



**NSPCC**



# Home again

Understanding reunification practice in the  
children's social care system in England

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## NSPCC

**Together, we can stop child abuse and neglect – by working with people and communities to prevent it, transforming the online world to make it safer for children, and making sure every child has a place to turn for support when they need it.**

We campaign for change. We work with schools to help children understand what abuse is and support them to speak out. Childline is here, whenever young people need us. And the NSPCC Helpline is ready to respond to adults with any worry about a child. We develop services in local communities to stop abuse before it starts and help children recover, so it doesn't shape their future

And, above all, we work together – because everyone has a part to play in keeping children safe. Every pound you raise, every petition you sign, every minute of your time, will make a difference.

Together, we can change children's lives.

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## Safe and happy childhood



Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.



# Acknowledgements

We're very grateful to all of the local authorities who took part in this research.

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Report by Jessica Ford & Eavan McKay

# Foreword

Matt Clayton, Coventry City Council Strategic Lead  
for Children in Care and Care Leavers.

It's very clear to everyone that the current model for delivering children's social care isn't working. There is a national shortage of the right homes to meet ever-increasing numbers of children entering the care system. This challenge has been highlighted through both the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and the Competition and Markets Authority report into the children's social care market. Rightly there has been a focus on preventing children from entering care. However, there is a gaping hole in the current discourse and guidance around the need to really strengthen practice around children exiting care through reunification. We know that most care leavers gravitate back towards family. Yet whilst a child is in care, far too often they can follow a trajectory of multiple placements without anyone stopping to reflect and revisit whether care is still the right answer.

Families' situations change and we need to be constantly asking the question as to whether a child should remain in care. This is especially true when we have children and young people for whom care clearly isn't working. In Coventry, our reunification work started from this basis. We had a group of children who had been in several different places with many missing episodes, and we needed to try something different.

**“.....  
In my years in social work, too often  
I have seen a system that breaks  
relationships rather than restores  
and develops them.”**

We know the sheer cost of accommodating a child and wanted to see if we could use these resources more creatively to bring families back together. This project has had tremendous success, but when you look at stories it shows we need to think differently about care. One sibling group of three children were in care partly because Mum was unable to provide a stable home life. In their time in care they were split up and moved around the country.

Now, they are all back home with Mum and doing brilliantly. The sad indictment is that often the state would have children removed from its own care if we applied the same threshold as we do to families. This isn't to say no child should be in care – for some children it's clearly the right thing, and we see how they thrive within the care system.

To me, this work is one of those rare examples of where you can see a massive improvement in outcomes whilst delivering financial savings. When I speak to other authorities my challenge is - why aren't you doing this work? What's stopping you?

There are challenges, and this report and its recommendations highlight some of these. To do reunification work well, we need to believe that families can change with the right support, and we need to be comfortable with holding risk differently. Clear practice guidance needs to be developed, which will also help with multiagency working which can be a barrier to reunification.

Ultimately, we need to remember that we have a moral and legal obligation to always be thinking - how can we allow children to live safely with their families? Practitioners should follow the principles of the Children Acts 1989 and 2004. These state that the welfare of children is paramount and that they are best looked after within their families, with their parents playing a full part in their lives, unless compulsory intervention in family life is necessary. This shouldn't just be about when they come into care, but revisited regularly.

In my years in social work, too often I have seen a system that breaks relationships rather than restores and develops them. A system where children move homes so regularly, they begin to reject people and break arrangements down before they are rejected again. We need to practice social work in a way that strengthens and builds relationships, empowering families and supporting them to find their own solutions wherever possible.





# Executive Summary

## What is this research about, and why is it needed?

In recent years, much has been said about the need to reform children's social care, to deliver the right support for families at the right time, better protect children, and create a sustainable system that delivers value for money.

Children's services in England are in crisis – rising numbers of children are entering care, and costs are spiraling. Increased spending on the care system has reduced spending on early, preventative services, which aim to prevent the need for more acute interventions (such as entering care), and keep children with their families.<sup>i</sup>

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care<sup>ii</sup> and the government's subsequent reform strategy, 'Stable Homes Built on Love'<sup>iii</sup>, propose a rebalancing of the system towards earlier, preventative support. The Strategy sets out a new 'family-first' model for England, prioritising family-led solutions and maximising the potential of family 'networks'.

The children's sector has welcomed this new approach, and it chimes with what councils – responsible for delivering these vital services – say is needed. Yet policy recommendations on returning children in care to their families ('reunification') – a vital aspect of any family-led social care model – have been absent from discussions.

Action for Children and the NSPCC believe that's a significant oversight, because the case for giving greater focus to reunification practice is clear. Reunification is the most common route for children to leave care (27% of those leaving care in England returned home this year)<sup>iv</sup>, but it's also common for reunified children to later re-enter care. The number of children returning to care is far too high, and higher than for other permanency routes, such as adoption and special guardianship<sup>v</sup>. National rates of re-entry to care following reunification are 12% at three months, 20% at one year, and 35% at six years.<sup>vi</sup>

While good practice certainly does exist, and some children do remain at home, re-entry rates suggest that, in a lot of cases, reunifications are going badly wrong. Currently, returns home are too often failing. And our research suggests this is because children and families are not always getting the support they need to make reunification work.

Our findings – based on insight gathered from an England-wide survey of local authorities, and in-depth interviews – explore the challenges areas face in delivering effective practice.

## What does our research show?

Our research shows that while there's growing interest in reunification practice across the country, it's not yet matched by a growing awareness of how best to do it. The majority of councils surveyed are unsure how to approach practice development and improvement.

**Over half (56%) of our survey respondents don't have a reunification policy or strategy.**

**Only 19% of our survey respondents have a standalone reunification team.**

**Only the minority of our survey respondents are monitoring any key data – for example, only 39%<sup>1</sup> are using and analysing data on reunification stability – whether or not children remain at home or re-enter care).**

National government hasn't proactively supported councils to prioritise this area. There is a lack of national direction and little applicable evidence on which local authorities can base their thinking. Local authorities are therefore at very different stages in their practice journeys: some are yet to begin work on developing a strategy; some are part way through the process; some have recently decided on an approach, with work needed to embed it; and a few have fully-embedded strategies and processes.

While local authorities are at various stages in the development of their approaches, they are grappling with many of the same issues. **Local authorities commonly told us that a lack of capacity and resources were limiting their ability to provide as much reunification support as they would like to.**

**The majority of our survey respondents told us that they knew they were not providing enough support either pre or post-reunification (78%<sup>2</sup> and 63%, respectively).**

Resource issues were a key theme in our research. Local authorities have faced years of funding cuts, amid growing demand for children's services. This has forced them to make difficult decisions about the prioritisation of services. Resource has been taken from early help and prevention to fund the fulfilment of statutory duties, including the provision of placements for children in care.

Our research suggests that, in a small number of areas, children's services are using financial pressures to their advantage in reunification practice, making invest-to-save arguments to boost prioritisation of the practice area. Those councils were redirecting investment to reunification support, in an effort to avoid some of the costs associated with expensive residential placements. Teenagers were commonly mentioned in this context – a growing cohort in the children in care population. We heard about the difficulties in sourcing suitable placements for teenagers, and a sense of inevitability that (unsuitable) placements would breakdown.

**Recent research by the Children's Services Funding Alliance (Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC and The Children's Society) found that, since 2010-11, real terms expenditure on the care system has increased by more than £2 billion – a rise of 61%. A 25% increase in the number of children in care in the last 12 years partially explains that rise, but a major transformation in the kind of care they receive also played a significant role. Since 2010-11, the number of children entering residential care has increased by 79%<sup>2</sup>, and spending on that type of care has increased by 63%.<sup>viii</sup>**

Added to that, local authorities reported that many teenagers were expressing an intention to 'vote with their feet', returning home regardless of the suitability of their placement, and despite their care plan. Consequently, children's services teams were focusing resources on intensive support to give reunifications the greatest chance of success, rather than continuing to fund costly (often unsuitable) placements. By bucking the national trend, those councils were not only seeing children successfully return home, but major costs savings too. One area reported savings of £2 million a year, which evidences that investment in reunification practice is both the right thing to do for children, and fiscally responsible.

<sup>1</sup> 74 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

<sup>2</sup> 74 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

The government's children's social care reform programme focuses on the need for investment in, and reform of, early help, to prevent the need for more acute interventions and reduce care entry.

We now need a similar level of focus further downstream, in the care system, to ensure that children who can return home, do, and avoid care re-entry.

## Recommendations

National and local government, political parties, policy officials, researchers, and parliamentarians, all have a role to play in raising the profile of this vital policy area, and in supporting local authorities to develop and refine their practice approaches.

