



Department
for Education

Improving practice in returning children home from care:

**Facilitating and sustaining practice and
service change: Toolkit of notes and
materials from an Action Learning Set
programme**

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Sheryl Burton and Sheree Kane

National Children's Bureau

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Introduction

Who should read this and what is it for?

This toolkit provides brief, practical and transferable information and pointers to assist those wishing to review, plan and implement changes in reunification practice at strategic, operational and practice levels.

Part One of this toolkit sets the context behind the project *Improving practice in returning children home from care: facilitating and sustaining practice and service change*, and the rationale for the approach that was taken.

Part Two concentrates specifically on work done within the action learning set programme aspect of the project and is divided into four sections:

- Starting out – creating the right environment, enlisting the right people and choosing the right problems.
- Creating the vision, agreeing priorities for change and setting goals.
- Making it happen – active implementation and review.
- Building and sustaining momentum over the longer term.

Each of the four sections will describe how some of these issues were handled within the programme, illustrated by example tools and exercises that we used in the sessions and by the participating local authorities in their change efforts.

Part One

Context

“Reunification should be planned with a view to permanence – approached with caution and with concern to ensure the qualities of the best possible care that we should seek for every child”

Boddy, J (2013) *Understanding Permanence for Looked After Children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, London: the Care Inquiry

Return home or reunification¹ as it is also known, is the most likely permanence option for many looked-after children, however practice in this area must improve to ensure that reunification is safe and sustainable. The most recent research on reunification (for example, Farmer et al, 2011; Wade et al, 2011)², as well as Department for Education data (DfE September 2013)³ points to a high risk of reunification breakdown and in some cases repeat abuse or neglect where children return home. In one study, almost half (47%) of children who returned home re-entered care or accommodation and a third of the experiences of these children were found to have been of poor quality. Research also shows wide variations between local authorities with regard to their practice in this area, not only in terms of quality, but also in the amount of resources allocated to reunification work (Thoburn et al, 2012 and SCIE Briefing no 42, *Returning children home from public care*).⁴

At the same time, the evidence points to critical factors in ensuring successful return home from care. It indicates a need for more rigour in assessment, decision-making, planning, monitoring and review, as well as high quality intensive support for children, parents and the wider family before, during and after children return home.

Whilst reunification is the most likely outcome for many looked-after children, research and policy in this area has been relatively sparse until recently. Recognising the need to

¹ Definition of return home informed by the Department for Education’s *Improving Permanence for Looked after Children Data Pack* (Department for Education, 2013): *By using the term(s) return home/reunification we mean where a child ceases to be looked after by returning to live with parents or another person who has parental responsibility. This includes a child who returns to live with their adoptive parents but does not include a child who becomes the subject of an adoption order for the first time, nor a child who becomes the subject of a residence or special guardianship order.*

² Farmer, E et al (2011) *Achieving Successful Returns from Care: What Makes Reunification Work?*, London, BAAF
Wade, J., Biehal, N., Farrelly, N. and Sinclair, I. (2011) *Caring for abused and neglected children: Making the right decisions for reunification or long-term care*, London: Jessica Kingsley.

³ Department for Education (2013) *Improving Stability of Care Placements for Looked After Children Data Pack*, London: Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-permanence-for-looked-after-children-data-pack-from-SSDA903-returns>.

⁴ Thoburn J, Robinson J, and Anderson B. (2012) *Returning children home from public care*, Research Briefing 42, Social Care Institute for Excellence. <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/briefings/briefing42/>
SCIE Briefing no 42 *Returning children home from public care* (see Thoburn et al above).

understand how research findings could be translated into effective practice for this group of children and their families, the Department for Education commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University to undertake a research and practice development project aimed at improving reunification practice. The research aimed to identify key success factors that need to be in place for local authorities to be able to utilise existing research evidence on 'effective practice' in the development and implementation of policy and practice.

As part of this research, the Department for Education also commissioned NCB to undertake practice development work with the same local authorities. This comprised of a learning set programme: a series of four semi-structured seminars delivered to staff across three tiers of the participating authorities. Representatives from practitioner, operational and strategic management level formed the local authority groups. It was hoped that targeting this vertical cross-section across the tiers would ensure that the experiences and concerns of key people would be reflected in any emerging plans for change, lead to more informed, fully sense-checked plans as well as creating a small pool of potential champions and change makers operating at different levels of local children's services.

Rationale for the approach

The NCB-facilitated Action Learning Set (ALS) programme adopted a semi-structured rather than pure action learning approach. The rationale was that this was a time-limited venture; participants were coming from a wide range of authorities and levels and with a diverse set of circumstances and concerns. It was also a large group to work with so we took the view that a degree of structure and some external input would benefit pace and focus. We also drew on our knowledge of various initiatives and approaches which had developed to facilitate greater engagement between researchers and practitioners – such as Research in Practice, Making Research Count and the Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE).

Additionally, while we have only limited knowledge of the relatively new and emerging field of implementation science, some of the principles and tenets resonated with NCB's approach to practice improvement. Our approach to the ALS programme placed a strong emphasis on participant responsiveness, involving participants before and during the ALS programme to learn their key concerns and their response to – and ideas on – activities they wished to incorporate. The learning sets also engaged with staff at different levels, directly working with staff from three tiers of their authority. Furthermore, through exercises, prompts, questions and direct suggestions, participants were themselves encouraged to engage directly with other key stakeholders in their local areas.

Another feature of the approach resonant with implementation science and change management was the deployment of a range of strategies to facilitate follow-through. The use of a learning set was in itself a tool and mechanism for assisting the implementation process. The group experiences afforded by the learning set allowed participants to reflect, seek and provide assistance with problems and to offer constructive challenge to each other. Additionally, participating authorities were encouraged to locally use the ideas, tools, exercises and the overall approach in either their original or adapted form as befitted their local context and needs.

