

REES CENTRE

Research in Fostering and Education
University of Oxford Department of Education



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Rees Centre Newsletter #13 April 2015 CONTENTS

[Research Updates](#)

*Study completed - increasing the benefits of support between foster carers
Innovative approaches to support young people transitioning from care to adulthood
Selection of foster carers by local authorities - Participants sought for study*

[Upcoming Events](#)

Live Friday Ashmolean Museum 15 May 2015

WEBINAR: Identifying and addressing the mental health needs of children in care. Wednesday 3 June at 4pm

WEBINAR: Educational progress of looked after children. Linking care and education. Weds 1 July at 4pm

[Rees Centre News](#)

Visiting Fellowship-Dr Sara McLean, Australian Centre for Child Protection, elected ACU Research Fellow 2015/16

Recent events, blog postings and conference presentations

[Foster Care in the News](#)

[Reviews](#)

Young People Leaving Care. Supporting Pathways to Adulthood by Mike Stein

[Young Voices](#)

Celebrating achievements of Oxfordshire young people

[Extras](#)

Out of care, into University. New report from La Trobe University, Melbourne

Review of kinship carer surveys – the 'Cinderella' of the care system

Attachment and Trauma Aware Schools Conference, Bath

CONTACT THE REES CENTRE

Phone: +44 (0)1865 274050

Email: rees.centre@education.ox.ac.uk

Website: <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk>

Blog: <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/blog/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ReesCentre>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook/ReesCentreOxford>

RESEARCH UPDATES

Increasing the benefits of foster carer peer support

The Rees Centre's study on the potential benefits of contact between foster carers is now complete. This mixed-methods study drew on our [review of the international research on peer contact between foster carers](#). Three local authorities in England considered our evidence-based recommendations when reviewing or re-launching their foster carer support groups. The groups were then evaluated. Our foster carer-researchers interviewed 71 carers about the contact that they had had with other carers prior to the project, whether and how it had changed by the end and what they found most useful about the group. They were also invited to suggest ways that support groups might be

improved.

The interviews revealed that when carers get together at support groups, they benefit from different kinds of support:

- **Emotional support** involves the provision of caring and empathy, and was talked about by the carers in all three authorities in terms of the ability to talk to others with shared experience and offload about any problems they were having in their role, in a confidential and non-judgemental environment. The benefit of emotional support was balanced with a desire to avoid negativity, which had been an issue with previous groups in some areas.
- **Informational support** involves carers assisting each other with problem-solving, usually in the form of swapping advice. This could help to counter any sense of isolation.
- **Appraisal support** involves receiving positive feedback from others. In this context, carers talked about this in relation to feeling reassured when they found out that they were doing 'a good job', and that others in the group would have handled things in a similar way.
- **Instrumental support** involves giving concrete assistance. This type of support was mentioned by only a handful of interviewees across the three authorities, but included respite or babysitting arrangements, lifts to training sessions and sharing transport to children's schools.

It is also important to consider differences in support needs for individual carers and at different career points.

Interviewees noted that new carers or those with new placements might especially benefit from peer support, but the time around the end of placements was also seen as a point of particular vulnerability and one in which carers could support each other.

By conducting this study across three local authorities, it is clear that a 'one size fits all' approach is not appropriate when arranging foster carer support groups. The geographical spread of carers in an authority, proportions of specialist carers and those looking after very young children or adolescents, and concentrations of carers from minority ethnic groups, all need to be taken into account when setting up a group. Moreover, carers need to be consulted to determine their preferences around the level of structure in the group and whether it is led by social workers or carers.

Some common messages may be drawn out, however. While external speakers were popular, carers in each authority valued most the opportunity to talk to others in the same situation. At least part of this discussion time might be conducted without the presence of social workers, so that carers could feel open to talk about anything without fear of feeling judged. One local authority had this element in the middle of the sessions and followed it immediately with feedback to fostering team staff. This minimized the risk of unproductive negativity putting some carers off attending. Another example of innovative practice was the use of non-fostering activities (such as cake-decorating). Carers enjoyed taking part in these, felt they gave them something else to concentrate on and the opportunity to mix with others, and liked recreating the activities at home with children. These strategies might be useful for other authorities to consider.