### Government, and political parties should commit to:

- **Developing national reunification guidance.**
- **Investing in reunification practice evaluations across England.**
- **Sharing learning from existing research on this practice area with local authorities.**

### Local government leaders and practitioners should commit to:

- **Aligning their practice with new national guidance, once issued.**
- **Ensuring they are acting on what is already known from existing research about this practice area.**
- **Ensuring they are making best use of available local data, to track children's outcomes and refine practice.**

### The research community should commit to:

- **Supporting the development of a 'what works' evidence base for England, through active participation in practice evaluations.**
- **Working to build on existing knowledge of risk factors for unstable reunifications.**
- **Investigating reunified children's outcomes, across key domains such as health and education.**

MPs and Peers can play their part in raising the issues highlighted in this report in Parliament and holding government and political parties to account for the actions outlined above. They should, furthermore, take opportunities to highlight the challenging context in which local authority children's services are currently delivered. Financial difficulties are affecting the provision of both statutory and non-statutory services and can restrict leaders' abilities to innovate and deliver the reforms the children's social care system so desperately needs.





# Introduction

## What is 'reunification'?

**When a child<sup>3</sup> in care returns home to their family, this is called a 'reunification'.<sup>4</sup>**

A 'stable' or 'successful' reunification sees the child remain at home, and not re-enter care.

In this report we refer to reunification 'stability' rather than 'success'. While these terms are often used interchangeably, we take the view that they are distinct – with reunification 'stability' referring to care re-entry, and reunification 'success' referring to the child's post-reunion outcomes.

**Reunification is the most common way for children to leave care ('permanency route') in England.**

More children exit the system through a return home than any other route, including adoption or special guardianship.<sup>ix</sup> In 2022-23, 27% of children leaving care returned home in England.<sup>x<sup>5</sup></sup> By contrast, 9% left care through adoption and 12% through special guardianship.<sup>xi</sup>

**However, many reunifications break down.**

National rates of re-entry to care are 12% at three months, 20% at one year, and 35% at six years.<sup>xii</sup>

**Certain factors have been found to influence the likelihood of reunification stability.**

Whether or not the reunification is 'planned' or 'unplanned' has been identified as a key driver of stability.<sup>xiii</sup> 'Unplanned' returns are those that local authority children's services and the reunifying family are unable to fully prepare for, because they happen spontaneously. This is sometimes due to placement breakdown or a child choosing to return home irrespective of their care plan.

There is a need for careful preparation and planning for a return home (as there should be for any major transition for children).<sup>xiv</sup> Research shows that a clear care plan aimed at achieving a staged return home, timely reviews and skilled care while the child is still in their placement, improve the chances of reunification stability.<sup>xv</sup>

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3 Please note that 'children' is used throughout this report as short-hand for 'babies, children and young people'.

4 The Department for Education defines 'reunification' as: a planned return to a parent with parental responsibility; an unplanned return to a parent with parental responsibility; or leaving care to live with parents, relatives or other persons with no parental responsibility.

5 This is the total number of returns home across the three reunification categories: a planned return to a parent with parental responsibility; an unplanned return to a parent with parental responsibility; leaving care to live with parents, relatives or other persons with no parental responsibility.



Studies have also investigated associations between stability, and certain child and family characteristics and circumstances.

More likely to experience reunification instability:



## Why is reunification important?

### Good reunification practice can benefit children and families, and the services that support them

It's widely accepted – and a fundamental principle of international and domestic law on children's rights<sup>6</sup> – that children should live with their families wherever possible and that, if a need for care arises, the separation should only last for as long as strictly necessary. In many cases, the underlying causes of care entry, such as parental mental ill-health or substance misuse, can be tackled with the right support. A return home may be possible for those children, and good reunification practice can significantly increase the likelihood of them remaining at home and not re-entering care.

Stable reunifications also benefit the children's social care system. While effective early help support can help to reduce the number of children requiring child protection interventions and entering care, effective reunification support can help to both increase the number of children safely exiting care and ensure that they stay out of care. This is urgently needed as local authorities are struggling to cope with high and rising numbers of children in care, and the financial implications of a costly placement market.

Recent research by the Children's Services Funding Alliance (Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC and The Children's Society) found that, since 2010–11, real terms expenditure on the care system has increased by more than £2 billion – a rise of 61%. A 25% increase in the number of children in care in the last 12 years partially explains that rise, but a major transformation in the kind of care they receive also played a significant role. Since 2010–11, the number of children entering residential care has increased by 79%, and spending on that type of care has increased by 63%.<sup>xxv</sup>

A survey of English local authorities by the Local Government Association found that they spent approximately £4.7 billion on children's social care placements in 2022/23, compared to a budgeted figure of £4.1 billion – an overspend of almost £670 million (16%).<sup>xxvi</sup> Survey responses suggested that councils paid for approximately 1,500 high-cost placements – costing £10,000 per week or more – in 2022/23, compared to 120 placements in 2018/19.

Reunified children re-entering care adds pressure to an already over-burdened system. High-quality reunification practice helps to ensure that children who can be at home, return home and remain at home. In doing so, it can help to alleviate local authorities' financial challenges, through cost-avoidance.

## What is this research about, and why is it needed?

Reunification as an area of children's social care policy and practice has received relatively little attention in England, leaving us with an unclear picture of local practice, an immature evidence base, and many unknowns.

The 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care, which assessed the needs, experiences and outcomes of children and young people supported by social care in England, set out a vision for a new system of support, protection and care in England.<sup>xxvii</sup> While the Review suggested that new 'family help' teams, and 'family network' approaches, should play a key role in

promoting and enabling reunifications, it stopped short of making reunification-specific recommendations. Consequently, the area has been somewhat neglected in discussions on the Review, and the government's subsequent reform programme. This is despite their shared focus on promoting a 'family first' approach, in which the nurturing of familial relationships is prioritised for children in contact with social care.

In the academic community, meanwhile, a small group of researchers have investigated high re-entry rates, including risk factors for reunification instability. This work has improved understanding of key trends in child and family characteristics and circumstances, and how they may affect

<sup>6</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – Article 9.

reunification outcomes. Researchers have identified a need for improved assessment, planning, and service provision, to support reunifying families.<sup>xxviii</sup>

However, there is still work to do to develop our understanding of what's effective in supporting reunification in the English care system.

International studies, mostly US-based, reveal a set of 'core components' common to reunification interventions, and some best practice principles.<sup>xxix</sup> However, these studies are limited by their relatively small sample sizes. Furthermore, the US and English care systems differ significantly, with the majority of children entering care via a court order in the US, while in the UK around half enter under voluntary (Section 20) admissions. Those factors unfortunately reduce the relevance of the findings to our national context.

NSPCC's London Infant and Family Team (LIFT) is an example of a new trial-stage intervention<sup>7</sup> that seeks to improve permanency planning for babies and infants, with a focus on reunification when it's considered to be the best option. The programme, which is based on the New Orleans Intervention Model (NIM), sits alongside and informs family court decision-making. LIFT's multi-disciplinary team uses interviews, observations and questionnaires to assess birth parents' mental health, the parental relationship, and the trauma they've experienced. Tailored interventions are then provided to support reunification.

While the programme is likely to offer important learnings for reunification practice, it was not developed as a specialist reunification intervention – it's a model to improve permanency planning and court decision making. That's common in the reunification space – many interventions were originally developed to aid permanency planning, trauma-informed practice, and the prioritisation of family-led solutions.

**We lack a formal, independently-evaluated, 'what works' evidence base in England. Further work is needed to test the effectiveness of interventions in the English system. However, a necessary precursor to that is determining what practice exists. Currently, we don't know what reunification practice looks like across the country.**

Anecdotally, we do know that practice varies between local authorities. Consequently, reunification rates vary, and re-entry rates vary<sup>xxx</sup>. We also know that local authorities often face barriers to delivering effective reunification support. However, we don't have an up to date national picture of practice.

**Our research goes some way towards filling that evidence gap. It aims to generate an understanding of what guides practice, how decisions are made pre and post-reunification, what support looks like, and how practice is monitored and improved. In doing so, it identifies some of the barriers and enablers to good reunification practice that local authorities perceive.**

Action for Children and the NSPCC want this report to serve as a springboard for future research and policy development. Our project pinpoints interesting, innovative, and potentially promising practice, for future consideration. Formal evaluations of these approaches could support the development of a much-needed national evidence base. In turn, that could help to develop and refine national and local policy.

More broadly, our research reveals some of the issues local authorities are currently grappling with which urgently require the attention of those with the means to address them – government ministers, policy officials, councillors, council officers, and parliamentarians.

