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Together or apart: supporting better decisions for siblings in care

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When children enter care in England, local authorities are responsible for placing them with their siblings where reasonably practicable and in their best interests (Children Act 1989). Despite this clear policy framework, there is limited evidence on how frequently siblings are separated, how such decisions are made in practice, and how sibling's living arrangements evolve over time. This policy brief presents research findings and co-produced recommendations to strengthen how sibling relationships are identified, considered in decision-making, supported and recorded throughout children's social care.

About the research

The research behind this policy briefing used a mixed method approach to examine children's sibling placement trajectories and decision-making. It combined analysis of administrative data following 544 children, as well as 14 interviews with social work professionals across two local authorities, alongside case-file analysis of 33 children's sibling networks and 19 sibling separation events in one local authority.

The research and co-produced recommendations presented in this policy briefing are intended to support national policymakers and local authorities in improving decision-making and ensuring that sibling relationships receive the recognition they deserve throughout children's journeys into, through and beyond care. This is particularly relevant in relation to the UK Government's new legislation strengthening duties to promote and facilitate sibling contact in care (Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026), which raises expectations for more consistent and better-evidenced decision-making in relation to sibling relationships. Together, the research and recommendations provide an important foundation for improving policy and practice on siblings in care and for further work in this area.

This policy briefing uses the terms 'sibling' and 'placement' to align with formal documentation, policy language and administrative data systems, while recognising that children and young people may prefer terms such as 'brothers and sisters' and 'home' or 'where you live'.

Research Findings

How sibling relationships are understood in practice

Social work professionals often have a nuanced understanding of siblinghood, taking into consideration child-defined and relationship-based definitions, such as the importance of co-residence in shaping 'sibling' relationships. However, these understandings were not always reflected in case files, which tended to default back to narrower definitions. In practice, difficulties in recording sibling relationships based on lived experience led to decisions being based primarily on biological and legal definitions.

Together or apart: sibling trajectories over time

Whether siblings were initially placed together or apart often shaped their subsequent care trajectories. Most siblings (75%) were initially placed with at least one sibling, and in many cases these living arrangements remained stable over time. Sibling placement stability was highest when all siblings lived together and when children experienced shorter stays in care. This stability was also evident when siblings lived separately; children who were initially separated were rarely reunified in later living arrangements.

Complexity and recording of decision-making

Siblings living together was the starting point for most social work professionals involved in decisions about this. However, social work professionals recognised that living together was not always appropriate, given siblings' behaviour, needs, wishes and risks, and felt this was sometimes overshadowed by an expectation that siblings should always be placed together.

Decisions to separate siblings reflected a complex interplay of professional judgement, assumptions and beliefs, local authority constraints, external pressures, and the characteristics of children and sibling groups, with social workers playing a central role. Yet the rationale for these decisions was not always clearly documented. Reasons for separation were often dispersed across the case file, with little coherent narrative. As a result, it was difficult to trace decision-making over time and fully understand the rationale for sibling living arrangement decisions.

Policy recommendations

The policy recommendations presented in this briefing were developed through a series of seven targeted stakeholder workshops, involving 45 participants across a range of perspectives, including kinship carers, foster carers, care-experienced adults, social workers, independent reviewing officers (IROs), local authority managers, children's guardians, legal professionals (including a judge), researchers and data specialists. A subsequent national England workshop, involving 25 participants, brought stakeholders together to refine and strengthen the final recommendations presented in this briefing.

Across the workshops, stakeholders highlighted emerging practices, interventions and models to better support sibling relationships and improve decision-making. These approaches require evaluation to determine their effectiveness for siblings in care. Future work should therefore focus on identifying, mapping and evaluating promising approaches to understand their effectiveness, implementation and potential to improve decision-making and outcomes for siblings in care.



1. Recognise and understand sibling relationships

- **Identify early and recognise throughout**. Identify and understand sibling and sibling-like relationships from the earliest opportunity, before children enter care and throughout children's time in care.
- **Listen to children about their sibling relationships**. Understand which relationships matter to children and how they want those relationships to be supported. Recognise paternal, maternal and sibling-like relationships and preserve opportunities for future connection with siblings they have not yet met.
- **Move beyond labels** such as full, half or step sibling and focus on relationships that are meaningful to the child.
- **Prioritise each child's needs and welfare while understanding the needs and dynamics of the sibling group** through early assessment, ongoing planning and direct work. Identify opportunities to support positive sibling relationships.