The issue of how to attract new attendees was the most common one raised across all three authorities. Attending the first session could be daunting for new carers, and interviewees suggested ways of making this easier, for example by having their mentors/buddies accompany them. In some cases, established carers may feel they have a strong support network that fulfils their needs and that they will gain nothing by attending. The limitation of this study is that we only spoke to carers who were already attending the support groups, and so to some extent were surveying a self-selected sample who were more likely to endorse the format of the groups they attended. The logical next step would be to talk to a group of carers in each local authority to determine why they choose not to attend support groups, and where appropriate, to determine which of the barriers to attendance (such as timing, location, crèche facilities, or group negativity) could be addressed.

We are grateful to all the carers who took part in this study and were willing to share their thoughts with us, and to all the staff in the three local authorities who worked with us on this study and showed real enthusiasm for integrating research and practice. Special thanks to our foster carer-interviewers Theresa, Gwen, Colin, Alex, Mike, Jane and Sue for being so generous with their time and experience.

Innovative approaches to support young people transitioning from care to adulthood, University of Gothenberg, Sweden, 17 March 2015

Video recordings from this seminar (Teenagers in Foster Care ESRC seminar series) are now available via the [Rees site](#).
Speaker presentations were as follows:

‘Supporting young people from care to adulthood: international research, policy and practice’ (Professor Mike Stein, University of York); ‘Educational attainments for young care leavers’ (Professor Sonia Jackson, Thomas Coram Research Unit, London); ‘Care leavers in Norway – challenges in supporting young people leaving care’ (Jan Storö, University College, Oslo); ‘Voices of young people leaving care in Sweden’ (Yvonne Sjöblom, Ingrid Höjer, University of Gothenburg).

Selection of foster carers by local authorities - Participants sought for study **Vânia Pinto, doctoral student at the Rees Centre**

As part of my research I would like to invite two local authorities, one from an urban and the other from a rural area, to participate in a study about the selection process of foster carers. This will involve the participation of 8 foster carers and 8 supervising social workers from each local authority, in separate focus groups. There will be one session for each focus group lasting approximately 45 minutes. If you are interested or want more details please contact me via email: vania.pinto@education.ox.ac.uk

UPCOMING EVENTS

Live Friday Ashmolean Museum Oxford 15 May 2015

We are participating in a showcase of the University’s Social Sciences research at the museum on 15 May from 7pm-10.30pm. Lots of interactive activities illustrating our work. Free event, open to the public. Find us in gallery 33.

WEBINAR: Identifying and addressing the mental health needs of children in care

Weds 3 June at 4pm. Open to all. No advance registration required.

This webinar will focus on two mental health projects involving the Rees Centre. Nikki Luke will discuss key messages arising from the NSPCC/Rees Centre evidence review on [What works in preventing and treating poor mental health in looked after children?](#) Helen Drew from the University of Sussex will talk about the research she is conducting with schools and Virtual Schools supporting [mental health needs of looked after children around the transition from primary to secondary school](#). The webinar will include an overview of both projects with plenty of time for discussion.

WEBINAR: Educational progress of looked after children, linking care and education

Weds 1 July at 4pm. Open to all. No advance registration required.

Please check the website closer to the date for more information.

[Webinar FAQs](#)

HOT OFF THE PRESS: Dr Sara McLean, Australian Centre for Child Protection, elected ACU Visiting Fellow. Supporting children and adolescents with significant and serious mental health and behavioural concerns.