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<sup>7</sup> The LIFT service is currently undergoing a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) funded by the National Institute of Health Research, which is the first RCT in the Family Court in England since 1978, and one of only a handful worldwide. We look forward to sharing findings from the trial when it's complete.



# Research methods

In designing this research, we drew upon the existing expertise and insight of our two organisations.

In 2015, NSPCC worked to develop a reunification 'Practice Framework' with Professor Elaine Farmer - currently the most widely-used return home assessment tool. It supports practitioners to apply structured professional judgements to decisions on whether and how a child should return home. It also supports families and practitioners to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support, and review progress.

Between 2020 and 2022, Action for Children worked with the University of East Anglia on a reunification research project, 'Reunification as a permanency route for children in care: reunion stability and educational outcomes'.<sup>xxxii</sup> Researchers analysed three years of Department for Education administrative data, to identify the key characteristics of reunified children, their reunification outcomes after two years (stable or unstable), and factors associated with stable returns. Additionally, the datasets (Children in Need, and Children Looked-After) were linked to the National Pupil Database, to examine the children's educational attainment at key stage 4 (GCSE).

The Action for Children and NSPCC Policy Teams began the scoping phase of this project with a series of informal discussions with key stakeholders. They included individuals with expertise in reunification, and related areas of policy and practice: government policy officials, local authority children's services leaders, and researchers.

We also commissioned the NSPCC Research and Evidence Team to produce a brief scoping review of the literature.<sup>8</sup>

These scoping exercises enabled us to refine our research questions and develop our methodology.

## In July 2023, we launched an England-wide online survey of local authorities.

We sent the survey to Directors of Children's Services, marking it for the attention of the individual with the greatest understanding of the local authority's reunification practice.

Respondents were presented with a range of multiple-choice and free-text questions, which sought to understand:

- What guides the local authority's reunification practice.
- How prospective reunification cases are identified.
- How children and families' needs are assessed.
- How support is planned and delivered, pre and post-reunification.
- How reunification outcomes are monitored.
- Whether the local authority faces any challenges in relation to the above.

The draft survey was quality-assured by a range of individuals with knowledge of the area, including government policy officials, local authorities, academics, and a research body.

The survey ran for 12 weeks. It was widely promoted, through both direct approaches to local authorities and sector newsletters.

## 75 local authorities responded, of a total of 153 local authorities with children's services responsibilities that received our request.

Alongside quantitative analysis of multiple-choice answers, we carried out thematic analysis of optional, additional free-text comments left by respondents.

## While the survey was live, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior staff in local authorities.

The interviews allowed participants to add qualitative insight to their survey responses, and discuss their practice approach, including successes and challenges, in detail.

We interviewed staff from six local authorities.

Sample selection for the interviews was informed by local authorities' survey responses. We scanned responses received early on in the surveying period, prior to our quantitative analysis, to identify a group of local authorities at different stages in the development of their reunification practice – developed, developing and undeveloped. Finally, we checked that the interview sample represented a range of geographic regions.

We undertook thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. The survey questions, and interview topic guide, are included as appendices to this report.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished



# Findings

## Who responded to our survey?

Respondents ranged from Directors of Children’s Services (DCSs) to social workers.

Respondents commonly had strategic and/or operational oversight of children in/leaving care services, and/or permanency planning, including the management of practitioners delivering reunification assessments, planning and support.

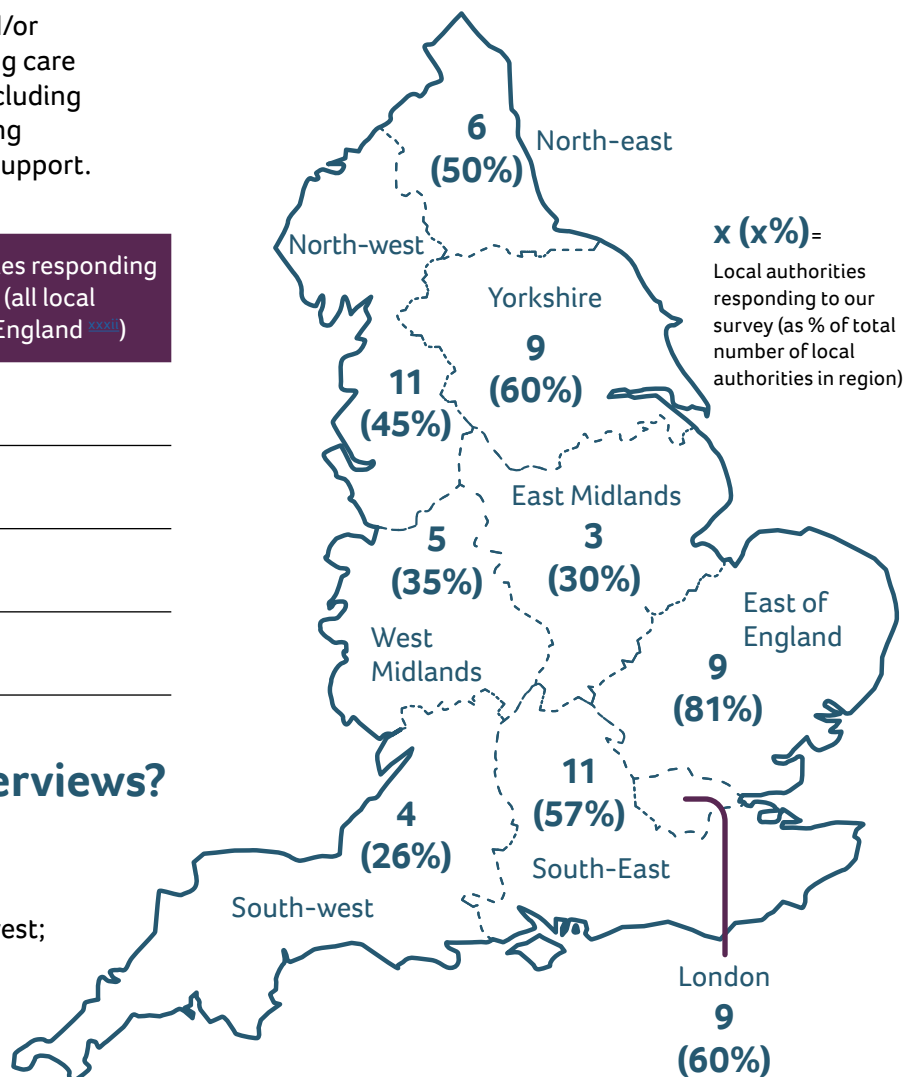
Ofsted rating at last inspection	Local authorities responding to our survey <sup>9</sup> (all local authorities in England <sup>xxxx</sup> )
Outstanding	21% (16%)
Good	48% (43%)
Requires improvement	25% (32%)
Inadequate	5% (9%)

## Who took part in our interviews?

- Participants included strategic leads, service managers, and social workers.
- Regions represented included: North-west; West Midlands; and East of England .

<sup>9</sup> Figures do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Survey response rate by region:



While not nationally representative, our sample included a broad range of local authorities – in terms of both geography and Ofsted performance.

It is important to note, however, that many of our survey respondents, and the majority of interviewees, were in a fairly positive position with their reunification practice – they had recently implemented a new reunification

approach, recently begun work to develop one, or were soon to do so. Generally speaking, the local authorities that chose to participate in our research were engaged with, and interested in, the development and refinement of their reunification practice. This should be taken into account when considering our findings.

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## What did we find?

Below, we set out headline statistics from our analysis of survey findings, and key themes arising from our analysis of interview transcripts, and optional free-text comments left by survey respondents.

### Overall approach to reunification practice

We asked local authorities about their approaches to reunification practice – including their use of strategies and assessment/planning tools. Of the 75 local authorities who responded to our survey:

#### Over half (56%) of survey respondents don't have a reunification policy or strategy.

Many survey respondents highlighted that while they do have processes in place for identifying prospective reunification cases, and planning and delivering support, they do not have an overarching policy or strategy.

*“Rather than a policy, we have a newly-embedded process to identify children who could return home.”*

Others explained that reunification practice sits within a broader strategic area – commonly permanency planning.

*“We do not have a specific policy or strategy uniquely for reunification, however our Permanency Strategy sets out our vision and practice model which supports reunification practice.”*

The majority also don't have reunification-specific teams.

#### Only 19% of survey respondents have a standalone reunification team to coordinate reunifications.

Local authorities were, in most cases, using tools and frameworks to aid practice.

#### 74% of respondents<sup>10</sup> were using a reunification tool or framework, with 44% of this group using the NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework.

However, many were using an adapted form of the NSPCC Framework or were using it inconsistently (with some reunification practitioners in the team using it, and not others). Local authorities frequently told us in interviews about the need for senior leader 'buy in' – leadership needed to recognise the importance of delivering good reunification practice. This was particularly true of councils that are currently developing their practice in this area.

