

# SUMMARY FOR ELECTED & LEAD MEMBERS

## Part of the Reunification Practice Guide

| Produced by Foundations, and commissioned by the Department for Education

This document provides a summary of the [Reunification Practice Guide](#) and offers Elected and Lead Members a set of key questions to support delivery. These questions are intended to help Elected and Lead Members work with senior leaders in children's services to strengthen their local support offer for children and families with reunification from care.

Practice Guides set out the best available evidence for leaders in children's social care to support effective practice and improve how services are commissioned, developed and delivered. They contain actionable key principles and recommendations for senior leaders based on the findings of a robust review of existing evidence, which explored what works, for whom, and in what contexts.

Practice Guides aim to support local areas to achieve the outcomes of the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#). This Practice Guide relates predominantly to Outcome 3: children are supported by their family network, and Outcome 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. It also relates to Outcome 1: families stay together and get the help they need.

## INTRODUCTION

[The Practice Guide this summary document refers to](#) focuses on reunification, which is the structured and supported process through which a child returns to their family after a period in care, including foster and residential care. Reunification serves as a pivotal transition in the lives of both the child or young person and their wider family. Decisions about whether looked after children can return home will rest on whether the reasons for a child going into care have been addressed. In these cases, the lead practitioner will be a social worker who should work with partners to make the decision about how to keep the child safe following the return to their family, and support the child and family in the reunification process for as long as support is wanted and needed.

Over the past decade, children's social care in England has rightly focused on the need for children to experience timely decisions and stable living arrangements, often framed

through the lens of permanence. However, within this landscape reunification as a route out of care has received comparatively less strategic attention, policy development, and investment than other pathways such as adoption or Special Guardianship Orders.

This Practice Guide is also published at a time of great change within national policy, via systems reforms including changes to Family Help. Parents and family networks can be supported by Family Help, by providing a route to support them to address the issues which led to a child being removed and increase success of reunification. Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) can also be seen as one of the pathways for reunification, with this potentially supported through a Family Network Support Package following FGDM. FGDM is an umbrella term for different methods that involve families in decisions about their children.

The Reunification Practice Guide:

- Draws on a comprehensive systematic review of quantitative and qualitative research, alongside primary insights from parents, young people, and practitioners involved in reunification. Its principles and recommendations are therefore grounded in a strong, UK-relevant evidence base
- Primarily focuses on how to create the conditions to support reunification, as part of a planned, supported process for children returning home from care, aiming to ensure safe, stable, and successful family outcomes
- Contains evidence-informed guidance for practitioners and leaders to strengthen decision-making, multi-agency working, and provide support for families before, during, and after reunification.

## KEY PRINCIPLES

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Key principles help to ensure that accessible, acceptable evidence-based support for reunification can be effectively implemented. They draw out qualitative evidence on the views, experiences, and preferences of children, young people and families in the UK on how to engage and support them. They also cover qualitative evidence on interventions which support children, young people and families to reunify successfully.

**Key principle 1:** Ensure reunification practice is based on partnership, trust, and shared decisions with children, young people, and families, throughout a child's care journey and continued beyond a child's return home.

**Key principle 2:** Develop a reunification policy which draws on existing practice models that can support reunification.

**Key principle 3:** Ensure reunification support is flexibly offered and tailored to the racial, cultural, linguistic, mental health, and SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) needs and preferences of children, young people, and parents.

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**Key principle 4:** Build the organisational and multi-agency capacity needed to deliver reunification support effectively.

**Key principle 5:** Have strong training and monitoring systems in place to support consistent reunification practice.

**Key principle 6:** Ensure reunification practice is shaped through the meaningful involvement of children, young people, and families, recognising the impact of trauma and understanding of risk.

**Key principle 7:** Invest in high quality reunification support to increase the chance of stability for children, young people, and families, reduce the chance of breakdowns, and prevent costly care re-entry for local area budgets.

**Key principle 8:** Recognise how systemic pressures can affect long-term permanence and ensure reunification planning includes support to help families address these challenges.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations summarise the best-evidenced support and training for improving outcomes for

RECOMMENDATION	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
<p>1. Ensure reunification support is made available and matched to the assessed needs and experiences of children and families</p>	<p><b>NO RATING</b></p> <p>Statistical analysis conducted as part of the underpinning systematic review indicates that intervention type was not a significant factor in the efficacy of reunification support. This suggests that commissioners, service leads and practice supervisors should be guided by thorough assessment of needs at the family level to choose appropriate intervention approach/es.</p>		
<p>2. Offer evidence-based interventions to support children to remain safely at home and reduce re-entry into care</p>		✓	

RECOMMENDATION	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
3. Link parents to appropriate specialist treatment and support through early intervention – following a child being placed into care – to increase the later likelihood of safe return home			✓
4. Target multi-agency reunification support to families with multiple needs, where coordinated, wraparound support is most needed to sustain reunification.			✓

**STRONG EVIDENCE**

- Meta-analysis of at least two randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies
- Low on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates effectiveness of the intervention(s).

