Testing Change Ideas to Improve Permanence Timescales for Looked After Children

Experiences of the Two Week Planning Meeting

Dr Brandi Lee Lough Dennell

Published April 2021

www.celcis.org

building brighter futures

Table of Contents

About this report

The case study presented within this report is the result of qualitative research undertaken in one of the Scottish local authorities involved in the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme. PACE was a national Quality Improvement programme underway from 2014-2020. Through this programme, CELCIS supported 27 of the 32 Scottish local authority partnerships to apply a Quality Improvement framework to their processes and practices in order to reduce timescales in providing a permanence recommendation on where babies, children and young people should live permanently. While the PACE programme included all looked after infants and children, including those in the care of social work while living at home with a parent, the report covers a process implemented for children who were cared for away from the family home (known as 'accommodated').

Using qualitative methods to gather and analyse the views and experiences of the people involved, this research focused on the decisions, activities, and reporting that one local authority partnership undertook when testing a change idea within the PACE programme. Alongside this, the report examines the impact of that test on professionals and processes within the local authority area.

Prior to undertaking this research in one local authority area, there was some evidence from other local authority areas that introducing a formal Looked After Child Review meeting at two weeks ('two week planning meeting') led to earlier permanence recommendations for babies, children, and young people. The research set out to consider:

- How the two week planning meeting was experienced by practitioners, children, and families
- What impact it has had on systems and processes
- How the application of one specific improvement methodology was experienced by the people involved in the PACE programme.

The research also served to highlight some of the complexities of using improvement methods in health and social care settings, particularly regarding the long timescales involved in testing new processes or ways of doing things.

Summary

The report is structured around the data from interviews with seven professionals and a focus group with three professionals involved in the Champions' Group working on the PACE programme in one local authority area, and one parent interview.

Professionals responsible for the care of babies, children and young people away from their parents or carers are legally required to hold Looked After Child Review meetings at seventy-two hours and six weeks after a child initially becomes cared for by a local authority away from their home. They are then required to hold additional review meetings three months after the six week meeting, and then every six months until a permanence recommendation is made. The Scottish Government states that a clear direction for a child's care should be agreed within six months of the child coming into the care of the local authority (Scottish Government 2010, 135). The two week planning meeting after the child came into the care of the local authority away from home (known as 'accommodated') is an additional meeting which at the time of publication is not a statutory requirement. In the local authority area studied, the new two week planning meeting followed the format of a formal review meeting known as a Looked After Child review.

The local authority partnership designed the two week planning meeting with two key purposes:

1. To discuss permanence with parents as soon as appropriate after a child became accommodated
2. To create and agree a care plan with parents, including timescales for the completion of assessments, and the support that would be available to parents

The permanence discussions aimed to make parents aware that the focus of social work involvement was to decide on a child's permanent placement, whether a return home to the care of their parent(s) with no further social work involvement, being cared for by another relative or close family friend in kinship care, living permanently with a foster carer, or becoming adopted.

Alongside this two week planning meeting, the local authority partnership updated the computer system to record the meeting date and outcome, and set dates in advance for each statutory meeting to follow the two week planning meeting. Further, the two week planning meeting meant that the professionals involved began working with parents on their care plans at an earlier stage in the process.

The professionals felt that what made the difference was not solely having a meeting at two weeks, but also having the opportunity to build relationships with parents, discuss the meaning of permanence, and ensure that care plans were formulated, understood by parents, and enacted long before the statutory six week Looked After Child review. Many also reflected on the positive consequences of the process and practice changes, including observing a greater clarity for parents and carers on the expectations on them during the assessment, as well as for professionals in decision-making processes.

In addition to the impact of the meeting itself, data from the local authority area showed an improvement into the time it took between a child becoming cared for away from home and professionals making a recommendation on that child's permanent placement. While it can be difficult when using improvement methodology to extrapolate how an

individual change idea tested affects overall aims, running tests in isolation can serve to highlight impact. Within this local authority area, it was the suite of improvements introduced in order to facilitate the functioning of the new two week planning meeting that integrated it into policy and practice and appears to have increased its impact.

Background

In 2011, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) published research that found that many looked after children were experiencing long periods of waiting and uncertainty before a decision about their permanent home was made (Henderson *et al.*). In response to the issues raised in the report, CELCIS and the Scottish Government jointly established the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme, delivered by the Permanence and Care Team within CELCIS. The PACE programme ran from 2014-2020 and worked with local authority partnerships in 27 of the 32 Scottish local authority areas. The CELCIS team provided support to local authority partnerships with corporate parenting responsibility (including Health and Social Care Partnerships, Community Planning Partnerships, and Corporate Parenting Boards) to apply a Quality Improvement approach to their permanence work. The programme aimed to reduce unnecessary delays for permanence decisions and increase local area capacity for change. In Scotland, permanence planning and decision making includes considerations relating to a child being returned to the care of their parents as well as legal processes that can facilitate a child being cared for by the same kinship or foster carers or by adoptive parents in the long term (Scottish Government 2015).