At the end of the ALS programme, the participants were asked to give in-depth feedback about the programme. The evaluation evidence generated from authorities has been analysed to identify lessons arising from participants' experiences to inform future developments. The report of the evaluation⁵ of the ALS programme is published alongside this toolkit. The evaluation, conducted only a few months after the end of the programme, confirmed that changes had occurred, primarily at practice and policy level. Promisingly, some changes more directly impacting on children and families were also picked up. For example, a number of authorities implemented changes focused on involving parents in reunification. Achievements included the adaptation of supervision record sheets to include parental involvement, and the establishment of a new social work post, involved in all potential reunification cases, with a sole remit of working with parents.

Some authorities wanted to target their efforts at improving support for families when children or young people return home. These areas had made some progress, for example, by reviewing the support packages for families or working with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to ensure that appropriate support is included in plans and then provided for children and families regardless of whether they return home or remain in a placement.

This toolkit captures and shares the experiences and learning of us as facilitators and that of the managers and practitioners from the seven authorities who took part. The overall approach to the programme as well as some of the materials and tools used within the semi-structured learning sets themselves are shared on the basis that these are potentially useful tools for practice development at local level. It distils learning points from their attempts to stimulate and introduce new ideas and changes to practice and the strategic level processes and systems.

⁵ Buckley E; Edwards A (2015). *Improving Practice in Respect of Children who Return Home from Care: Evaluation report on the Return Home from Care learning set programme*. London: Department for Education

Part Two

Starting out: Creating the right environment, enlisting the right people, choosing the right problem

“Action Learning (AL) focuses on critical problems whose solution is highly important to an individual, a team, or an organisation. AL is most appropriate where the problem is complex, the desired outcome is vague, and the solution is uncertain or unknown. In addition, the problem should be complicated enough to provide learning opportunities, knowledge building, and the development of specialised skills.” (Freedman 2011)⁶

The Action Learning Sets (ALS) brought together social care staff from a wide cross-section of local authorities each experiencing their own set of challenges, with each local authority fielding three staff each across three tiers. Recruitment from a diversity of local authorities was seen as vital to ensuring that the learning would have relevance to a reasonably wide audience. Our experience and expectations for the programme were in line with the SCIE finding that “robust evidence of what works in promoting research use in social care is limited,” (SCIE Knowledge Review 7)⁷. SCIE goes on to suggest that a “whole systems approach for enhancing research use in social care may be a positive way forward.”⁸

While the approach used by us in the ALS programme is some distance away from applying a whole systems approach, it is informed by the idea that strategies, systems and change efforts are more likely to succeed if there is coherence, and different parts of the system are trying to work to maximise harmony and to minimise conflict. The approach was also based on the view that the actions of individual professionals are heavily influenced by the tone set by and the attitudes of senior managers, which in turn shape the organisational culture, determines what is prioritised; and influence the environment, the degree of openness to ideas from elsewhere and perceptions of such things as research and their relationship to practice. All of these factors, taken together, heavily influence the actions of individual professionals.

In brief, the underpinning assumptions to our approach were that:

⁶ Freedman, A.M (2011) *Using Action Learning for Organisational Change*. OD practitioner.Vol43.no2

⁷ Walter et al (2004) *Improving the use of research in social care practice*. SCIE Knowledge Review 7

⁸ Whole systems approach: way of thinking which suggests that to understand an area of practice, we need to look at more than single individuals or single organisations acting in isolation. Instead, we need to examine the interconnections and relationships between different people and organisations, and any potential synergy or conflicts between them, within the whole social care system.

- Sustainable practice change requires a longer-term multi-level approach, involving strategic and middle managers and front-line practitioners.
- All local authorities have something to learn and something others can learn from regardless of their performance data.
- The programme design and content must take account of factors which influence take up, adherence and implementation, most notably paying attention to how a programme is delivered rather than just what is delivered.
- Participant engagement is critical with success dependent on such factors as participants having a high degree of say in whether or not they participate, and a programme being delivered in dynamic way with plenty of participant input, drawing on their own experience and expertise.
- Whilst practitioner engagement is critical to any change effort, organisational and managerial attitudes and culture are equally, if not more, important.
- Exposure to practice issues is likely to produce more effective developments in organisational policy and strategy.
- External support is often limited and short-term so any change must be sustainable in its absence. Thus the model pursued has to place emphasis on actions and priorities determined, be designed and owned by participants, and be incorporated with minimal support.
- Change is unlikely to be a linear process. Participants need to be supported to sustain motivation and helped to identify strategies for dealing with efforts which stall or relapse.

In designing the ALS programme, we thought carefully about how to encourage a focus on local or individually-defined problems and then working to identify desired outcomes, potential solutions and routes to achieving them. We wanted to avoid and mitigate against a 'top down' approach and the general tendency to rush to uniform prescriptions and solutions for all without a clear understanding of the particular problem for the participating individual or area. We anticipated that while most or even all local authorities were likely to have similar areas of concern and themes, the salience and urgency would vary between authorities and between different sections of the same authority. We were dealing with a diverse set of authorities that we knew were at different points on the performance spectrum overall; would have variable performance, experience and expertise in some specific aspects; and would have differing organisational contexts and priorities. For example, some authorities in our sample were emerging from special measures while others were handling the process of merging with another authority. The achievement for each authority would thus have to be judged in relation to their own starting point, not through measurement against an externally set goal or expectation.

