Exploring international perspectives of out-of-home care

Professor Lisa Holmes

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Three overarching topics

- Rethinking the use of residential care in child welfare: beyond binary comparisons with family-based care.
- Promoting relational stability: mechanisms for maintaining meaningful relationships for children in care.
- Defining and measuring value: how do we understand and assess value for money in out-of-home care?

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Some common themes (issues)

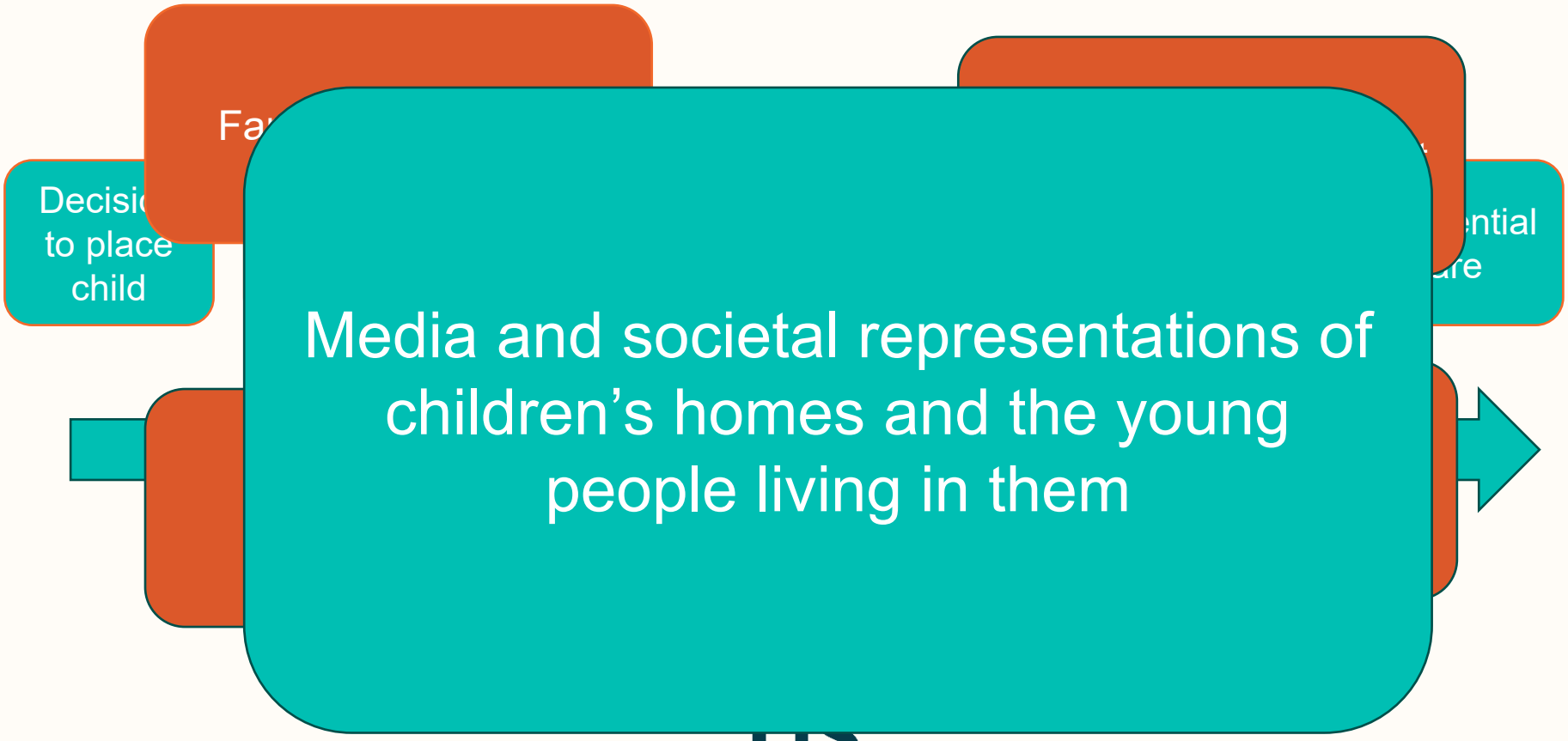
Complex and nuanced system where ’one size does not fit all’

