Permanence And Care Excellence (PACE): Background, Approach and Evidence

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Introduction

Background to the Permanence and Care Excellence programme

When a child is removed from their birth family there is rarely initial agreement that the separation will be permanent; instead, most children experience a period of uncertainty while decisions are made about their future care[i]. Such uncertainty can be prolonged. Children often move through a series of temporary placements with different carers, or may be reunited with their parents before being removed into care again[ii]. Late separation and disruption of attachments formed during alternative care-giving relationships can have a profound effect on the development and wellbeing of those children in their childhoods and for their future. Recent Scottish research drew attention to extended timescales in achieving permanence for children and highlighted drift and delay in decision-making processes as problematic[iii].

The Scottish Government responded to these concerns by commissioning CELCIS to develop a whole systems change programme to be delivered in partnership with local areas. The Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme has evolved to support multi-agency partners rise to the challenge of ensuring that every child should have a stable home that offers them nurturing relationships as early as possible. Using a whole systems approach, PACE is focused on supporting evidence-informed sustainable improvement in systems, process and practices critical to good permanence practice.

The policy context

In policy, 'permanence' is defined as providing children with a stable, secure, nurturing relationship and home, where possible within a family setting, which continues into adulthood[iv]. There are a range of different routes to achieving permanence and the most appropriate route will depend on the needs and circumstances of a child and their family. These include:

- Returning or remaining at home where family functioning has improved. This may require ongoing support for a child, parents and the family as a whole.

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- A permanence order for a child who is living in kinship care, foster care or residential care
- A kinship care order
- Adoption

The PACE approach to facilitating change in local areas

The PACE Programme follows the approach outlined in *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational Performance[v].* It involves bringing together key stakeholders to analyse how the system to be changed is operating in the local context. It allows us to establish a 'process map' that can be used as a reference for developmental work towards the ideal system in the local context, and which, when considered along with data, provides a helpful picture of the issues that are causing blockage at any point and those that are working well.

Stakeholders agree aims, based on an analysis of their local data, and decide upon tests of change using PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles to trial and evaluate change. The programme is further strengthened by drawing on the evidence base related to permanence work and also knowledge about what works in implementation to drive and sustain change.

Within PACE, the powerful impact of whole system partnership working cannot be over emphasised. The 'guiding coalition' of a governance group comprising heads of service and senior managers from each stakeholder agency spearheads the most effective PACE partnerships. Our learning to date from PACE is that the greater the 'buy in' from each corporate parenting agency, the greater the impact and potential improvement in drift and delay.

About this paper

This paper combines an overview of research evidence and illustrations from the PACE programme, to date, to assist prospective participants to understand the impetus for the programme and its role in achieving improvement in service planning, processes and practice with children and families. It is organized around themes that likely need to be addressed to have maximum impact on improving permanence outcomes for looked after children.

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Early assessment and intervention

The challenge

It is crucial to identify difficulties and intervene early when children's needs are not being met, and risk of harm is likely to increase. The evidence is clear on the need to be proactive in working with families to minimize the potential impacts of neglect and abuse[vi], and/or put in place pathways towards reunification with family or alternative caring relationships on a permanent basis. Analysis of that assessment information must integrate wider knowledge of the environmental and relational conditions that interact to promote, or impair, children's development with *evidence* of an individual child's experiences of caregiving and their environment, and the potential for that to improve with appropriate support. Sufficient change must occur within a timeframe critical to that child's immediate and long-term development and wellbeing.

