

# Expression of interest

# LONGITUDINAL STUDY: TRACKING THE NEEDS, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN LEAVING CARE THROUGH PERMANENCE OR SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP

**Project reference: DFERPPU/20-21/002**

**Deadline for expressions of interest: 11.59pm on Tuesday 20th April 2021**

## Summary

Expressions of interest are sought to undertake a large-scale longitudinal research study to investigate the needs, experiences and outcomes of children who have left care on an Adoption Order (AO) and Special Guardianship Order (SGO). The Department wishes this study to be a seminal piece of research that provides a detailed understanding of the complexity that lies behind outcomes for children and young people leaving care permanently, how these affect and impact on a full range of outcomes, how these change over time, and how they vary between different routes to permanence.

## Background

Adoption and Special Guardianship are both routes into permanence for children who the courts have decided can no longer live with their birth parents. An adoption order is made by the court giving full parental responsibility for a child to the adopter/s; the relationship with the birth parent is legally severed. A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is a legal order where the court appoints a carer, usually a relative, as the ‘Special Guardian’ of a child until they turn 18.

Published data shows that adoptions from care continues to fall. In 2019-20 adoptions fell by 4% to 3,440: and down from a peak of 5,360 in 2015. The number of children leaving care on an SGO had been increasing to 3,870 in 2018-19, however there was a decrease of 4% to 3,700 in 2019-20. In 2019-20 12% of children left care with a SGO (13% in 2018-19), similar for children with an adoption order (12% in 2018-19 and 2019-20). Data on looked after, and previously looked after, children also shows that their outcomes tend to be poorer[[1]](#footnote-1).

Previous research[[2]](#footnote-2) has highlighted high levels of social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties faced by children following such placements. Parents faced difficulty in accessing services, disputes over funding, and eligibility criteria that excluded adopted children. Whilst there were examples of good practice the research also found wide variations in the support offered, with an on-going need for support to address children’s challenging behaviour, particularly as families were having difficulty accessing children’s mental health services (CAMHS). This research has also shown that disruption rates are low for children adopted, and breakdown rates lower for SGO than AO. However, as SGOs have only been available since 2005 the research was unable to investigate thoroughly the rate of SGO disruptions that may occur during adolescence.

## Evaluation aims

The **aim of this research** is to provide an updated understanding of the needs, experiences and long-term outcomes for children leaving care through these routes. It will build and expand on the available body of evidence. In particular, it will seek to track children and young people after their adoption or SGO to understand their experiences over time. This new evidence will be used to review existing policy that seeks to improve their outcomes and life chances of these young people/children and support their families.

The **objectives** of the research are to:

* To support improved outcomes for children by improving our understanding of the complexity of factors, and core elements, that affect and influence the support needs and outcomes of children and their adoptive families and special guardians; how these change over time, by age, circumstances, and other factors such as contact with birth families.
* Assess the long-term outcomes of children placed under these orders, for at least five years after the SGO and AO are made, and particularly into adolescence.
* Identify key issues in local authority and Regional Adoption Agency practice in relation to SGOs and adoptions such as professionals’ and practitioners’ understanding of the experiences and support needs of the children and families.
* Improve decision making by local authorities and courts on permanency options for those children who cannot return home to live with their birth parents.

The key **research questions** are:

* What are the needs and experiences and long-term outcomes of children placed via these legal orders? What differences, if any, are there between them, and how do these change over time – accounting for different characteristics of children?
* What life events, childhood experiences and/ or circumstances impact of the well-being and health of children throughout their life, and after the have been removed from traumatic circumstances? What impact do they have on outcomes? What are the long-term impacts of multiple adverse childhood experiences on the wellbeing and health of children throughout their life, after they have been removed from traumatic circumstances?
* What are the needs and experiences of SGO and adoptive families? How do these differ between special guardians and adopters? What are the key factors that affect these and how do these change over time?
* What are the factors and/ or triggers that place stress on adoptive parents and SGO carers and their families? At what points do these occur and what impact do they have?
* What is the role of schools and multi-agency partners in supporting outcomes for previously looked after children? What impact are support provisions in schools, such as pupil premium plus or access to VSH support, having on outcomes?

## Methodology

This study aims to provide robust quantitative evidence on families and children leaving care on a permanent route, based on tracking their experiences longitudinally. We anticipate that the research will collect a range of evidence across a broad range of outcome measures to maximise its utility. This includes, and where possible (and with permissions), linking survey data with our administrative data allowing gaps to be filled in our knowledge.

The successful contractor will be required to work with the Department to lead the development, set up and delivery of this new longitudinal study.

While the Invitation to Tender will set out some ideas, bidders will be asked to suggest the most robust and cost-effective methodologies to meet the aims of the evaluation within the budget – and to include costed options where appropriate. Please note that budget and costings are not required at this Expression of Interest stage.

We anticipate that the key strands of work will include:

1. **A feasibility study** from which to develop a solid and seminal piece of research. The aim of the feasibility study will be to: consider and identify the best approach that will deliver on the aims and objectives; explore the availability and accessibility of the data; establish an appropriate sampling frame and the viability of including children include children living under a SGO who were not previously in care, as well as other forms of permanence. Including for example, long-term foster care and children living under a child arrangement order (where grandparents and other family members may be looking after the children).
2. **Mixed methods longitudinal surveys of children and families**, which will allow children, young people, as well as their parents and carers to be followed up over five years.