Quality Improvement

There are a range of improvement methodologies that systematically apply tools, analysis, and decisions to processes and practices in order to improve outcomes. Two examples are Quality Improvement and Active Implementation. The PACE programme used Quality Improvement methodology, using the Model for Improvement as a framework, which is based on the following:

- Understanding the system 'as is' and why an improvement is needed
- Using data to identify a clear goal or aim, and to understand the system
- Agreeing defined measures to recognise when a change has resulted in improvement
- Hypothesising which changes will bring improvements
- Testing change ideas over time and on a small scale, before scaling up
- Recognising when and how to permanently implement a change (Langley *et al.* 2009, 25).

The PACE programme was originally designed to run in local authority areas through three phases: contracting and establishing a baseline (Phase 1), diagnosis and testing (Phase 2), and implementation (Phase 3). During Phase 1, the PACE team at CELCIS worked with the local authorities involved to gain engagement from key agencies who have a role in decisions surrounding children's permanence, authorisation from heads of service, and to support the gathering of a robust baseline data set which included information on each looked after child in the local authority area.

Members of the local authority partnership's PACE Champions' Group then compared the local authority data to the national statistics, often drawn from what is available in the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) publication. To unify national efforts to improve

decision making timelines for looked after children, and bring focus in local areas, CELCIS introduced four national aims across all the local authority areas involved in PACE. The aims covered key parts of the permanence process experienced by most children and young people in care, with several dates aligning with the dates (milestones) captured in the Children Looked After Statistics national data set.

Getting it Right for Looked After Children and Young People reinforced the PACE ask of data sets for all children in care by adding an action for the Scottish Government to work with CELCIS in 2015 and 2016 to support local authorities to track permanence data (Scottish Government, 2015). The strategy stated that from 2016-2017 all local authorities would be expected to track each child's permanence journey, using 'consistent data agreed nationally' on key milestones through CLAS from 2016-2017. The Scottish Government subsequently made reporting voluntary. The CLAS return does not include milestone data, meaning that at the time of publication there remains no national picture for milestones.

To create the four national programme aims, CELCIS drew on understanding of: evidence regarding the impact of long waiting times for decision making and uncertainty on children's wellbeing and development; the legal and policy context guiding assessment, planning and decision making; organisational and service structures and responsibilities; and theory and evidence around quality improvement.

In line with the Model for Improvement, the Champions' Group members in local authority areas were responsible for scrutinising this data to understand what was identified for improvement and setting an overall aim to begin Phase 2. While the national aims referred to specific milestones that provided a focus for the local authority partnerships involved, they also enabled them to create locally informed measures for those aims. For instance, each local authority partnership beginning PACE was prompted to consider creating an aim for the length of time between when a child becomes accommodated and when a permanence recommendation is made for them. What each local authority partnership had to decide was the percentage of children for whom the change was achievable within the chosen timescales. CELCIS consultants noted that the 2016 implementation of four PACE national aims was helpful in supporting local authority partnerships to create meaningful aims. Porter's evaluation, however, cautions that while these national stretch aims provide a clear starting point for local authority partnerships, they 'do not necessarily produce aims which are readily measurable to demonstrate the desired improvement' (2017a, 29).

Quality data is a pre-requisite for the improvement methodology on which PACE is based: it facilitates an understanding of the issues at play within a local area, supports practitioners to set aims, and enables the measurement of progress throughout the improvement process.

In Phase 2, practitioners tested potential solutions to the challenges identified in Phase 1. According to the Model for Improvement, the process of testing change ideas (known as Tests of Change) should be an iterative process which emphasises gathering and evaluating evidence to inform small, incremental changes to devise a lasting improvement. This process is referred to as a 'Plan Do Study Act' (PDSA) cycle. The principles underpinning Tests of Change are testing on a small scale, testing data over time, and include a wide range of conditions through the series of tests (Langley *et al.* 2009: 41-42). Data informing the study phase may range from numerical measures, feedback solicited or received from practitioners or service users (i.e. children and families), and observations.

During Phase 3, the change ideas tested which were shown to be effective were implemented across the local authority areas as improvements and the use of the Model for Improvement was integrated within the local authority partnership's standard activity.

A 2017 evaluation of the PACE programme found that several factors influenced the successful implementation of PACE:

- Using a whole-system approach, by involving the key agencies responsible for progressing permanence plans, improved relationships across the agencies
- Engaging people able to influence strategic direction within each of the agencies involved
- Reviewing data to inform actions undertaken within improvement programme
- Having clarity on the resources, data and time commitments required for PACE
- Undertaking small, manageable changes as knowledge and expertise develop (Porter 2017b, unpublished)

Policy context

In the same year as the PACE programme's founding, the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014* further defined expectations for what are known as Corporate Parents. Corporate Parents are all public bodies that have parenting duties for looked after babies, children and young people, including local authorities, health boards, education, and Scottish Housing Regulator. A key requirement for Corporate Parents under the 2014 Act is to collaborate with other corporate bodies '*where they consider that doing so would safeguard or promote the wellbeing of children or young people to whom this Part applies*' (Part 9, section 58). The PACE programme focused on local multi-agency work aligned with this duty to collaborate for the benefit of looked after children and young people.