We are delighted to announce that the Governing Body of Linacre College, University of Oxford has elected Dr Sara McLean, Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia as the 2015-16 ACU Visiting Fellow. This means that Sara will spend 3 weeks at the Rees Centre in April 2016 collaborating with Rees researchers, meeting fostering services managers and giving seminars and the guest Association of Commonwealth Universities Lecture at Linacre College. Sara is a specialist in supporting children and adolescents with significant and serious mental health and behavioural concerns. She is committed to the development of more effective support for looked after children, through research focused on developing customised and relevant support for foster carers. Her work focuses on synthesising current and emerging knowledge from neuropsychology, clinical psychology interventions and child protection theory and translates this knowledge into practical strategies that are relevant to the 'real world' complexity of working with looked after children and families.

Does being in care provide protection or increase risk? Understanding the outcomes of children in care.

Prof Janet Boddy, University of Sussex and Prof Donald Forrester, University of Bedfordshire. The Rees Centre hosted this public seminar on 2 March. [Watch now](#) as a University of Oxford podcast.

Improving outcomes and experiences of disadvantaged and looked after children in schools through use of the pupil premium and pupil premium plus (for children in care).



The Rees Centre hosted this event on 11 March based on the TeachMeet format. Chaired by Sir Tim Brighouse, nearly 60 teachers and others attended this event at which nine speakers from primary and secondary schools in Oxfordshire and beyond including Sussex and Portsmouth gave short presentations on their own experiences of using the pupil premium (plus). There will be a follow up session later in the year, chaired again by Tim, who challenged those presenting to return with a report of their progress. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Pe41db7pxQ>

Knowledge Exchange Visiting Practitioners

The Rees Centre was joined by two Visiting Practitioners, Alun Rees and Lucy Wawrzyniak, part-time for six months from July 2014 funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Impact Accelerator Accounts Scheme (which funds knowledge exchange activities to accelerate the impact of research). Alun is a former Virtual School Head in Leeds and Lucy was at the time Deputy Head of the Oxfordshire Virtual School.

The two Visiting Practitioners built extensively on existing key local and national partnerships, particularly with the National Virtual School Headteachers' Steering Group and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). Alun revised and extended

the Virtual School Handbook for the DfE and Virtual School Steering Group so it reflects the available research evidence. Lucy drew on Rees Centre research to develop 'knowledge claims' which are statements about practice that have a strong evidence base and which some Oxfordshire schools are now using to review their practice. This has increased the profile and credibility of the Rees Centre, ensuring our research is more accessible and better used by practitioners involved in the education of children in care. As importantly, it has increased the voice of organisations such as OCC in determining our research priorities while the Rees Centre has developed a better understanding of the systems we are looking to influence.

Media coverage

Judy and Áine were quoted in [Schools Week](#) on 6th March regarding the attainment gap for looked after children.

Rees Centre blog

We welcome your comments on the following topic:

[Foster carer perspective on care leaver pathway to University](#)

Conference presentations

Judy chaired the DfE Retention & recruitment consortia conference Manchester 19 March 2015 and gave an impromptu short keynote on the motivation to foster study when one of the speakers had to pull out!

Aoife presented a workshop and Judy gave a keynote at the FCA hosted conference on Supporting Looked After Children in Education, Northern Ireland 25 March 2015.

Judy presented a seminar on 'Improving the outcomes of children in care, what does the research tell us?' at the School of Applied Social Sciences, University of Stirling on 8 April 2015.

Judy is giving a seminar in Glasgow at the Fostering Panel Development Day hosted by Core Assets Scotland on 8 May 2015

Judy will be chairing the one day national conference **Looked After Children in Education: Improving Outcomes & Driving Progress** on 19 May in Birmingham. **Nikki** and **Jane Vellacott**, one of our carer-interviewers, will be co-presenting a workshop on how schools can work with foster carers to support children's learning at home. Further details can be found [here](#). Use code REES15 to receive £30 discount off the delegate rate.

Who Cares? About Running

Nikki reports on her training efforts - Couch to 20k for children in care.