Sector dominated by over-simplification and reliance on binary comparisons

Many believe a family environment is a more suitable placement for a young person to grow up in. That may be the case for lots of young people and children in care, but not for all. Unfortunately, there seems to be a big push for foster care as residential care isn't viewed as an ideal option, more of a last resort if they can't find another suitable placement. ***That attitude needs to change, residential care homes work for a number of young people for reasons that are probably far too complicated than I can ever fully explain.*** But I do know that for me and a number of other young people, care homes were the BEST option, not the last resort option and they did some amazing work with us during our time there. (Care leaver quoted in Narey, 2016, p. 5)

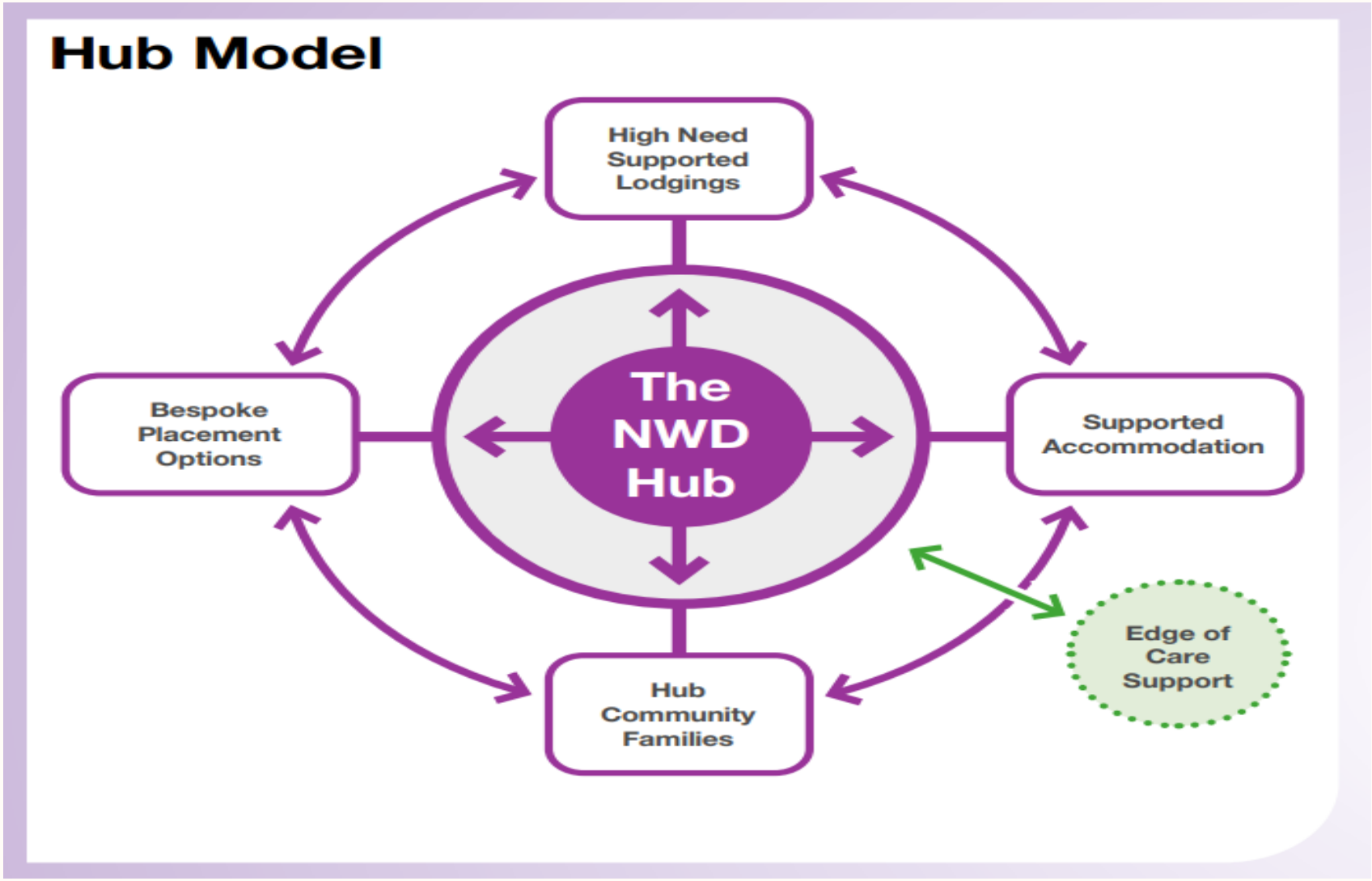
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Linear care pathway



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Flexible care pathway



A focus on some positives...