In 2015, the Scottish Government published the strategy *Getting it Right for Looked After Children and Young People: Early engagement, early permanence and improving the quality of care*. The strategy defines 'permanence' as '*providing children with a stable, secure, nurturing relationship and home, where possible within a family setting, that continues into adulthood*', and recognises that the child's needs and circumstances will be taken into account when considering the various permanence options (pp 18).

When babies, children, and young people are accommodated, a return home is the first and preferred option for where the child might experience legal permanence. For children who will not have legal permanence in their family home, '*they need an alternative permanent and nurturing home, which should be underpinned by legal security, whether this is a kinship care order, permanence order or an adoption order*' (*Ibid.* 19). These four options (a return home, kinship care order, permanence order, or adoption order) are known as the four routes to permanence. The strategy expectations for local authorities is that they work with partner agencies, in line with legal requirements for corporate parents, to identify clear permanence plans for each child, reduce long waiting times until a decision is made, avoid unnecessary placement moves, use a rights-based approach (known in policy as Getting it Right for Every Child, or GIRFEC) to monitor the quality of their care planning, and undertake improvements when necessary (*Ibid*. 23). Part of the Scottish Government's strategic work around permanence included supporting CELCIS to deliver the PACE programme. PACE-related actions within the strategy

included extending involvement in the PACE programme and applying the learning in new local authority areas.

Research Methodology

Aims

The research set out to consider: how the people involved in the PACE programme in one local authority partnership experienced the process of applying improvement methodology to the permanence process; how a Test of Change was experienced by practitioners, children, and families; and what impact the change idea tested had on the permanence process.

Methods

From July 2018 to February 2019, the researcher employed qualitative methods including:

- Analysis of the paperwork associated with the decision to focus on a specific change idea to test and the carrying out and evaluation of that test
- Observation of Champions' Group meetings where tests were planned and discussed
- Focus groups with the people involved in making decisions related to carrying out a test
- Semi-structured interviews with the professionals involved in a specific test
- An interview with a parent who had experienced the two week planning meeting developed as the change idea was tested

The research also unsuccessfully sought participation from children who had experienced the two week planning meeting.

Of the ten professionals with whom we spoke, four had been part of a two week planning meeting, two were not involved in the two week planning meeting but were part of the six week Looked After Child review, and the remaining four were involved in other stages of the permanence process. Parental interviews were designed to focus on participants' understanding and experience of a two week planning meeting.

Research participants

Category	Interaction	Number of individuals
Children (ages 8-12)	Interview	None
Parents (aged 18+)	Interview	1
Professionals	Interview	7
Professionals	Focus group	3
Category	Roles involved	Number of individuals
All research participants	Parent, social worker, service manager, team leader, independent reviewing officer, Children's Hearing Scotland lead panel member, paediatrician, data lead, solicitor	11

Limitations

A major limitation shaping the findings is the absence of children's views and the view of only one parent. These absences mean that the data was weighted toward professional reflections. The researcher prompted the professional interviewees to consider how they would evidence the impact on children and parents, yet our understanding of children's and parents' experiences of the two week planning meeting and its relationship with the permanence planning process remains limited. As a result, it is not possible to draw conclusions about how parents and children experienced the two week planning meeting. Timing the research near the end of the testing process maximised the potential participant pool. Despite social work support for the proposed interviews with children, no children aged between eight and twelve were interested in taking part in the research.

This research did not involve observing the meetings that constituted the specific change idea tested. While observations of these meetings would have allowed the researcher to build her own frame of reference, her presence at these meetings would not have been appropriate within the scope of this study due to the sensitivity of the interactions and potential for inadvertent coercion as a result of power imbalances. Due to the limited information in the written meeting minutes and the lack of PDSA cycle paperwork, evidence is drawn mainly from Champions' Group members' retrospective accounts of the process. Although this does not enable us to understand the succession of minor discussion points and decisions, relying upon verbal accounts serves to highlight the major decisions and changes that have influenced the process and final understandings of the two week planning meetings.

Ethical considerations and representation

We aimed to interview parents whose children first became accommodated during the testing phase of the change idea, over the previous year. The recent timeframe meant that interviewees might have spoken from a vulnerable position. Within this context, interviews had the potential to be emotionally fraught encounters for parents as well as the researcher. Parents were to be given information about ParentLine's helpline[1] should they wish to speak to someone after the interviews and the protocol was followed for the one parent interview that took place.

The researcher was aware of the potential for meeting observations and interviews with parents, children, and social workers to inadvertently expose her to case details for children and families. Ethical practices meant that she did not take notes of this information and remained conscious of her responsibility to not only reflect on her own biases brought to the research but to be aware of how the 'off-record' information she might have been exposed to influenced her thoughts and actions during interactions, data collection, and analysis.