*“...There's a strong shared kind of value base and consensus around ensuring that the right children are in care at the right time and not looking after children that don't need looking after...there has been a huge shift from when we first started, so I think we've seen the culture change. And people just feeling more confident to have conversations around returning children home and knowing where to access resources.”*

Many areas told us in interviews that, despite an organisational commitment to prioritise reunification, awareness of, and expertise in, this practice area varied considerably within their local authority.

*“I think it depends on which layer and which services to how much depth of knowledge there is. So, I would say that 'in care life' and 'life beyond care' teams – every practitioner, every manager, has a really good understanding of why it's so important (...) Then in family assessment safeguarding...they know how important it is, but I think that they just haven't got the same level of expertise because they're responsible for safeguarding all the other kids as well.”*

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<sup>10</sup> 73 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

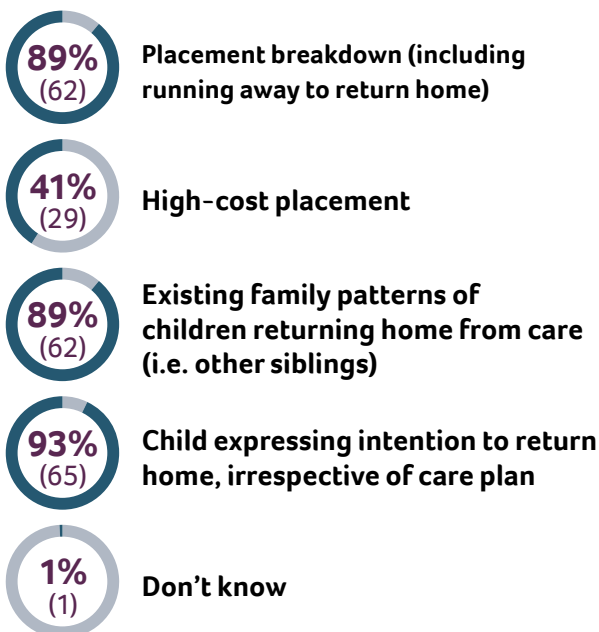


## Identifying prospective reunification cases, and planning support

We asked survey respondents about their approach to identifying, and planning support for, prospective reunification cases.

Areas are identifying children who could potentially be reunified in different ways.

We asked survey respondents<sup>11</sup> if they use any of the following criteria to identify prospective reunification cases, to prioritise for support:



Criteria used to identify prospective cases vary, but the majority of local authorities prioritise children who have vocalised an intention to return home irrespective of their care plan.

**93% of respondents said they prioritise children who have expressed an intention to go home, irrespective of care plans.**

‘Voting with their feet’ was a common refrain in our interviews – every local authority we spoke to emphasised that much of their reunification practice is serving this group. It’s largely teenagers.

Placement breakdown is another common consideration when identifying prospective cases.

**89% of respondents said that placement breakdown is a common consideration when identifying prospective reunifications.**

This theme was explored in interviews too.

*“We had a number of children who were struggling to settle in their care placements. Parents were very much involved, and sometimes we were seeking parents’ assistance to try and get kids back into foster placements. And that’s when I would say, hang on a minute, why aren’t we assessing this dad? You know, we’re calling him for his help so why aren’t we assessing to see if things have changed?”*

Some local authorities emphasised in interviews that while there can be risks associated with returning home, there can be risks associated with remaining in care too. Multiple placement moves and episodes missing from care are not in a child’s interest and can carry risks.

*“Let’s not pretend it’s a zero-sum game, actually, being in care is risky. Some of these children weren’t thriving in the care system, so actually we’ve got to balance, actually being at home has risks and being in care has risks. And pretending being in care just removes risk - it doesn’t. It creates a whole different bunch of risks... one of the reasons [one group of siblings] came into care was that mum was unable to provide a stable home. While these three girls were in our care, they had something like 15 placements between them and are all separated. You think, well, 15? We weren’t able to provide a stable home either so how was that any better for them?”*

*“If they’re going to keep running away and we don’t know where they are and we don’t know what they’re doing, how are they safer than being with parents who want to change? They want to engage and they want their young people back home.”*

Local authorities are also taking financial considerations into account in decision-making on possible reunifications.

**41% of respondents said that high placement costs are a consideration when identifying prospective cases to support for reunification.**

Every local authority we interviewed discussed the financial pressures they’re currently under, and the placement sufficiency crisis in their local area.

*“We know that there’s a national shortage in terms of placements that means that our matching is not good enough. I often feel that what we’re offering children isn’t good enough. And so personally I think if there is an option that we can channel support into families, my position is that that would be the preferred option.”*

*“Why wouldn’t we invest in families if we can? Why am I spending £7000 a week on a rubbish placement?...And I think we’ve now got some real perspective on that and that’s a shift.”*

11 70 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

Financial pressures and placement sufficiency issues are leading some local authorities to reconsider where resources are best directed. The high costs of many placements and absence of choice in the market mean that these local authorities are choosing to focus spending on reunification support, rather than continuing to fund costly placements that often don't meet children's needs.

*"We were just bouncing them into more and more high cost placements and were spending close to about £4 million on these 11 children. So you're like, actually, is there something different we can do? Can we spend money in a different way to get better outcomes for these children?...even if five of the 11 ended up back home, we'd more than cover the cost of what we needed to do."*

*"These ridiculously expensive placements that every authority has, so costing £7,000 to £8,000 a week minimum – you only need to have one or two of these children go home and you pay for a service that can support 10/15/20 children. So, it doesn't take much to make it stack up financially...it's one of those win-win things: you get better outcomes, it's better for the children and it saves the local authority money."*

These local authorities seem to be bucking the national trend, by prioritising reunification support to avoid continued high spend on residential placements.

## Delivering pre-reunification support

We asked local authorities about the support they offer to children and families prior to reunifications, whether they think it's sufficient and, if not, what prevents them from increasing it.

Despite being at different stages in their reunification practice development journeys, the local authorities we interviewed universally emphasised the importance of supporting children and families in the lead up to a return home. Many highlighted that withdrawing family help at the point of a child's removal can undermine a potential future reunification. Work is needed to address the underlying causes of care entry, and build trust with parents, to enable the possibility of a return home.

However, while pre-reunification support is regarded as vital, the majority of areas surveyed aren't delivering as much of it as they think is needed.

**78% of respondents<sup>12</sup> said they would like to provide more pre-reunification support than is currently offered.**

*"I think there needs to be much more engagement and involvement with parents of children in care. Supporting 'contact', helping them play a parenting role, enabling them to access support on an ongoing basis. They are too marginalised at the moment. This work forms the foundation of all reunification work."*

There was some consensus among those respondents on the key barriers to increasing support:

**69%** 

said that funding constraints were a barrier to offering more support.

**65%** 

said that recruitment and retention were a barrier to offering more support.

**51%** 

said that a lack of specialist support services available to commission locally was a barrier to offering more support.

**34%** 

said that other services being prioritised over reunification was a barrier to offering more support.