- Inter-agency working
- Multi-disciplinary teams
- Family partnership
- Research and practice collaborations
- Collaborations across the sector (public and private)
- Flexibility rather than linear
- Placing value on voice and experiences
- Supervision (investment in staff)
- Trauma informed and therapeutic placements

Family partnership and relational stability

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Lifelong Links

Lifelong Links is for children in out-of-home care which aims to restore children's relationships with members of their extended family and other trusted adults

Lifelong Links is ***child led***, where the child decides whether and when they are ready to take part

Lifelong Links utilises Family Group Conferences as a mechanism for reunions

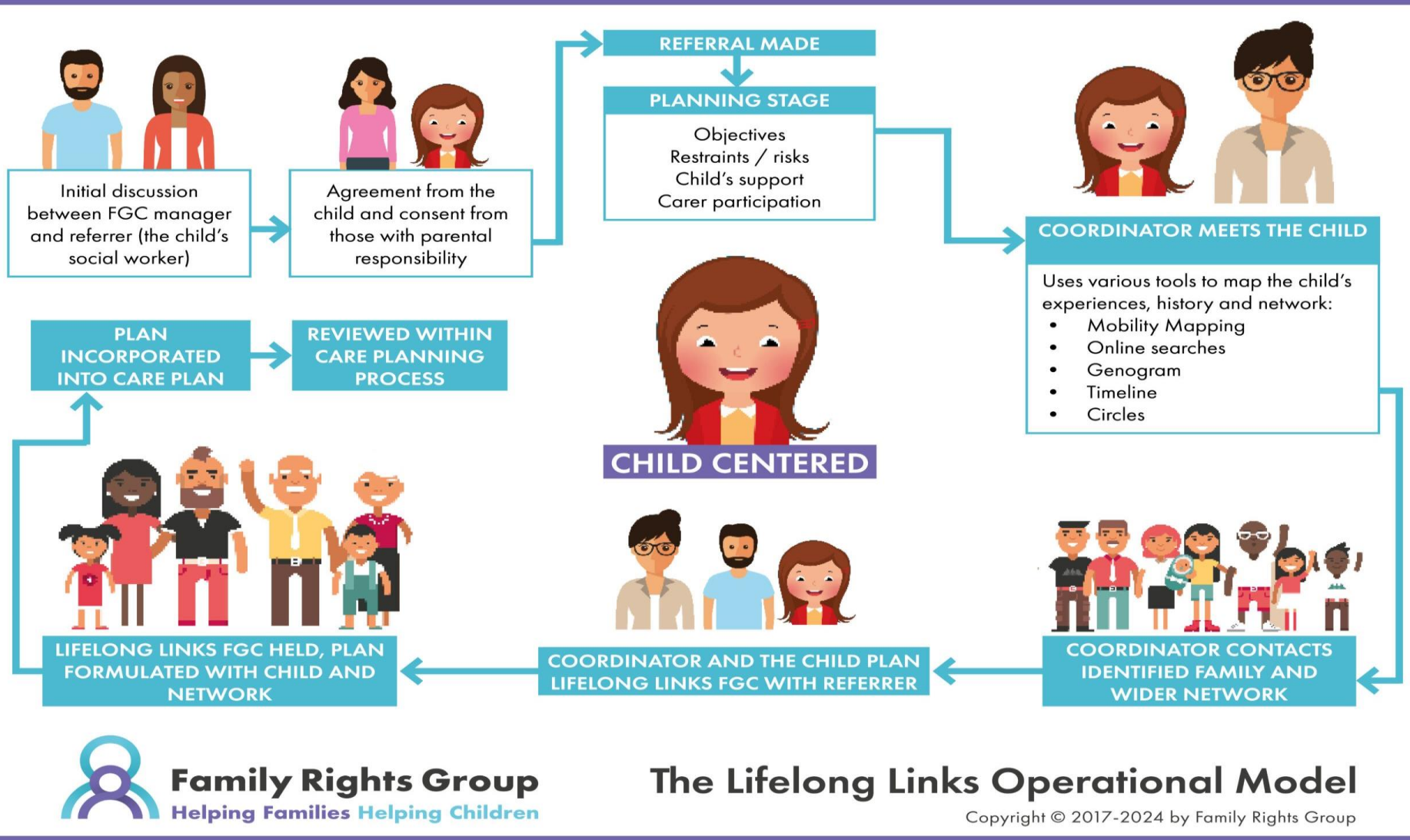
During the trial in England and Scotland, Lifelong links was offered to children who:

