



Webinar recording

Lifelong Links: Building supportive networks for children in care in Scotland



October 2024

Evaluation of the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland

Dr Heather Ottaway

Good morning, everyone, and a very warm welcome to our webinar this morning. Today we're going to be focusing on the findings and learning from the evaluation of Lifelong Links in Scotland. Lifelong Links has been described as a very innovative approach developed by the Family Rights Group with the aim of building supportive relationship networks for children in care and as such, and in a Scottish context, has real, particular resonance, with The Promise here. I'm Dr Heather Ottaway, and I'm the Head of Evidence and Innovation at CELCIS. So, I'm delighted that we're joined today by Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive of Family Rights Group, who will do some context setting at the start of the webinar. We're then joined by Dr Robert Porter and Dr Nadine Fowler, who undertook the longitudinal evaluation of Lifelong Links in Scotland over five years. And then we're also going to be joined by Paul Reddiex, Lifelong Links consultant at the Family Rights Group, and Lucy Hutchinson, Head of Programs at the Family Rights Group, who'll be responding to the findings and learning in Scotland and considering the next steps for Lifelong Links. And the final part of the webinar will be a Q&A and we'll also be joined for that by Pam Ledward, the Principal Social Work Advisor for the Family Rights Group. So, without further ado, I'd like to hand over to Cathy Ashley, the Chief Executive of the Family Rights Group. Thanks, Cathy.

Cathy Ashley



Introduction to Lifelong Links and setting the context

Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive
Family Rights Group



So, a huge welcome to you all, and thank you very much for joining us. I'm just going to introduce you for a moment to Family Rights Group, and then I'm going to just take you, very briefly, on the journey of Lifelong Links in Scotland and actually in the UK. Family Rights Group has got its 50th anniversary coming up this year, which is very exciting. And the purpose of Family Rights Group as an organisation is to create a more socially just society in which children are able to live safely with their families, and where we strengthen the family and communities of children who can't live at home.

About Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group is the leading national charity working to ensure the child welfare system supports children to live safely and thrive within their family. We also work to strengthen the family and community networks of those children who cannot live at home.

- Our free **specialist advice service** supports parents and kinship carers to understand their rights and options.
- We pioneer **innovative child welfare practices** including Lifelong Links and family group conferences.
- For 50-years, our **legal, policy and campaigning work** has influenced developments in the child welfare system.

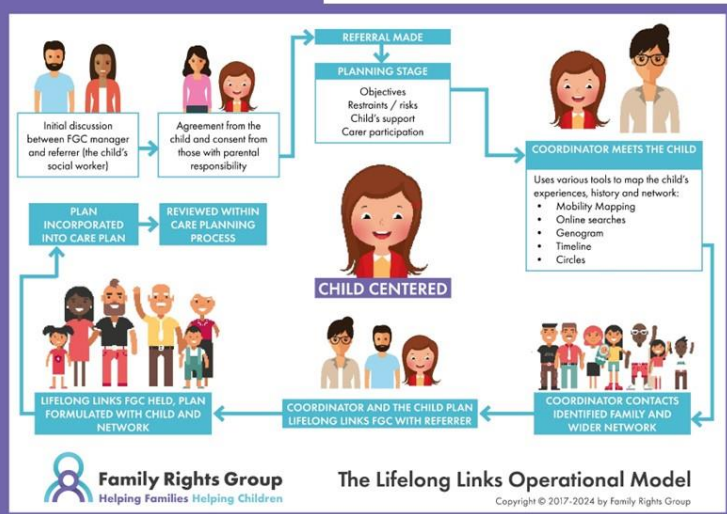


So that's our mission, and we do that through a raft of different ways. In England, we have an independent advice service for parents and kinship carers. We campaign for changes in policy, practice and legislation, and that includes, for example, changes that we secured around kinship care in terms of kinship children, so that's children who are living with family and friends but not able to live with their parents. We secured exemption from those children to the two-child tax credit limit, and also we secured changes around work conditionality requirements for kinship carers. And importantly, in relation to this presentation, we have pioneered innovative Child Welfare practices. So, we introduced family group conferences to the UK in the early 90s, by bringing over social workers from New Zealand, where, as you may be aware, family group conferences are indeed part of their legislative framework, and we have developed Lifelong Links, and that's what I'm going to focus on now.

So, just to explain why we need Lifelong Links. What is Lifelong Links? So, we were part of a care inquiry that covered all four nations, and we looked at the experience of the young people and children in the care system, and we engaged as part of that inquiry with foster carers, with the doctors, with birth parents, with young people themselves, with social workers, children's homes. And the conclusion that was overwhelming, was that the greatest failing of our care system is that it too often breaks rather than built relationships for children. And the consequence of that can be devastating for young people and that means, too often, young people are left isolated, not having a sense of why they were in care, who they are not seeing brothers and sisters, being sent far away from their schools, from their friendships, from grandparents as well as parents and other people who looked out for them. And so, we wanted to turn that on its head. So, we were very fortunate that we got some funding, and this was about 2015-16 in order to be able to explore how to create an approach that actually supported young people and children in the care system to have loving relationships around them, and we did desk-based research. We did lots of engagement work, including talking to foster carers in Scotland, to young people in Scotland, as well as in England. And we were very fortunate that Edinburgh had already sort of identified that this was something that they wanted to address. So, they had started to look at how could you explore who could be in that child's life. And so we learned a lot from early work that was taking place in Edinburgh, and we started a trial of what became known as Lifelong Links. We'd had a challenge event in Scotland and one in England, and we were really, before the trials, really trying to interrogate how to create an approach which was both going to achieve the objective of building relationships with children, but also, although that's a simple idea, it's not simplistic, and issues of safeguarding, thinking about who's central in terms of that approach was key.

Key Principles

- Young person driven
- Child safety & welfare is central
- Strength-based family centred approach
- Enable participation for all
- Independent coordinator
- Supportive of all involved
- A problem-solving dynamic approach



The trial in England and Scotland kicked off in 2017 and in Scotland really got going in 2018, initially with three local authorities. That did then extend to another two local authorities in Scotland. But I know the evaluation today focuses on findings from those initial three Scottish authorities. So the principle around Lifelong Links, as I say, has really sort of clear purpose, which is that the child is at the centre and it only happens if a child says so, because it's their network. It's not about finding somewhere for a child to live. It's about the child having people who they care about and want to see and who care about them, and it only goes at the pace that the child wants it to. So it's very young person driven. Issues of safety and welfare are central and thought through throughout the approach. It's a trained independent coordinator who's an experienced family group conference coordinator who does the exploratory work with the child to look at who they can connect to, it needs to have the consent of either parents or organization, or if the young person's old enough the young person, who's got parental responsibility. And as you will see on the right, there are a number of different tools that are used once a young person is referred to the Lifelong Link service that in order to explore who's in that child's network. Some of those are things that you'll be familiar with, such as Genograms. Others are things which we created. It was called the social connections tool. Lots of work has been done and it's now called Circles, and it's effectively a sort of interactive questionnaire with the child to say, who do you turn to for this? And who'd you would you turn to for that? And to try and identify who the child thinks is important. And then the coordinator, in conjunction with the child and the social worker brings those people together in a celebratory event where a Lifelong Links plan is made, so a sort of Lifelong Links family group conference, and critically, that plan then needs to be supported and embedded in the child's care plan or pathway plan.

Lifelong Links trial in England

Three year trial (2017-2020)
Seven local authorities, growing to twelve by end of year two.
Funded by Department for Education's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme



Health and wellbeing

The longitudinal child level analysis shows that emotional health and well-being improve and that improvement is sustained over time.



Increased stability

Almost three-quarters (74%) of the children and young people who were referred remained in their same home in the year following Lifelong Links, compared to 41% for the comparison group.



Improved sense of identity

78% of children and young people who were offered Lifelong Links felt an improved sense of identity

Lifelong Links evaluation report (2020) // Lifelong Links: embedding practice (2022)
Dr Lisa Holmes et al

So the trial in England lasted three years and the evaluation was conducted by Professor Lisa Holmes, and what she found - there was comparative group who had not participated in Lifelong Links, what she found was that Lifelong Links led to an improvement in children's mental health, and well-being, an improvement in their emotional health, and that was measured by strength and difficulties questionnaire, she found that it led to children and young people, being more stable and where they were living. So, 74% of the children and young people who referred remained in their children's home, foster care home, compared to 41% in the comparator group. And as you can see, 78% of the children and young people, felt an improved sense of identity. And those findings continued, it wasn't just an immediate positive impact, it was long term on those children and young people.

So, I think that's to sort of give you a bit of a measure of what's happened to date. We do want to say a huge thank you to funders who have made it possible for us to support Lifelong Links in Scotland, and that includes KPMG Foundation, who put in money right from the start, and Esme Fairburn Foundation, as well as RS McDonald Charitable Trust and the Robertson Trust. And I'm now going to show you a film which exemplifies Lifelong Links better than anything I can do through my words.

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-3ffF_MYyc

Lifelong Links. Take a right long think, it might not sink in until you hit the brink of this rink that's frozen, so break it open.

