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# Evaluation of the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland

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# Our Presentation:

- Introduction to the evaluation
- How Lifelong Links was delivered
- Findings:
  - Children and young people's experiences
  - Carers and families' experiences
  - Practitioners' perspectives
- Learning from trial implementation
- Key messages



September 2024

## Evaluation of the Lifelong Links trial in Scotland

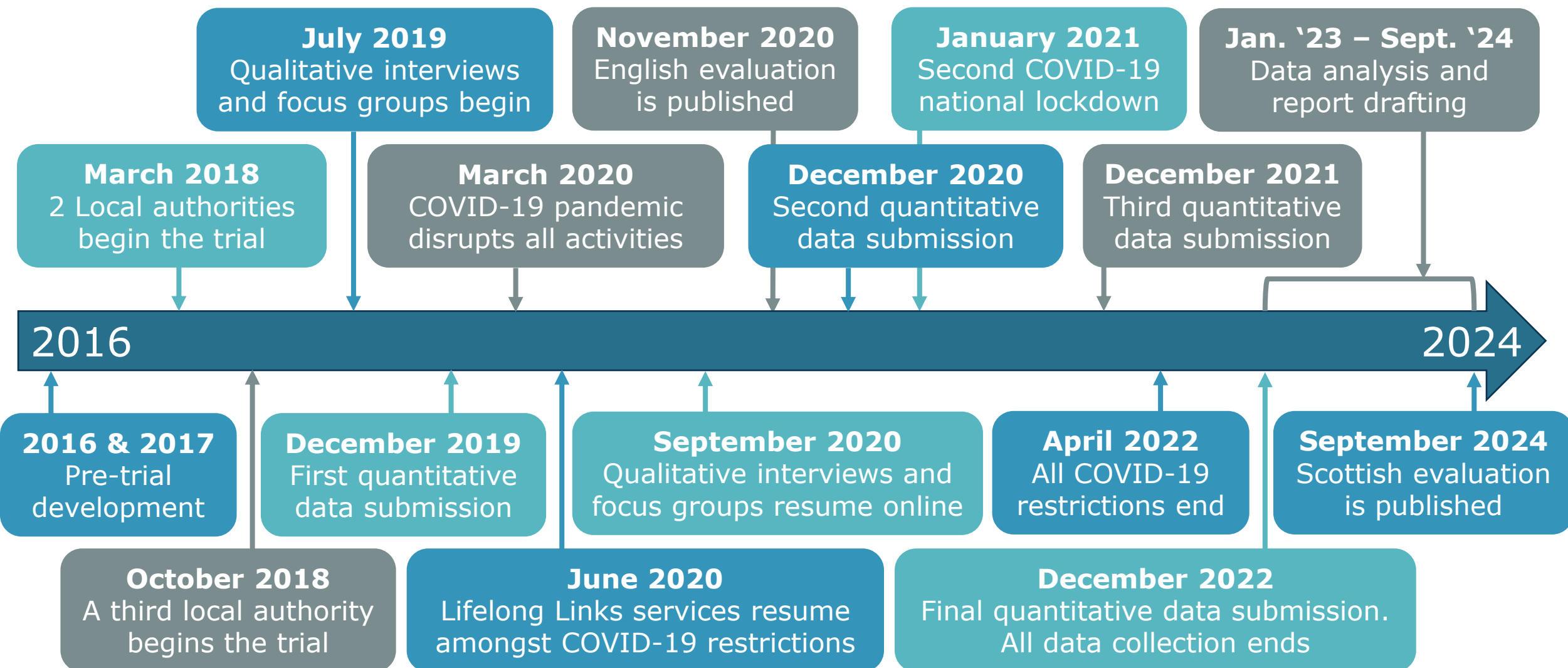
Authors: Dr Robert Porter and Dr Nadine Fowler  
CELCCIS