- Were under 16-years-old
- Had been in Foster or Residential care for less than 3 years (less than 5 years in Scotland)
- No plan to return home to live with their parents

If you would like more information about Lifelong Links:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMmgwL_-YB8

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Lifelong Links



Family Rights Group
Helping Families Helping Children

The Lifelong Links Operational Model

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Lifelong Links trial

- Findings suggest that Lifelong Links impacted positively on the lives of children in out-of-home care
  - Contribution to young people's identity
  - Build own narratives and address needs to build safe connections
  - Restorative
  - Prevent disconnects in children & young people's lives
- Placement stability

Evaluation report published in January 2021:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/955953/Lifelong_Links_evaluation_report.pdf

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How can Lifelong Links support relational stability?

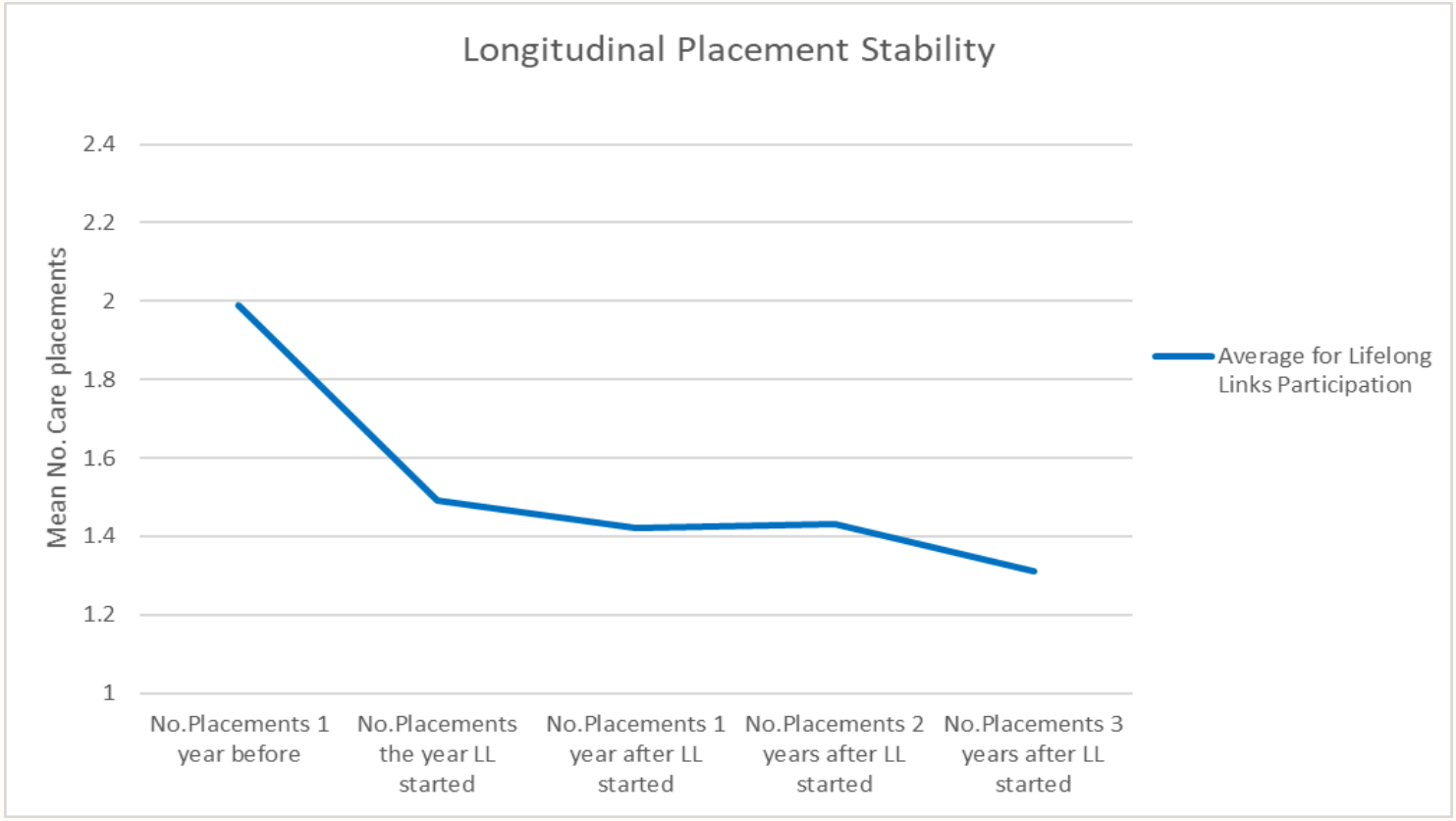
- How can Lifelong Links support relational stability?
- Culture and emphasis on permanency – what does that mean for children in care and their birth families