As is common in training and development activities, participants were asked to identify their particular hopes and expectations for the programme. This was to help us to identify any major differences between what we had to offer and their expectations, misalignments between participants' expectations and those of the senior managers who'd agreed for the authority to participate, as well as to facilitate joining and ownership and help us to be responsive to need over the course of the programme.

Participants' hopes and expectations for Action learning Set (ALS) programme

As we'd anticipated, the issues that the local authorities hoped to address through participation in the Action Learning Sets (ALS) were across a spectrum and covered both content and process issues.

Participants from each local authority worked on defining the specific problems they wanted to work on and selected priority areas on which to focus. The action learning set programme supported participants in doing this.

Process issues:

- **Addressing cultural change** – this was by far the most common theme. Participants talked of the need to convince practitioners and other key players of the benefits and possibilities, and giving them confidence and inspiration.
- **Taking solid evidence back to the authority to promote change** – a need for proof of what was key and evidence that would help to drive and sustain impetus.
- **Opportunity to focus in depth on tackling one area of practice** in the context of often being over-stretched and having to balance between sets of wide and competing demands. This was seen as especially important for small authorities where senior roles often cover a greater diversity of functions.
- **Learning from success stories** and what has worked in other authorities while at examining and reflecting carefully on what is working in own authority.

Specific content issues

- **Improving assessment, preparation and support after a child has returned home to their family** – e.g. better preparation and awareness of the challenges when the child gets home; ensuring monitoring/support looks beyond initial "honeymoon" period, recognising that the child is likely to be keen, greater vigilance/monitoring and support afterwards.
- **Child's voice** – evidence on what is important for children and incorporating this focus into local practice and guidance.
- **The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)** – their role in the process.
- **Children accommodated under s20 of the Children Act 1989**: exploring strategies for better management of returning home children where local authorities do not share parental responsibility and where a parent or other person with parental responsibility can remove the child from the accommodation.

Participants received presentations and opportunities to read and discuss the evidence from research (national and international)⁹ and data from DfE data pack on placement stability and children returning home¹⁰.

Summary of what research says about children returning home from care

- Most likely but increasingly regarded as "least successful" permanence option for maltreated children (Thoburn et al 2012).
- Lack of evidence based assessment and decision-making (Turney et al 2011; Farmer et al 2012).
- Poor support post-reunification: "quality of practice frequently deteriorates, or intensive services end too soon, to be replaced by a form of monitoring with no clear purpose" (Thoburn 2009).

⁹ Appendix A of Dryden G et al (2015), *Improving practice in respect of children who return home from care*. Department for Education

¹⁰ Department for Education (2013) *Improving Permanence for Looked After Children Data Pack*. London: Department for Education.

- High risk of return breakdown and repeat abuse or neglect when children are reunified (Farmer et al, 2008; Wade et al, 2011).
- Revolving door experience for many children: some studies report between a third and a half re-enter care. In one study, 47% had re-entered care at least once at the two-year follow-up point, rising to 65% at five-year follow-up (Farmer et al 2008,2011).
- High variation across authorities in: rates of reunification; outcomes; quality of practice and resource allocation (Farmer et al 2008; Wade et al 2011; Biehal et al 2007).
- Key to success: quality care planning; gradual/phased return home; services to help parents overcome the difficulties that led to their child(ren) being taken into care (Farmer et al 2008; Wade et al 2010; Thoburn et al 2012).

Participants applied their local knowledge and experience to general research findings to inform their thinking and further sharpen their focus. The work they did back in their own local authorities included data-finding quests and carrying out surveys and interviews of practitioners and managers within their own and other services. This was both to increase their facility with data and also to try to get behind the data – an effort to better understand what might be happening and a recognition that the quantitative data could only provide indicators, not illumination.

Participants understood that the practice behind such data could be good, bad or indifferent – the result of the impact of a good practitioner or service or simply the redrawing or redesignation of the boundaries and thresholds governing a particular issue. Getting to the story behind the data and surfacing explanations for apparent good or bad figures is essential information for development and change. Additionally, questions, who asks them, and the way they are framed can have a significant impact on the profile and value attached to a particular concern.

These quests served the dual purpose of helping with problem definition and sowing the seeds for, and even stimulating, change through raising the profile and awareness of the issue of reunification and offering the opportunity to engage with other key players.

Examples of authorities' engagement with data

Exploration of past and current performance around reunification. One authority saw understanding of this as a key facet in improving their reunification offer. To that end, they carried out an exercise to establish the correlation between the number of looked-after children where the plan for permanence within the care plan was reunification, with the average number of children who ceased to be looked after and returned to family (or

another person with parental responsibility). This highlighted a considerable mismatch with only 12% of care plans citing reunification, and on average 45% of children returning to family. This led them to undertake further analysis of the cases where children 'ceased to be looked-after' within their six looked-after children teams to establish whether there were differences in approach/performance across the teams – that work is ongoing and will inform further developments.

Steps to increase engagement with and use local data were taken by another authority. The local authority identified a need to establish a baseline for performance and realised that there had to be some work on coding tables (for social workers to complete) in order to get any meaningful information, and are now progressing this. They also did some initial analysis looking at the breakdown profiles of those children who had experienced repeat re-entry to care/accommodation. This confirmed for the local authority that they did not prematurely return children home without support. The local authority also decided to develop a performance measure to monitor, on a monthly basis, those children who re-entered care/accommodation less than three months after returning home. After early nil returns, the authority are now broadening the criteria. In addition, the authority are part of a google data group through which they are seeking comparison data with other authorities.

Managers and practitioners assessing and reflecting on how local practice and received wisdoms on reunification compare with general evidence: How “true” are these research findings for us?

