

New Ofsted report highlights need to get matching right

While recruiting enough foster carers to meet demand is vital, more could be done to make sure matches with children are successful, new Ofsted research finds.

The shortage of foster carers is one of the most significant challenges in making successful matches for children, the report shows, particularly when finding homes for groups of brothers and sisters, disabled children and teenagers. Local authorities and fostering agencies often have a limited choice, balancing what is ideal for a child with what is available.

Ofsted's study highlights the importance of getting foster matches right for children's futures, as well as keeping foster carers in the system. When matches fail, they cause more distress for children who have already faced trauma and disruption in their lives. Placement breakdowns can also lead to foster carers taking a break or deciding to stop fostering altogether.

Today's report finds room for improvement beyond recruitment. While researchers saw examples of good work to match children with the right foster carers, there was little in the way of wider organisational learning from successful matches.

Chemistry lies at the heart of a good match, but researchers found that this isn't down to luck. This 'magic' can be built through good practice that encourages relationships to flourish.

The best matches happen when a child's individual needs, as well as the skills and experience of foster carers, are properly understood. Taking children's wishes into account and making them feel part of the process is vital. While matches are often made in emergencies, there is more that professionals can do to give placements the best chance of success.

Today's report sets out the elements of a good match, including:

- Making sure children feel 'heard': children told researchers that they don't always feel involved in decisions and plans about where they are going to live. When they can say what they want, they don't always believe that their views make a difference to what happens.
- Good information sharing: giving children the information they need about potential carers is vital, as is making sure that foster carers know everything that they need to know about a child. The best referrals give full and balanced descriptions of children and represent their wishes and feelings.

- Involving birth families and previous carers: professionals recognised that more could be done to involve birth families in matching decisions. Similarly, more could be done to involve previous foster carers and to support their lasting relationships with children.
- Recognising foster carers as professionals: foster carers who felt empowered and confident in their role as part of a wider professional team are typically more likely to ask for additional information about children than carers who feel undervalued or less confident.

Yvette Stanley, Ofsted's National Director for Social Care, said:

Successful matches aren't down to chance. Our research shows that chemistry isn't always about luck – it's something that can be developed through strong practice. When a match is built on solid foundations, it has more chance of succeeding and giving children the love, stability and future that they deserve.

Above all, children need to feel as though they have a say in what is happening to them. Going to live with people who are often complete strangers is an enormous step for any child. Their needs and wishes should – as much as possible – be at the heart of decision-making.

Ofsted researchers visited 4 local authorities and spoke to children, foster carers and social workers. They spoke to representatives from independent fostering agencies (IFAs), birth parents, as well as carrying out national online surveys of children in care, care leavers and current foster carers.