The mission of Family Rights Group is to create a more socially just society in which children are able to live safely and thrive within their family, and to strengthen the community and support networks of children who are unable to live at home. And that's where Lifelong Links comes into it.

Lifelong Links is where young folk get the opportunity to have an independent coordinator who researches that young person's family and then reaches out.

Seize the moment, realise the importance - the good that it does, builds foundations for love, helps rise above past use of drink or drugs.

We started being curious about Lifelong Links about six years ago, just asking questions of some of the youngsters that were coming into our care system, wondering who else was in the family, who else was there, who else was important to them.

I remember I was about maybe 12-13, because I knew I didn't have much of a family, and I remember feeling quite isolated. I felt really disconnected, because everybody had like, some sort of idea of family and where they came from, and I just knew that I was in care and that that was very, very different, and I was just really scared about, like, what the future was gonna have in store for me.

It's not about them and it's not about you. It's about finding the ones that love me too. In a world that's a skew filled with drink and abuse, I think that we should find a family that's good.

They will have a birth family and people that were around, probably when they were quite a bit younger, that have been important to them. And we can't just rule these people out and not do anything to kind of keep them connected.

I think one of the biggest fears I had was about being rejected. From my perspective, I went into care because my family didn't love me, and nobody wanted to be involved in my life, and that was my whole understanding of it, and it wasn't the case at all. Most people were actually really, really excited to hear from me.

A lot of the relationships that Lifelong Links has brought about should never have been broken in the first place. So we need to shift the system so that doesn't happen.

I think the biggest surprise for me was probably getting in touch with my auntie. She'll have some of the answers as to like, the questions I had about my mum. I just I wanted to see my brothers, wanting to know what they look like, wanting to have a relationship with them. I actually have that now, things just feel a bit more normal. I feel a lot more connected because I have family now, like most people do, and it's just it's been mind-blowing, really, not sure what to say, not sure how to act. And now it's a fact I got my family back.

Cathy Ashley

Sandy wonderfully describing Lifelong Links and based on a really basic presumption: that we all need people to turn to in life - practically and emotionally, on good days to celebrate and also on harsher days when we just

need somebody at the end of the phone. We need things to look forward too, we need people that we know are there for us, and that's basically what Lifelong Links is predicated on. And at that point I'm going to hand over to CELCIS.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thank you, Cathy, and thank you for sharing really helpful context and such a powerful film about Lifelong Links. So, I'm going to hand over to Dr Robert Porter and Dr Nadine Fowler to go through and discuss their findings and learning from Lifelong Links in Scotland.

Dr Robert Porter



Evaluation of the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland

Dr Robert Porter, Research Lead, CELCIS
Dr Nadine Fowler, Research Associate, CELCIS

www.celcis.org

Thank you, Heather, and thanks to Cathy, and also to Sandy. Very much for sharing their experiences and their talents in that video, which is a great introduction to Lifelong Links. So, my name is Robert Porter. I had the pleasure of being the principal investigator on the evaluation of the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland. And myself and my colleague Nadine, are going to talk you through some of the findings of that evaluation over the next half hour. So, I'm going to give you a little introduction to the evaluation, how that was conducted, and how Lifelong Links was delivered in practice, before Nadine takes you through some of the experiences from children and young people's perspectives, carers and families and practitioners perspectives. And then you'll hear from me again at the end, reflecting back over the learning from the from the whole trial, and highlighting some of the key messages that we've gained from it.

Evaluating Lifelong Links

- The evaluation took place over 5 years from March 2018 to March 2023.
- We utilised a mixed-methods design, including:
 - Quantitative data from national government datasets and the local authority Lifelong Links teams
 - Qualitative interview and focus group data
 - Quantitative and qualitative data from Lifelong Links practice tools
- In Scotland, 3 trial local authorities took part in the evaluation – henceforth referred to as local authority A, B and C.



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So, this evaluation was a five year evaluation. So, it was a really longitudinal study which was carried out from March 2018 to March 2023, so a really long time, and we use their mixed methods design, so we use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to gather data and learning. In Scotland, there were three trial local authorities that took part. They're referred to as local authority A, B and C, to retain their anonymity, but really, you'll only see these appearing after quotes in the presentation. But I think it's important to highlight that the findings that we're presenting here are reflecting the learning across Scotland. It's not about an individual local authority at all. And the other thing about the evaluation is that, because it was a trial, there were criteria applied to identify children and young people who'd be participating in that and the criteria consisted of the child had to be looked after by a local authority for five years or less. So that's formally looked after. They were children for whom social work had ruled out a return home, and they were children who were aged under 16 years old at the point of referral. And again, those criteria were applied consistently across the three local authorities, and those criteria were determined in consultation with the sites, and they really help the evaluation attribute findings to the impact of Lifelong Links, as opposed to perhaps other contextual factors.

Timeline of the evaluation



So, as I say, this is a long timeline, five years of evaluation, and really eight years since we started talking about Lifelong Links here in CELCIS. And you can see there on the slide there, there's a lot of the major milestones in the course of the evaluation. But it's important to note that, of course, an evaluation that covers a timeline like this encounters many challenges, and these can include things like personnel moving, and we experience that internally at CELCIS and our great thanks to all those who are involved, from CELCIS perspective, earlier stages, also externally, in the local authorities, people moving jobs. You know, there are always going to be changes over an eight-year time period. And of course, also there are policy changes a local and a national level. And within Scotland, the about the period of the evaluation, of course, covers the conduct of the Independent Care Review, the publication of The Promise and the establishment of The Promise Scotland, which is really obviously such a huge driving force in policy around the care and protection of children and young people in Scotland. And of course, this evaluation also happens to cover an unexpected world changing events, in our case, the COVID-19 pandemic, which of course, had a major impact on how Lifelong Links could be delivered by coordinators. And also, of course, our work as well.

Quantitative data

Types of data	Number
Lifelong Links programme information	162 children and young people
Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland ('episode', 'placement' and 'legal reason')	544 children and young people
Throughcare and aftercare data	68 children and young people

- We undertook a matched pairs analysis for 127 'participating' and 127 'comparator' children and young people, totalling 254 children and young people.



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So, in our evaluation, we used quantitative and qualitative data. In terms of quantitative data, we use data that came from information that came from the Lifelong Links program, and that was in relation to the 162 young people that were included in the trial data, we also use data from the local authority, the Children's Social Work statistics, including episode information, information about the care settings that children and Young people were living in, as well as the legal reasons for those placements. And that covered 544 young people. And that's those 162 young people who are involved in the trial, and also 382 who are available to us to be comparators. And we'll hear a bit more about that in just very shortly. And then also we looked at throughcare and aftercare data, which is data about services and support is provided to young people once they've left formally being looked after. And as you can see there, part of our quantitative analysis involved a match pairs analysis, and what that does is it's essentially matching children and young people who participated in the Lifelong Links trial with children and young people who had similar experiences prior to the to the trial, and they were matched on a number of attributes, which included gender, age, ethnicity, local authority, things like that. And Nadine will talk to you about those a little bit more. But what that does is that helps us to see the impact of Lifelong Links for children and young people, because it compares like with like is one way of thinking about it, and important to know that all those comparators also fulfilled the criteria for eligibility. So, we're really comparing people with similar experiences and backgrounds.

Qualitative data

- We conducted interviews and focus groups with:

Participants	Number of people
Local authority and Lifelong Links managers	5
Lifelong Links coordinators	16
Social workers	21
Foster carers and residential carers	27
Children and young people	9
Family members	1

- We thematically analysed the interviews and focus groups using NVivo software.

In terms of the qualitative data, we conducted a large number of interviews and focus groups with people, all people who were involved in Lifelong Links at any level. So that included from local authorities, senior management and management lifelong Links coordinators, other social workers and obviously, really importantly, carers, children and young people, families and those were thematically analysed on using NVivo. We also used information from the practice summaries, which are documents which are written by Lifelong Links coordinators and shared with us. And we received 78 of those, and they contain both qualitative and quantitative data about the activities that Lifelong Links coordinators and/or the young person had undertaken and the outcomes that were achieved for them. And a lot of that data was analysed using Microsoft Excel.

Delivering Lifelong Links

- The number of children and young people taking part in Lifelong Links varied by local authority:
 - Local Authority A = 73
 - Local Authority B = 82
 - Local Authority C = 7
- Of the children and young people that took part:
 - Their ages ranged from 2 to 16 years old when beginning Lifelong Links (average age was 10 years 11 months old)
 - They were almost as likely to be male (56%) as female (44%)
 - They were most likely to have their ethnicity recorded as 'White' (81%)

So the delivery of Lifelong Links, as I say, there were a total of 162, young people who took part. Each local authority had a target number of children and young people to participate. And the figures you see there are reflecting there the numbers you participate from each local authority are in proportion with that. Children and young people that took part, they had a wide range of ages from 2 to 16, with an average age of just under 11 years of age, they were a little bit more likely to be male than female and were most likely to have their ethnicity recorded as white. There are no differences between this participating group of 162 and that comparator group that I talked about a second ago on either their ages or on their gender. But there was a very slight difference in the ethnicity that was recorded with participating children and young people more likely to be recorded under mixed or multiple Asian, Asian Scottish, Asian British, African, Caribbean or black or other grouping, 18% compared to the comparative group. But essentially the similarity between the comparison group and the participation group means that the people who experienced Lifelong Links, the support with Lifelong Links, they're really representative of the wider population.