# 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.

# Timeline of the evaluation



# 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.

# 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.

# 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%)

# 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.



# Children and young people's experiences

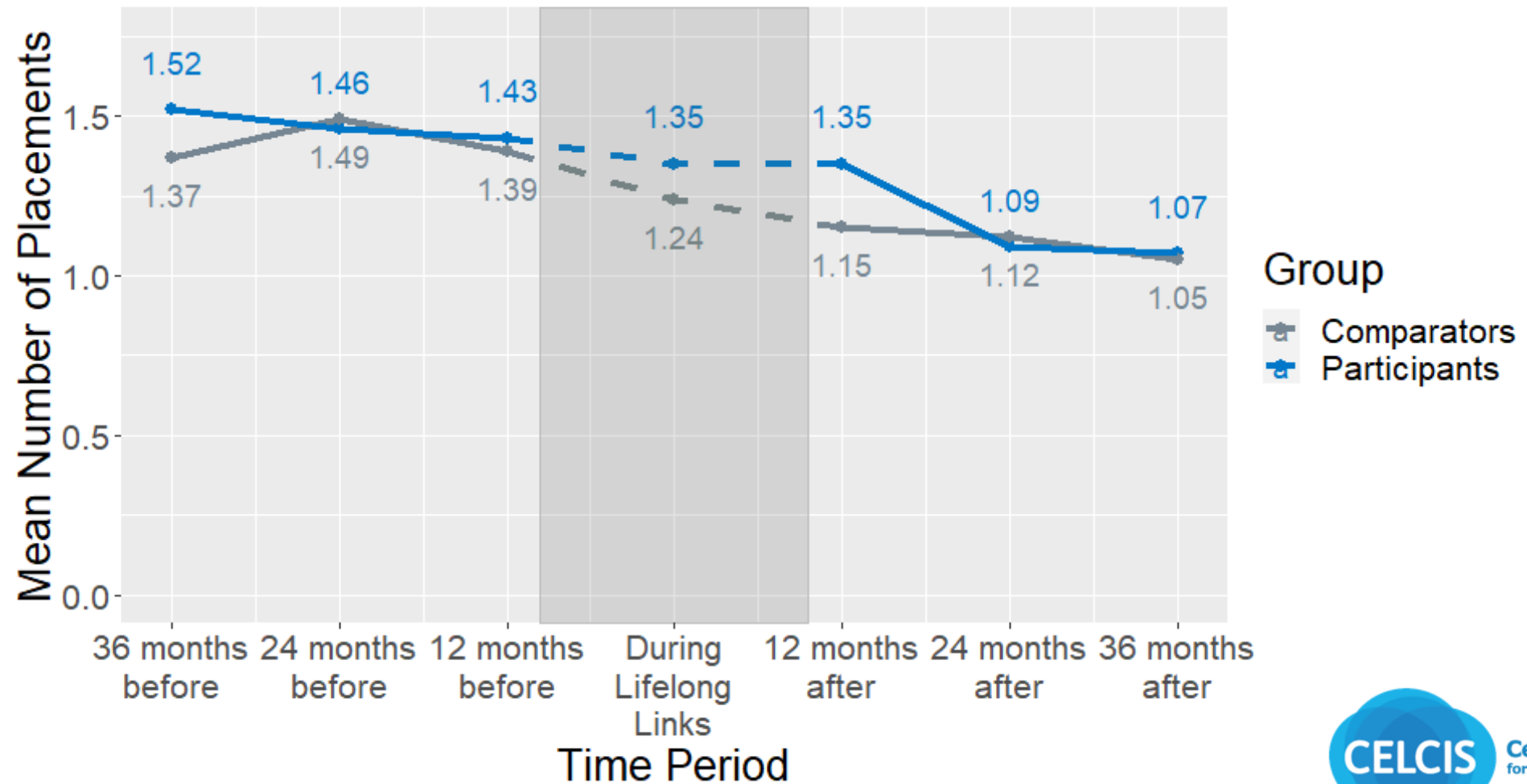
- Taking part in Lifelong Links could be exciting for children and young people.
- The outputs from Lifelong Links, such as family trees and mobility maps, were often cherished by the children and young people.
- Having a consistent Lifelong Links coordinator helped children and young people through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

