

Briefing

An update for all those involved in Lifelong Links in Scotland

What is Lifelong Links?

Lifelong Links is an innovative approach to supporting children and young people who are looked after away from their parents and their families. It was developed by the Family Rights Group to address concerns about how networks of children who are looked after can become fragmented, impacting upon their sense of belonging and identity. The Lifelong Links approach aims to improve both experiences and outcomes for children and young people.

The Lifelong Links process works to identify and engage relatives and other supportive adults, including those who have become distant, or are not yet known to the child or young person. Lifelong Links has a set of tools and techniques that professionals can use to search for and find family members (known and unknown) and other adults (such as former foster carers and teachers) who care about the child. This network of people is then brought together in a family group conference (also known as family group decision making) to make a support plan with the child or young person.

By identifying adults who are willing to make a life-long commitment to the child or young person, Lifelong Links aims to increase their sense of permanence, security and wellbeing. It is hoped the resulting continuity and permanence of relationships (be it with relatives or others connected to the child or young person) will provide ongoing support, an explanation of historical events, and reinforce identity, belonging and a sense of self.



The Evaluation

Lifelong Links is currently being trialled in three Scottish local authorities and seven English local authorities. Working collaboratively with colleagues from the Rees Centre (based at the University of Oxford) and the Family Rights Group, CELCIS has developed and conducted the evaluation of the Lifelong Links model in Scotland.

The Scottish evaluation of Lifelong Links is a five-year, mixed method longitudinal evaluation running from 2018 to 2023. The evaluation uses two main types of data:

'Child level data' is information about individual children or young people which is collected throughout the trial period. This tells us about changes in outcomes for those referred to Lifelong Links compared with those who were not referred. Most of this data is extracted from the Scottish Government's Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) and Educational data returns. Additionally, changes in the size and nature of children and young people's support networks are also measured, through a Social Connections Tool developed specifically for Lifelong Links. Practice Summaries which detail the background of each completed case and the work undertaken by Lifelong Links staff also contribute to our understanding of how Lifelong Links works.

'Experience data' is information collected through interviews and focus groups which are conducted with children and young people, Lifelong Links staff members, social workers, foster carers, and residential workers who have experience of Lifelong Links. This qualitative data will help us to understand how children, young people, their carers, and others have experienced Lifelong Links, and why changes have or have not occurred.

Through the collection and analysis of this data, we hope to find out:

1. To what extent did Lifelong Links achieve the intended outcomes?
2. What helped or hindered the achievement of these outcomes?
3. How is Lifelong Links carried out and experienced by those involved?
4. What helped or hindered the use of Lifelong Links in Scottish sites?
5. What enables or limits longer-term sustainability?

What we have learned so far

Over the last two years we have collected a lot of information. This has included information given to us by the different Lifelong Links sites, as well a lot of first-hand data collected through interviews and focus groups with children and young people, Lifelong Links staff members, social workers, foster carers, and residential workers. Through gathering this data and hearing about people's experiences of Lifelong Links, we have begun to learn about how the service is run, how it is impacting people, and how it might be developed in the future.

Although we are only part-way through the evaluation, we are keen to ensure that we provide feedback on what we are beginning to learn about Lifelong Links. We hope that this will help local sites and the Family Rights Group to continue to develop their practice and improve the lives of children and young people in Scotland. Below we have highlighted some initial topics that seem to be emerging from the data we have received or collected. These are by no means conclusive, and are simply indications of topics which have been raised by participants.

In our interviews and focus groups, we have heard that Lifelong Links can provide an avenue for children and young people to build connections, find out about their families and establish support networks for when they move on from care. Children and young people have expressed a range of reactions to the idea of Lifelong Links, including both enthusiasm to take part and to find additional family connections, and concern that the process might be unsettling or upsetting.

Some people mentioned that the independence of Lifelong Links workers can help children and young people, and also their families, engage with the service.

While the trial for Lifelong Links has very specific criteria, some respondents have indicated that they think the service could be expanded to help a wider range of children and young people find additional social support networks.

People told us that children and young people value the opportunity to make sense of their own identity, fill gaps in their story and learn about their families. In particular, children and young people seem to appreciate learning about hobbies and interests they have in common with their families, who they look like and how they fit within their family tree. Where they have been previously separated from their siblings, there were also indications that Lifelong Links could be useful for rebuilding these relationships and providing opportunities to reconnect.

We have learned that different workers can work with children, young people, and their families, differently. However, they are always focused on providing a safe and supportive way for children and young people to find additional social support networks.

Looking ahead

The Lifelong Links evaluation will continue until March 2023, when CELCIS will publish their final project report. This report will be based on the analysis of five years' worth of data collection. We have already begun to look at the child level data that has been received so far, and have started to analyse the data which was collected during the first round of interviews and focus groups with children and young people, Lifelong Links coordinators, social workers, residential workers, and foster carers.

We plan to continue analysing the data collected through the Practice Summaries and Social Connections Tools. These will provide a reflection on the processes and learning which has taken place so far, as well as the objectives and outcomes of the completed cases, helping us to understand the relationships and supports that children and young people feel they have.

Analysing all of this data will help us to begin answering our research questions, but this work will also feed into future data collection processes as appropriate, allowing us to build on any initial findings as the project progresses. Following the second and third data returns, our evaluation team will begin to be able to explore any changes over time and look at more longitudinal aspects of the data.

By the end of the evaluation period we expect to have five years' worth of Lifelong Links referral data, along with the corresponding child level CLAS and Education data for both Lifelong Links referrals and an identified comparator group across all three sites. To complement this quantitative data, we will have qualitative data collected from children and young people throughout the evaluation, and at three points with other people involved in the Lifelong Links trial. We will also have Social Connections Tools and Practice Summaries relating to five years' worth of Lifelong Links cases across the sites. This represents a significant amount of data and we look forward to pulling it all together and sharing our findings with you in 2023!



About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

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