Delivering Lifelong Links

- When taking part in Lifelong Links, coordinators would use a variety of tools with children and young people to help learn more about who was important to them. The most common being:
 - Timeline/chronology
 - Speaking with family
 - Genograms
- In Scotland, FRG negotiated access to National Records of Scotland to help Lifelong Links coordinators create family trees for children and young people.
- Overall, the average length of children and young people's direct involvement with a Lifelong Links coordinator was 12.2 months.

And the delivery of Lifelong Links, you heard from Cathy there about some of the tools that are available to Lifelong Links coordinators, as we heard, they use, really a variety of tools that are available to them, but the ones that were most commonly used that we saw crop up most commonly in those practice summaries were using the timeline and chronology, speaking with family, so really extended family, going out and seeking family members to go and speak with to find out who might have been important, who was around, where might we go to gain more information for this child or young person and those Genograms which Cathy also mentioned. It's important to know that in Scotland, FRG negotiate access to the National Records of Scotland to help lifelong

coordinators create family trees for children and young people. And we really heard about that in our findings. We really heard from children and young people, from families, from social workers and coordinators, that these family trees could exceed people's expectations. They really provided a lot of information more often than they thought was possible. And really importantly, they provided a tangible output, something that the children and young people could take away with them and cherish and see. And it always became a reminder for them as well, of the network that they had and their family. And we can see there that the average length of duration of the support, of the direct involvement with Lifelong Links was just over a year, but of course, then that plan is then passed on to the social work department or the local social worker to carry on the support and ensure that plan is implemented in an ongoing basis. So now I'm going to pass over to Nadine, who's going to tell you a little bit more about the experiences of children and young people, of families, carers and practitioners. So, thank you, Nadine.

Dr Nadine Fowler

Children and young people's experiences

- Taking part in Lifelong Links could be exciting for children and young people.
- The outputs from Lifelong Links, such as family trees and mobility maps, were often cherished by the children and young people.
- Having a consistent Lifelong Links coordinator helped children and young people through the Lifelong Links process.

Thank you, Robert. And good morning, everyone. I'm Dr Nadine Fowler, and I was the research associate on this evaluation of Lifelong Links with Robert at CELGIS. And it's nice to see you all here today, as Robert just said, I'm going to talk to you all about the main findings from our evaluation, beginning with children and young people's experiences of Lifelong Links. Overall, we heard that children and young people had largely positive experiences of Lifelong Links, and we were told that they often enjoy taking part, and that they found Lifelong Links to be exciting and value the time that Lifelong Links coordinators would spend with them, talking about their histories and bringing back their memories.

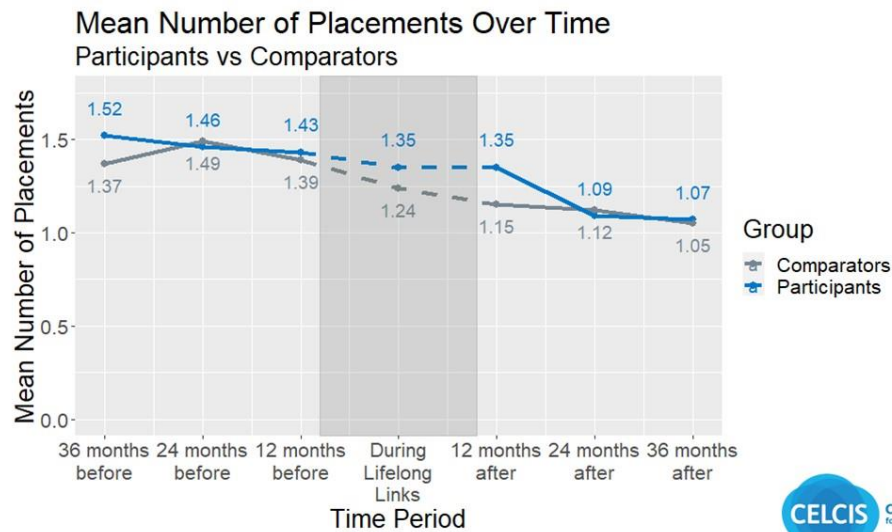
We also heard that they cherished the outputs that they got from Lifelong Links such as the family trees and Mobility Map with one young person telling us that they loved taking part and that having their mobility map in their memory box was very special for them. Having a consistent Lifelong Links coordinator where possible, helped to achieve these positive experiences, giving young people a single point of contact to build supportive relationships with throughout the process.

Children and young people's experiences

"I'd say, since all that happened with Lifelong Links, I've been a lot happier now that I know that I've got contact with a lot of people that I've missed and lost contact with because I moved away, so I'd say I've been a lot happier, which is obviously a good thing." (Tim, Young Person, Local Authority B)

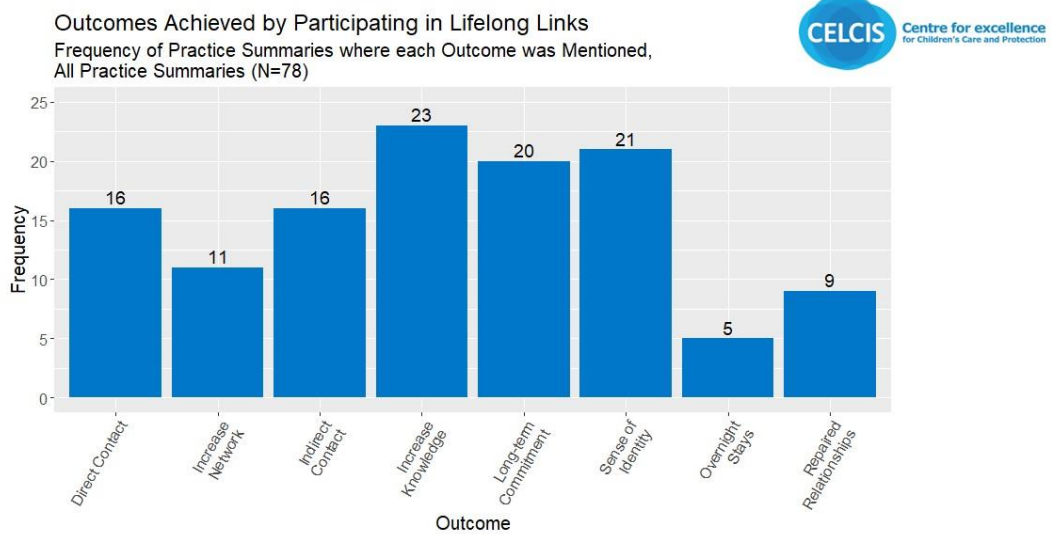
The young person Tim, on the slide here, explained that Lifelong Links could help children and young people, to feel happier, especially when their Lifelong Links coordinator helped them to get back in touch with people who they missed from their past. I'm going to read out his quote because I think that's important. He said, "I'd say since all that happened with Lifelong Links, I've been a lot happier now that I know that I've got contact with a lot of people that I've missed and lost contact with because I moved away. So, I'd say I've been a lot happier, which is obviously a good thing." Alongside this qualitative information, we also wanted to understand whether Lifelong Links had any impact on the stability of children and young people's care placement and the outcomes that were achieved for children and young people. As Robert said, we collected data about children's care experiences and their outcomes during Lifelong Links which allowed us to explore the placement stability of children and young people who took part, and a comparator group of children and young people who did not take part. The matching process that Robert explained allowed us to understand whether there were differences between children and young people who had previously had similar demographics and experiences before Lifelong Links began.

Children and young people's experiences



Our matched pairs analysis showed that the participating group of children and young people did not have a statistically significant difference in the number of care placements they experienced in the three years before taking part in Lifelong Links than the comparator group of children and young people. This is on the light grey section on the left-hand side of the screen. Similarly, there was not a statistically significant difference in the number of care placements between the participating group of children and young people and the comparator group in the three years after taking part in Lifelong Links, which is on the right-hand side of the screen. However, the analysis did identify that there was a slight, statistically significantly higher number of care placements experienced by the participating group of children and young people, in the period during which they received their life on support. This is the dark grey section in the middle of the graph here. While this is a meaningful difference, it is not a large one, and our additional analysis showed that Lifelong Links did not appear to introduce any long term disruption into children and young people's lives, which was supported by the finding that both groups did not have the statistically significant difference in the number of their care placements in the three years after Lifelong Links - this section of the graph on the right hand side.

Children and young people's experiences



During the evaluation, we also collected information about children and young people's outcomes from Lifelong Links via those practice summary documents that Robert mentioned, this data indicated that children and young people experienced increased knowledge and improved sense of identity and a long-term commitment from the networks of important people as a result of taking part in Lifelong Links.