Evidence from research

Research evidence would suggest improvements can be made through a focus on the following areas:

- Clarifying the *multi-agency* task when a child becomes looked after or looked after and accommodated.
- Gathering information from and about children and families using a range of methods as part of day-to-day practice in social work, health and education services, and sharing it in a holistic assessment process[vii].
- Evaluating the occurrence of factors that often coalesce to create risks to children, as well as paying attention to those that are protective for children and families[viii]. In particular, how different issues intersect to: affect parenting capability, substantially increase the risk of exposure to neglect or abuse for a child, and impair parents' capacity for change[ix].
- Recognising that the occurrence of neglect and abuse in infancy has a particularly pernicious effect, due to its impact on neurobiological development and the attachment process[xxi], while also recognizing it can be harmful when experienced at any stage of childhood and adolescence[xii].
- Delivering interventions that are likely to be effective in improving parents' capacity to change and to increase their capability in caring for their

children. This work needs to begin as early as possible after the risk of harm is identified in order to ensure that parents have the best opportunities to make necessary changes within a child's timeframe[xiii].

- Using concurrent planning to allow for work towards reunification in parallel with preparing for alternative permanent care for a child, when it is necessary to separate children from parents while more focused work is undertaken[xiv].

- Making judgements and decisions that are informed by the use of standard measures to strengthen professional intuition and experience.

Acting on the evidence in partnership with the PACE team

One local authority area identified that critical decision making processes – involving social work and Children's Hearings – were working in sequence rather than parallel and resulted in increased timescales for reaching a permanence decision. Following a test of change all children under the age of three are now automatically referred to the Reporter on the date they are accommodated.

Another area identified that processes allowed a timeframe of one month for the return of valued legal review and advice on completed assessments/plans, meaning that assessments were completed but not actioned for a four-week period. Following a series of small tests, local authority solicitors agreed to commit to more immediate deadlines for advice, which resulted in the removal of this four weeks of delay in the decision-making process.

Another area mapped the timescales involved in decision making for children aged from birth to three years old. This audit highlighted significant delay in the assessment process and the area has now agreed a deadline of 40 days for the completion of all assessments involving 0-3 year olds.

Recommended wider reading

H. Ward, R.Brown and G. Hyde-Dryden (2014) "*Assessing Parental Capacity to Change when Children are on the Edge of Care: an overview of current research evidence*" can be obtained at*: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/330332/RR369_Assessing_parental_capacity_to_change_Final.pdf

Gerhardt, S. (2004) "*Why Love Matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain*". Routledge, London and New York

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Donald, T., and Jureidini, J. (2004), Parenting capacity. *Child Abuse Rev.*, 13: 5–17. doi: 10.1002/car.827

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Family contact

The challenge

Family contact between children and their birth parents during a period of separation is an abiding legal and practice concern for professionals and lay members involved in making decisions about child and family life. Given what we know about attachment and separation, and the impact of experiences of neglect and abuse, decisions about the occurrence, nature and support for contact are critical to the welfare and wellbeing of children. Attention to parental rights and wellbeing is also important. Detailed consideration and clarity of the purposes of contact at all stages of planning for separated children is complex and critical.

Evidence from research

Research evidence can help to improve knowledge and skills in:

- Integrating key principles into assessment and planning for contact between separated children and their relatives, including parents, siblings and extended family. Contact is a dynamic process that needs to change and adapt within certain principles – that contact should not compound the harm a child has already suffered, it should promote their wellbeing and self-esteem, and it should attend to harm already experienced. More contact does not necessarily mean better quality or increase a parent's chance of making the necessary changes.
- Improving practice around facilitating and structuring contact between children and parents, or other relatives depending on the circumstances of separation.
- Drawing on and analyzing evidence from periods of contact as part of focused and robust assessments of children's needs, parenting capability to meet those needs, and why there might be a gap between parental capability and the child's needs.
- Recognising the risks and limitations in our understanding of the use of contact as part of work to support a child's return home to live with their parents, and its effects for children who are separated in the longer term.
- Taking account of the place of contact for children at different ages and stages, with particular experiences, and living in particular circumstances. Needs are likely to differ for babies/infants[xv] [xvi]and adolescents; for children and young who have experienced neglect and abuse, or domestic abuse; for children living in kinship care, foster care, residential care or adopted.

