

# Returning children home from care: learning from case reviews

Summary of key issues and learning for improving practice around returning children home from care

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## Introduction

This briefing highlights learning from a sample of case reviews published by local safeguarding partnerships between 2016 and 2023 where returning a child home from care was a key factor. These case reviews do not reflect the experiences of all children harmed following return to their families. Harm can go unidentified or unreported, and not all identified cases will result in a review.

**Guidance and legislation across the UK** makes it clear that children are best looked after within their families unless an intervention is needed to protect the child. So, if it's in the child's best interests, those with responsibility for children in care are expected to work towards returning children home to their families. This process is often known as 'family reunification' and is **the most common reason** why children leave care.

For many children, returning home from care is the best possible outcome. But research shows that for others this can result in further abuse or neglect (Holmes, 2014). Research commissioned by the independent review of children's social care identified a number of societal factors which impacted the chances of successful reunification, including family poverty, lack of community resources, financial uncertainty, poor housing and a shortage of universal services (Hood et al, 2022). The case reviews analysed in this briefing highlighted further factors which can affect a child's experience of returning home from care.

### Reasons case reviews were commissioned

Children in the case reviews analysed became the subject of case reviews following:

- physical abuse
- sexual abuse
- life threatening self-harm
- suspected suicide
- unexplained death of an infant
- death caused by a parent or carer

## Key issues

### Lack of robust assessment before deciding to return a child home

The case reviews demonstrated inconsistent practice around family reunification assessments. This led to a lack of clarity around the process and expectations for both families and professionals.

- Families sometimes faced confusion about the purpose and process of assessments. This was worsened by delays in initiating and completing them.
- The decision to return the child home was not always informed by a parenting assessment, and there wasn't always a formalised assessment of parenting capacity or the parents' relationship with the child.
- In some cases, the decision to return a child home was based partly on an assumption that the wider family would provide support to the parents in caring for the child. However, agencies did not always assess the capacity and suitability of these family members, nor did they reassess the situation if support was not provided as expected.
- Professionals sometimes assumed that the measures they had put in place to keep children safe and support families were working effectively. This meant they didn't always pick up on new and ongoing risks to the child.
- Professionals sometimes made an over-optimistic assessment of parents' capacity to care for their children based on observations of their parenting during supervised contact or whilst receiving intensive support from services.

### Ineffective action to address parent difficulties

Children were sometimes returned to parents who were dealing with a range of unresolved difficulties including a lack of parenting skills, mental health problems, domestic abuse and alcohol or drug use. Without addressing these difficulties there was a significant risk of further abuse and neglect once children returned to the family home.

- The impact of concerns such as the parent's mental health problems, attitudes towards parenting, and lack of cooperation with services were not always fully explored before reunification.
- Professionals did not take a consistent approach to involving both parents in planning and decision making.

- In some cases, one parent was seen as the sole, or main, source of concerns. This obscured potential risks posed by the other parent.
- Reunification plans sometimes relied on parents voluntarily engaging with adult services. When parents weren't able to maintain these commitments, it posed significant challenges to reunification.

## Ineffective action to address risks and vulnerabilities experienced by children

The difficulties experienced by children weren't always tackled before they were returned home from care. This included exposure to extra-familial risks.

- When protecting adolescents from extra-familial risks, professionals sometimes focused solely on removing the child from risky situations and didn't also work with the child to help them recognise abusive situations and talk about what had happened to them.
- Child mental health concerns were not always highlighted, and the risk of self-harm following reunification was sometimes underestimated.
- Unresolved issues around education, including low attendance, school exclusion or a lack of school spaces, affected the success of reunification.
- A lack of suitable placements resulted in a loss of focus on options outside the family home.
- In some cases, there was insufficient attention paid to the child's role as a young carer within the family and how this would impact reunification.

## Listening to the voice of the child

Children weren't always involved in planning for family reunification, and their hopes and fears weren't always listened to or understood.

- When children were sent back to their family after making a disclosure of abuse, they sometimes felt that they hadn't been believed.
- Children were sometimes returned home quickly without proper checks or work to rebuild the parent-child relationship. This risked eroding the child's confidence in adults' ability to keep them safe, impacted their adjustment to the change, and left some children feeling frustrated and isolated.
- In some cases, decisions around returning a child to a family, focused on the behaviour, demands and challenges of the adult carers, and did not fully consider the child's vulnerabilities, needs, wishes and feelings.
- Sometimes efforts to build a positive relationship with parents led to professionals focusing on the wishes of the parents, to the detriment of the best interests of the child.
- Parents were sometimes allowed to dominate discussions about reunification, and children's voices and views weren't always heard.
- There was sometimes insufficient thought given to the impact of the child returning home after a period of separation and what this might mean for the child's relationship with their family.

### Lack of use or understanding of legal powers

In some cases, there was misunderstanding about the legal powers of professionals and a lack of confidence in challenging other professionals' decisions.

- When a parent refused to work with children's social care following reunification, professionals sometimes felt they had run out of options to intervene.
- A judge's decision to reunite the family against the advice of social work professionals, sometimes left social workers believing they had lost their authority to intervene to safeguard the child.

## Difficulties sharing information between relevant agencies

Information about children and their families wasn't always effectively recorded or shared. This meant appropriate action wasn't always taken to prevent harm to the child following reunification or to offer effective support during the reunification process.

- Failures of information sharing across geographic boundaries meant that appropriate assessments weren't always undertaken, and support wasn't provided for reunification.
- Sometimes not everyone in the professional network was made aware of the child's return home. This meant that vital information held by other agencies was sometimes missed.
- Agencies sometimes worked in isolation and had no joint plan to support the family. The absence of collective responsibility meant that when there were differences of opinion, decisions were sometimes delayed.
- There was sometimes a lack of challenge to decisions made by other agencies during reunification.