  the recognition that placement stability, and some instances 'permanence' can be achieved alongside relational stability with birth family members, or other trusted adults identified by the children and young people as part of Lifelong Links

- Connections without contact
- Placement stability…

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Placement stability



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Messages for policy and practice

- Necessity for Lifelong Links to be embedded in an environment where there is a shared culture and environment to work collaboratively with birth families.
- The way in which Lifelong Links is operationalised must be informed by the child.
- Lifelong Links needs to be considered as ongoing, rather than a process that stops when the work is completed by the Lifelong Link coordinator.
- The concept of permanence and stability should be re-framed as relational stability rather than placement stability, in recognition that relationships transcend living arrangements.
- There are benefits associated with the independence of the coordinator and separation of Lifelong Links, maintained as part of the Family Group Conference service, to provide a conceptual disconnect for family members.
- Training and support should be provided to foster carers and key workers in children's homes focused on partnership working with birth family.

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New interventions and programmes, or ways of working, come with a financial cost. How do we determine whether they offer ‘value for money’

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Value for money

Importance of maximising the value derived from public spending and improving outcomes for citizens (Treasury Magenta Book, 2020)

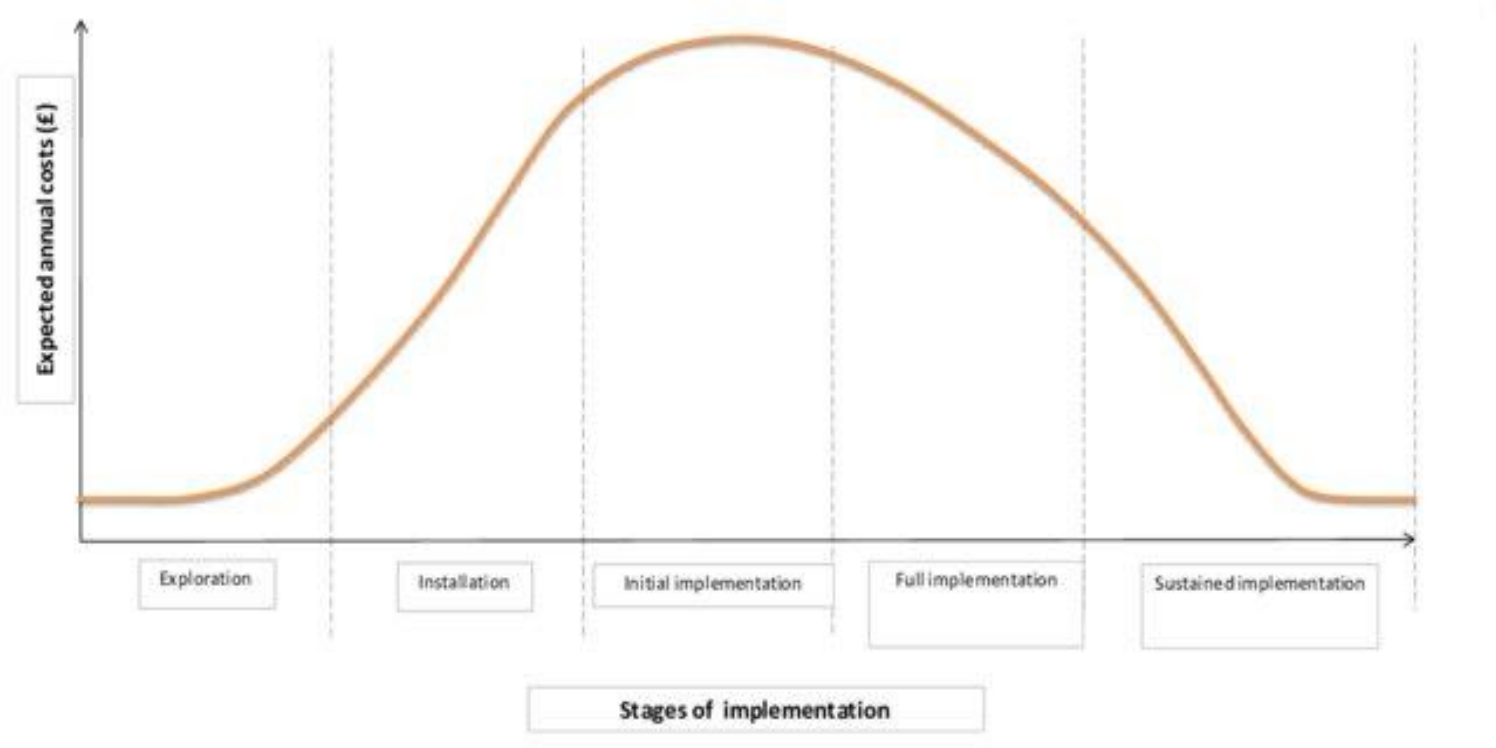
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Issues