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Acting on the evidence in partnership with the PACE team

Our partners are universally[xvii] concerned about decision-making regarding contact. Social workers and the multi-agency partners describe:

- A lack of clarity as to the purpose and level of contact
- Difficulty in articulating arguments for reducing or stopping contact
- A lack of knowledge by decision-makers about the impact of contact on child development
- Confusion about the nature and application of the law as a tool to get the best outcomes for children.

In PACE we have delivered in different areas:

- Learning sessions for panel members to inform them about the high degree of multi-agency process and practice that goes into decision-making. This was revelatory to some of them.
- Tests using family and agency contacts at the start of an intervention setting out the aims and purpose of an assessment of parental capacity, including the purpose of contact. This has a been reported on positively by workers and families
- Practice advice on the key principles of contact and recent research on the subject for staff training sessions. This has now been incorporated into that area's training plan for 2016.

Recommended wider reading

Adams, P. (2012) *"Planning for Contact in Permanent Placements"*. London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

"Coram Practice Note 2: Infancy Contact Research. Intensive contact with birth parents: implications for the emotional development of infants and young people placed in foster care" can be obtained at: http://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource_files/24%20Practice%20Note%202%20-%20Infancy%20contact_2010.pdf

Humphreys, C., and Kiraly, M. (2010) Developmentally sensitive parental contact for infants when families are separated. *Family Matters*, No.85, Australian Institute of Family Studies: https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm85f.pdf

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Confident and timely decisions

The challenge

It is not possible to predict how long it will take for struggling parents to develop sufficient capacity to meet their children's needs. It is however evident that it is unlikely to happen quickly, that the process of change is likely to be lengthy, and that setbacks are common. It can be challenging for parents with multiple intersecting problems to accept the need for change and to engage with services. Intensive interventions can take several weeks to deliver and are often followed by further follow-up. Relapse is also common[xviii]. For some children, there is only a short window of opportunity in which actions can be taken to ensure children's longer-term development and wellbeing are protected. Delays in decision-making shut off those opportunities.[xix] For these reasons, decision-making in permanence processes[xx] - with a need to focus on reducing drift and delay - has been identified by the Scottish Government as a priority area.

Poor planning means that children can experience sudden changes in circumstances when arrangements need to be altered,[xxi] while more timely decision making can ensure that changes are planned for and allow children to enter their permanent placements as early as possible.[xxii] In addition, a shortage of placements can make it tempting to put off permanent placement until an 'ideal' placement can be found. This often results in rushed placements at a time of crisis, which are then not prioritized for a move to more appropriate permanent placements.[xxiii]

Evidence from research

Research evidence[xxiv] highlights the importance of:

- Paying attention to child development, crucially attachment and the importance of working to a child's timeframe.
- Ensuring that decisions made focus on the relative costs and benefits to the child, and ensuring that child welfare rather than resources are at the heart of decision making

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- Understanding the intersection between the timescales that parents need to engage with and benefit from support, and the timing and duration of experiences of neglect and abuse for children.
- Recognising the limitations of professional observation and clinical judgements in predicting future behaviour and opportunities for strengthening this with standardized actuarial instruments[xxv]
- Appraising how, and in what circumstances, parents are able to overcome neglectful or abusive behavior patterns that place their children at risk of significant harm.
- Recognising what facilitates the establishment of and sustainability of alternative, positive caregiving relationships for children throughout their childhood, when they are needed.
- Involving birth parents in decision making in order to promote engagement and acceptance of decisions.[xxvi]

Acting on the evidence in partnership with the PACE team

In one area, a test for change involves the establishment of a new 'permanence planning meeting'. This meeting facilitates planning in advance of Looked After Child (LAC) reviews and legal advice meetings. They are chaired by a social work champion (in this case the Fostering and Adoption Service Manager) who agrees roles and responsibilities of the workers involved, and sets meeting dates and timescales for assessments. Feedback from workers suggests that this is a positive development, and initial tests suggest that this early planning has contributed to improved timescales for reaching a permanence decision.