A vital sense check and a necessary step in the process towards making sense of research – in moving from knowledge through to use – is reflecting on, and appraising, the inevitably general findings against an own experience, from both management and practice levels. ALS participants were given space, time, questions and prompts to reflect on the research with their peers from other authorities. In peer groups across authorities they considered the extent to which the general research findings applied to them.

Example of “true for us exercise” used in action learning programme

Main aim – to promote reflection and exploration of how own local authority reunification practice/issues compares to the research, from perspective of practitioner/team manager/service manager.

- What, for you, was most surprising/least surprising about the findings?
- Do you have the data/knowledge to make comparisons?
- If yes, how does your local data/experience compare to that presented?

- If no, what is your general perception? What information do you need? Where might you get it from?
- Do you think your performance/practice/outcomes for children are better/worse than those highlighted?
- Who in your authority would agree with you and who would not?
- What about children? Families? Other professionals including magistrates or LA solicitors? What might their views be?
- What is the service provision like for supporting children returning home to their families?
- What do you think your assessment and decision-making processes are like?
- Is the trend in your LA over the time you've been there or the past three years (whichever is shorter) one of improvement or deterioration in terms of safe and effective reunification of children? In terms of support services? In terms of quality of practice?
- Do you know how you compare to other LAs, especially comparable authorities (i.e. authorities which compare in terms of size of care population, age profile, numbers returning home)?
- If there are notable differences, do you have some ideas why?
- What is your evidence for saying these things?

This process of reflection, discussion and sharing of views across very different local authorities and staff at different levels helped participants to connect the research to their practice, bringing it to life and making it real and meaningful. Most participants wanted to seek out the views of, or involve, other staff in their own local authority as part of the process of awareness-raising and change. Participants ran focus groups, held informal discussions, and ran surveys with different levels of staff within their authority and in partner agencies.

3. Creating the vision, agreeing priorities, setting goals

Creating the vision

Generating a vision helps to facilitate a determined focus on the future through creating distance from problems in the immediate or every day. Guided fantasy¹¹ can be a very useful tool for this future-focused need. In the Action Learning Set (ALS), we used this to good effect.

Creating the vision exercise

Aim

To create an aspirational picture of what practice in reunification in my authority could/should look like, if striving for the best practice and best outcomes for children returning home from care.

Magic wand exercise (also known as miracle question)

Explain to participants that you will briefly take them on a guided fantasy followed by a series of questions for them to reflect on individually, for which they need to imagine themselves freed from everyday constraints – then ask them to close their eyes and read out the following:

Imagine that tonight, when you are asleep, an interfering good fairy waves a magic wand and when you wake up three years have passed. During that time, everything has changed including the fact that there is now an award for practice in this area and that your local authority is a proud winner of this award, hailed as the beacon of excellence in working with, and supporting, children to return home from care safely.

Pause, remind participants about the questions that follow and pause for 30 seconds between each one. **Continue with:**

- When you wake up and go into work, what will be the first sign to you that practice has changed? What will you notice?
- How will you be behaving?
- How will other practitioners and managers be behaving?

¹¹ Guided fantasy or phantasy is a technique derived from psychotherapy to facilitate transition from one situation to another. In a work context it can be used as role-rehearsal technique helping people to anticipate and feel through a future event. Douglas R, Ettridge D et al(1988) *Helping People Work Together: A guide to Participative Working Practices*. NISW Papers No.21.

- How will the atmosphere in the team/authority have changed?
- When you see children and families, how will they be behaving?
- Will there be other visible signs of change?

In groups (in ALS it was participants from same local authority together):

- Share and record ideas on flip chart together – be creative. You can draw pictures/use symbols as well as words.
- Generate as many ideas as possible – try to be as clear/specific about what the situation looks like in your vision of practice three years from now.

Agreeing priorities and setting goals

To increase the likelihood of implementation, goals have to be specific, realistic and achievable within a meaningful timeframe for those involved.

In relation to local reunification policy, practice managers and practitioners can and should be asked to identify their highest priority area for improvements i.e. the outcomes they would like to see within a tangible, realistic timeframe – a year for example. If selecting one priority immediately is too large a step then it can be done over two steps. For example, in the first step, three priorities could be identified and from there agreement is sought on one through discussion and debate. This is the approach we took in the ALS. Participants were encouraged to be really honest and challenge themselves and each other about their commitment to achieving the changes.

Priority-setting exercise used in ALS programme

In the ALS, to help practitioners and managers consider their priorities fully they were first asked to:

Discuss where you think your authority is now in relation to the idealised picture of your vision. On a scale of 1–10 if idealised picture is a 10, recall earlier discussion following research **presentation** and consider where you are now.

- In a year's time, should you aim to be two points up? Three points up? What would that mean? Is that ambitious enough or maybe too ambitious?
- Pick three priority improvements you want to achieve by this time next year, a staging post along the road towards achieving longer-term vision.
- Discuss and agree between you one key priority.

- While reflecting and discussing, be honest and challenge others to be honest about how committed you or they really are to achieving these changes. For example, are you thinking “I’ll make this my number one priority” or are you really thinking “to be honest I’m quite reluctant or no way am I going to do this, I don’t understand or believe it”. How committed to this are you, really?

To help bring other perspectives into the picture think about:

- What a child returning home from care might say/think?
- What a director or whoever has supported participation in this project might say?
- What would practitioners say about the picture you’ve got of the local authority in a year’s time?
- What would other professionals including local authority solicitors say? What about magistrates? IROs?
- Discuss and log for later, the three priority improvements you would like to see.

Making it happen – active implementation and review

In the approach taken to the ALS programme, agreeing specific goals and then developing detailed plans for implementation were seen as critical to the change process. It was made clear to participants from the point of authorities signing up that there was a firm expectation that they would do “home work” between each session of the Action learning Sets and would report back on progress on actions at the subsequent session.