The phrases 'Looked After and Accommodated Child review' and 'Looked After Child review' refer to a series of statutory meetings held between professionals to assess and promote the needs of children in care. In social work vernacular, they are often shortened to 'LAAC' or 'LAC', pronounced as 'lack', and professionals use the acronyms to refer to meetings, cases, and children. Children and young with care experience told Scotland's Independent Care Review, that the acronym felt stigmatising by setting them apart from other children (2020). For this reason, the researcher has chosen to write the phrase in its entirety where used rather than using the acronym.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Strathclyde.

Findings

Designing a Test of Change

The Champions' Group in the local authority area studied included twenty two members whose roles were involved in various points of the permanence process: social worker and manager, Children's Hearing Scotland panel member, solicitor, independent reviewing officer, paediatrician, education representative, local authority data lead, and children's reporter. The roles of individuals taking part in interviews and focus groups are listed in the 'research participants' table on page 9. This multi-agency approach is a central component of the PACE programme. It allows the group working on change to draw on different experiences and perspectives when identifying potential barriers to implementation thus making changes more likely to be sustainable once they are implemented as improvements.

Working with the second of the four national aims within the PACE programme (to reduce the timescales between a child being accommodated and a permanence recommendation for a child), the local authority partnership set the percentage of children for whom they

---

[1] At the time of the research, ParentLine was open seven days a week, for twelve hours a day during the workweek and three hours each weekend day.

felt the change was achievable within the chosen timescales. Although the data available did not indicate delays prior to the six week Looked After Child Review, which was taking place in line with statutory timescales, Champions' Group members felt that the time between the 72 hour meeting and the six week review was characterised by a lack of progress towards permanence. They noted that the 72 hour meeting focused on assessing the immediate accommodation of the child and took place too soon after accommodation for multi-agency partners to be involved. They also reflected that they had observed delays to their workloads and procedures in terms of progressing discussions and planning with parents. This meant that a six week review meeting was often held for children before a care plan had been agreed, further delaying the start of parental capacity assessment work, which forms an important part of the information upon which permanence decisions are made. The Champions' Group wanted to implement something that would progress activity between meetings, and used experience and data to build their theories on what changes would result in improvements. Beginning with the overall aim to reduce the time it took between a child becoming accommodated and professionals reaching a permanence decision for that child, the Champions' Group completed a driver diagram to represent their theory of change. The change ideas represented new ways of working that they felt would help them achieve this aim. Adding an additional formal review meeting at two weeks was the change idea that they felt would have an immediate impact.
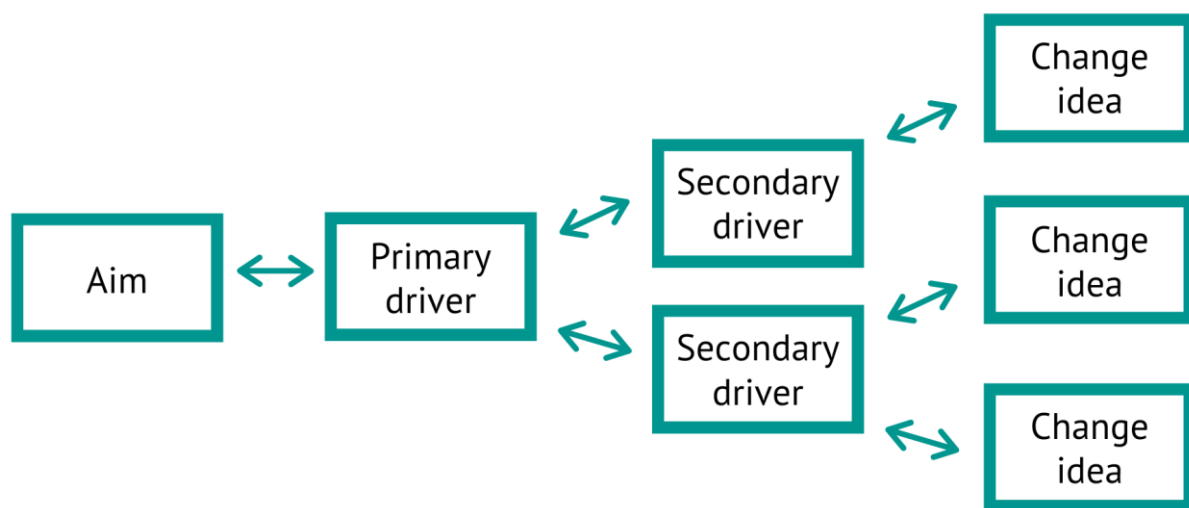

Figure 1: Driver diagram

When adding the two week planning meeting to the review process, the local authority partnership retained the statutory seventy two hour planning meeting and looked after child review meetings at six weeks and three months. Although the statutory requirement is for a meeting to be held at six months after the three month Looked After Child review, the local authority partnership chose to hold meetings more frequently, three months later, so that no child would wait for longer than three months between meetings. The local authority partnership designed the two week planning meeting to include parents and carers, children, wider agencies, social workers and team leaders, with the team leader chairing the meeting and logging the actions agreed within the meeting.

