

Bringing Stability to Children's Placements

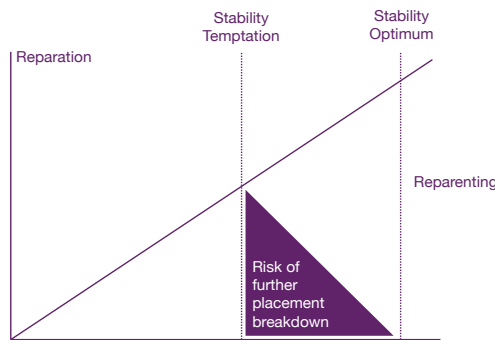
When the Minister released details about instability of foster placements recently, few of us were surprised, albeit still saddened, at what was revealed. The information identified that thousands of children are moved from one family placement to another as, presumably, inappropriate matching or lack of carer skill failed to give the young people the security and stability they so deserved. So why does the new legislation still seem to pay such little regard for the real difference that residential care can make in bringing about those vital aspects of any placement?

Part of the problem is that so many placement moves are judged to be because of the child's inability to "bond" with their placement. Whereas, it is more likely, that Looked After Children have such complex and challenging needs (needs that led to them coming into care in the first place), that their behaviours or demands are beyond that which could reasonably be expected for any family placement to cope with.

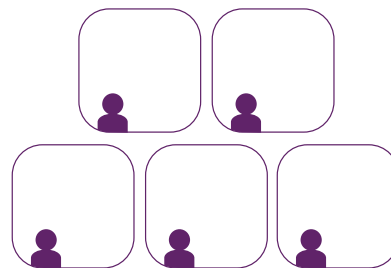
That is where specialist residential homes can bring about significant change. The main difference being that whilst re-parenting and nurturing are the basics in residential care, reparation of the child's issues are also much more likely to be dealt with by staff trained in a range of intervention skills.

The improvement can sometimes be noticeable and quick and that is where a temptation is introduced. The first diagram illustrates how placing authorities can see the significant improvement, and this then provides them with a perceived opportunity to perhaps end the placement. There are usually two drivers to this: the first is the genuine wish for the child to be in a family living situation, the second being budget driven. However, the risk in giving in to the temptation is that the young person has only just learnt how to behave; it is too soon to assume this behavioural adjustment has

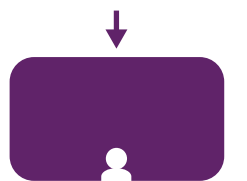
been consolidated into a change of personality. The diagram below illustrates how allowing a longer period in placement helps bring about that consolidation and assists in a successful transition to family living.



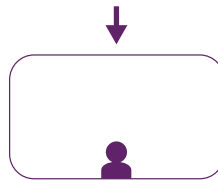
One such home which specialises in this work to prepare young people for successful family living after multiple foster placement breakdowns is northerncare's The Willows.



Five foster placements in less than a year



One placement at The Willows for 24 months



One foster placement for 2 years +

A similar approach, but with different outcome requirements, needs to be applied in other areas of specialist need, for example, harmful sexual behaviour. The outcome needs to be community integration and outreach support, as often the stability temptation moment is driven by a chronological milestone of the young person turning 16 or 18. An additional problem is the hard to access adult services for such young adults.

northerncare work with these young people in specialist residential settings, to build up confidence, trust and mobility within a framework of risk assessment. The young person develops their own "extended family" from within and receives all the support necessary to secure a college place or employment and, ultimately, their own accommodation. They continue to be managed within a behaviour risk assessment programme until a new lifestyle and personal support community is established. As illustrated by the diagram below, the time to look at moving on from the placement may be sooner than what the placing authority may have expected, but the "move on" is with support rather than being discharged because of placement end.