In other local authorities support has been offered to social workers with assessment and report writing skills to improve the quality of information available to decision makers and further evidence recommendations made on behalf of children throughout their permanence journey.

The research into the best timescale for a child is mixed and depends on age, stage, and circumstances. The important thing for the PACE programme is that where decisions take longer than the designated aim, it will be a purposeful and proactive decision based on the child's circumstances and best interest, not because the system inhibits timely decision making. Consequently, local authority areas do not define outcome aims that state 100% as the desirable achievement.

Recommended wider reading

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Ward, H., R.Brown and G. Hyde-Dryden (2014) *"Assessing Parental Capacity to Change when Children are on the Edge of Care: an overview of current research evidence"* can be obtained
at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/330332/RR369_Assessing_parental_capacity_to_change_Final.pdf

Fostering and Adoption (2014) *"Impacts of and Avoidance of Delay in Decision Making*" can be obtained
at: http://fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/topics/decision-making/

Henderson, A., Hanson, G., Kurlus, I., Hunt, M., Laing, A. (2015) *"Permanence Planning and Decision Making for Looked After Children in Scotland: Supplementary Report – Children identified as at risk at or before birth"*. The Scottish Government. Can be obtained at: http://www.scra.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Permanence-research-supplementary-report-1.pdf

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Leadership and culture

The challenge

Providing leadership in the contemporary context of drift and delay in permanence challenges management at all levels. In the context of institutional reform and change this leadership becomes paramount[xxvii]. Research has shown that the financial situation has little impact on drift and delay for children, but that leadership does[xxviii]. Clear and empowering leadership is necessary to influence positive change in services and processes to ensure improvements are ingrained into everyday work. These changes to practice and organizational culture require that managers at all levels handle the change carefully in order to minimize damage and maximize improvements[xxix].Child abuse enquiries have noted the dangers for children already at risk of harm during periods of organizational change in multi-agency networks[xxx], and the role of managers in making the change as safe, smooth, and fast as possible is critical. Ensuring that the complexity of the change is acknowledged, and that people issues, such as the anxiety that change can cause are sensitively supported to reduce the risk of adverse effects for service users'[xxxi].

Evidence from research

Research evidence would suggest improvements can be made through a focus on the following areas:

- 'Transformational leadership'; identifying the challenge, creating a vision of the change that is necessary and executing a plan to effect the change required[xxxii].
- The key leadership skills for social work: management skills, communication skills, systems thinking and conveying passion[xxxiii].
- Adapting organisational culture to effect change[xxxiv].
- Effectively working with others, building relationships, encouraging contributions from others, and working within teams[xxxv].
- Managing the tensions between top-down pressures for change, and professional collegiality and resistance to change[xxxvi]
- Ensuring that the change is as positive as possible for staff, while ensuring and handling the change in a collaborative, constructive manner.

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Acting on the evidence in partnership with the PACE team

Early on in the process, the PACE programme begins a dialogue with heads of service in organisations, holding multi-agency meetings of senior leaders to develop strong governance arrangements: this acts as a 'guiding coalition' of staff who act as the message carrier, leaders, supporters, and driving force behind the programme. We then ask agencies to identify their own champions (our guiding coalition) who will drive the work forward. They meet fortnightly for three months to continue to develop the work begun at the two-day workshop. The champions are the focus of improvement for their particular part of the work and the conduit through which information should travel back to their own organisations about the work of the programme

The two-day stakeholder launch event fosters the development of a local vision for permanence and a target improvement aim related to current baseline data. This leads into mapping of current processes and the design and implementation of tests of change. Advice is offered and provided around design of data collection and analysis techniques to enable best measures of improvement.