Completing 'Plan Do Study Act' Cycles of Improvement

Once the change ideas are identified, the iterative testing process begins, which the Model for Improvement refers to as a 'Plan Do Study Act' (PDSA) cycles. The principles underpinning testing are:

- Testing on a small scale before scaling up
- Testing over time
- Including a wide range of conditions throughout the series of tests (Langley *et al.* 2009 41-42).

Each PDSA test cycle provides evidence and learning which is then used to shape modifications to the successive test cycle. Through this process, the emphasis is on gathering and evaluating evidence to inform small, incremental changes to lead to a lasting improvement.

PDSA paperwork

Early on in the research, through both interviews and document analysis, it became clear that the Champions' Group did not regularly complete PDSA paperwork associated with each testing cycle to capture cycle expectations, outcomes and learning. This excludes a potential source of reflection when undertaking additional test cycles, when evaluating the improvement process overall, or informing how best to spread or scale-up changes. In an unpublished evaluation of the PACE programme, Porter noted that Taylor et al.'s findings that users of Quality Improvement programmes did not always complete the paperwork consistently also applied to many of the local authority partnerships taking part in PACE (Taylor *et al.* 2014 cited in Porter 2017a, unpublished). Since recording and analysing learning in order to inform successive test cycles is central to Model for Improvement methodology, we cannot know what the local authority partnership would have done differently had the tools been applied consistently.

Without an initial statement within paperwork from each PDSA cycle, we do not know what each successive cycle set out to achieve or how the group planned to identify whether the change idea tested influenced the overall aim. The Champions' Group meeting minutes from the month prior to the start of the testing phase state that the new process includes: '2 week planning meeting (team leader chair, PCA [Parenting Capacity Assessment] started at this point if not before) and plan agreed' (Champions' Group Meeting minutes, Phase 2, Month -1). In order to clarify initial outcome measures, the researcher asked participants whether there were discussions about what those choosing to test the two week planning meeting had hoped it would achieve. The themes that emerged were:

- Earlier discussions with parents on what permanence outcomes professionals would consider for each child, including the possibility of permanence away from home
- Having a care plan in place and beginning work with parents
- Evidence that, with earlier agreement on the care plans, parents were engaging with care plans prior to the six week Looked After Child reviews
- Having the dates set for all future Looked After Child review meetings

Variation in testing

Prior to introducing intentional variation into test cycles, the local authority partnership first took action to standardise the unintentional variation in how the meeting was delivered that had come to their attention during Champions' Group reflections and discussions. To ensure consistency, they added a set agenda to the two week planning meetings. They tested an agenda based on a modified Looked After Child review meeting, with small changes made after group discussion on the set agenda points. Another variation introduced was the use of a leaflet that was made available to some parents to supplement conversations about permanence in the two week planning meeting.

There seemed to be several interpretations of how to test a change idea in line with the Model for Improvement's Test of Change approach. Interview participants variably noted that the two week planning meeting was or was not a Test of Change. Some also commented on the difficulty of conducting and observing tests with fewer opportunities to test the change idea. While the Model for Improvement does not require a large population from which to draw test cases, the changes implemented in health and social care settings take longer to test, observe, understand and take effect as they are often measuring lived experiences. In the case studied, holding the two week planning meeting for a single child represents one test. The details known immediately about the impact of that test are whether particular discussions have taken place and a care plan has been agreed. The learning from this test is used to inform the next test undertaken when a further child is accommodated, which could be weeks or months away depending on the local authority area. It can take up to an additional seven and a half months to know whether professionals have achieved their aim of making a permanence decision for a child, with multiple children's experiences required within the data to indicate whether the change being tested is contributing to the aim. As testing a change in this setting involves people's lives, there may be many other factors that mean children may not receive a permanence decision within agreed timescales. The information from one case cannot be shown to prove or disprove the efficacy of the Test of Change; it may take many cycles to see whether the change tested is responsible for, or contributes, to the desired or observed outcome.

Evidence

Despite incomplete PDSA testing, evidence emerged throughout meeting observations, interviews, and analysis of meeting minutes, that the local authority partnership actively engaged with Quality Improvement principles and applied other tools to transform reflections and learning. The theory of a Test of Change and the Model for Improvement overall were followed, even if the overall testing structure was not followed strictly. Although the completion of PDSA cycle paperwork did not take place to evidence the learning from each iteration of the test, there is evidence in meeting minutes and observed meetings that they had the relevant conversations needed to construct their plans, revisit them and continue in a cycle of iterative change.

Access to, and analysis of, a strong baseline data set is important for setting aims and measures. The local authority partnership had extensive baseline data to analyse the points in the permanence process at which children experienced delay. Having a Champions' Group member with responsibility for the local authority's data placed them in a strong position to apply improvement methodology. This member of staff already

oversaw data related to key milestones for permanence and worked with software that was able to extract information relevant to understanding the timescales experienced by children. As the data lead for the Champion's Group, this member of staff extracted and analysed data and presented reports at each Champions' Group meeting, where other members reviewed the data and actively engaged in improvement-focused discussions.