# 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)

# Children and young people's experiences

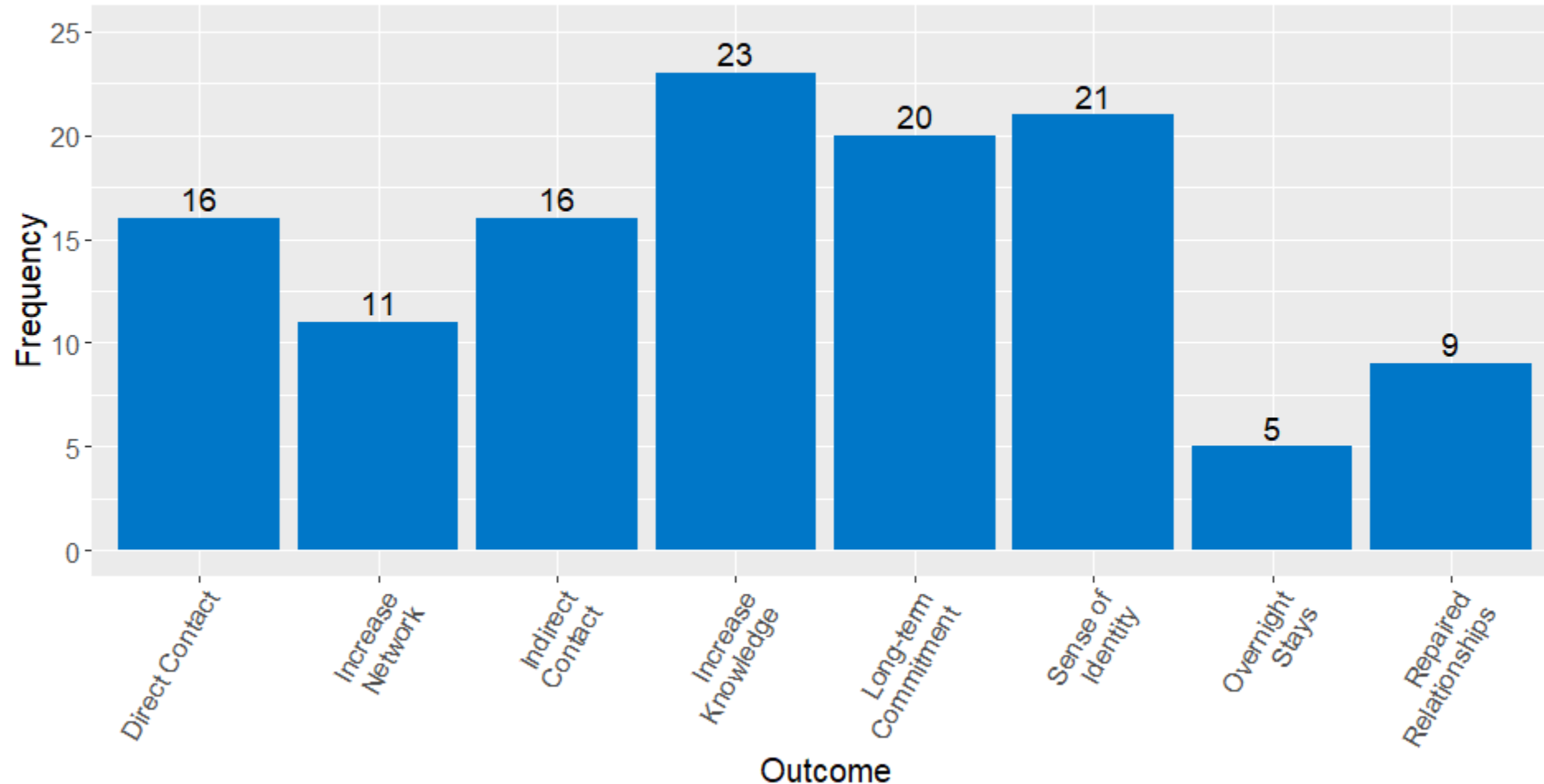
Mean Number of Placements Over Time  
Participants vs Comparators



# Children and young people's experiences

## Outcomes Achieved by Participating in Lifelong Links

Frequency of Practice Summaries where each Outcome was Mentioned,  
All Practice Summaries (N=78)