One authority has established a sub-group of experienced social workers to provide a series of short workshops on knowledge, skills and the application of research in practice. They are carrying out a test of change on decision making for children looked after on a compulsory supervision order. This will support the mentoring less experienced social workers in their decision making and recommendation prior to the next looked after children reviews.

Recommended wider reading

Kotter, J. P. (2012) *"Leading Change"*, Harvard Business Review Press

The National Skills Academy for Social Care (2014) *"The Leadership Qualities Framework"* can be obtained at: http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Leadership-and-management/Leadership-Qualities-Framework/Leadership-Qualities-Framework.pdf

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Tracking progress using data

The challenge

Tracking the progress of children undergoing permanence processes is critical if we are to know whether improvements are being made. The effective tracking and monitoring of timescales has been highlighted as a key task in driving timely progress of cases, while research on evidence-based service planning highlights the importance of tracking for continuous improvement[xxxvii]. There are challenges to implementing monitoring criteria. The use of tracking to inform decision-making and promote the safety, permanence and wellbeing of children requires that measurement is flexible, and integrates local context, values, and priorities.[xxxviii] Local authorities who use case tracking systems have been found to be more likely to reduce the risk of significant delay.[xxxix]

Evidence from research

Research evidence can help to improve knowledge and skills in:

- System mapping to establish the key stages in the journey of a child through permanence processes
- Identifying the right things to measure to make sure that you know where the blockages lie, or whether a change is causing improvement
- Analysing tracking data to demonstrate changes as a result of innovations or changes introduced.
- Identifying data that allow you to evidence if change has occurred
- Documenting and disseminating the results of Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles as part of an effort to improve services

Acting on the evidence in partnership with the PACE team

Data can first be used to see where drift and delay are occurring in a system. The Scottish Government has recently added a set of indicators to the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) return which relate to permanence processes. These will be comparable across Scotland, but also provide an opportunity for authorities to examine their performance between particular milestones. Locally, these can be used more frequently than the annualized returns to monitor

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improvements, and enable authorities to both begin to identify areas that require improvement, and later to demonstrate whether improvements are being made.

Alongside the 'high level' CLAS return data, it will be important for authorities to develop data that reflects their local challenges and improvements. Observation is the basic element of tracking and monitoring, but it is easy to misinterpret individual observations. For this reason, it is important to identify what data to collect in order to measure improvement[xl]. Selecting the right data to collect requires that you have a specific question to answer. Developing these questions in relation to permanence processes requires knowledge and understanding of the local context and processes, as well as principles of measurement. Getting this combination right, and consistently tracking the progress of children undergoing permanence processes, means that data is collected that reflects the reality on the ground, and can be used to demonstrate improvements as they occur.

The PACE delivery team operates an internal PDSA cycle that informs how we work in each PACE site, and to inform our practice as we move into partnership working with each new PACE authority. It is our aim to have outcomes measures which assess progress against the main aim. This data should capture information to tell us if the changes we are making to the system – defined in our driver diagram relating to a specific aim – are having the effect we want. In addition we seek to capture process measures - the improvement due to specific changes - and also balancing measures, to allow us to see if we are adversely affecting other children or services, by focusing attention or resource on a particular area.

For example, areas collate and regularly analyse key milestone dates on the journey to permanence. Data is collected to evaluate individual tests of change designed to contribute to achievement of an aim, and to measure achievement of the aim itself. One area's aim is to have 95% of decisions on a child's destination made within 6 months of the child being accommodated; it has incorporated key milestone dates into the core social work information system to allow tracking and analysis with increased visibility.

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Bauer, M. S., Damschroder, L., Hagedorn, H., Smith, J., & Kilbourne, A. M. (2015) *"An introduction to implementation science for the non-specialist"*. BMC Psychology 32(3) can be obtained

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Provost, L. P., and Murray, S. K., (2011) *"The Health Care Data Guide: Learning from Data for Improvement"* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, Wiley Publishers.

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