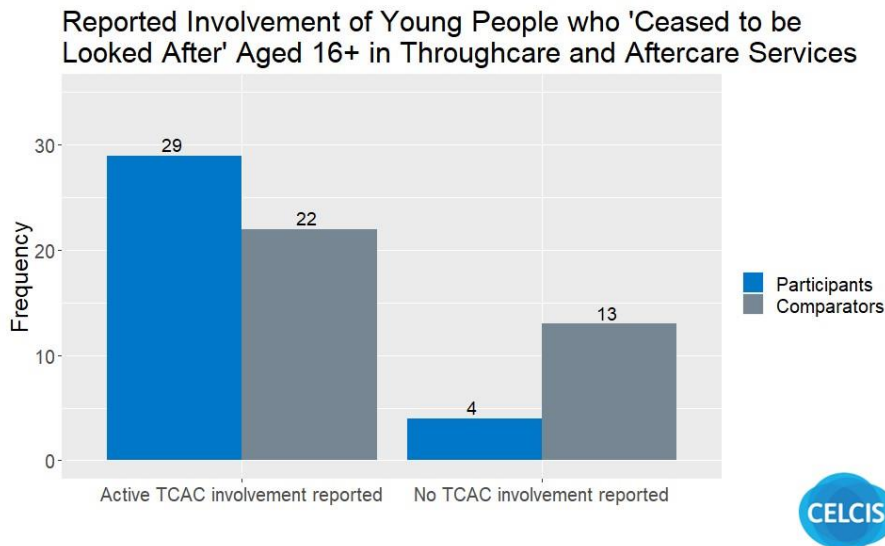
Children and young people's experiences

- Lifelong Links can help children and young people to feel valued and empowered.
- Children and young people's sense of identity can be improved by taking part in Lifelong Links.
- Lifelong Links was able to connect and re-connect children and young people with family members and other important people.
- Children and young people gain important knowledge and information that they might not have previously had.

Building on the information collected in the practice summary document our qualitative data demonstrates that Lifelong Links could have powerful outcomes for children and young people, including feeling valued and empowered, improving their sense of identity, allowing them to connect and reconnect with

family members and other important people, and gaining important knowledge and information.

Children and young people's experiences



Moving on, our quantitative data showed that some of these powerful outcomes could include supporting young people into adulthood and independence with the through care and aftercare data that Robert mentioned demonstrating that there was a significant difference between the participating group and the comparator group in the number of young people who were reported as being supported by through care and aftercare services. Our analysis indicated that participating group young people are much more likely to be involved with through care and aftercare services than comparative group young people. We know that despite widespread efforts to encourage young people who are moving into adulthood and independence into through care and aftercare in Scotland, the uptake of these supports can be low. So, our findings suggest that taking part in Lifelong Links had a positive influence on the number of young people who access through care and aftercare services when they became eligible for these. This was, of course, in addition to any support and guidance that they were now receiving from their networks of important people as a result of Lifelong Links and as a Lifelong Links coordinator told us, support through Lifelong Links could determine whether young people sink or swim when they leave care, as there could now be a network around a young person when they are figuring things out, struggling or progressing that might not have otherwise been there.

Children and young people's experiences

"It was like I was kind of in the dark and didn't know much about my family, but then after Lifelong Links it was a broad new scale, I knew a lot more about my family, it was quite good in that way." (Jack, Young Person, Local Authority B)

Overall children and young people's experiences of Lifelong Links can be summarised by Jack, who explains that before taking part in Lifelong Links, he felt in the dark about his family or where he fits in his family tree, but now he knows a lot more. And again, I'm going to read his quote, because I think it's important. "It was like I was kind of in the dark and didn't know much about my family. And then after Lifelong Links, it was a broad new scale. I know a lot more about my family. It was quite good in that way."

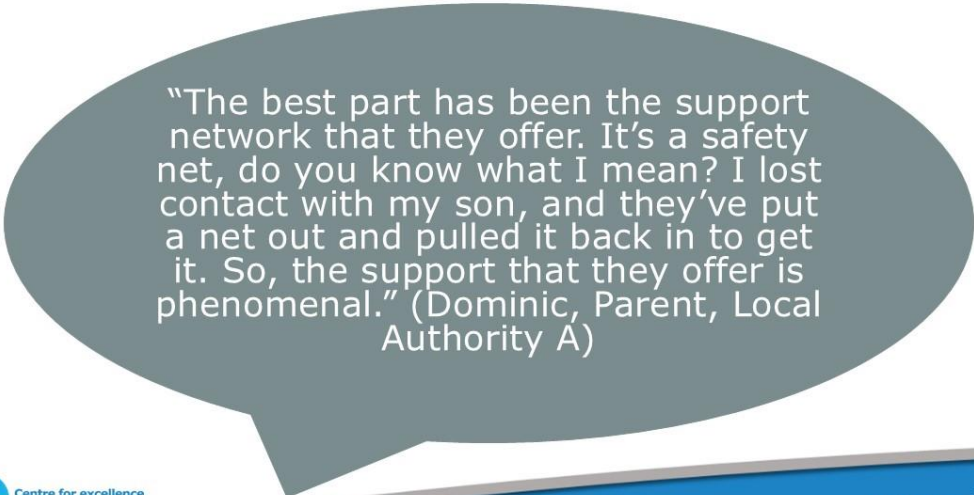
Carers and families' experiences

- In the initial stages of Lifelong Links, carers could experience anxieties and worries about Lifelong Links.
- After taking part, carers reflected that Lifelong Links had conferred significant benefits on children and young people, highlighting that coordinators can obtain information that carers cannot.
- Carers and families found the support and reliability of Lifelong Links coordinators very helpful throughout the process.

When we move on to consider carers and families experiences, we can see that there were some mixed reactions to Lifelong Links in the initial stages of the

evaluation. We heard that carers could be anxious or worried about their children and young people taking part, with some worried that the process might unsettle them. Lifelong Links coordinators played a key role in seeking to alleviate these worries, discussing the process, the different options for taking part and the benefits for children and young people with the carers when they expressed their concerns. While taking part, we heard that carers anxiety is often reduced, as they witnessed first-hand the benefits of Lifelong Links for children and people. After taking part, carers largely reflected that Lifelong Links had been very beneficial for their children and young people, highlighting that the coordinators have the time and resources to do things that they couldn't do themselves. Carers and families also told us that they really valued the support of the Lifelong Links coordinator throughout the process, and that this helped them to relax and entrust that the children and young people were being cared for and looked after.

Families' experiences



"The best part has been the support network that they offer. It's a safety net, do you know what I mean? I lost contact with my son, and they've put a net out and pulled it back in to get it. So, the support that they offer is phenomenal." (Dominic, Parent, Local Authority A)

As one parent we spoke to remarked Lifelong Links offered a safety net around reconnecting with their child, and this made the process easier for him and his child. He said: "The best part has been the support network that they offer. It's a safety net. You know what I mean? I lost contact with my son, and they put a net out and pulled it back in to get it so the support that they offer is phenomenal."

Carers' experiences

- While carers acknowledged the positive outcomes of Lifelong Links for children and young people, they cautioned that taking part was not always 'plain sailing'.
- Carers highlighted the need for *ongoing* support to manage the Lifelong Links plan and helping children and young people to stay in contact with their new connections and re-connections.
- Carers really valued being involved and consulted during the Lifelong Links process, having their knowledge and experience respected by coordinators.

Some carers cautioned, however, that Lifelong Links was not always plain sailing, as it could open a can of worms for children and young people and carers needed to be able to work with the children in person, to move through any stormy waters, help navigate any challenges that could arise. They also reflected that there was a need for ongoing support to help manage a lifelong plan and ensure that children and young people stayed in contact with their new network of important people. We heard that carers really valued being involved and consulted during the Lifelong Links process, having their knowledge and expertise of a child or young person and experience of caring for them respected by the coordinators that they worked with.

Carers' experiences

"I mean, it was just a really positive experience, and Donald has gone from someone who says, 'oh I don't trust my dad, I'll never trust him, I never want to see him' to 'actually, I would like to see him and have more of an opportunity to get to know him'. And, yeah, so they re-established that contact in a really, you know, slow, gentle, easy, and good way." (Amelia, Foster Carer, Local Authority A)

As Amelia summarizes, carers' and families' experiences were largely positive, and that connecting and reconnecting with important people can have lasting impact for children and young people, suggesting that Lifelong Links process could transform a child or young person's attitude. She said: "I mean, it was just a really positive experience. And Donald has gone from someone who says, Oh, I don't trust my dad. I'll never trust him. I never want to see him, to actually, I would like to see him and have more of an opportunity to get to know Him. And yeah, so they've re-established that contact in a really, you know, slow, gentle, easy and good way."

Lifelong Links and child-centred practice

- When undertaking Lifelong Links, practitioners worked hard to prioritise the voice and wishes of children and young people.
- Practitioners made sure to go at the child or young person's pace, doing what they want, *when* they want.
- We heard that it was important for Lifelong Links coordinators to communicate with children and young people in an open and transparent way.