A central plank of the research will be a longitudinal study of children and young people that left care on an AO or SGO. The aim is to design a large-scale study that will collect robust longitudinal quantitative evidence on children and families, their experiences, and outcomes. We want to commission a longitudinal study that will help us understand development and lifespan issues, and how things change at different points depending on circumstances and/or life events. We are looking for a study that will provide a comprehensive picture of the extent and reasons for breakdown, understand short, medium- and long-term outcomes at critical points in children and family lives, understand their experiences and how these affect outcomes. Once established we anticipate that the cohort will be surveyed for a total of five waves, that surveys and follow ups will occur at least annually to capture any changes in their situations and lives of the children and families. At the tender stage we will welcome suggestions from bidders on the timings of each wave.

1. **Longitudinal qualitative research with** **children and families** to provide an in-depth understanding of the quantitative evidence. This qualitative strand could also include: (i) an **analysis of case files** to support any qualitative research with children and families to develop an in-depth understanding the children’s family history, circumstances and interventions or support provided to understand any link with child outcomes; and (ii) **qualitative interviews** with LA and RAA stakeholders.

The Department will be looking for organisations or consortia that can offer a suitable methodology that:

* Responds to the key questions and provide a quantitative comprehensive picture of the needs of children and families, issues they face, support needed, long-term outcomes, and establish critical points for children and families.
* Is manageable for families and can offer them something in return for taking part in the study.
* Demonstrates key similarities and differences between permanence routes, and outcomes of the children.
* Measures the level of need of children and young people using a range of assessment and outcome measures, child, and parental/ guardian well-being.
* Looks at multiple variables over an extended period; unpack the effects of differences which arise from specific experiences and discover relationships between variables that are not related to background variables. Demonstrate how they change over time and affect outcomes for children and families.

## Indicative commissioning timings

* ***Invitation to tenders (ITT) issued*** – circa w/c 10th May 2021.
* ***Deadline for ITT submission*** – circa w/c 21st June 2021. The deadline will be confirmed in the ITT and bidders will be given at least 6 weeks to respond to the ITT.
* ***Placeholder for clarification questions and/or bidder interviews*** (if required) w/c 12th and 19th July 2021. Dates will be provided in the ITT.
* ***Inception placeholder meeting*** - August 2021.

## Indicative design and feasibility study phase

* Project design and set up – September to October/ November 2021.
* Feasibility study – November 2021 to March 2022.
* Main stage wave 1 - commence Summer/ Autumn 2022.

## Assessment criteria

Expressions of interest will be assessed using the following criteria, with each having an equal weight with regard scoring:

1. Understanding the Department’s requirements including an outline of the proposed approach to conducting the research.
2. Expertise and subject knowledge regarding children’s social care, the needs, experiences, and outcomes of looked after children, and previously looked after children and young people. This will include knowledge and experience of developing research instruments to measure outcomes in these areas.
3. Experience and expertise of undertaking feasibility studies and scoping large scale research studies.
4. Technical and professional ability to design and develop a complex longitudinal study. This will include expertise in survey design and methodology, e.g., probability sampling, achieving high response rates, estimated power of survey.
5. Capacity to deliver the work to time and writing good quality reports with clear conclusions. This will include evidence of delivering large scale, complex surveys (ideally within the children’s social care area).

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| Mark | Description |
| 0 | Fails to meet the criteria |
| 1 | Meets some of the criteria |
| 2 | Meets most of the criteria |
| 3 | Fully meets the criteria |
| 4 | Exceeds the criteria  |

CVs and references are not required at this stage.

Expressions of interests submitted must be **no more than 1,000 words overall.** Anything longer than 1,000 words will be disregarded. Please do not include website links or references. Budget and costings are not required at this Expression of Interest stage.

Collaborative/ consortia expressions of interest are welcome and may be advisable to score highly across the criteria.

During the EOI stage, where applicable, the Contracts Finder listing for this advert will be updated to notify potential bidders of our responses to any questions that have been asked. Questions will be anonymised, and any commercially sensitive information removed. Contracts Finder will automatically issue an alert to suppliers that have set up notifications. We recommend you check your alert settings should you wish to be notified of any updates. Alternatively, you can periodically check the listing for updates.

| **Closing date for EOIs: 11.59pm on Tuesday 20th April 2021****Send your EOI form to:** **maura.lantrua@education.gov.uk** **and** **anna.wales@education.gov.uk** |
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## How to submit an expression of interest

You must submit an expression of interest (EOI) to be considered to be invited to tender. To do so, please complete the NEW EOI Form which can be found under attachments. A submission of an EOI does not guarantee an invitation to tender and the Department does not routinely advise organisations that they have not been successful in being invited to tender. Feedback is however available on request.

All contracts are let on the basis of the Department’s Terms & Conditions, a copy is available attached to the Contracts Finder listing. You are encouraged to check these before submitting your expression of interest, as these form part of your contractual obligations.

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1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This includes DfE funded research such as: Wade, J et al (2014) [Investigating special guardianship.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/investigating-special-guardianship); Selwyn, J et al (2014) [Beyond the adoption order: challenges, intervention, disruption](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-adoption-order-challenges-intervention-disruption). Other research also includes: Harwin, J et al (2019) [Special Guardianship: a review of the English research studies.](https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/files/documents/Nuffield%20FJO_Special%20guardianship_English%20research%20studies_final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)