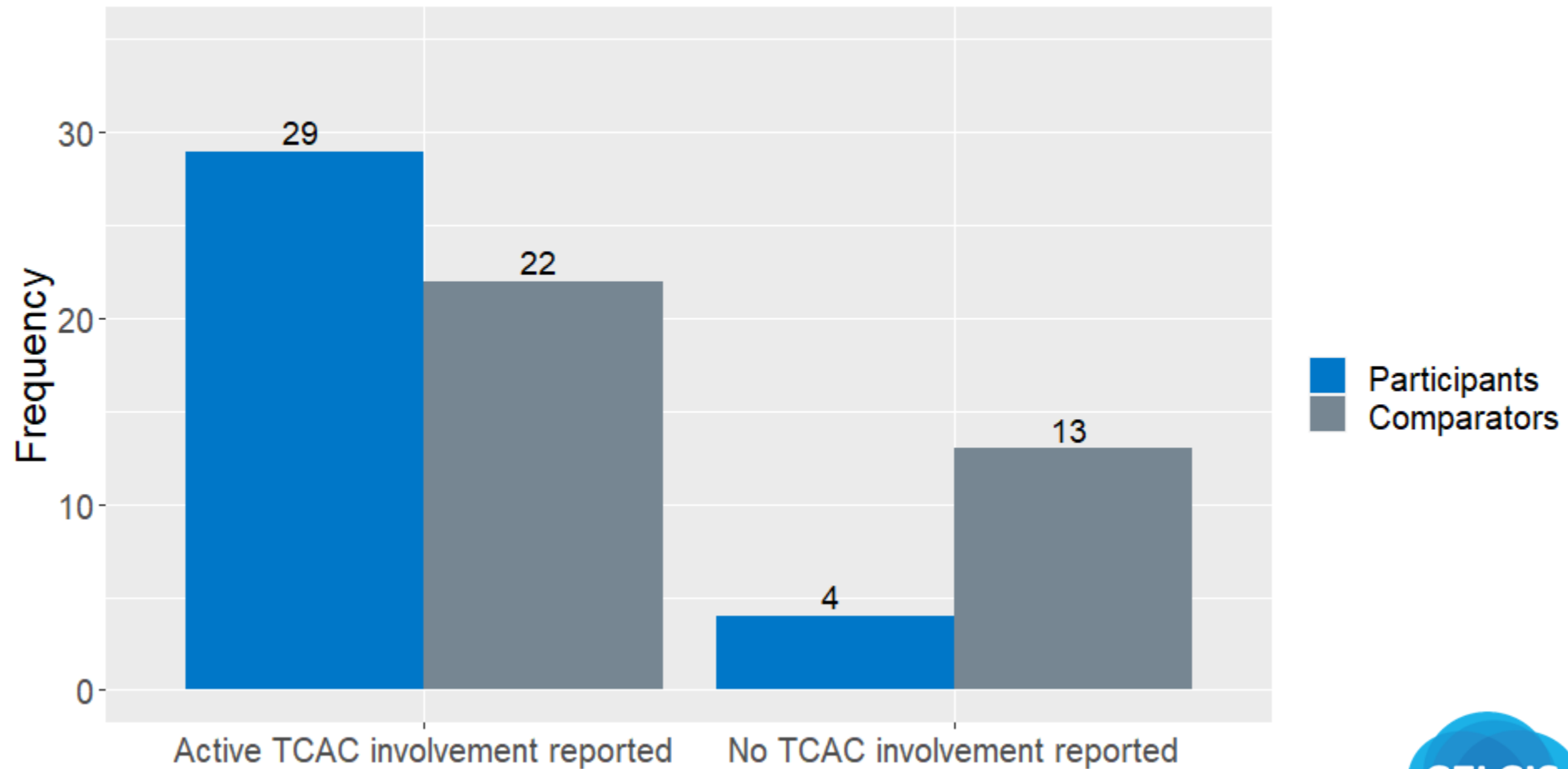


# Children and young people's experiences

- 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.

# Children and young people's experiences

Reported Involvement of Young People who 'Ceased to be Looked After' Aged 16+ in Throughcare and Aftercare Services



# 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)

# 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.



# 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)

# 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.

# 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)

# 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.

# 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.

# 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)

# 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.

# Learning from trial implementation

- Co-operation and coordination. The trial required cooperation between local authorities, third sector organisations, FRG and CELCIS. Access to systems and data is not always shared or simple to manage
- Flexibility is key. It is not possible to plan for every challenge, but new services should be willing to adapt to best help the people they are designed to support (for Lifelong Links, this included making use of online resources during COVID-19).
- Fidelity in implementation takes effort: training, coaching, and peer support



# Key messages

## Key message

The successful delivery of Lifelong Links requires that Lifelong Links staff members have significant time dedicated to this work

## Key message

Lifelong Links should be maintained as an independent service, separate to the children and families' social worker

## Key message

Including, working with, and supporting carers to engage with Lifelong Links can generate the best outcomes for children and young people

# Key messages

## Key message

Child-centred practice is central to Lifelong Links' success; Lifelong Links works best when it is tailored to what children and young people wanted and needed

## Key message

Lifelong Links can change social work practice and culture; social workers and senior staff highlighted that Lifelong Links reflects 'core' social work values

## Key message

Lifelong Links helps children and young people strengthen their sense of identity and agency, informing how they see themselves and navigate the future



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# Thank you!

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