Our practitioner experiences of Lifelong Links. Section opens by considering life buildings in child centred practice. We heard that practitioners worked hard to prioritize the voice and wishes of children young people, placing their wants and desires at the forefront of Lifelong Links. This was framed as being in contrast to some other processes that children and young people could be involved in, such as Looked After Children, reviews, Children's Hearings panels or Team Around the Child meetings, which could feel overly bureaucratic. As Cathy highlighted earlier, they were also told that it was important to go at the child or young person's pace, doing what they wanted, when they wanted, and in a way that was comfortable for them. Lifelong Links worked best when it was done at the right time and in the right way for each individual child or young person, and it was also clear that the Lifelong Links coordinators needed to communicate in an open and transparent way, keeping children and young people informed throughout the process, especially when things could take a long time or be delayed. As Robert said, the average length of time on Lifelong Links for direct support was a year. The practitioners reflected that liaising with children and young people's carers when the child or young person gave them permission could also help to make sure that any arrangements were noted in people's

diaries, and that children and young people felt supported to meet their coordinator

Changing social work practice and culture

- Lifelong Links can fill a gap in service provision, with coordinators able to undertake tasks that children and families social work practitioners are unable to do.
- Lifelong Links can also challenge existing narratives of social work, encouraging practitioners to see the positive attributes of family members.
- Lifelong Links can 'get ahead' of children and young people's curiosities, supporting them to navigate the process of connecting and re-connecting with family and important people.



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When practitioners told us about Lifelong Links changing social work practice and culture, they highlighted that Lifelong Links can fill a gap in service provision with coordinators having the time and resources to do things normal social workers can't prioritize. This included digging deeper into children and young people's families and histories with the tools and services that social workers might not be supported to use, such as the family trees, the Genograms and mobility mapping. Lifelong Links, can also challenge existing narratives of social work, encouraging social workers to see the positive attributes of family members and help them increase their capacity to support their child or young person. We heard that this change in practice was ongoing in traditional social work services and was not necessarily something new, but that Lifelong Links was building on this and empowering people to work in partnership with families. And while we heard some concerns that taking part in Lifelong Links could have the potential to unsettle children and young people, it didn't mean that children and young people shouldn't be offered the opportunity to take part. The practitioners told us that children and young people are likely to be curious about their families and histories at some point, particularly during their teenage years and into adulthood and Lifelong Links could get ahead of this curiosity making sure that children and young people are adequately supported to navigate the process of connecting or reconnecting with the people that are important to them.

Practitioners' perspectives

"Young people, I think, just that bit about having a trusted adult to talk to them and hear their story and not being in a hurry to get somewhere else, has made such a difference, and has actually put that time into spend with them, makes a massive difference."
(Lifelong Links manager, Local Authority C)

Our practitioner perspectives of Lifelong Links can be summarised by this Lifelong Links manager who reflected that Lifelong Links could make a massive difference to children and young people, helping them to make sense of their life story: "Young people, I think, just that bit about having a trusted adult to talk to them and hear their story and not being in a hurry to get somewhere else, has made such a difference, and has actually put that time into spend with them makes a massive difference". So now I'm going to pass you back to Robert, who will take us through some lessons learned from an evaluation.

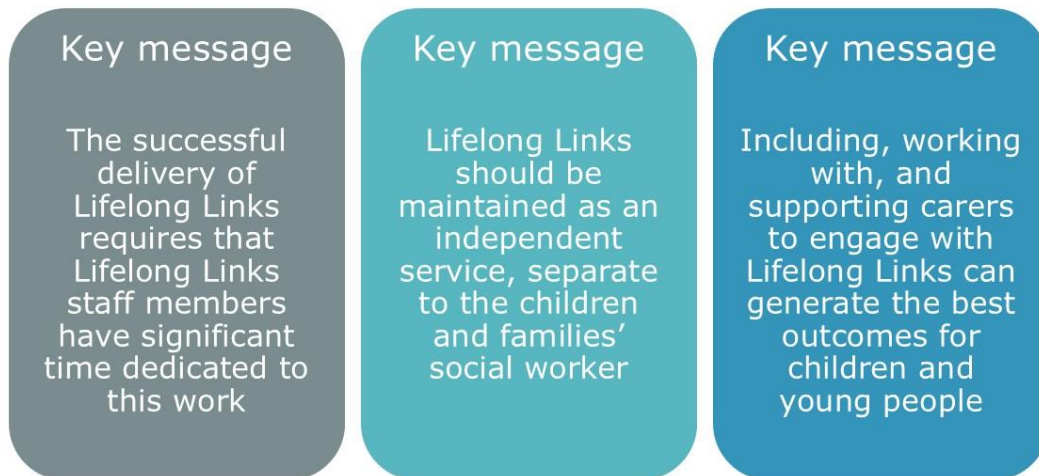
Dr Robert Porter

Learning from trial implementation

- Alignment between ongoing organisation and national government priorities is a significant facilitator to successful implementation of a new service.
- Integrating new services requires significant time, resources and organisational buy-in.
- The importance of raising awareness, understanding and support from affected stakeholders. In the case of Lifelong Links, this included practitioners, carers, children, young people and families.

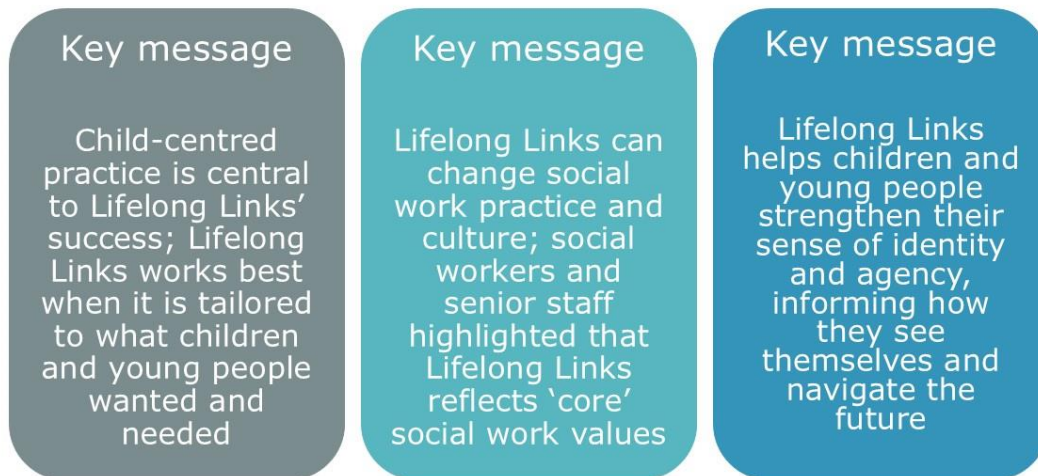
Thank you very much, Nadine, and what I'm going to do is looking across all of that information that we've gathered and think what that's told us as a whole and as a body. And I'm going to start with thinking about what we've learned about that implementation and actually embedding Lifelong Links within local authorities and within other services. And some of the key learning that we got there was that alignment between organizational and national priorities is really a significant factor in the successful implementation of a new service. Managers and senior leaders were really clear that this alignment was essential, and this is basically because it can take a long time to bed in a new service, and it requires resource and organizational buy in to become effectively integrated, and so that alignment really supports that provision of that buy in and that commitment. We also saw the importance of raising awareness across all parties and all levels of organizations, from children and young people right up to senior local authority management, and this communication was seen as key to the success of Lifelong Links implementations across all three local authorities. Now, as I'm sure will come as no surprise, cooperation and coordination is at the heart of this successful implementation, and the complex relationships with between parties is rarely, if ever simple. And of course, in a trial like this, we have local authorities, third sector organizations, Family Rights Group and CELCIS all involved. And so that cooperation, coordination and communication is really, really important to make it work. And in a trial like this it is, of course, as I highlighted, some of the challenges or changes that occur in the course of eight years. It's not possible to plan for everything, but you do need to be flexible and respond appropriately when these changes come along. And of course, COVID-19 was a significant one of those in this context. But while doing that, you really still need to pay attention to fidelity. Fidelity always requires effort and support. In the case of Lifelong Links, FRG provided training, coaching and support as part of the accreditation for coordinators, as well as supporting local planning and implementation groups. There were also practice learning sets, which helped local authorities to share experiences between each other and learn from each other. And there was also a lot of informal communication that took place between local authority leads, in particular, who would often be in direct contact to share experiences and learning and check out ideas.

Key messages



So I'm now just going to wrap this up by taking through our key messages coming from this research. So the first one of those is that the successful delivery of Lifelong Links requires staffing. It's clear that the support that was delivered in the trial was by committed coordinators who were really committed to their work and to providing a great service for children and young people. These staff were also split between providing both the lifelong link service and the standard local authority, family group decision making service. And that split role can actually support the impact of Lifelong Links in terms of impacting on social work, practice and culture outside of the direct delivery. But it's also important that attention is paid, that those coordinators aren't split or spread too thin. Another key message is around the importance of maintaining Lifelong Links as an independent service. Having coordinators who are not directly linked to children, families, social work or area teams allowed them to avoid being linked with any prior experiences that families or children and young people or carers might have of social work, and sometimes those experiences can be negative, and this independence supported the involvement of family members and carers who might otherwise being wary of speaking openly with a social worker. Another key message is about the importance of involving carers. Carers have a really critical role, obviously, in supporting the children and young people they care for to benefit from Lifelong Links. Working with and supporting carers to engage with Lifelong Links generates the best outcomes for children and young people. Carers are able to support Lifelong Links in the initial and planning stages, as well as through the young person's involvement and beyond. Also informing and talking, communicating with carers early in the Lifelong Links process helps it to reduce worries or anxieties that they might have, and help create a really positive, supportive environment in which Lifelong Links could be conducted and in which children and young people could benefit from that service.