The local authority partnership continued to gather evidence to inform their improvement; reviewing data run charts as permanence decisions were achieved for children; sharing their own observations of meetings and interactions; and any feedback from parents and children. They recognised the difficulty of capturing parental views of the two week planning meeting yet several said in interviews that they had experienced improved interactions with parents.

The researcher asked one interviewee whether children's views were captured for the two week planning meeting. This interviewee discussed the ways children's views were captured for other permanence meetings in relation to the placement, including child-friendly software usage, but that gathering their views was not currently on the two week planning meeting's agenda. In the next Champions' Group meeting, this person discussed the need for adding this to the two week planning meeting agenda and the local authority area's permanence policy. Using existing child-friendly software and other approaches may offer structure for seeking feedback on experiences of the system itself, creating valuable information on the impact of changes and improvements implemented.

From observation and interviewee reflections, the local area PACE lead seems to have fostered an open and collaborative environment in which Champions' Group members are encouraged to share their views, ideas, and perspectives. In Champions' Group meetings, the researcher observed idea generation leading to further exploration, and several interviewees recounted having ideas and working them up to bring to the group for further group contributions.

Throughout the process of testing the two week planning meeting as a change idea, the Champions' Group also undertook additional work—some tested and others immediately implemented—to improve the efficiency of other processes that interacted with the meeting:

- Updated the case recording system to capture data from the new meeting
- changed relevant procedures to embed the meeting in the system, including Updating the permanence policy to mention the two week planning meeting
- setting all mandatory meeting dates for each child in advance
- Aligning all existing paperwork to focus on a child's outcome
- Providing a three month period in which parents were able to access support for issues that would have otherwise interfered with their ability to engage with the parenting capacity assessment

Participants noted that these changes streamlined the decision-making process, reduced the effort required to complete different forms at various stages in the permanence process, and promoted fair and well-evidenced assessments.

PACE mindset

One focus group participant referred to the Champions' Group's approach as a 'PACE mindset', which embodied Quality Improvement methodology. Interviews and

observations supported the application of this approach to the whole Champions' Group. As noted, the evidence gathered indicated that the local authority partnership understood how their permanence process functioned, used variation in testing, regularly reflected on learning, involved partners across relevant agencies, made wider changes to procedures, recording systems and practice affected by or affecting the two week planning meeting, and were informed by data. What seemed to contribute to the success of their engagement with these theories and tools is what is understood as the human side of change. As noted above, members of the Champions' Group were supported by their individual agencies to engage with the programme and they had shared ownership of the programme's progress. Through interview and focus group conversations, champions told stories that positioned their experiences of the Champions' Group as one of open collaboration, in which people felt motivated, comfortable, and respected to share their opinions, observations, and ideas to inform innovation and testing.

Prior to undertaking PACE, the local authority partnership implemented several service changes that provided a solid foundation for using the Model for Improvement to focus on permanence. Several years before becoming involved in PACE, the local authority employed independent reviewing officers to chair Looked After Child review meetings, scrutinise progress and advocate for the child in these meetings. At the time, the majority of the workload undertaken by staff was around child protection, leaving little capacity for work to improve permanence. The local authority area later created a permanence policy and flowchart, positioning permanence as a priority. Building on the policy's priority on permanence, the local authority area delayed their involvement in PACE in order for the local authority to restructure the service, creating teams that dealt with early intervention and teams focused on permanence after accommodation.

Impact of the two week planning meeting

From their responses to questions on the change idea tested and how it developed, the researcher recognised that participants felt that the two week planning meeting worked. Interested in understanding how they evidenced its success, particularly without the PDSA cycle paperwork to record aims achieved, she moved the conversation on to questions around impact.

In response to a question on evidence captured to show that the two week planning meeting was working, three interviewees raised the overarching data as evidence. One (Interviewee 2) responded by saying *'it's all running fine because our data shows that'*. Another said evidence was available by comparing the data to that of previous years, and discussed the visible improvement in timescales for children achieved since the introduction of PACE. Although the data shows an improvement, it is not solely influenced by the Test of Change, so cannot serve as absolute evidence that the Test of Change has been responsible for the improvement. To move away from the pattern established over three interviews of referencing the data as proof, and to clarify the understood impact of the Test of Change, the researcher asked a follow up question. One of those interviewees returned to a comparison of data with previous years, this time saying that *'it must be the Test of Change that has led to that reduction because there've not been any other changes'* (Interviewee 3). Initially, the two week planning meeting was introduced as the Test of Change, yet this statement reinforces the concept that the change idea tested was the collection of activity rather than solely the meeting in itself.