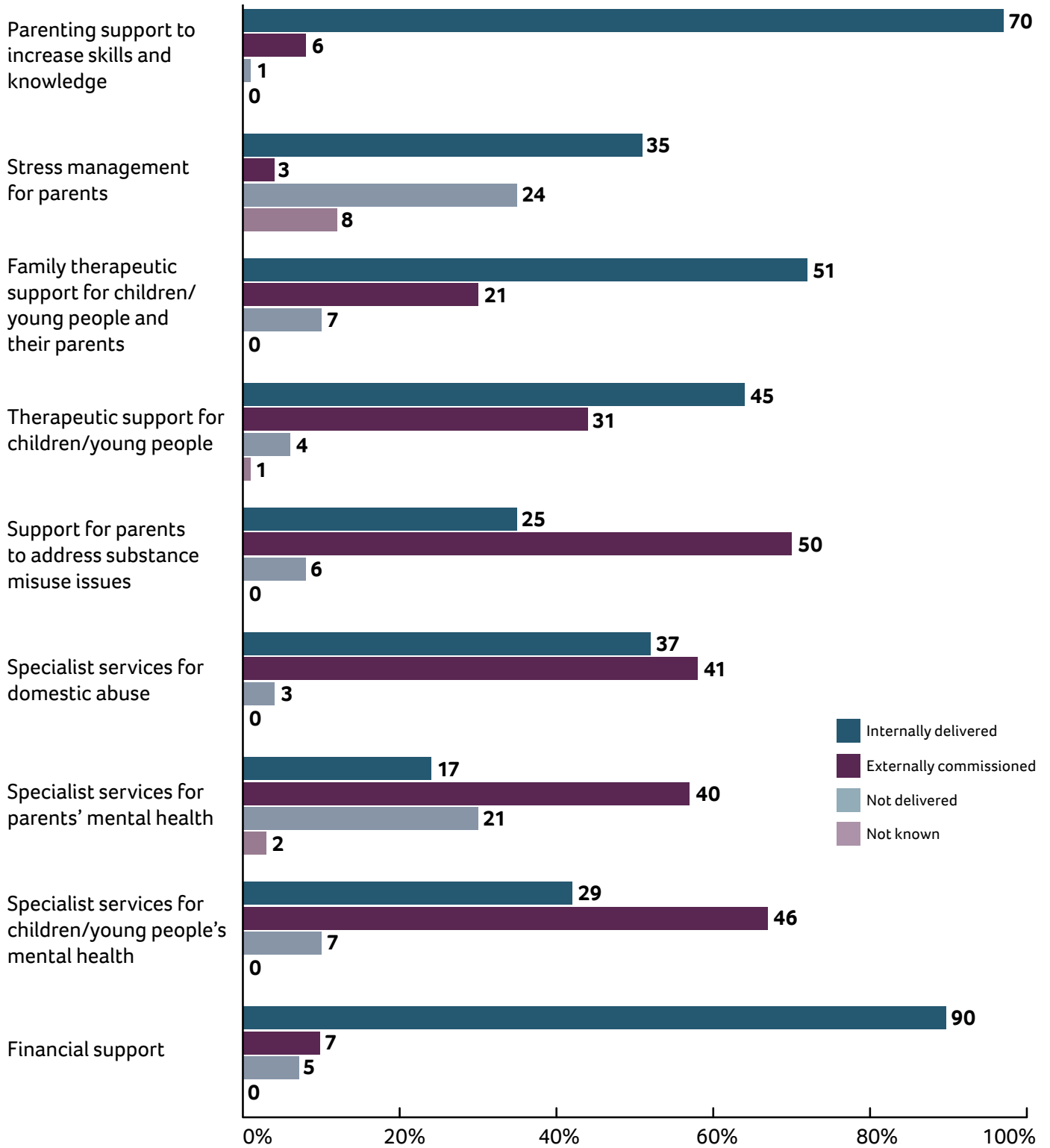
*"Currently there's not the specialism available internally or externally. However, an invest-to-save model will be considered alongside repurposing specific roles within the service, to develop the specialism required."*

*"...Improving further the recruitment and retention of our social care workforce will improve [our] ability to provide a greater level of post-reunification support."*

After asking local authorities if they're happy with their pre-reunification support offer, we asked them what that offer looks like. They said they're offering a wide range of support, tailoring help to children and families' needs as much as possible.

11 70 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

The range of pre-reunification support, delivered either directly or commissioned, reported by respondents in our survey included:





One local authority we interviewed described a parenting programme available in their local area, which works with parents up to a year in advance of a potential reunification:

*“Their focus will be on supporting parents to improve parenting, address any outstanding needs for parents that may have contributed to children entering care in the first place, or any ongoing issues for parents...They will do reflective work around the impact of what’s happened and use a trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy approach. It’s not therapy with a capital ‘T’, but it’s more that therapeutic intervention.”*

Additionally, the local authorities we surveyed are commonly offering financial support to families where it’s needed to enable and facilitate the return home.

**90% of respondents offer financial support to families to support reunification.**

*“I’ve just paid off rent arrears [for a mother], which meant she couldn’t be prioritised for social housing, so we paid them [but] it still took her a really long time to get, you know, a property...”*

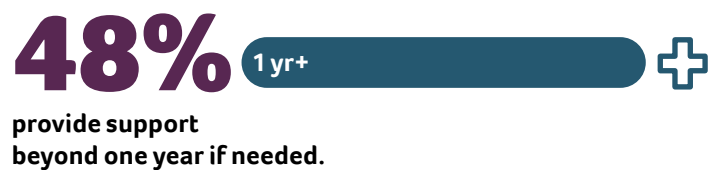
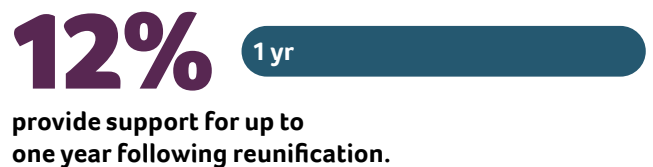
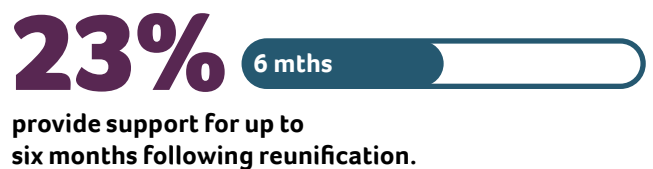
*“There was one [family] early on where they were all ready to move but they couldn’t because there was an issue with refurbishing some rooms. They’re waiting for grants to come through and it got to me at one stage and I was like, well, how much are we talking - and it’s about £3000. And I said - we’re delaying moving these children home that are in five grand a week placement each who would be better off at home because no one’s willing to pay, so we just need to pay it, don’t we?”*

This demonstrates that in many cases finances may be a key barrier to reunification. It also shows that some local authorities are taking a proactive approach to reunification practice – seeking to identify and address barriers to the planned return home.

**Delivering post-reunification support**

We asked councils what support they offer to children and families following reunifications, whether they think it’s sufficient and, if not, what prevents them from increasing it.

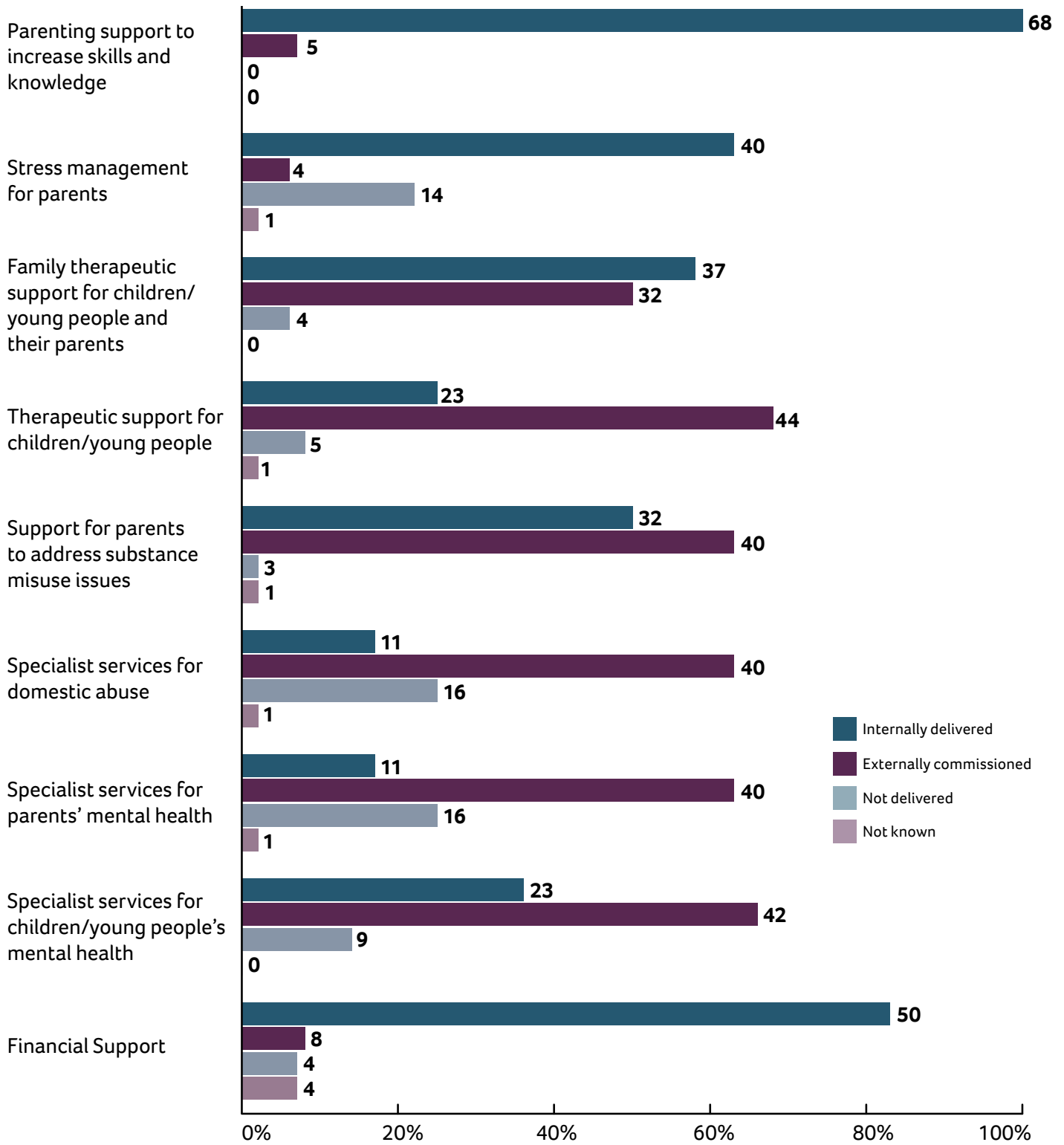
We asked survey respondents whether they offer support to reunified children and families following a return home and, if so, how long that support lasts for before its withdrawn.



