them.

The aim of the innovation project (IP) was to address these issues by taking on statutory duties for the young people, delegated by the LA, and also providing wrap-around services, including health, education and psychology. The supervising social worker (SSW) from Match took on the role of the LA child and family social worker (CFSW) for the young people, including statutory visits, looked after child (LAC) reviews and personal education plan (PEP) reviews, contact and work with the birth family. Each young person was also allocated an independent advocate.

In the shorter term, the project aimed to achieve:

- A consistent allocated Match social worker for each young person
- Informed decision making and timely access to services
- Consistent and increased support for transitions
- Foster carers empowered to act as ‘parents.’

In the longer term, it was hoped that these changes would lead to a range of better outcomes for young people, foster carers and professionals.

### Aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation were to examine the process of implementation and the impact of delegated statutory duties and wrap-around services on young people, carers and professional staff in the innovation project, and to explore the perspectives of the relevant LA professionals.

### Evaluation

The methods used were: measures of development, attachment and carer self-efficacy; file searches; qualitative interviews and focus groups. These methods were applied to a sample of all Match children in the IP (n= 8) and a comparison IFP sample (n=17). A total of 26 foster carers, 21 young people and 8 SSWs were interviewed, with a range of other professionals interviewed or participating in focus groups. The evaluation examined the process of implementation and the impact of the innovation on all concerned, including the relevant LA professionals. Implementation of the innovation was delayed due to LA engagement and project development issues.

## Findings

A small target sample and short timescale did not allow for outcomes to be meaningfully evaluated. However, the evaluation identified issues during the implementation which merit further exploration:

- The IP sample of long-term fostered young people had a consistent social worker through the project period (not always the case in the comparison sample). This worker was also the supervising social worker for Match.
- Across both the IP and comparison samples, there was a high level of professional satisfaction amongst the supervising social workers and the foster carers.
- Match social workers expressed additional satisfaction in working holistically with the whole foster family. Match carers and young people liked this joint approach. However LA managers had some concerns about retaining corporate parenting responsibility without direct LA involvement with the child.
- Decision making (especially regarding contact) could be swifter when only the Match social worker needed to be involved. However, since the LA remained accountable as the corporate parent, key decisions (e.g. changes of school) had to be referred to the LA and discussed with the IRO.
- The Match model did not reduce the number of professionals involved for long-term foster children, which was higher than in the comparison agency. However, swift access to wrap-around services was highly valued by LAs, social workers and most foster carers and was not always available in the comparison sample. The advocacy service also worked well for most young people and carers in this small sample, though there were some concerns regarding overlap with the social worker role.

## Cost benefits

- The costs of Match carrying out delegated statutory duties appeared similar to those estimated for LAs. Match was providing additional services and time, thus potentially offering value for money.

## Recommendations

- There is potential for further piloting of elements of this innovation, in particular the combining of the role of supervising and LAC social worker, within selected long-term fostering placements in both the independent sector and LAs. The provision of wrap-around services by an IFP could be of benefit, but would need to be costed as part of local authority commissioning.
- There is also the potential for greater flexibility within current arrangements regarding the roles of supervising and LAC social workers if the case specific approach encouraged in the statutory regulations and guidance in relation to long-term foster care and permanence (DFE 2015) were to be appropriately applied within children's care plans.

This evaluation study was carried out between April 2015 and April 2016 by Mary Beek, Gillian Schofield and Julie Young in the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia, Norwich.

*The DFE Children's Social Care Innovation Programme funded this project and its independent evaluation. Co-ordination of the evaluation was undertaken by the Rees Centre from the University of Oxford ([www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk](http://www.reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk).) A full copy of this report can be found at [www.gov.uk/government/publications](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications)*