## Lack of planning and support during and after the process of returning a child home

Children and families were not provided with the support they needed, when they needed it, to achieve successful reunification.

- Family members weren't always meaningfully prepared or supported to take on the caring role needed for successful reunification.
- There wasn't always an effective system in place to respond, help or protect children returned home from care who were being criminally exploited outside the home, nor was there an effective support system in place for their families.

- There wasn't always a process in place for how to respond if parents breached working agreements or the conditions set out in child protection plans. This meant concerns weren't always responded to or escalated appropriately to mitigate risk.

## Learning for improving practice

The case reviews identified ways to improve social work practice which would have an impact on family reunification practice and permanence planning.

### **Thorough assessments of risk, protective factors, and parental capacity to change**

Assessments should consider the risks posed to a child, how much parents are able to change, and their ability to protect the child from harm.

- Professionals need to be both curious and challenging when reuniting families.
- Clear information about fathers or significant male figures should be included in assessments before reunification. This should include: the nature of the parental relationships, the relationship with the child, the part men play in the care of the child, and any observations about parenting capacity.
- Previous assessments to decide the level of parental contact a child received whilst in care should be used to inform the full parenting assessment needed for reunification.
- Where criminal exploitation is suspected, professionals should consider what steps need to be put in place to support the child's physical and psychological safety on reunification.
- Understanding the nature of domestic abuse and impact on the child is essential for assessing the risks of reunification.

- During reunification, professionals can find it challenging to work with parents who present as resistant and hostile. This increases the importance of staying focussed on the child and assessing the potential risk to the child of abuse or neglect.

### Clear preparation for return of the child

It is important to return the child home gradually and put in place plans for what needs to happen before and after the child returns home, and what will happen if the return is not going well.

- Families need to know, understand, and participate in decision making and planning when a child returns home. Wherever possible this should involve both parents.
- The agencies involved in supporting the child and their family should have a meeting to reassess the family situation and discuss the risk assessment and plan before a child is returned home from care.

### Sharing information and working with professionals in other agencies

Foster carers, residential care staff, schools and professionals in other agencies all have a significant role to play in supporting children and parents throughout the reunification process. Practitioners need to be aware of the need for multi-agency collaboration and ensure information is shared between professionals in a timely manner.

- During reunification, all practitioners should consider all the information that is known about the family, whether extra support is needed, and other ways to engage with the family.



- Timely and effective information sharing is essential when a child comes into care; moves placement, area or school; has a change in professional involvement; or is reunited with their family.
- When care proceedings are withdrawn or there is an unexpected outcome from a court case, the local authority should convene a multi-agency meeting to share information.
- Where multiple agencies are involved in reunification there is a need for clarity about roles, responsibilities and accountability.

## Supporting the child and family before and after return

It's important to provide support and services for the child and their family before and after the return home to help strengthen the relationship and protect the child from harm.

- A balance must be struck between the child's wishes and their need to be kept safe from significant harm when returning to the community.
- When a child is moving back into an area, there needs to be communication between all parts of the education system to ensure that information is shared, and that appropriate education provision is in place.
- If a child will be taking on caring responsibilities when they return home from care, they should receive support as a young carer. This support should not be reliant on the consent of their parents.
- Children returning to their families need to receive timely and specialist support for any identified concerns, such as vulnerability to exploitation, substance misuse, and self-harm.
- To ensure a successful reunification, a 'Think Family' approach should be adopted, looking at the whole family network, providing support tailored to their needs, and building on family strengths.
- When returning a child to a community where they have suffered criminal exploitation, professionals need to look beyond a narrow focus on resilience

work or relationship building with the child. There should also be an emphasis on locating and disrupting the networks that are causing the harm in the first place.

### Good monitoring of the child before, during and after the return

Monitoring how the child and their family are doing, and adjusting the support provided to take account of changing circumstances is a vital part of successful reunification.

- Professionals should be aware of the potential impact of the upheaval of reunification on a child's attendance at school. Support should be provided to children absent or missing from education.
- When monitoring reunited families, professionals need to keep clear records of what they are observing and their professional opinions.

## Learning from previous case reviews

Additional findings from previous analysis of case reviews published between 2010 and 2015.

- A transition period should be provided to allow both the child and carer to adjust to the move home. This should include a period of increased contact so professionals can monitor how the parents cope with the pressure of assuming more responsibility for caring for their child.
- Returning a child to their birth family shouldn't automatically result in the closure of a case. All children returning home from care should be considered Children in Need for a suitable period of time following a return home.

## References and resources

Holmes, L. (2014) **Supporting children and families returning home from care: counting the costs.** [London]: NSPCC.

<<https://cirqa.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C5206>>

Hood, R. et al (2022) **Improving the chances of successful reunification for children who return home from care: a rapid evidence review.** [Accessed 12/01/2024].

<<https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-report/improving-the-chances-of-successful-reunification-for-children-who-return-home-from-care-a-rapid-evidence-review/>>

Guidance and legislation across the UK is set out in our pages on the **child protection system in the UK**

<<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system>>

Statistics on the most common reasons why children leave care are included in our **Looked after children statistics briefing.**

<<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/looked-after-children>>

A **list of the case reviews** analysed for this briefing is available on the NSPCC Library Catalogue.

<<https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/retrieve2?SetID=C4359092-8290-451C-B3E0-10BDCFD09631&DataSetName=LIVEDATA>>

You can also visit the **national case review repository** to search the most comprehensive collection of case reviews in the UK.

<[nspcc.org.uk/repository](https://nspcc.org.uk/repository)>

You can find out more on [learning from case reviews](#) on a range of related issues by browsing our full suite of briefings.

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