**94% of survey respondents offer support to reunified children and families following the return home.**

Evidence tells us reunification support should ideally begin at the point of admission to care and continue for at least six to 12 months post-reunification (as recommended in the NSPCC Reunification Framework)<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

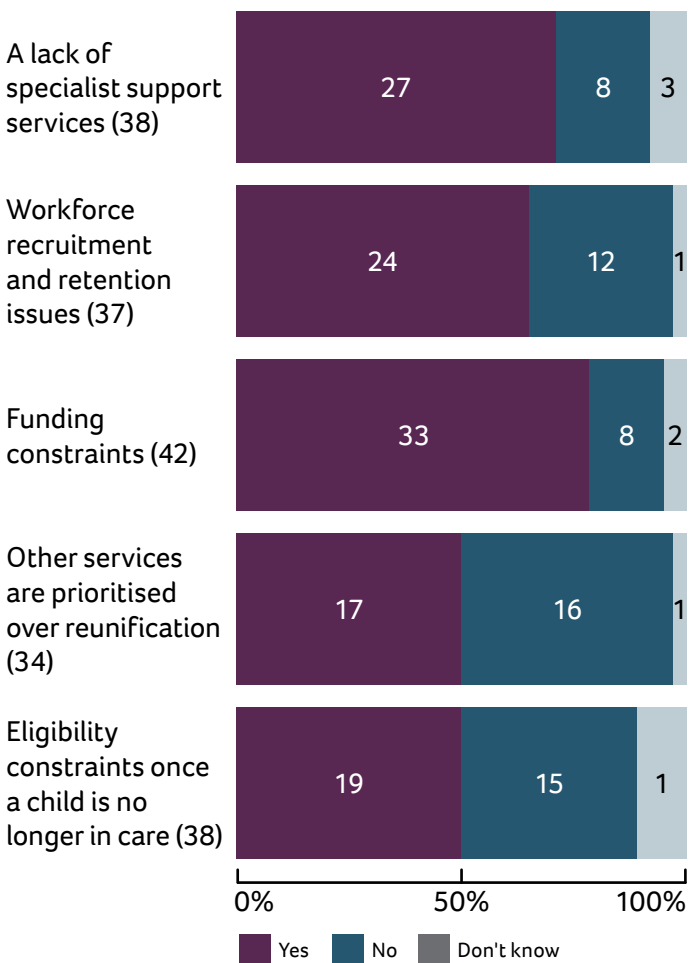
We asked those providing post-reunification support, what that support looks like:



Despite the range of services available, these statistics don't tell us anything about whether families' needs are being adequately met. Worryingly, the majority of local authorities told us they think their offer falls short.

**63% of survey respondents would like to offer more post-reunification support.**

There was some consensus among those respondents on the key barriers to providing more help:



**71% identified a lack of specialist support services available locally to commission.**

*"...We struggle because our social workers become maybe four or five practitioners rolled into one. So, it means that they are delivering intensive levels of work [to a family] without a certain level of expertise...sometimes on a daily basis. So, whereas in the past you might have access to, you know, a domestic abuse worker, a drug misuse worker, and they would see the family weekly, you might have our social workers deliver similar sessions one day and something else on another day, something else on another day. So, it's really time intensive for social workers."*

**79% identified funding constraints as a barrier.**

*"I mean back in the day, we used to have a dedicated clinician and we've lost that, so ideally if there were no limitations, I'd have a multidisciplinary team, I'd have a clinician. It's like, yeah, substance misuse workers. So ideally you would have a multi-skilled team around you. Now practitioners will beg, borrow and steal to get the support, but ideally you would have your own... or access to your own, or just...dedicated leads in each area."*

Multi-disciplinary reunification teams, with practitioners with specialist expertise in the types of help families commonly need, are clearly advantageous.

**50% said that they're limited by the eligibility constraints that kick-in once a child is no longer in care.**

*"Due to having to prioritise resources, there's a risk that once not CLA [child looked-after] they will receive less support..."*

If families face a 'cliff edge' of support following a return home, there's a greater risk of the underlying causes of care entry resurfacing.

**65% identified workforce recruitment retention issues as a barrier to providing more support.**

*"...Improving further the recruitment and retention of our social care workforce will improve [our] ability to provide a greater level of post-reunification support."*

After asking councils whether they're satisfied with their post-reunification support offer, we asked them what it looks like.

Survey respondents said that they're offering a wide range of support, with an emphasis on tailoring the help to meet each family's needs. The range of services typically offered pre and post-reunification were similar.

**Use of family group decision-making models**

We asked councils about the use, and perceived effectiveness of, family group decision-making models for reunification (as opposed to during pre-proceedings or else).

**68% of survey respondents use family group decision-making models pre-reunification, with 85% of them<sup>13</sup> determining the models to be somewhat or very effective.** (We didn't, however, ask respondents about frequency of use).



*“We consider family group decision-making models are very effective in supporting reunification. When the family clearly understands the worries and what the goal is, they are mostly best-placed to make the safety plans, which will be sustained over time, to keep the child safe and well when they return home. Family-led and owned plans are more likely to work than if a family are only told what to do.”*

**A similar proportion (66%) of survey respondents<sup>14</sup> use family group decision-making models post-reunification, with 87% of those<sup>15</sup> considering them somewhat or very effective.**

*“Plans can be revisited, other support can be explored, it’s an empowering platform.”*

Despite the majority of survey respondents considering the models to be effective, to some extent, in the post-reunification period, many respondents and interviewees commented that they sometimes struggle to maintain the engagement of families with these models post-reunification, perhaps because the incentive to participate diminishes. This may be because local authorities think that the models hold a lot of potential – once family engagement issues are addressed, the models could be very effective in aiding family-led decision-making.



## Foster carer engagement in the reunification process

We asked councils whether foster carers are commonly encouraged to engage with the reunification process.

81% of respondents said they encourage foster carers to engage with, and proactively support, birth parents, as part of the reunification process, unless circumstances mean this would be inappropriate.

It seems likely, however, that some local authorities have more fully integrated this into everyday practice than others. Furthermore, we didn’t ask local authorities how foster carers are engaged – for example, mentoring birth parents.

Emerging evidence, in particular from the US, indicates the effectiveness of foster carers becoming mentors to birth parents (where appropriate) to support the transition back home.

*“That link with foster carers is really, really key. We’ve done lots of work with foster carers, they’re quite familiar with the process and the language around reunification and how they need to join up with parents, and potentially we can use them to coach and mentor parents.”*

*“I’d say it’s less likely where we have carers who are completely opposed to the plan. So, whilst we might try and do some work with them and the supervising social worker, they’re just...the whole process could be really unfamiliar to them.”*