Within the session, participants worked together in their authority groups to create road maps. To break down barriers, engage the brain, reinforce and embed learning, we tried to find different and fun ways for participants to work together. To that end, we used a host of aids – from providing participants with pens and flip-chart through to stickers, cut outs of signs, plastic bollards, laminates and blue tack for them to create road maps which could easily be moved around.

Creating the road maps

- Take one key priority at a time and locate that at the end of the road/destination point (on the road map).
- Think about where you are now in relation to that outcome/ priority – label with information/thoughts.

- Think about where you want to go from here to arrive at that changed situation in a year's time.
- Consider and log necessary early steps towards the goal.
- Identify the activities needed and milestones along the way.
- Identify the barriers and how to address these including things/people and the supports (including sponsor for participation in ALS and research project) to help keep on course.
- Think about the things that you'll need to STOP and those you'll need to START and log those.
- Be creative.

Sample road maps of ALS participants

Two anonymised road maps completed by local authorities

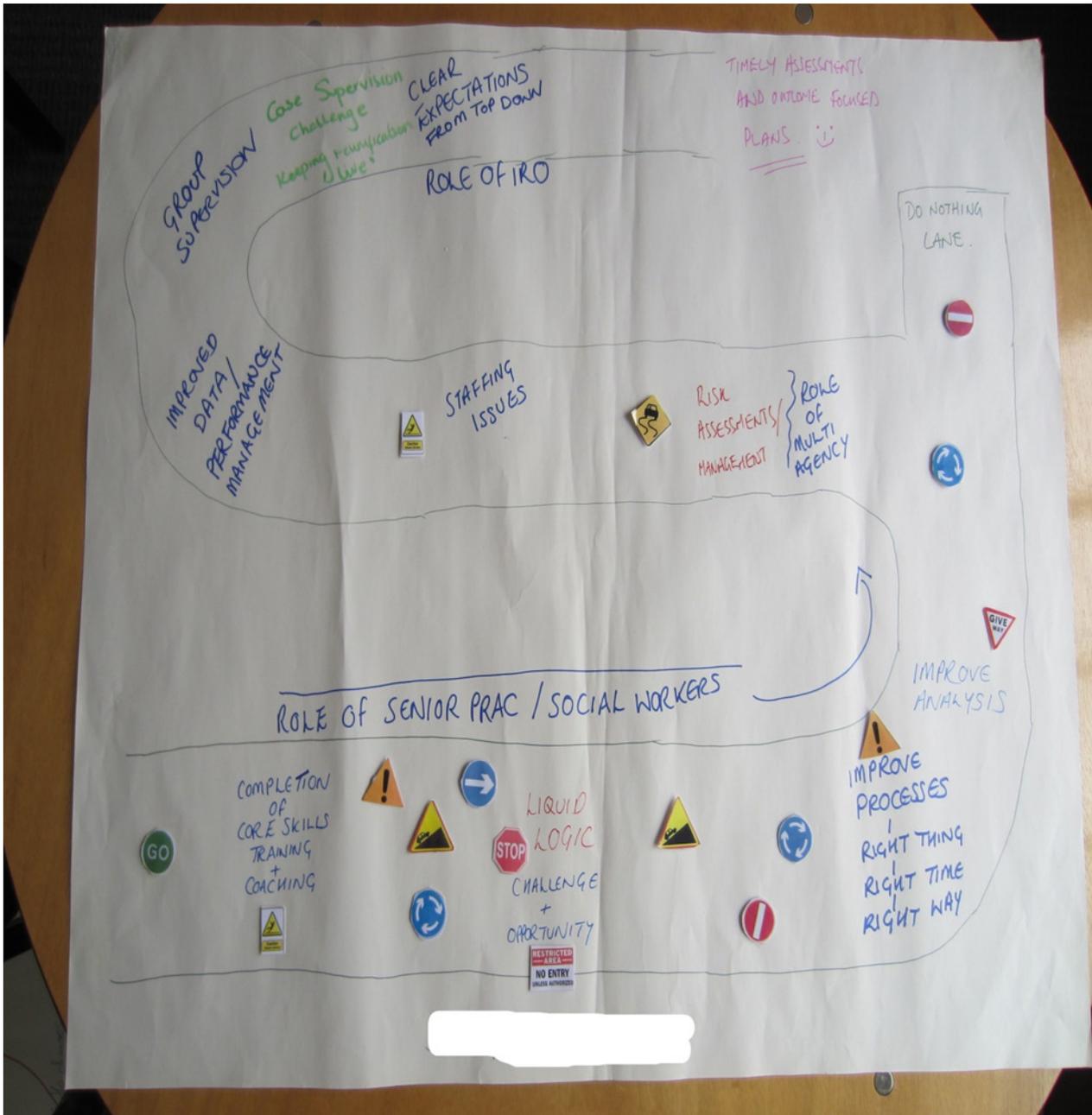


Figure 1 - Anonymised road map

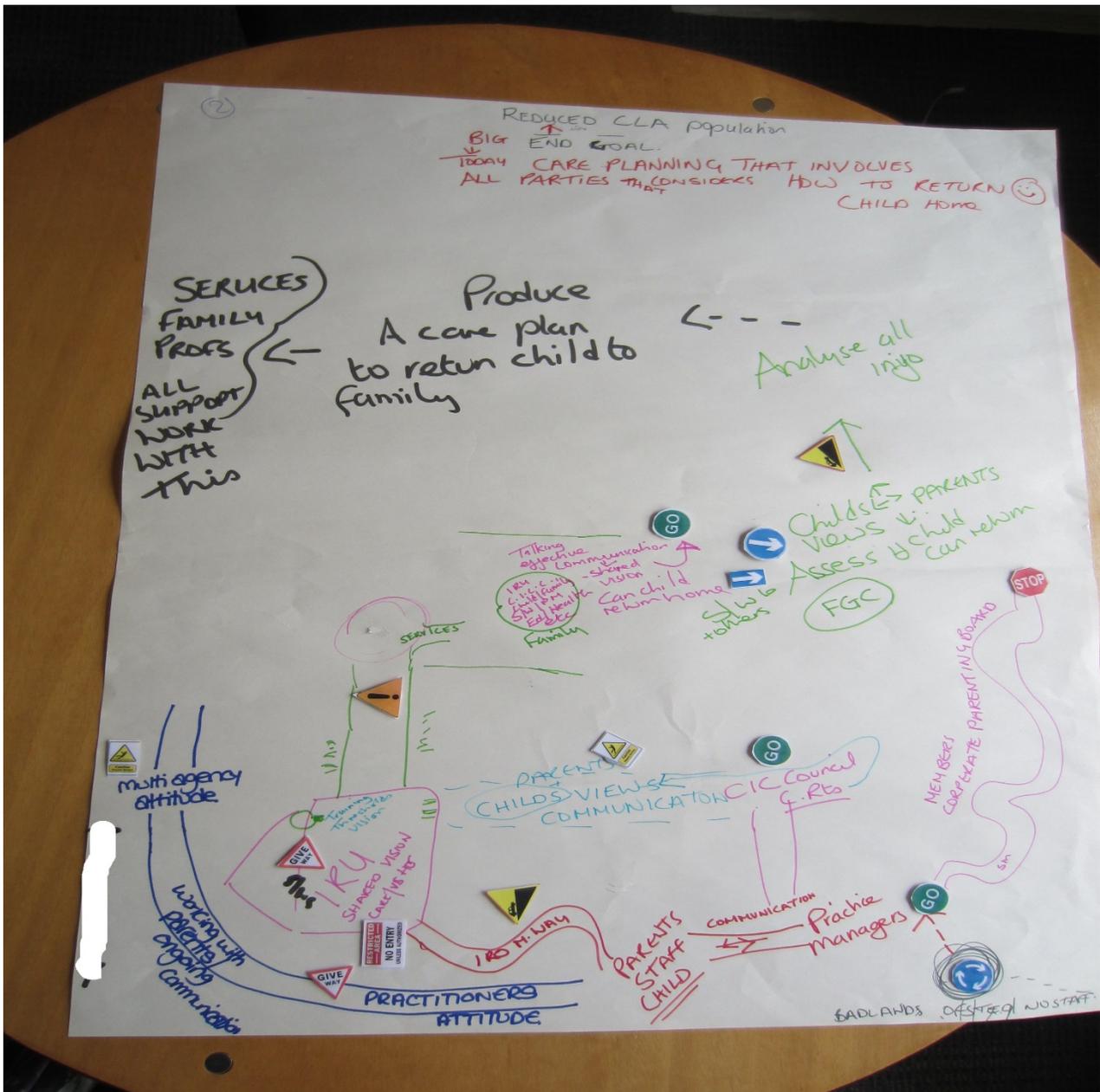


Figure 2 - Anonymised road map

Action Planning

Action planning was a key element of each Action Learning Set session. To increase likelihood of plans being implemented, local authorities worked in their multi-level groups, identified three actions which had to be implemented in the short timeframe between each session and importantly allocated responsibility for each task. To reinforce commitment and likelihood of goal achievement, local authorities were then paired with another authority and encouraged to share, challenge, suggest ideas and provide support for each other's plans.

Action Planning in Local Authority groups template

Local Authority name:

Three actions that we will take in our authority between now and the next ALS are:

Acton	By whom	By when
1.		
2.		
3.		

Table 1

Implementation

The participants from each local authority worked together within their local areas, tested out ideas with others, developed them further and implemented plans. Some established working groups to help implement actions and/or identified key people within their authority to support them with implementation. All authorities were sent individual reminders of action plans between each session.

