

From residential unit to permanent foster care: Reflections on one child's journey towards legal permanence in Scotland

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Abstract

This article reflects on the transition journey of one child who for various reasons was unable to live with his biological parents. The focus is on the child's move from living in a residential children's unit to living with a permanent foster carer. The author reflects on some of the significant factors which emerged as the team around Kieran worked hard to 'get it right'. Reflections for practice highlight the importance of each role in the team around the child and the opportunities offered by working together.

Keywords

Permanence; foster care; wellbeing; placement transition; Scotland

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Ensuring that a child is safe, thriving and living with their permanent family is a key motivation for Scotland's looked after children's workers. It is also the focus of national policy embedded in the [Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007](#) and the Getting It Right For Every Child ([GIRFEC](#)) national approach to improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

In Scotland a child's permanent family means living with birth parents, kinship carers, permanent long term foster carers or adoptive parents. Achieving legal permanence is recognised as fundamental to a child's physical and emotional health encapsulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Based on the principles of children's and young people's rights and wellbeing, the GIRFEC framework supports families to work in partnership with the public services that can help them.

This article reflects on the transition journey of one child, Keiran (not his real name). Kieran's social worker was passionately searching to find a permanent family for him after two years spent in a residential children's unit. The author's role was as the social worker supporting the foster carer, Diane, during the matching process and Kieran's first year in placement with his new foster family.

The child at the centre

Kieran is now 12 years old and very small for his age. He wears strong lensed glasses which magnify his blue eyes as huge and tentative. He has blonde wavy hair, freckles and a smile that melts toffee. He is friendly, engaging and very eager to please adults. Kieran takes great care with his personal appearance and keeps a remarkably tidy bedroom. He desperately wants to have friends and be 'like everyone else'. He likes animals, scoffs his food, enjoys watching TV, playing on his iPad and riding his bike. He wants to be 'someone who works with animals' when he grows up.

The match

Keiran was almost 11 when he was referred for a permanent foster placement. He had lived in a small residential unit for two years with older children. Initial information available to his new foster carer about Kieran's early years was sketchy. His father was dead and his mother's needs meant she could not prioritise Kieran's. Aged eight, he had stayed with his paternal aunt (Aunt May) after starting a fire during unsupervised play in his parental home. Aunt May had her own physical health struggles and Kieran's unsettled and often disruptive and risk taking behaviours were too demanding for her. There were no suitable alternative family placements for Keiran leading to his eventual care in a residential children's unit. Kieran is the first member of the family to be 'looked after'. Aunt May and older adult siblings are passionately protective of Kieran while articulating that he has always been 'a bit hyper'.

Regularly excluded from mainstream school due to his struggles to cope with daily life in the classroom and distracting behaviours, Kieran was initially educated within the unit. By the time he was aged 11 he had been slowly integrated back into the final year class of his local primary school via periods of gradual introduction and special 'nurture' support.

Described at initial referral as 'a friendly wee boy who struggles with boundaries and concentration', Kieran's referral profile highlighted how well he had progressed in the unit enabling return to mainstream education. It was emphasised that he no longer needed the structure and intensity of residential care and that the influence of older peers in the unit was not in his best interests. All workers around Keiran agreed that what he needed most was a permanent foster family to provide nurture and the secure base from which to

thrive. Kieran expressed that he was very happy in the unit, at school and seeing Aunt May twice a week. He was adamant that he was 'absolutely not ***ing leaving'. He made it entirely clear to his social worker that he would only consider doing so on three conditions: stay at the same school, visit his aunt and siblings twice a week, and if the new family had at least one dog, a big one.

The local authority responsible for Kieran's safety and wellbeing could not identify a long term foster placement from their own resources for Kieran, with or without the three conditions. A match was sought from the voluntary sector.