2. Rethinking sibling placement decisions

- **Sibling relationships should be a core consideration** in early placement decision-making, with all professionals sharing responsibility for understanding and prioritising them. Sibling relationships should receive at least equal attention to parent-child relationships in placement decisions.
- **Assess, review and be accountable**. Decisions about whether siblings live together or apart should be informed by assessment before care, reviewed regularly, and revisited when children's circumstances, wishes, or relationships change. Plans to place siblings apart should allow for future joint placement where appropriate.
- **Challenge assumptions and think creatively**. Professionals should think more creatively about how siblings' needs can be met through placements. Curiosity and respectful challenge are needed to unpick assumptions about permanence, stability and what constitutes the best placement for siblings.
- **Ensuring togetherness when apart**. When siblings need to be placed separately, placement decisions should explore what "togetherness" can look like. Professionals and carers should consider how placements can help sustain sibling relationships.

3. Supporting those who support sibling relationships

- **Anticipate needs not crises**. Carers should be helped to understand what caring for siblings involves, with support needs identified at the outset and plans for practical, financial and therapeutic support to carers established early on and reviewed regularly. Plans should be discussed during review meetings and facilitated by social work professionals and organisations.
- **Being family should not mean less support**. Kinship carers often take on the care of sibling groups unexpectedly and face significant challenges despite being family members. They should receive early and ongoing support to help sustain sibling placements and relationships. Support should reflect needs, not family status. Sibling support plans should be considered within Special Guardianship arrangements.
- **When children are in care**, kinship and foster carers' views should be actively sought and taken into account in decisions about sibling placements and relationships, with clear communication about how decisions are reached and the reasons for them.
- **Enable social workers to prioritise siblings**. Social workers should be provided with the time, support and organisational structures needed to prioritise and fully consider sibling relationships in placement decisions, enabling preventative rather than crisis-led and assumption-based practice. This could involve a role for independent advocates or reviewing officers.

4. Improve recording and evidence for siblings in care

- **Record relationships and decisions**. Sibling relationships, sibling placement decisions and the reasons underpinning those decisions should be clearly and consistently recorded throughout a child's time in care and reviewed when circumstances and children's views change.
- **Record meaningfully**. Records should provide children and carers with the information they need to understand past decisions, relationships and experiences. Recording should use clear, strengths-based, non-blaming language and avoid "copy and paste" recording across siblings' files to prevent excessive redaction when adults access their records later in life.
- **Use data to inform practice and build the evidence base**. Local and national government should improve the collection, quality and use of sibling data to support planning and decision-making for children and families. Local authorities, researchers and policymakers should strengthen analytical capacity and data linkages to better understand sibling experiences, placement decisions and outcomes over time.

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International perspectives

An international workshop with 25 policy and practice representatives from England, Wales, Scotland and the Netherlands highlighted strong commonality across countries in the challenges and priorities identified above. While the four countries are at different stages of legislative, policy and practice development, there was a shared commitment to providing greater opportunities for siblings to be placed together and to support sibling relationships. Alongside this was recognition of common challenges, including insufficient resources and availability of suitable homes, the complexity of balancing the best interests of all siblings within a sibling group, and limited data and analysis on siblings in care.

The international discussion reflected the recommendations developed through the national stakeholder groups, specifically highlighting the importance of:

- siblings living together where possible and, where this is not safe or in their best interests, supporting their relationships before, during and after time spent in care;
- ensuring the identification, recognition and recording of sibling relationships is relationship-centred and child-led;
- achieving cultural change requires resources and leadership at all levels of the system, informed by policy, practice, research and lived experience. This is essential to keeping siblings' needs at the forefront of decision-making and promoting and sustaining sibling relationships.

The consistency of these messages across different child welfare systems provides important international support for the direction of change set out in this briefing.

Further information

This research has been published as a PhD thesis by Dr Florie Schmits, accessed here.

Additionally, two empirical articles have been published: Who Is a Sibling? Social Work Professionals' Views on Definitions of Siblinghood in Foster Care in England

Reasons for sibling separation in care in England: A case file analysis.

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