Below are some of the activities undertaken by authorities participating in the ALS programme and some of the changes to strategies, processes and practice they sought to implement.

Some activities undertaken by local authorities in the gaps between sessions included:

- Detailed examination of data over the past year – patterns, trends, breakdowns and so on.
- Audit of case files to look in particular at: the quality of assessments; involvement of child and family; planning; support post-reunification; extent of use of resources and mechanisms such as family group conferences.
- Raising the profile of reunification with practitioners, team managers, independent reviewing officers and service managers. In some areas, this was extended to elected members, corporate parenting groups and colleagues in other agencies.
- Sharing research, attending team discussions, running surveys of practitioners, holding research into practice sessions, setting up task groups and panels to take a closer look at the issue, holding reflective supervision sessions, establishing new practice guidelines and processes for improving decision-making.
- Identifying champions or leads in teams and seeking to recruit champions in other agencies.
- Looking at policies, strategies, planning tools, checklists and forms to try to ensure that the focus on reunification is incorporated across systems and processes.

- Seeking to explore the possible use of resources with other groups or at other points in the process for example boarding school/child minders/short breaks; CAMHS support.

Sample of developments initiated by authorities Initiating culture change at local level

Strategy and policy development

Strategy to safely address issue of large population of looked after children: One authority with a large looked-after children population has developed a three-year strategy to reduce their number of looked-after children. Reunification is central to that strategy, and this has become a consistent theme in supervisions, team meetings and mentoring sessions. The authority also engaged consultants to undertake independent assessments of decision-making and planning on every case where there was no clear plan to cease to look after the child, to identify if the authority should be looking at the possibility of the child returning to their family. The same consultants are providing mentoring to Team Managers to ensure that they employ the same critical/inquisitive approach to case review and the same open-minded approach to family reunification as a way of sustaining the practice in future. This authority is also adopting 'signs of safety' as an approach to underpin social work practice, with a view to significantly shifting culture and practice in relation to the approach to working with families.