The move

Multiple visits were arranged to enable Keiran to move in a planned, supported way. His unit manager and social worker visited the foster carer, Diane, allowing for information exchange about Kieran's needs and behaviours and assessment of whether Diane's family and Kieran would be a suitable match. Keiran would be moving into a family with two older teenagers both in permanent placements from different local authorities. The residential unit manager was concerned about how many other children would be in the foster home and was visibly relieved that there were only two. Diane was concerned that Kieran didn't seem to want to move out of the unit. She wanted to meet him to be sure that there could be an emotional connection between them. The new placement was 25 miles from Keiran's school and Aunt May's home but it did have one unique selling point of three dogs, including a German Shepherd, and lots of other pets to look after.

Equipped with Diane's welcome book and multiple canine photographs Keiran's social worker broached the subject of moving with him. The dog factor was a great asset. Diane visited Kieran at his unit with more photos. Kieran visited Diane's home with his social worker, viewed his new bedroom and met the family pets and humans. So far so good. Keiran stayed overnight for a first weekend and met the family pony. Two more weekend visits; then a three day midweek visit with a long taxi journey daily to and from school. Diane and family attended a concert at Keiran's school and met Aunt May. Both Diane and Aunt May agreed that Keiran was a 'great wee boy' who liked to get his own way. Diane offered Aunt May a lift home. Afterwards, Aunt May reflected that she liked Diane very much.

The day of the Children's Hearing¹ to consider legally changing Kieran's place of residence from the unit to Diane's home arrived at last. The three members of

¹ In Scotland, a children's hearing (sometimes called a children's panel) is a legal meeting arranged to consider and make decisions about children and young people who are having problems in their lives. Panel members are trained volunteers. Scotland's children's hearings system was introduced by the [Social Work \(Scotland\) Act 1968](#) and is now governed by the [Children's Hearings \(Scotland\) Act 2011](#). For more information, see: www.chscotland.gov.uk and www.scra.gov.uk.

the hearing panel listened, questioned and smiled. Kieran made it entirely clear that he wanted to move into his new home as soon as the meeting was over. Unanimous approval was given by panel members to continue the supervision order for Kieran to live away from his legal parent and to reside in long term foster care with Diane. All agreed that this was a happy outcome for Keiran to be reviewed in twelve months' time during which his social worker would continue the process to enable full legal permanence with the foster carer as soon as possible.

The taxi journeys continued twice daily to school including after school and weekend visits to Aunt May. Diane invited Kieran's siblings to visit him at his new home. Both expressed relief that Kieran seemed so happy. They visibly relaxed in response to Diane's warm welcome. All seemed to be progressing remarkably well during this early honeymoon period in placement. Kieran responded well to Diane's kindness, fun, clear boundaries and structure and tried very hard to please all the new people in his life.

The aftermath

A post-placement planning meeting and Looked After Child Review were organised in line with the local authority's timescales. These were attended by residential unit and school staff as well as Diane and Kieran, Aunt May and adult siblings. All agreed that this was a good match and Keiran appeared to be settling. Kieran couldn't stop smiling, basking in the novelty of approval from key adults in his life: his birth family, his foster carer, his social worker, the unit manager who had been his secure base for two years, teachers and the author of this account. Kieran's smile faltered at the suggestion that it was time to move school. He was hard sold the benefits of doing so: new local friends, no more taxi rides, longer in bed each day and reassurances that he would still see Aunt May twice a week. A plan was agreed for a phased transfer to the primary school close to Kieran's new home. Another Review was arranged for three months' time.

Kieran transferred to his new school over a period of four weeks. His endearing smile, cheeky chat and eagerness to please adults impressed his new teachers. Kieran was much less confident with his peers and the school team worked hard to support him to make and sustain friendships. More of a shock was the gradual realisation of the size of his attainment gap in literacy and numeracy. He was more Primary 2 (age 6) level than Primary 7 (age 11). The toll of Kieran's previous struggle to cope in a mainstream learning environment was increasingly evident. Alarm bells clanged regarding his transition to secondary (high) school expected later in the year.

As the weeks passed Kieran's wellbeing priorities crystallised for the team around him. He thrived and glowed in response to warm praise and firmly held boundaries around relationship skills and safety. He settled well with the two older children in placement who welcomed him while they all jostled for position within the new family dynamic. With short periods of focussed one to one learning support in the classroom and a watchful eye in the playground Keiran seemed to manage and catch up with learning in a school environment.