**GOOD EVIDENCE**

- Meta-analysis or narrative synthesis of at least two randomised controlled trials and/or quasi-experimental studies
- Moderate on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

**PROMISING EVIDENCE**

- One randomised controlled trial or quasi-experimental study
- Low or moderate on risk of bias assessment
- Demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

Read the evidence ratings in full: <https://foundations.org.uk/how-to-use-the-practice-guides/>

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR ENGAGING SENIOR LOCAL LEADERS

These questions are designed to help Elected and Lead Members work with senior local leaders of children’s social care to strengthen their approach to supporting families with reunification from care. They should act as prompts to aid conversations with local leaders on implementing the Practice Guide’s recommendations and key principles.

### How well planned, supported, and evidence informed is our local approach to reunification?

Reunification is the most common route out of care, yet it has often been under planned and under supported. The Practice Guide positions reunification as a structured, purposeful process rather than a single event. Local leaders should be able to clearly set out how their approach to reunification is informed by evidence, how it starts when a child enters care, and how support continues beyond return home.

Strong leadership is critical to ensuring reunification planning is proactive, consistent, and centred on children’s welfare and best interests. Elected Members should seek

assurance that reunification support is designed as a long term offer, with clear assessment frameworks, planning tools, and expectations for post return support.

Leaders should also be able to demonstrate how local services identify and respond to the factors most likely to undermine reunification, including trauma, mental health needs, material challenges, and housing instability, and how data is used to monitor outcomes and improve practice over time.

## How do we ensure children, young people and families are meaningfully involved in reunification decisions and support?

The evidence highlights that successful reunification depends on strong partnerships with children, young people and families. Local leaders should ensure that children and families are actively involved in planning, understand decision making processes, and feel listened to throughout the child's journey into and out of care.

Elected Members should explore how the local system enables meaningful participation, including for groups who may be less well served, such as fathers and younger children. This includes ensuring communication is clear, accessible, and developmentally appropriate, and that practical barriers to participation, including transport, childcare, or timing, are addressed.

Leaders should also consider how services maintain continuity of relationships from a child's time in care, including with practitioners and carers, and how support is sustained after reunification to support enduring relationships and promote stability.

## How well do we tailor reunification support to the needs of different families?

Reunification is not a one-size-fits-all process. The Practice Guide emphasises the importance of flexible, tailored support that responds to children's and families' individual circumstances, including cultural, linguistic, mental health and SEND needs.

Local leaders should be able to demonstrate how the local offer adapts to diverse needs, including access to interpreters, culturally responsive services, and specialist support (where required). This includes ensuring practitioners have the skills, training, and supervision needed to deliver inclusive and equitable practice.

Elected Members should also seek assurance that the system identifies and addresses disparities in access, engagement, and outcomes across different groups, and that families experience support as respectful, relevant, and accessible. For example, by using data on which families are being supported with reunification to identify whether any groups may be missing out on reunification support.

## How effectively are we working with partners to deliver coordinated reunification support?

Reunification requires strong multi-agency collaboration across children's social care, health, education, housing, and the voluntary and community sector. The reunification Practice Guide highlights the importance of shared responsibility, clear roles, and coordinated planning.

Local leaders should ensure there are clear governance arrangements, shared pathways, and effective information-sharing processes so families experience joined-up support. This includes working closely with Family Help services, mental health provision, schools, and housing services to address the full range of needs affecting reunification.

Elected Members should also consider how partners are held to account for delivering coordinated, strengths-based support, and how the system responds when differences in professional views or practical barriers risk delaying reunification or weakening support to families.

## Do we have the workforce capacity, skills, and systems needed to deliver high quality reunification practice?

Delivering effective reunification support depends on a well-resourced and confident workforce. High caseloads, limited access to services, and inconsistent training can undermine practice and reduce stability for families.

Local leaders should be able to demonstrate how they are investing in workforce development, including training, supervision, and access to specialist expertise. There should be clear expectations for what good reunification practice looks like, supported by quality assurance systems and ongoing monitoring.

Elected Members should also seek assurance that practitioners have the time and capacity to build relationships with families and deliver consistent support, and that system pressures are identified and addressed proactively.

## How are we using this Practice Guide to support wider children's social care reform?

This Practice Guide aligns with the [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) and the [Families First Partnership programme](#). It supports a shift towards stronger prioritisation of reunification, supporting family networks, more coordinated multi-agency delivery, and ultimately, keeping more families together and ensuring families receive the right help at the right time.

Local leaders should be able to set out how they are embedding reunification within their broader strategic approach, including links to Family Group Decision Making and Family Network Support Packages. Reunification should be seen as a core part of a supportive, family-focused system.

By implementing the Reunification Practice Guide, local authorities can improve stability for children, support enduring relationships, and reduce re entry into care. Elected Members may wish to work across Cabinet and with partners such as Integrated Care Boards, housing, and wider partnership bodies to ensure reunification is prioritised and supported across the system.

## This resource is part of a set of publications linked to the Reunification Practice Guide:

- Full Practice Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-full-guide.pdf>
- Summary/online Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/reunification>
- Reflective Tool: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/reunification-practice-guide-reflective-tool.pdf>.

Find out more about the series of Practice Guides: <https://foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides>.

We want to hear from local leaders who are engaging with the Practice Guides. Get in touch at [practice\\_guides@foundations.org.uk](mailto:practice_guides@foundations.org.uk).