Sufficiency strategies: A second authority has carried out a review of their looked after children and sufficiency strategies to address reunification. This element – as in the other areas – has involved undertaking a wider piece of work regarding placement arrangements. They have updated their sufficiency strategy with projections of how many young people they anticipate returning home and are considering returning home strategies alongside their Staying Put discussions.

Policy on reunification: Another authority recognised that they did not have a policy on reunification and that practice focus had been on achieving permanence away from families. They have now added reunification to their permanence action plan which is updated and monitored by the head of service bi-monthly. Reunification will be included in the next policy update. The authority's supervision tool has been amended to include a trigger for discussion about reunification, and case transfer meetings include meeting the child's parents as well as the child who is looked after.

Bringing about culture change was the single most commonly expressed wish of participating local authorities. For most, changing the culture of their organisations and the attitudes and behaviours of key people within them was seen as a prerequisite to any improvements in practice and outcomes. While culture change can frequently be cited as the solution to tricky issues, pinning down what different people mean by it – and more importantly, how to achieve it – can be somewhat more elusive. In anticipation of this, we invited a speaker from the Behavioural Insights Team at the Department of Health to make a presentation which focused on behaviour change and research in this area, highlighting specific examples of how behavioural insights had been used to engender change in related fields.

The group was introduced to MINDSPACE (Messenger, Incentives, Norms, Defaults, Saliency, Priming, Affect, Commitments, Ego), which they used to design their actions and activities, and found it helpful to apply it to their local change efforts.

The MINDSPACE Template, from the MINDSPACE practical guide to influencing behaviour through public policy and created by the Institute of Government and The Cabinet Office, is available at:

<http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/better-policy-making/mindspace-behavioural-economics>

http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MINDSPACE-Practical-guide-final-Web_1.pdf

Influencer of behaviour		The behaviour I want to change is
Messenger	we are heavily influenced by who communicates information	
Incentives	our responses to incentives are shaped by predictable mental shortcuts, such as strongly avoiding losses	
Norms	we are strongly influenced by what others do	
Defaults	we 'go with the flow' of pre-set options	
Saliency	our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us	

Priming	our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues	
Affect	our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions	
Commitments	we seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts	
Ego	we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves	

Table 2

Changing local practice and culture

Use of Family Group Conferences (FGCs). Several authorities initiated reviews of the way that FGCs were being used within their authorities. One found that FGCs were only being used when consideration was being given as part of the pre-proceedings work where the local authority were considering care proceedings. Where increased family and friends contact happened within a child's care episode, FGCs were never considered as a way to help rehabilitation plans even if all involved felt that this was the likely outcome in terms of achieving permanence for the child. The authority have therefore held a learning set across the organisation, including independent reviewing officer(IRO) representation to encourage consideration and challenge on using FGCs at potential points of transition such as care planning reviews and as part of the process for Pathway Planning.

Inclusion of reunification in supervision and other regular agendas/processes .

Other attempts to spark off thinking and embed change have focused on inserting checks and pointers into standard processes such as supervision. In one local authority, meetings were held with the Looked After Children, Fostering and Permanency Services to discuss the inclusion of reunification discussions in the supervision agenda of supervising social workers and children and family social workers. It was found that generally, once children became looked-after, the focus tended to shift to the permanence arrangements away from family and that there was then limited or no exploration of the potential for reunification.

Providing challenge and support with planning and reviews. Review processes and the role of the IRO were identified as key areas of focus for a number of participants. One authority has prioritised the engagement of IROs as potential and essential drivers in any

change efforts, and this has been given a high level of attention. They have taken a number of steps to stimulate and embed change. They have:

- Identified a named IRO as part of the project to raise awareness amongst IROs and to help facilitate critical thinking and challenge about reunification.
- Completed a presentation to all managers/IROs on the issues with a view to following up three months later.
- Set up a working group that recognised the need for multi-agency engagement and support and are making progress on securing that.
- Identified a named social worker, with no caseload, within the Looked After Children team to specifically work with parents where the potential for reunification appears to be high.
- Started to identify families and, to begin with, selected a small number of families to start assessments where they will be using the NSPCC framework to determine whether or not reunification should be considered.

Culture change tools

There is a large range of tools which can be used to influence and realise culture change. For example, whilst the tool below was not used in this programme, it is one which we have used and found helpful in other practice development projects. It provides a template to help to break down what the local authority is trying to achieve, identify how it can be achieved, and give the staff a clear agenda and work programme to sign up to and crucially, to take responsibility for.

Culture change template

Culture change: what is the culture now, how do we want it to change, what will it look like when it has been achieved? Is it about colleagues' attitudes, beliefs, behaviour, practice? Or something else?

- Review: What is the picture? How big is it, and if it is too big to achieve in the time left on the project, how can we prioritise what's most important? It's OK to have the bigger ideas, but let's break it down into smaller chunks, leaving us with 1–3 SMART objectives.
- What needs to happen to set off a chain reaction that will lead to the realisation of the objectives set? E.g. Can we really change review practice in relation to return home

until we have our heads around care planning OR will a change in the practice around reviews trigger a change in the cultural understanding of what care planning is?