Key messages



The last three messages really just shone through throughout the information that we were given in the evaluation and everything that we saw, and the first of those is the importance of child-centred practice, and that is central, as we heard from Cathy and Sandy and from what Nadine has been telling us as well, central to Lifelong Links. And the concern of Lifelong Links coordinators about how every aspect of the work they're carrying out impacts on the child or young person, is what ensures that Lifelong Links provide the greatest value possible. That value is rooted in being tailored to what children and young people want and need, what works for one child or young person like not for another. And coordinators continually focused on the wishes and best interests of the children and young people they were working with. That meant working with them at their pace, being clear and honest with them, and taking the time it needed to work with them and to provide that service while protecting them from as many or any potentially negative experiences. What we also heard there from Nadine, Lifelong Links can change social work practice and culture beyond just the Lifelong Links coordinators. So, we heard about how Lifelong Links can influence other practitioners and change their attitudes, both towards Lifelong Links, but also more generally, to their approaches to relationships and connections for all children and young people in their care. So, the benefits really spread out throughout the social work force, rather than just being constrained within this particular team. And finally, most importantly, and as we've heard continually over the last half hour, Lifelong Links can empower children and young people to support their agency and their sense of identity, and it's hard to overstate how important that is. Through Lifelong Links, children and young people develop an increased knowledge and understanding of their own identities and histories, as well as an understanding of why they were being cared for away from their families, essentially Lifelong Links help children and young people to experience a strengthened sense of their own identity and agency, and it continues to

inform how they see themselves as they navigate into the future. And that is just perhaps the most important thing we can do for any child or young person. So, I'd like to thank you very much for listening. I'd also like to thank all the people who spoke to us in the course of this evaluation, the professionals, but particularly the children and young people, the family members and the carers, the local authorities, and, of course, FRG. And also to Lisa Holmes and her colleagues at the Rees Centre in Oxford, who also supported us and our colleagues throughout CELCIS, who provide so much help throughout this evaluation. Thank you very much, and I'll pass you back to Heather.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thank you very much, Robert and Nadine for such a helpful and really insightful presentation about the findings and the learning. I'd now like to invite Paul Reddiex and Lucy Hutchinson from Family Rights Group to come in. I think we lose. We may have lost Lucy temporarily. In which case could I ask if Pam would come in too.

Paul Reddiex

I think Heather, I'll, yeah, I think, I think I'll start. I need to apologize for my backdrop right away. I don't have the corporate logo, but at least I don't have my Motherwell 1991 Cup winning team. I've actually moved that; I thought it was maybe a bit more professional. I've been asked, I think, to give a formal response to Robert and Nadine's feedback on the evaluation. The obvious starting point is a massive thanks to them and everyone at CELCIS for the thoroughness and dedication and hard work they've put in over five years. We're incredibly grateful for it, and I think the insights of the evaluation are going to be amazingly helpful going forward. I've been incredibly privileged at the end of my social work career, to have now had a long piece of involvement in Lifelong Links, starting as an individual with some of the early discussions and development, the way back as long as goes nine years ago, around Lifelong Links with the Family Rights Group and academics and young people and carers, and then have the opportunity in two local authorities to commission Lifelong Links and oversee its development. It's probably been the privilege of my professional career. In my dotage, I've now had the opportunity to just to help and support local authorities in Scotland to implement Lifelong Links. Again, I think Pam would want me to give a big thanks to previous FGC workers in Scotland, Stuart and Vicky and all those young people and children who have participated in Lifelong Links, those coordinators, social workers, carers, those wonderful people. At the start of every training course on Lifelong Links, when we're training coordinators, one of the things we say right from the outset is we absolutely recognize at FRG that there are 1000s upon 1000s of dedicated people out there, foster carers, adopters, children of adopted and foster carers,

Social Workers, family support workers, who do an incredible job for children in the care system. But what we do know, we absolutely know from research experience and comments from children in care and aftercare, that too many young people in the care system lose relationships, have fractured relationships, and it's particularly impactful when they leave care, often bereft of those support systems. So that's why we would recognize that Lifelong Links is really important. I haven't checked this out with Cathy, but I'm going to say it anyway. I suspect an aspiration might be within a generation for us not to need a lifelong link service. The practice is so embedded and exemplary that's not required, but we believe it is for the moment, until we get there. I don't think Pam and Cathy and I would make any grandiose pronouncements or exaggerate - Lifelong Links isn't rocket science. It isn't uniquely innovative with lots of new ideas, but what it is, is a framework, a process, that allows very skilled, very caring, very dedicated people to work with children and young people in care and begin to build those networks of connections and also help with issues around the life stories and identity. I think, as Robert and Nadine have highlighted, I think the unique role of those independent, skilled caring coordinators, is absolutely clear within Lifelong Links. In terms of a response to the evaluation, I think the obvious thing to say is that the generalised support that Robert and Nadine have highlighted in their evaluation, the support across Scotland from children and young people, carers, social workers, family support workers, towards Lifelong Links is really gratifying. I mean, I think, on an obvious level, time is always important with Lifelong Links, but it's really hard to make a compelling argument that it's not something that should be there as a right really, for Children and Young People. Albeit the timing needs to be right within that. I think, an obvious initial point to make, as we were really gratified that the evaluation was able to nail, in a sense that there is strong evidence that we were successful. Local authorities were successful in building up the number of connections that, in the sense, is the bread and butter of Lifelong Links. It's about building up those networks. So that was very clear in the evaluation, and that's incredibly important. I think there's lots and lots of evidence within the evaluation about the incredible impact of Lifelong Links in filling often information gaps for children and young people, helping them with their stories, with their life narratives, and I suppose, building up a sense of identity and self. That's a really incredibly important element of Lifelong Links, and that's there in the evaluation. I think we've heard about the crucial role of independent coordinators, of people given the time and space to dedicate to issues around family relationships and identity for young people. Young people often have told us that it's really important. It's been brilliant to work with people who are not interested in other stuff. They're not interested in what happens at school, necessarily or potentially issues around offending. It's about family and it's about relationships, and that's incredibly important. I think there are statements in the report that really seem really profoundly important about the impact of Lifelong Links and encouraging modelling influencing different thinking and practices within wider local authorities. I think there's a quote in the evaluation that says the underlying

principles of Lifelong Links may be changing existing narratives and social work practice. So that modelling seems incredibly important, impactful. I think in the new evaluation, when I when I read that, there are slightly different emphases in the Scottish evaluation to the English evaluation. I think the sections on the carer observations in Scotland on Lifelong Links are really strong and really powerful around both the process and the positive impacts on the children and young people, and that's incredibly important for us. I think we would make the statement that carers need to be co-partners in this work. They're just crucially involved in it all. And actually, you know, eight, nine years ago, when we started on this Lifelong Links journey, we did actually recognize that Lifelong Links could have an impact on the stability of placements, that we might face some very understandable concerns from carers. I think the experience has been over eight or nine years. We've managed to address that. We've managed to get carers on board, and they've become incredibly supportive allies of Lifelong Links going forward, I think also, the evidence around the engagement of young people who have Lifelong Links with through care and aftercare is really important and really significant. I think what we've seen over the last eight or nine years is as Lifelong Links has developed, there is a fairly big interest in appetite in terms of Lifelong Links with older care leavers, while recognizing that essentially, Lifelong Links is probably better done as early as possible as a preventative measure. But across the country, there is an interest in appetite in working with care leavers. The current position in Scotland, I think, could be summarised in terms of our two larger authorities in Scotland, Glasgow and Edinburgh, have very much mainstreamed Lifelong Links very much part of business as usual now, and that's fantastic, while they continue to inevitably innovate around that. A couple of smaller local authorities in terms of friends at Midlothian and Falkirk, maintaining small offers and terribly challenging financial circumstances, but it's great that they're able to maintain that. And then we have Perth and Kinross in North Lanarkshire, who are growing and very innovatory, albeit they've landed in quite different positions really, with Lifelong Links. In Perth and Kinross, the aspiration is very much as a universal offer to all children in care in Perth and Kinross, where North Lanarkshire saw a very particular need with their older care experienced care leavers, to concentrate their services. And actually, constantly innovating. I think, as we saw from Sandy's film, the real wonder of Lifelong Links is the stories, and we genuinely get hundreds of those every year. Every week there's a new story. I mean, examples would be Perth and Kinross have been able, with a young man in residential care, to reunite with him, with his very, very elderly glam, rather living in the Western Isles, who he hasn't seen for more than a decade, where that that granny was really, essentially advised that she really needed to let go, let her grandkids go off with the dad, and form new lives. But that granny had said, there has not been a day that she hasn't thought about her grandkids and often shed a tear for their loss. And the profound impact of that reunification - you just can't put a value on it. Or the young woman down in North Lanarkshire, who was reunited with her first foster carers from a decade ago - an incredibly moving and emotional reunion and re-

meeting, but those foster carers who are fairly elderly now, for a period were going down to this young woman's new college where she was, at lunchtime to be with her, to support her, because she was struggling to reintegrate. An incredible piece of relationship, work and support. I think it need to, we would need to be honest at the at this point, at this juncture, and saying that we've probably hit a little bit of an impasse. We've stalled a bit in terms of developing Lifelong Links in Scotland. We have lots of local authorities who are interested, but the difficulties are around money and finance. You're going to hear in the wee minute from Pam, about the I suppose I think spectacular wouldn't be too strong a word, the spectacular growth of Lifelong Links in it in England. But that's really only been possible with central government start-up funding and developmental funding. So we have a big challenge at the moment, which we are thinking about, we're working on, we're talking to colleagues about, but we have reached a bit of an impasse. So hopefully that'll just give you a little bit of flavour. But the true worth of Lifelong Links is about the children and young people, their experiences and their stories. It's been an unbelievable privilege of a career to hear of those. I'll pass it on to Pam now.