Interviewees recounted experiencing and observing positive impacts of the two week planning meeting on professionals largely in terms of clarity and confidence. They felt

that they and other practitioners were clearer about their responsibilities in permanence cases during and between meetings, beginning with the responsibility to discuss permanence with parents of looked after children and create a care plan. Responses referred to this responsibility extending throughout the Looked After Child review meetings, noting that professionals were now expected to submit reports and paperwork for each meeting even if they were not going to attend. Some interviewees felt that this reduced the likelihood of unproductive meetings that would otherwise contribute to delays for the child. Whether through interrogating data, checking that permanence planning had begun, or constructively challenging colleagues responsible for different parts of the process, several participants viewed the change as an opportunity to scrutinise practitioner progress in moving children toward permanence decisions.

Turning to the impact on families, both professional and parent responses aligned with what interviewees had previously stated the change idea had set out to do: involve parents in permanence discussions and agree care plans at an earlier date. An Independent Reviewing Officer said that at the six week Looked After Child review meeting, she saw evidence that the care plans have not only been created but work has begun with parents on the plans. As noted above, the research included an interview with one parent. Throughout the interview, this parent responded to questions about clarity and said that both the reason for the meeting and the outcomes were made clear to her. Professional interviewees observed other parents understanding the early discussions on permanence and being clear about what was expected of them. The limited responses regarding observed and measured impact on children of the change idea tested and PACE were around timescales and receiving quicker decisions or moving home sooner.

Discussion

It can be difficult to isolate or evidence impact in complex systems. In the context of this research, measuring whether an additional meeting has taken place cannot evidence impact on the timescales taken to recommend permanence for a child. One would expect that earlier decision-making processes could lead to earlier decisions but, as there will be multiple points in the system where both advances and delays may occur, the existence or output of a particular meeting will not be solely responsible for achieving the overarching aim of quicker permanence decisions for looked after children.

Although we cannot ascertain the effect of the two week planning meeting itself on achieving improved timescales, the local authority area data shows an improvement to overall timescales since becoming involved with the PACE programme. Qualitative evidence gathered throughout this research indicate that these improvements are a collective result of:

- The various changes associated with the two week planning meeting
- Application of the 'PACE mindset', through which they applied Quality Improvement tools and principles.

The key learning from testing the two week planning meeting is that adding one meeting alone will not improve permanence outcomes. The changes made in relation to the two week planning meeting serve to anchor the activity together as a coordinated process in the early stages of permanence decision-making. The two week planning meeting was underpinned by recording and reporting systems, permanence discussions and care planning with parents no later than two weeks post-accommodation, agreeing all Looked

After Child Review dates from the point a child is accommodated, and the removal of barriers parents may have faced such as through the aforementioned intensive support period for parents prior to beginning parenting capacity assessments. The focus on supporting changes to systems and processes is what made the change idea viable.

In addition to the positive impacts of two week planning meeting, interviewees mentioned positive effects of being involved in the PACE programme, closely linked with the concept of the 'PACE mindset'. These include recognising the need for and implementing streamlined outcome reports for children. As a result, there is reduced paperwork used and required, professionals across agencies feel confident to challenge one another when deadlines for children are missed, and the addition of alerts within case recording systems indicate when a child is approaching a decision-making deadline. Bringing together the key agencies involved in permanence for looked after children has maximised the multi-agency system knowledge and expertise when concentrating innovation on specific points in the permanence process.

Prior to PACE and using Quality Improvement, the local authority area studied had already begun to improve their permanence timescales. Creating a clear permanence policy and flowchart, the local authority area signalled that permanence was a priority alongside child protection. They created the independent reviewing officer role to ensure that there were staff members reviewing individual children's cases and beginning to challenge timescales at Looked After Child reviews. The local authority also restructured to create teams responsible for early intervention and teams for permanence, aligning social work engagement with legal services and implementing monthly legal meetings to review all children approaching points in the process where legal applications were required. This earlier legal advice supports the way that social work gathers evidence and creates reports. When these changes took place, the local authority area already had a strong data lead and the data showing the time it was taking for professionals to reach permanence decisions for children around the time of the new policy evidences an improvement. These changes provided the framework which was further strengthened by undertaking the PACE Quality Improvement programme.

Recommendations

For local authority partnerships working to improve permanence:

- Write and implement clear policies that position permanence as a priority for the work undertaken with children and families. Policies should provide clarity on responsibilities, deadlines, and processes
- Ensure that the case recording system in use within the local authority area has the ability and functionality to produce reports on permanence data
- Employ a staff member to focus on data or upskill a staff member to include this within their role, ensuring that they are competent in analysing and presenting data for review
- Involve multi-agency partners in contributing to improving and continuously monitoring permanence processes. Their different perspectives and skills ensure invaluable reflections and innovations
- Undertake earlier work with parents to discuss permanence, and set and agree care plans. This should take place no later than two weeks after a child becomes accommodated
- Review the forms completed for children on permanence routes and consider how these may be reduced and coordinated
- Consider and implement safe ways to capture the views of children and parents on their experiences of permanence processes
- When testing change ideas, record—at the very least—what it is hoped the change will achieve, what was learned, and next steps.