- And at a practical level, whom do we need to influence to ensure that the practical steps identified can be taken? At what level do they sit and who has influence with them?
- What are the different drivers/motivations for these people to change their practice so that the objectives can be realised? Is it inspection outcomes, performance reviews or something else? And which of these influencing factors can we hit as a project team?
- Looking at the priorities again, are there quick wins we can identify, to build up to the bigger picture? Which (if any) of the tasks emerging don't actually contribute to the agreed goal?
- Hearts and minds: Is it enough to tackle this through the current project structure or do we need to bring people from different sections and different levels together, including young people? Has everyone had their say (even if it can't be carried forward) and does everyone feel like they have had their say? Adults, like young people, need to know that someone has listened, even if they aren't the one to have had the idea that is eventually taken on.
- Who will facilitate some of this or support practitioners to do so?
- How will we ensure that there is a legacy after the end of the project, and embed the learning?

Reviewing progress post-implementation

The importance of continually reviewing, listening carefully and paying close attention to the messages and information coming back from attempts at implementation of initial ideas cannot be over-emphasised and was strongly stressed throughout.

There was an in-built expectation of each authority reporting back to peers on progress on action plans between sessions, and encouragement given to those listening to question, support, challenge respectfully and add ideas as appropriate. Report Back templates were provided for participants to log what had gone well, what hadn't and what had been learnt.

Example of a Report Back template

Date:

Local authority	
Actions agreed at actions learning set	
A very brief summary of progress on action plan since the last action learning set under headings: gone well, hasn't gone well, what we've learnt (bullet points)	

Table 3

Within each session, road maps and action plans were reviewed and updated as necessary.

Task : Reflecting on today's presentation and discussions:

- Consider whether there needs to be changes/amendments to the goals and road map and priorities.
- Are there new considerations that need to be made?
- Are you working on the right priorities?
- What would help take your plan to the next level?

5. Building and sustaining momentum for the longer term

It is generally accepted that while starting change might be problematic, the real challenge lies, not in starting, but in sustaining focus and momentum. We were mindful of this when designing the ALS programme, and so invited external speakers to present on key themes around content as well as process and tools/techniques to fold into and boost participants and our own resources and ideas.

Due to the timeframe for delivery, some of the topics for presenters had to be anticipated in advance but others were determined from participants' concerns and expectations. Thus the Department for Education Policy team provided input on existing and forthcoming policy, whilst the NSPCC provided input on their Taking Care project because participants were very keen to hear about developments elsewhere.

In recognition of the likely strategic concerns with costs and effectiveness, the team at the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University were invited to present on the 'Costs of Reunification'. Participants have subsequently been provided with updated information. Since the completion of the ALS programme, the Department for Education has published the Government response to the consultation on improving permanence:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/365091/Locked-after_children_improving_permanence_consultation_response.pdf

and since their presentation to the ALS, CCFR have published a report on their work:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/www/lboroacuk/content/ccfr/publications/Supporting%20children%20and%20families%20returning%20home%20from%20care.pdf>

As highlighted earlier, there was input from the Behavioural Insights Team at the Department of Health in anticipation of a concern with changing culture and behaviour. In addition, some participants also received input on coaching in social care contexts. Those who participated in the sessions on coaching were provided with a range of further information and tools, for example, ideas from coaching and a forcefield analysis tool¹² that could be adapted and applied to further stimulate change/overcome difficulties.

Additionally, within the ALS programme at all sessions except the first, review and planning had the theme of 'taking it to the next level'/'turning it up a notch', and we used

¹² Forcefield analysis: Approach developed by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and 1950s which involves the use of a diagram, into which can be plotted forces working for and against a change effort. Lewin, K (1951) Field Theory in Social Science, New York: Harper & Row.

a 'Dragons' Den'¹³ type format for feedback and challenge. In this context, following the review and updating of their road maps and plans, local authorities were paired up, with each taking it in turn to present their updated road map and vision to the other local authority, who then asked questions and provided challenge and ideas. The aim of this was to give the authority's plans a boost to see what would take it to the next level.

The sample task for the final action planning session in the programme is outlined below.

Task

Working in your local authority group:

- For the priority area you've been working on, agree up to six actions that you will take towards reaching your goal over the next six months.
- How will you make sure that you keep up the momentum and the challenge?
- Who do you need to recruit to support you?
- How can you challenge and support each other?

¹³ Dragons' Den is a reality television programme featuring entrepreneurs pitching their business ideas in order to secure investment from a panel of venture capitalists, the so-called "dragons". The dragons probe the idea further once the contestant has made the presentation.

Concluding observations

- The outcomes for children and young people who return home from care are poor. There has been an increase in policy focus on a national level and some areas are taking steps to prioritise this work.
- Peer support provides a valuable tool and mechanism for stimulating and sustaining change but requires visible endorsement as well as practical support.
- Creating supportive action learning environments within a local, regional or sub-regional area where peers learn from, and feel safe to, challenge each other can help to ensure that changes to practice are embedded and sustained through being seen as relevant, to and clearly anchored in, every-day practice.
- Working vertically, i.e. across tiers of managers and practitioners, can ensure that problems identified and actions taken are more widely shared – that strategic level changes are informed by practice reality and in turn, that policy rationale is understood. This in can create more dynamic and relevant solutions and a greater sense of ownership.
- Supported action learning sets across areas and peer groups or even across sub-regions or regions could provide the catalyst, and help to sustain the momentum.
- The services, interventions, skills and values (e.g. quality assessments which are analytical and rigorous, high intensity direct work with family, timely-decision-making) that typify effective practice in this area are not fundamentally different from those required for other areas of practice such as child protection and work with children and families on the edge of care. Therefore, reunification policy and practice has to be located in the wider context of all work with vulnerable children and families. Children and families experiencing reunification should have ongoing access to good quality services and practice skills as well as evidence-based interventions, thus increasing the likelihood for successful and sustainable positive outcomes.

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

improving.permanence@education.gsi.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus

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