Pam Ledward

Thanks, Paul. So, I'm just going to talk a little bit about what's going on in England and nationally across the UK. So not just England, but as Paul said, one of the significant benefits in England has been investment by central government and that has really helped sort of cash poor local authorities build and invest in Lifelong Links in their authorities. So, we have now worked with nearly 3300 young people who have been offered Lifelong Links. And at the moment, 42 local authorities across the UK, so England, Scotland and Wales are offering a Lifelong Link service. And as Paul said, it's the stories that capture attention. Sandy really wanted to be involved in in Lifelong Links promotion at national level and obviously did the film and spoke on Radio4, and really felt Lifelong Links should be an offer to all children in care and care leavers and Cathy reminded me of one of the stories quite early on in the trial, was of a young person who found, I think it was a great uncle who owned a sweetie factory, and that was just fantastic. There are many stories across local authorities in the UK as Paul mentioned, the grandparent, but that's not unusual. Lots of grandparents and coordinators getting involved with a child, reconnecting with a grandparent, and the grandparent showing the coordinator presents that they had in their wardrobe for the child, and just not knowing how to connect back with their grandchild. Brothers and sisters found and children not knowing where their brothers and sisters are. so many, many stories and as and again, as Paul said, it shines a light on some pretty poor social work decisions being made across the country, so not Scotland, but across the country, where decisions are made to stop a relationship or to not sustain a relationship for a child in the care system,

not for any safeguarding reason. So just because it's a sort of a procedural decision around what permanence means, or what long term care means.

Reduced homelessness
Research shows that Lifelong Links, which helps build family support networks for care leavers, reduces the risk of homelessness amongst care leavers by 10%.

Cost avoidance
Hertfordshire County Council found that Lifelong Links supported their local authority in achieving an estimated cost avoidance of over £800,000

Discover Circles

- **Adoption**
- **Residential**
- **Care experienced young people in prison**
- **Young people's participation**

Family Rights Group 50 Years **Continuing developments of Lifelong Links** **Lifelong Links**

So, just to let you know about current developments, there was a further evaluation. So on top of the evaluation that Professor Lisa Holmes did, there was an evaluation by King's College, which showed that, very briefly, just showed that life and links helped to reduce the risk of homelessness amongst care leavers by 10% and we've got details of that research on our website if you want more information on that, Cathy spoke about Circles, and that's an online app which is available and is part of the offer of Lifelong Links, so the young person is offered circles, and it basically facilitates a conversation between the coordinator as part of Lifelong Links, and then it's an ongoing conversation with the social worker. So you're keeping in touch with who matters to the child from their perspective, and as Cathy said, who they would turn to. So Lifelong Links isn't just about family. It is about reconnecting with as Nadine and Robert said, it's about reconnecting with anyone who is important to them, and that will vary on each individual and it certainly made me reflect on my practice as a social worker, thinking about assumptions that I made about who was important to that child. And we've, again, we've had examples across the country where a social worker has said, actually, that I know this what I've been working with this child for so long. I know this child, and then the coordinator comes along, and because, as previous speakers have said, it's that dedicated person who's independent, who's doing the searching, who's really talking to the child, and basically, generally, you're finding many people that probably the social worker isn't aware of. Hertfordshire has been involved since the beginning of the trial, and as the slide says, they did a deep dive. So, the managers of the Family Group Conference Service there, who've been offering a Lifelong Links service since 2017, they just looked at costs avoided over a 12 month period, and it was

over 800,000 pounds. And that enabled them to then make the case to their senior leaders to continue to invest in the Lifelong Links service and really quickly, just to let you know about the current work that we're doing. So we are working with children in children's homes. We've got funding from Reaching Communities to do that. So, we were always interested in those young people who are less likely to be offered Lifelong Links. And so, this is a three-year project working with local authorities to really to offer Lifelong Links to children in children's homes who were within the authority and those who are outside of the authority. And we're going to be developing resources about that to help Lifelong Links coordinators with their practice. We are fortunate to be that we've had funding from adoption England, and to really think carefully about whether or not Lifelong Links could be adapted to be a framework to support adopted young people to reconnect with birth family when their adoptive parents are supportive of that. And I think both with children and care and with adopted young people, we know that social media means that sometimes young people are doing that on their own, without support and in secret, and we obviously know the risks of that, and that relationships could inadvertently be harmed by that, so this is a supportive way of enabling a child to do that, and with adopted children, it's when the adoptive parents are supportive. Paul was involved in a project we had funding from the innovation unit to offer Lifelong Links to care experienced young people in prison. And I know that that's happening in Scotland as well, and that authorities have done that as well, but we've developed bespoke guidance around that and a huge amount of learning. And as I said about Sandy, that we are as a charity, we've got funding to develop our young people's participation work. So, we're keen for any young person who had with that to get in contact with us. And there's a project we've also had funding focusing on young care leavers in London with the with the aim, which is part of a campaign that we've got, which is build not break, and it's to basically offer Lifelong Links to all care leavers as a right, basically, to all care leavers.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Pam, thank you so much, and thank you to both you and Paul and for all of that information. And what's great is that you've answered quite a few of the questions that have been in the Q&A, particularly around things about how many local authorities in Scotland are involved. You know, what will it take to expand that and questions around other groups of children and young people that you're working with in England? So, thank you very much for that, and thank you too to everyone who's been listening for the questions. We will try and get through as many as possible in the time available. The first one, and the one that has had the most popular upvotes, is someone has asked about how Lifelong Links coordinators in liaison with social workers, helps to negotiate and manage risk. So, if a young person identified a positive reconnection they wanted to make, the local authority had deemed this person to be of high risk or perhaps, and the

question person is saying, this may or may not have come up. So I'm going to go to Robert and Nadine first, and then to our Family Rights Group colleagues.

Dr Robert Porter

So, risk was certainly something which was raised by both coordinators and social workers. And really, I think I would say that in totality, the way it was addressed was through communication and through working alongside the social worker or whoever maybe had the concern to understand what that concern was, to really explain what the Lifelong Links process was. Obviously, it's not about increasing risk for children and young people but making those connections where they are suitable and safe and desired by the child or young person. And so there was a lot of work that went on between from coordinators to support social workers in their understanding of that approach and the impacts that that could have for the child or young person, as well as, obviously, assessments of any risk that might actually be there to ensure that there was no additional risk placed to the child or young person. I don't know if Nadine wants to add anything else more in depth about the qualitative data.

Dr Nadine Fowler

Thank you, Robert. I think where there were risks that did need to be managed and those, those were real and actual risks. The key was the communication and also some flexibility. So, if a young person wanted to regain contact with a risky family member, for instance, it's what that contact would look like in the end, it may not mean meeting them, it may mean being in touch through letters or through telephone calls. It could mean getting more information about their background through the family trees, for instance. Very rarely was there ever a situation, I think, where our risk was so high that there was no scope for any reconnection between a child or young person and a person they wanted to get in touch with. It's just what that reconnection looked like. And I think the Lifelong Links coordinators, as Robert said, were very skilful at working with social workers to understand risk, but also to help manage what could be done for a child or young person, so that the answer wasn't just a complete No. Obviously when whatever was negotiated might have been disappointing for a child or young person versus their expectations, that was also about communicating clearly, transparently and managing expectations with children young people so that they could understand why someone might be deemed risky or a little bit unsafe for them, but in a way that was very helpful for them to move forward, rather than to just harbour any resentment, confusion or upset. And so, I think that was the key for any contacts that could be a little bit challenging.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks. Robert and Nadine,

Paul Reddiex

There's a lovely phrase in the evaluation. It was, it's not an unfettered pursuit of contact. And I thought that was really nicely put. I think the reality is that I remember doing a consultation with lots of young people who had been in care in North Tyneside, and most of them said that they had unilaterally without adult support when they were care, tried to find people in their families. So I think that's the reality we I think we all have to understand in this technological age. And I think the massive benefit of Lifelong Links, is it often has supportive mitigation by good adults of those natural desires of young people, to know, to make contact. And so it's not a zero sum game, but it's a protective way of doing it. And I think our mantra has always been we absolutely do no harm, that's not what this is about, but it's about that support for young people to make safe connections and talk and think as we do as practitioners about risk.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks, Paul. Pam, did you want to come in?