13 69 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

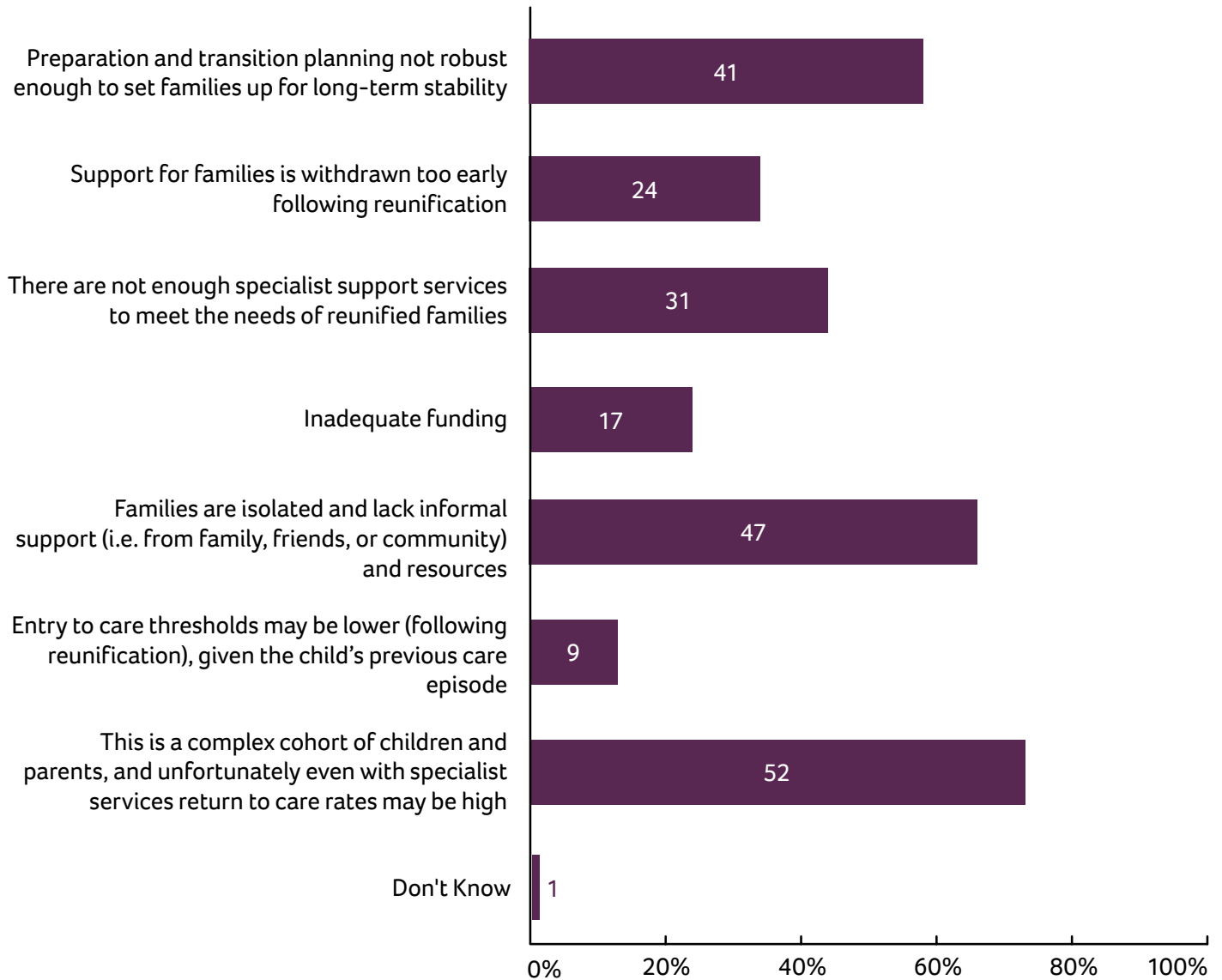
14 71 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

15 47 out of 71 respondents answered this question.

16 73 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

## Reunification breakdown

We asked local authorities what they think causes reunifications to breakdown. We asked respondents<sup>17</sup> to select all that apply:



Councils commonly recognised the link between early planning and support, and reunification stability.

**58% of survey respondents identified one of the main causes of reunification breakdown as a lack of robust preparation and transition planning.**

Local authorities told us in interviews that good preparation and transition planning can be particularly difficult in the context of unplanned returns home.

*“Where [a] family or a child instigated the [unplanned] return home, we have a much higher rate of reunification*

*breakdown because the necessary planning has not taken place.”*

*“I would say that [unplanned reunifications are] probably not that successful in comparison to our planned ones. I have very few planned reunifications that have broken down. I'm struggling to think of any, whereas I can think of quite a few unplanned that have broken down.”*

**44% of survey respondents said there are not enough specialist support services to meet the needs of reunified families.**

<sup>17</sup> 70 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

## Reunification data

We asked councils whether they analyse data on reunification, to identify key trends.

**39% of respondents<sup>20</sup> are analysing data on reunification stability (whether or not children remain at home or re-enter care).**

Of those, the majority appear to be doing so for financial purposes – to demonstrate savings associated with stable reunifications, rather than to inform practice improvement.

One local authority we interviewed, said:

*“So we're always tracking efficacy - time out of care, etc - for money purposes. It frustrates me that that's our primary purpose, but it is what it is.”*

**41%<sup>19</sup> of respondents analyse data on the number of children whose reunification was unplanned.**

**23%<sup>20</sup> of respondents analyse data on the support provided to children pre-reunification, and similarly, 23% of survey respondents<sup>21</sup> analyse data on post-reunification support.**

Local authorities will find it difficult to make evidence-based adjustments to their reunification practice without sufficient, high-quality data-analysis. Furthermore, policymakers will find it hard to identify and understand the key issues affecting this area

## Additional common themes

We identified some additional themes when analysing interview transcripts that didn't appear in our survey analysis. We used the interviews in part to ask questions that did not lend themselves to being quantitative survey questions. In addition, the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that participants were free to raise topics of interest or concern to them.

## Theme: Local authorities are often focusing their reunification work on teenagers.

Our research revealed two reasons for this. Firstly, teenagers can 'vote with their feet' – return home irrespective of their care plan - in a way that younger children cannot. Secondly, councils are commonly struggling to find appropriate placements for this cohort, due to acute pressures in the placement market. Some areas are therefore choosing to focus attention and resources on facilitating a return home for them.

*“That's why we're so focused on work for teenagers, because they often don't want to be in care. It's usually kind of that 15 to 17-year-olds, they've been running from placement, they've had difficulty. They've had breakdowns, and in-placement care is not necessarily the right answer for them.”*

Local authorities told us that while younger children can still of course be reunified with their families, approaches to working with them are often different, and the support is often delivered by separate teams. This can mean that reunification teams lack expertise and confidence in working with young children.

*“I'd say that most of the resource within the reunification team is focused on the adolescent side... It's reasonably different for the younger ones in that we keep their allocated social worker, we don't move them to a social worker within the reunification team, because [the reunification team's] skill is really around adolescence and working in that space.”*

*“Maybe we should be doing a bit of work with the teams as to why we're not working with younger children, whether it's anxiety or children at that age can be very settled in placement, so they're just left because they're settled... there's the sort of the six, seven, eight-year-olds where I think there is a greater amount of anxiety.”*

Evidence shows that younger children are more likely to have stable reunifications<sup>xxxiv</sup>, yet many local authorities acknowledge that they lack expertise on reunifying this cohort.

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18 74 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

19 74 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

20 70 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

21 70 out of 75 respondents answered this question.

**Theme: Multi-agency partners are vital to good reunification work, but can sometimes be difficult to engage.**

Local authorities told us that, as partners have become involved in reunification practice, they have tended to become supportive, and have contributed to practice development.

*“We have learned to hold risk differently I think as a children’s service, but as a bit of a partnership as well... I think a lot of robust partnership conversations, especially with the police, I would say, early on, were difficult. But I think that as it’s been successful that it’s gotten easier.”*

*“I think as [partners] have seen the success of [our reunification work], it’s got a lot easier to be honest... because [partners] are seeing that it works. I think the fact we probably started with children where care wasn’t really working probably made it easier [for them to support it] as well.”*

Local authorities did, however, sometimes mention ongoing challenges they encountered in engaging partners and building trust. Some interview participants mentioned difficulties working with particular partners, including Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), CAFCASS, and the family court. They felt that the issues often stemmed from a lack of shared commitment and language, as well as insufficient trust.

*“We had a couple of IRO escalations about things and we had to have meetings where we reassured them, talked about what we were doing...but partners are now seeing that it works.”*

*“There’s a general kind of mistrust of local authorities... [we need partners] to shift a bit to give us the space to do what we need to do.”*

Local authorities told us that many of the challenges could be alleviated by partners building their awareness of, and expertise in, reunification practice.

*“We have ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’, but I think we need some sort of similar document that supports reunification specifically. It’s everybody’s business. Everybody should be thinking about that from before even a child is accommodated, but certainly the day they are...I think if we could get some national guidelines that set out clearly when we should and when we shouldn’t return home, and when we should or shouldn’t discharge an order and, I think that would help us further as well.”*

Local authorities told us they would welcome national direction on how best to engage partners with reunification processes, and establish integrated working arrangements.



# Conclusions and recommendations





## Conclusions

### Our research found a growing interest in reunification practice in local authorities across England.

The areas we spoke to were at various stages in their reunification practice journeys: some were yet to begin work on developing a strategy; some were part way through the process; some had recently decided on an approach, with work needed to embed it; and some (but few) had fully-embedded strategies and processes.