Unfortunately outside of these safe settings he struggled to sustain peer friendships and was regularly painfully excluded from play or invitations. Diane and his teachers worked hard to pick up the emotional pieces and encourage Kieran to build confidence and self-esteem. The head teacher galvanised assessment from the local authority's educational psychology team to ensure that Kieran would be allocated additional educational support when he moved to the even more demanding environment of secondary school. This meant he had an extra member of staff to help him in class and to offer discrete support and supervision at break times where he was vulnerable and volatile in peer relationships.

Kieran continued to visit Aunt May, sometimes choosing to go just once a week depending on his leisure choices and commitments but telephone contact continued as needed.

Reflections for practice

A frequent frustration for looked after children's workers is the emergency nature and speed of placement moves. Kieran's transition experience from residential to family care had several deeply positive factors. Unit staff visited the foster carer before and during the matching process enabling exchange of information and familiarisation. The unit workers provided a base of knowledge for Diane during introductory overnight visits and in the early days of the placement, especially if there were questions about Kieran's needs or behaviours. There was reassurance for the residential team who had cared for Keiran that he was moving on to a warm hearted and happy home. There was plenty of time for planned overnight visits for Kieran to meet his new family and understand where he would be living. This reassured him and offered a gradual transition from the secure relationships with workers at the unit. The key adults in Kieran's life met and talked to Diane and each other – unit staff who knew him, his class and head teachers and family members. Diane was later to reflect that the most useful information she gleaned about Keiran's early life, behaviours and needs came from these discussions. The importance of a residential unit worker's knowledge and input to a young person's transition journey onwards from residential to permanent family care cannot be over emphasised. They are key members of the team around the child.

The foster carer reached out to the child's birth family with respect and warmth and followed the contact arrangements in the child's plan. Seeds of trust were sown regarding each adult's role in Keiran's life. As the birth family/foster carer relationship strengthened they provided a united message for Keiran to hear regarding praise, expected behaviours and efforts at school. Such birth family/foster family contact and rapport is aspirational and often not possible due to issues of safety or emotional capacity. Reflections on the positive effects on the child of harnessing this strength reminds us however to expect to achieve this aspect in practice whenever possible. Kieran's social worker prioritised safeguarding, facilitating his legal care plan and accessing resources. She visited Keiran and jointly with the writer supported Diane in her role of parenting him towards full wellbeing against the backdrop of his care plan and Scotland's Getting It Right For Every Child framework.

Early childhood fractured by disrupted attachments and uncertainty endangers a child's capacity to feel psychologically safe enough to learn in the mainstream classroom environment. The work of residential and educational teams in nurturing a child back to mainstream learning is not explored or celebrated enough. While it became evident that Keiran needed intensive support to begin to catch up with reading and mathematics it was highly significant that he succeeded in re-joining mainstream education. Having achieved this, the connections and priorities for additional support around his wellbeing and learning at school and the necessity for his new home and school to work together to maximise his wellbeing outcomes became fully clear. Linked with Keiran's low self-esteem and lack of confidence in peer relationships, these issues became the over-riding areas where he most needed help.

A child's unique journey towards permanence encapsulates all aspects of their individual wellbeing. This article reflects on the critical opportunity presented at the time of a looked after child's move to their permanent family. It offers an example of the adult roles involved and what can be achieved by collaborative working. It emphasises the necessity of home and school working together with a shared understanding of the child's needs and how mutually supportive and beneficial this can be. Kieran's journey has continued into first year at secondary school now. He is well established with his foster family while his struggles around learning and relationships remain the same. The team around him continue to work together and remain determined and hopeful for him. Kieran still sees Aunt May twice a week. He is besotted with some new puppies at home with Diane. His bedroom is a bit less tidy. He still wants to work with animals when he grows up.

About the author

Aileen Nicol leads the Permanence Team at CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland, based at the University of Strathclyde in

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