Pam Ledward

Yeah, I just wanted to add what the kind of tiny point, which is it also encourages, I think Lifelong Links encourages a kind of current risk assessment. And again, across the country, they've been revisiting decisions that were made around supervised contact and really thinking, is the risk still there for that child, and then having those conversations.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks. Going to move on to another question that's had a lot of interest, which is, first, to Family Rights Group colleagues, is there scope for Lifelong Links to include therapeutic work with siblings who are separated due to their shared experience of trauma, making it unsafe for them to be cared for together due to re-traumatisation?

Yes.

Pam Ledward

So in the planning stage, as Cathy showed that kind of really clear model, in the planning stage, any sort of therapeutic needs for any child would be addressed at that point, it certainly there's absolutely no reason why you wouldn't include therapeutic work.

Paul Reddiex

I think we've often said Heather that that Lifelong Links isn't therapy in itself with a capital T, but by the nature of doing it, it can be very therapeutic with a small t for children and young people. If you do your work, you know, skilfully in a caring way, it can have an incredibly positive impact in terms of the emotional well being of children and young people. But we wouldn't argue for a moment that in itself, it's therapy, but the scope for separate therapeutic input within we'd always look at the outset in our planning meetings.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks, Paul. Question first to Nadine and Robert. And this is about, I think, one of the differences that we found between the Scottish and the English evaluation, which was the difference in placement stability between the trial in England and the trial in in Scotland and the person was asking any thoughts about why this might be and I'll come to Robert and Nadine first, and then to our Family Rights Groups, colleagues.

Dr Robert Porter

Thanks Heather. We don't really have any answers to this. I think it's clear to say first, as to why that difference came out, I would imagine that one of the significant factors is, honestly, scale. So one of the big differences between the English and the Scottish evaluations was the scale. So the English evaluation was conducted in 12 English local authorities compared to three in Scotland. And each of those local authorities, also, on average, is bigger than any of the authorities in Scotland. That's just the nature of the world. And what that means, in reality, for evaluative purposes, is that their N, their number of children and young people that are involved in their evaluation and were able to be assessed, if you like, is much, much, much larger than ours, an order of magnitude larger than ours, and that means that you're much more likely to be able to identify significant differences. So ours essentially came out saying there was no long term impact whatsoever, whereas the English evaluation identified that there was a there was a benefit in the long term, and that difference may be down just simply to the power of the analysis that they were able to conduct in England, as opposed to Scotland. The conduct of Lifelong Links was the same

across the two countries. So I struggle to see a reasoning there. And so that's where it really that's where my intuition says that's where the difference lies.

Dr Nadine Fowler

I think it's just also worth noting that the data sets that we were using were are the Scottish data set is different to the English data set, and we capture information in a slightly different way. So not only, as Robert just said, were we working with much smaller numbers of children and young people, the data we were working with was different, and it meant whilst we tried to replicate the exact process they had employed in England. This was a challenge, and we had to make adaptations along the way. One of these adaptations, for instance, is that while in England, they were able to match comparator group children and young people and participating group children and young people on their placement type at the start of Lifelong Links. We couldn't do that in Scotland. So, although we tried to compare like for like as much as possible, the placement data in Scotland did mean that some participating group, children and young people, were in different places, for instance, foster or residential care, than the comparator group, children and young people. So that may have had an impact on the data in Scotland, as well as their legal reasons for being accommodated. So, while in England, the criteria meant that Lifelong Links was only offered to children and young people who already had a legal permanence order in place. In Scotland, it was assessed in a more nuanced way, where children and young people had no plan to return home. But as we know, in Scotland, the actual number of children and people who have a legal permanence order can be quite low, so the children and young people in our data set didn't have a plan to return home, but they might not have actually been in their permanent placement when they took part in Lifelong Links, and that wasn't really something we could have foreseen causing the same challenges as we've had until we actually got to the end of the evaluation and had all of the data in front of us. So that is just two lessons about the differences in the data that therefore could have meant we've come out with a different placement stability story than what they had in the English evaluation.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks, Robert and Nadine, that's really helpful. Anything else from our Family Rights Group, colleagues around that?

Cathy Ashley

I think that was a really extensive explanation. I think the differences between children or young people who participate in Lifelong Links in Scotland compared

to the comparator group about how in Scotland, there was a higher number, I think, in children's homes from residential care, and so that, unsurprisingly, will have also affected the number of different moves those children will have had.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks, Cathy, another question which I'm going to address, firstly to our Family Rights Group colleagues, we'd like Lifelong Links to be available to every child in care. Lasting, loving relationships are so important for everything. Whilst we wait for funding to be available to mainstream Lifelong Links, can we adopt the practices and principles to develop supportive relationships for children now in our day-to-day practice?

Pam Ledward

So, I think there's a difference between the kind of practice and principle. So, I think absolutely the principles of respecting and supporting relationships for children in care from the first point of contact, actually from a social worker's first point of contact with any child and family. So that absolutely makes the difference. And that's what's happened again. So, the way that we implement Lifelong Links in local authorities is about that system change that we've talked about, so that children don't lose those relationships in the first place. So absolutely, but in terms of Lifelong Links and the tools that are available, Lifelong Links is a very well thought through approach informed by children saying, you know, so the children are telling us they want the independent coordinator, the time spent with them, focusing on who matters to them and finding people that matter to them. So, I think Lifelong Links needs investment. It's not expensive, but it still needs investment and a dedicated person working with that child, carefully, however long it takes for the child, and building that support network and the Lifelong Links plan. I hope that's clear.

Cathy Ashley

Can I just add to that? Because one of the things about the independence was also from the perspective of family members. There may be a lot of angst, a lot of anger, a lot of upset as to why the child was in care. There may be all sorts of information that's unknown amongst family members, this might come as a real shock when they're contacted by their coordinator, and the independence of the coordinator means that they can approach and work with relatives who were not involved in decisions about whether that child or young person went into care, or decisions made whilst that child was in care, for example, in relation to contact. And that really matters, because it allows that ability to enable the family to be more open to how to do this in a way that's right for them and right for the

child. So, I just wanted to throw that out as well and it is really interesting with Lifelong Links, because we all have people in our lives who matter to us, but you may not know who matters to me, and I may not know who matters to you, and often, social workers do not know who matters to children. We did not anticipate when we designed Lifelong Links, for example, the number of children who have experienced a level of bereavement. Sometimes literally, the coordinators' role has ended up being finding where the gravestone of their parent is or their sibling. Lots of children not knowing that they even had brothers and sisters, or a connection with paternal relatives. And all that work needs to be done really thoughtfully and carefully, and it does involve some elements of mediation, and it does mean stopping when the child says stop and hearing that. So absolutely we can change the way, for example, foster carers are recruited as to understanding the importance of the importance of children's relationships, and how the foster carer can support that child throughout their time in care. But Lifelong Links, the work itself is skilled. It's thoughtful. It does use specific tools and approaches, and it's been adapted for children as young as two. It involves pets sometimes in relation to that child's networks. And as has been said, we've also adapted guidance around unaccompanied asylum, seeking children, how to work with brothers and sisters, going through Lifelong Links. It's so it does need time and investment. But as Paul often says, really, it's as cheap as chips compared to the value of those relationships long term.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thank you, Cathy. And sadly, we are out of time, so we can't answer any more of your questions. I'd want to say a huge thank you to Cathy, Paul, Pam and obviously, to Robert and Nadine too, for a really fascinating and very thought-provoking seminar. But also, for, I think, your clarity about what's needed to further develop Lifelong Links work in Scotland.

Cathy Ashley

Heather, can I just indulge 15 seconds? If you're interested in developing Lifelong Links in Scotland, or if you're part of the promise of the government and wants to discuss this further, please do contact us, and a huge thanks to colleagues in CELCIS for working so collaboratively.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks, absolutely Cathy. Robert and Nadine, I just wanted to give you a chance to highlight where people can find the Lifelong Links evaluation report.

Dr Robert Porter

The report is available on the CELCIS website, and if you click into the knowledge bank area, that probably the quickest way to find it. In the top right of the CELCIS homepage. And there you will find much more detail and information and the nuance behind a lot of the things that we have been talking about. And if you have any questions about the evaluation etc, then we are very happy to hear from anyone with questions.

Dr Nadine Fowler

And can I just extend a final thanks to everyone who took part in the evaluation, and I actually can see some of the people in the meeting today, it is very lovely to see you here. And we really appreciate all the time and effort you put into our evaluation. This would not be possible without you guys, so thank you.

Dr Heather Ottaway

Thanks everyone and have a good rest of the day.

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