#### **Local authorities had both principled and pragmatic reasons for wanting to give greater priority to reunification practice.**

Some described their increasing awareness of the importance of long-term relationships to children and young people's lives – particularly those with their parents and siblings. Local authorities often felt a sense of moral duty to consider if and how a return home to family could happen, to promote good relational outcomes. In many cases this idea was encouraged by an organisational culture that emphasised the importance of accepting and 'holding' risk in order to achieve positive outcomes for children.

Others spoke of the need to give greater consideration to reunification for pragmatic reasons. Many highlighted dysfunction in the placement market, particularly high costs and an inability to meet demand. Local authorities commonly mentioned teenagers in this context, a growing cohort among the children-in-care population. Practitioners frequently struggle to identify suitable placements for adolescents. Young people can consequently end up in inappropriate homes in which they don't feel settled. Meanwhile, many would simply prefer to live at home with their family, despite their assessed care needs. Teenagers 'voting with their feet' was a common theme in our discussions, with young people returning home irrespective of their care plan. These considerations are leading many local authorities to take a pragmatic approach, focusing resources on facilitating a return home when requested by the young person, rather than continuing to fund placements that may inevitably break down.

Many areas felt driven by both – principles and pragmatism.

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#### **Our research suggests that this growing interest in reunification practice is not yet matched by a growing awareness of how best to do it.**

While the local authorities we heard from are at different stages in their journeys, practice largely appears under-developed.

Well over three-quarters of the local authorities surveyed don't have a dedicated, standalone reunification team. Over half don't have a reunification strategy or policy (and of those that do, many are still in development). And only a minority are tracking key data, limiting their ability to improve practice through the identification of key trends.

Our research didn't find a singular, unified approach to reunification across the country. Local authorities differ on key factors such as: which children and young people are eligible for reunification; how prospective cases are identified; who undertakes assessment and planning, and how; and what support is delivered, by who, and for how long.

#### **We believe this is indicative of a lack of national direction on this practice area. Local authorities have not been proactively supported to prioritise reunification. And those looking to establish an approach find little applicable evidence on which to base their thinking.<sup>22</sup>**

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22 Anecdotally, we heard of one area which, in the process of redeveloping their early help model, identified a trend of repeat entries to care. This led them to conclude that a focus on reunification practice was needed including the creation of a new dedicated service. However, they found few examples to inform their thinking - their need for assurance about the effectiveness of their chosen approach was left unmet.

Our research found that, while practice varies, local authorities are grappling with many of the same issues. Some of these include:

- **How best to build trust with parents in the lead up to a reunification, and retain their engagement afterwards.** Councils often spoke of the importance of building and repairing relationships with parents, in the lead up to a reunification, after the pressures caused by the child's removal. This was seen as a necessary condition for a stable reunification, but often difficult to achieve. The challenge arises from it being the same service separating the family, and later reunifying them. Many areas described how they also struggle to maintain engagement with families post-reunification – particularly where the child's Section 20 status means that there isn't a care order mandating parental engagement. They emphasised that it can be difficult for parents to accept ongoing scrutiny beyond the point of the return home.
- **How best to engage and build trust with partners – such as the police, courts, Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS), and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) – in key aspects of the reunification process.**

Effective multi-agency working is a core component of children's social care, underpinned by the Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance. However, local authorities reported a range of experiences working with partners on reunifications, with some working more effectively than others. However, there was consensus that they're integral to a well-planned process, and to reunification stability. They're needed to support in identifying prospective cases, assessing families, and planning and delivering support.

- **How best to overcome barriers to providing more reunification support.** Many councils emphasised the bespoke nature of their support packages, with children and families' needs considered on a case-by-case basis. However, the vast majority expressed a desire to increase the support offered. That seemed to mean different things to different local authorities, for example: providing a greater intensity of support, a wider range of support, working with a larger number of families, or doing more work with families at an earlier stage – long before reunification is considered. Areas commonly identified several barriers to achieving this: funding constraints, workforce recruitment and retention issues, and a lack of specialist services available locally to commission.

## Further research needed

Our research engaged roughly half of all English local authorities with children's services responsibilities (75), representing all geographic regions, and the full range of Ofsted performance ratings. Further research is now needed to generate a complete national picture of practice, building on this work.

More specifically, follow-on research is needed to understand:

- **The experiences of local authorities struggling to prioritise reunification within their children's social care practice.** We engaged some of those areas, but many of the survey respondents, and the

majority of interview participants, were in a more positive position – they had recently implemented a new reunification approach, recently begun work to develop one, or were soon to do so.

- **What reunification support local authorities are delivering.** Our research indicates what local authorities offer, but it doesn't tell us about take-up and delivery.
- **The quality of local authority assessment, planning, and support.** Our research indicates what guides practice, and (as above) what local authorities offer to children and families – it doesn't tell us about the effectiveness of those approaches, or interventions.

## Recommendations

National and local government, political parties, policy officials, researchers, and parliamentarians, all have a role to play in raising the profile of this vital policy area, and supporting local authorities to develop and refine their practice approaches.

Doing so would help to boost the rate of stable returns home. More separated families would be reunited, giving them a chance to repair and nurture their relationships. Fewer reunified children would return to our overburdened care system, and local authorities' spending on costly placements would reduce.

## Recommendations

### Government and political parties should commit to:

- **Developing national reunification guidance.**

The guidance should set out a national vision for reunification practice.

It should:

- Define key terms.
- Recommend evidence-based approaches to assessment, planning, support, and monitoring.
- Detail learnings from existing research, and commissioned evaluations (as below).
- Include recommended assessment and planning tools, and case studies.

The guidance should establish new reporting obligations to improve national policymakers' understanding of practice, and children's outcomes.

In addition to current reporting requirements on the number of planned/unplanned reunifications to persons with/without parental responsibility, national government should require anonymised local data on:

- Reunifying/reunified children and families' key characteristics and circumstances (including their care journey).
- The scope, scale and duration of support provided pre and post-reunification.
- Return home stability/instability (including repeat reunifications).
- Post-reunification outcomes across key domains, including health, wellbeing and education.

The document should be as clear and concise as possible - accessible to those responsible for overseeing and delivering reunification practice - and include a short opening summary of the new vision.

It must also sit alongside, and effectively cross reference, other related guidance including *Working Together to Safeguard Children*.

- **Investing in reunification practice evaluations across England.**

Evaluation is needed to rigorously test the effectiveness of existing approaches and interventions, in our national context. Despite the difficulties many local authorities face in delivering high-quality reunification practice, there are some examples of innovative and potentially good approaches, which are ripe for evaluation.

Work to understand 'what works' to support reunification, and ensure return home stability, is vital. High-quality, evidence-based reunification practice could help to increase the number of children leaving the care system, and reduce the number of children re-entering it.

This is urgently needed - local authorities are struggling to cope with high and rising numbers of children in care, and the financial implications of a costly placement market.

- **Sharing learnings from existing research on this practice area with local authorities**

While steps are taken to conduct evaluations, and develop national guidance, an evidence summary should be shared with local authorities, highlighting learnings across key aspects of reunification practice - assessment, planning, and the delivery of support.



## Recommendations (continued)

### Local government leaders and practitioners should commit to:

- **Aligning their practice with new national guidance, once issued.**
- **Ensuring they are acting on what's already known from existing research about this practice area (as described in the evidence summary, once issued).**
- **Ensuring they are making best use of available local data to track children's outcomes and refine practice.**

While awaiting national guidance, local authorities should review what data they collect and analyse on reunifying/reunified children and families, to ensure they're making strategic use of any learnings about their practice, and children's outcomes.

Once issued, national guidance should provide clear direction to local areas on data-collection, analysis, and reporting.

### The research community should commit to:

- **Supporting the development of a 'what works' evidence base for England, through active participation in practice evaluations.**
- **Working to build on existing knowledge of risk factors for unstable reunifications.**

Existing research highlights the need for further investigation of certain child and family characteristics and circumstances that make reunification breakdown more or less likely.

For example, Action for Children's research with the University of East Anglia pointed to the relatively low care re-entry rates of children from Asian families.

- **Investigating reunified children's outcomes, across key domains such as health, wellbeing and education.**

Work is needed to understand children's post-reunification outcomes, comparing them to children who remained in care over the same period, children who exited care through a different permanency route, and the general population.

This work should include a focus on stable reunifications that don't achieve good outcomes for children, in fact proving detrimental (whether because the wrong decision was made at assessment, or the return home wasn't adequately supported).

### MPs and Peers, meanwhile, can play their part by:

raising the issues highlighted in this report in Parliament, and holding government and political party leadership to account for the actions outlined above.

They should also take opportunities to highlight the challenging context in which local authority children's services are currently delivered. Financial difficulties are affecting the provision of both statutory and non-statutory services, and can restrict leaders' abilities to innovate and deliver the reforms the children's social care system so desperately needs.

# References

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# Notes

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