- Limited resources
- Value for money is often used as shorthand for low cost
- How soon before there is a return on investment?
- How do we align timeframes of budget cycles, policy, implementation of new programmes & generation of evidence?
- What if the outcomes cannot be monetised?
  - Outcomes for whom?
  - Change in the experience of children, young people and families?

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Implementation costs over time



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Where next?

- Holistic multi-agency viewpoint
  - Who pays and who saves?
- Long-term costs of not intervening
- Methodological rigour
- Transparency
- Embrace complexity and nuance
- Creation of tools and resources to inform sustainability plans and business cases

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Moving forward

- What matters to children, young people and their families?
- Opportunities to learn from other sectors (advance methodologies)
- Better use of meaningful data
- Integration of moral and societal arguments?

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Questions and discussion

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Resources and links: Residential care

International Work Group for Therapeutic Residential Care:

https://togetherthevoice.org/who-we-are/trc-workgroup/

This link includes information about the work group, and associated resources, including two edited books, our 2016 consensus statement and also 2024 webinar.

No Wrong Door evaluation report:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/no-wrong-door-innovation-programme-evaluation

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Resources and links: Lifelong Links

Lifelong Links introduction and video guides:

https://frg.org.uk/lifelong-links/

Lifelong Links trial evaluation (funded by the UK gvt):

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60104f74d3bf7f05c3182253/Lifelong_Links_evaluation_report.pdf

Lifelong Links follow up evaluation 'embedding practice':

https://sussex.figshare.com/articles/report/Lifelong_links_embedding_practice/23488250?file=41196806

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Resources and links: Value for money

Cost pressures and variations in unit costs:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-cost-pressures-and-variation-in-unit-costs

Critical review of cost effectiveness studies:

Suh, E. and Holmes, L. (2022) A critical review of cost-effectiveness research in children's social care: What have we learnt so far? Social Policy and Administration. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/spol.12795

Value for whom?:

Holmes, L., & Lefevre, M. (2024). Value for whom? Rethinking cost-effectiveness from young people's perspective. Health Education Journal, 84(4), 446-458. https://doi.org/10.1177/00178969241300849

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Resources and links: Miscellaneous

Related to exploitation and risks outside the home. Programme of work at Durham University, led by Prof Carlene Firmin:

https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/

Costs associated with 'relocation' placements:

Holmes, L., Pinto, V.S., Wroe, L.E., Peace, D. and Firmin, C (2024) 'Relocating Adolescents': The Costs of Out-of-Area Placements as a Response to Extra-Familial Risk/Harm, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 2024;, bcae109, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae109

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