For Scottish Government:

- Include permanence milestones used in the Permanence and Care Excellence programme as mandatory rather than voluntary for Children Looked After Statistics returns completed by each local authority; this would improve understanding of children's experiences at local and national levels

References

Henderson, Gillian, Lucy Hanson, and Indiya Whitehead. 2011. *Care and Permanence Planning for Looked After Children in Scotland*. Scottish Children's Reporter Administration. https://www.scra.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Care-and-Permanence-Planning-for-Looked-After-Children-in-Scotland.pdf

Independent Care Review. 2020. *The Promise*. https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf

Langley, Gerald, Ronald Moen, Kevin Nolan, Thomas Nolan, Clifford Norman, and Lloyd Provost. 2009. *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Porter, Robert. 2017a. *Permanence and Care Excellence: 2016-2017. Learning from Nine Sites.* Glasgow: CELCIS. Unpublished, January.

Porter, Robert. 2017b. *Permanence and Excellence Programme (PACE) 2016/2017. Summary Report.* Glasgow: CELCIS. Unpublished, November.

Scottish Government. 2010. *Guidance on Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007.* Accessed April 2021. https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-looked-children-scotland-regulations-2009-adoption-children-scotland-act-2007/

Scottish Government. 2014. Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Accessed 3 July, 2018. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8/pdfs/asp_20140008_en.pdf

Scottish Government. 2015. *Getting it Right for Every Looked After Children and Young People: Early Engagement, Early Permanence, and Improving the Quality of Care*. Edinburgh. https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-right-looked-children-young-people-strategy/

building brighter futures

Glossary of terms

Adoption
Adoption is the legal process by which a child or a group of siblings who cannot be brought up within their birth family become full, permanent and legal members of a new family.

Baseline data
Information that is collected and analysed to establish a picture and understanding of how a system or process is functioning. This can be used as a comparison to measure trends and, in the case of improvement programmes, to measure the impact of changes implemented.

Champions' Group
A group of people responsible for leading the PACE improvement work in their agency, including overseeing tests of change, assisting with the collation and interpretation of data, reporting progress, planning and attending champions' meetings. Some areas have opted to use the term 'permanence lead' instead of 'champion'.

Corporate Parents
Corporate parenting refers to an organisation's performance of actions necessary to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of a looked after child or care leaver, and through which their physical, emotional, spiritual, social and educational development is promoted, from infancy though to adulthood. A corporate parent listens to the needs, fears and wishes of children and young people, and is proactive and determined in their collective efforts to meet these. Part 9 of the Children (Scotland) Act 2014 puts this concept and policy of 'corporate parenting' onto a statutory basis in Scotland and established a framework of duties and responsibilities for relevant public bodies, requiring them to be systematic and proactive in their efforts to meet the needs of looked after children and care leavers.

Foster care
Foster care is where a child is temporarily cared for within a domestic family setting which is not their own family, by carers who have been trained, assessed and approved for providing such care.

Kinship care
Kinship care is where a child is cared for, informally or formally, by a relative or close friend who is known to them.

Looked after
The term which is used in legislation in Scotland to mandate care and protection of children.

Looked after child
In Scotland, a child or young person currently looked after in a formal arrangement with a local authority, typically, but not always, involving compulsory supervision arrangements following a children's hearing. Children can be 'looked after' while remaining in the family home, with social work support, or in a kinship, foster or residential care placement.

building brighter futures

Looked After Child Reviews
A meeting to review the agreed plan and arrangements for caring for a child who is looked after. Overseen at a local authority level, this is usually chaired by an independent reviewing officer and attended by the child, their family, carers and the professional team around the child.

Model for Improvement
The three questions of: what we are trying to accomplish; how we will know that a change is an improvement; and what changes can we make that will result in improvement, together with the PDSA Cycle, make up the Model for Improvement which guides the PACE approach.

Permanence
Permanence in Scotland refers to a child's permanent, loving, safe, and nurturing home, which provides them with emotional, physical and legal stability, where possible within a family setting and which continues into adulthood. In PACE, permanence can be achieved through four routes:

• Returning or remaining at home where family functioning has improved.
• A permanence order for a child who is living in kinship care, foster care or residential care
• A child living under a kinship care order (or 'section 11 order') where they are living with kinship carers
• A child living with an adoptive family

Quality Improvement
The application of a systematic approach to achieve improvement that uses specific methods and techniques to design, test, measure and implement new ways of working.

Residential care / Residential child care
Residential child care is a form of short or long-term care that is provided for children within a non-family-based group setting, alongside other children. The care provided includes accommodation and support from qualified staff. Some residential child care also includes educational provision.

Test of change
Testing a proposed change in a system to see if this leads to improvement. I PACE, tests are scaled up if they are successful, and tried out across different conditions (e.g. teams, localities, ages of children etc.) before any decisions are made on implementing the change.

Whole-system
In PACE, this term is applied where all of the agencies who have a role in progressing permanence outcomes for children, including local authority social work and legal teams, health, education, Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, Children's Hearings Scotland, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, and this may also involve third sector and other organisations, depending on local models of service delivery.

building brighter futures

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.

For more information

Visit: www.celcis.org   **Email:** celcis@strath.ac.uk   **Tel:** 0141 444 8500