<https://whocaresaboutrunning.wordpress.com>

<http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/NikkiLuke>

FOSTER CARE IN THE NEWS

[1,400 new foster families needed for rise of children in care](#), ITV News, 5 February 2015

[Dog attack fears see potential carers turned away](#), Children and Young People Now, 9 February 2015

[Half of foster carers do not feel their role is valued by social work teams](#), Community Care, 18 February 2015

[A commitment for life. Parents' stories of adoption and fostering](#), Guardian Social Care Network, 4 March 2015

[Foster Care, you can't put a price on a happy, secure childhood](#), Guardian Social Care Network, 24 February 2015

[Children in Care failed by government say MPs](#), BBC News, 13 March 2015

[Children in Care \(44th report\)](#), Public Accounts, Commons Select Committee, March 2015

[Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children. Statutory guidance for local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England](#), Department for Education and Department of Health, 17 March 2015

[How social workers can achieve successful reunifications for children in care](#), Community Care, 20 March 2015

[Permanence, long term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child, Statutory guidance for local authorities](#), Department for Education, March 2015

[A new belonging for care leavers: how one project is helping councils to raise standards](#), Guardian Social Care Network, 14 April 2015

[Are we failing parents whose children are taken into care?](#) The Guardian, 25 April 2015

BOOK REVIEW

Young People Leaving Care. Supporting Pathways to Adulthood

Mike Stein; Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2012

Reviewed by Áine Rose Kelly, doctoral student at the Rees Centre & care leaver

This book maps out the journey that young people take when leaving the care system. Although young people in care are recognised as being much more vulnerable than their peers, they are often expected to become independent at a much earlier age. This book mirrors my own experiences of leaving the care system and therefore, I would suggest that it is read by anyone working with young people in or from care. It should be used as a key resource for highlighting some of the challenges that we face during early adulthood when our support from children services has been withdrawn.

The book is split into three easy to follow sections: 1) Policy and context, 2) the main pathways from care to adulthood and 3) the main themes and ideas that informed the book. It provides a comprehensive review of the development of policies in England; at the same time, it also highlights the needs of the most vulnerable young people to leave the care system and suggests ways in which professionals can promote their successful transitions into adulthood.

The responsibility of promoting successful transitions should not just be left to the leaving care teams. All professionals working with young people need to accept collective responsibility and prepare young people for independence throughout their journey through the care system.

YOUNG VOICES

Celebrating Achievements of Oxfordshire Young People

Áine attended the launch of the Oxfordshire Youth Parliament Manifesto 2015-2016. The celebration event looked at what has been achieved with the past year's campaigns including a focus on improving educational outcomes for children in care and leaving care and keeping children and young people safe. The event also celebrated the achievements of the Oxfordshire Children in Care Council. Members, including Hollie who came to work at the Rees Centre on TakeOver Day 2014, received awards in recognition of their work and dedication to improving the lives of children in care in Oxfordshire.

EXTRAS

[Out of care, into University. Raising higher education access and achievement of care leavers](#), March 2015, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

[A review of kinship carer surveys – the 'Cinderella' of the care system](#), March 2015, Meredith Kiraly, University of Melbourne. While kinship care may offer stability and a sense of belonging for children, the unmet needs of kinship carers and families are overwhelming.

[Attachment and Trauma Aware Schools Conference](#), Friday 26 June 2015, jointly arranged by Bath and North East Somerset Council and Bath Spa University at Newton Park, Bath. Keynote speakers include Mary Gordon of the 'Roots of Empathy' project in Canada, and Professor Jeremy Holmes, an internationally acclaimed authority on John Bowlby and attachment theory. Workshops will be provided by attachment aware school projects in Stoke on Trent and B&NES, and there will be an opportunity to hear from other organisations such as Place 2 Be and Adoption UK, as well as presentations from current Professional Masters students following the Attachment and Learning module at Bath Spa.