An Evaluation of the Step Up Step Down Pilot Programme in Pembrokeshire

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Summary

This evaluation focussed on the implementation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, which supported families on the edge of care, with the aim being to reduce the number of children coming into care and to support the bonds and capacities of families. The evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure that it would involve both implementation sites of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, Pembrokeshire and Powys. This report focusses on the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. In the evaluation period, 12 families (23 children) successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months, supporting children aged between five months and 11 years. Among families who engaged with the programme in Pembrokeshire, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation. The evaluation involved children, parents, and Family Support Foster Carers, as well as staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads who were involved in the commissioning, organisation and delivery of Step Up Step Down. The evidence generated in this evaluation suggests that the combination of all elements of the Step Up Step Down pilot worked effectively to support families who gained capacity, skills and knowledge, and built supportive networks, which contributed to stable family relationships. The efficacy of Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire, the positive evaluations of all those involved with the programme, and its success in supporting families to stay together are key indicators that this intervention should be continued and expanded.

What we do

- Generate internationally recognised primary research evidence
- Make our research accessible to all, including; service users, professionals and policymakers.
- Develop social care research capacity in Wales by providing opportunities for researchers from undergraduate through to senior career stages.
- Engage a range of collaborators in research, including children and young people, parents and carers, practitioners, policymakers and social care providers from the public, private and third sectors.

How we do it

- The only centre of its kind in Wales – promoting evidence, improving outcomes
- A diverse range of research methods – Ethnography, interviews and focus groups, cohort and routine data sets, quasi-experiments, randomised controlled trials and reviews (rapid, systematic and realist)
- Strong links with policy and practice – Parents and children, social workers and senior managers, government (Welsh and UK) and the third sector

1 Background to the Research

Children's social care in Wales faces significant challenges, including increasing demand for services, pressures on care provision, and the need to develop sustainable approaches that improve outcomes for children and families. This changing policy landscape has seen the introduction of reforms aimed at reshaping children's social care in Wales. One element of this reform programme is a commitment to eliminate private profit from the care of looked after children. This has been implemented through the Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025, reflecting concerns about commodification and the appropriateness of profit extraction from children's care, and prioritising a reshaping of the provider landscape and future commissioning environment in Wales (Welsh Government 2025; Care Inspectorate Wales 2025).

However, there is a capacity crisis in foster care, shaped by recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers. Sector estimates suggest that additional foster families are needed to meet demand and keep children supported in their communities, while qualitative evidence from exit interviews indicates that carers leave for multiple, cumulative reasons, including insufficient support, pressures associated with the role, and wider system strain (The Fostering Network 2025a, 2025b). This instability in the availability of fostering placements and a move away from for-profit provision raises significant questions about how to best support children on the edge of care, highlighting the importance of interventions that can prevent avoidable entry to care.

Accordingly, there has been a recognition and prioritisation of edge of care services in both policy and practice. Evidence from inspection and review-based literature suggests that birth parents and social care professionals have called for services that work intensively with families to address challenges such as domestic violence, mental health challenges, and the wider impacts of poverty (Welsh Parliament 2023a). Qualitative accounts indicate that following targeted intensive support parents were able to have children returned to their care or to retain care of subsequent children, demonstrating the potential of preventative interventions to disrupt trajectories of repeat removal (Welsh Parliament 2023b).Therefore, this form of support can be an integral mechanism for reducing the number of children entering care, rather than simply managing risk once thresholds for removal have been reached; and there have been calls for the Welsh Government to develop a long-term, national, sustainable funding model for successful edge of care services (Welsh Parliament 2023b).

As edge of care interventions take on greater strategic importance within a pressured system, the evaluation of the effectiveness and sustainability of these interventions is essential. Evaluations are required to assess outcomes, such as reduced care entry, improved safety and wellbeing, and to understand the implementation conditions, workforce requirements, and the limits of what such interventions can achieve when wider structural drivers of need remain acute (The Fostering Network 2025a; Welsh Government 2025b).

Step Up Step Down is a programme that offers families a comprehensive package of support with the aim of preventing problems escalating, improving relationships and building networks of support. The programme has already seen success within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust in Northern Ireland (The Fostering Network 2023), and between 2016 and 2023, Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland supported 183 children with 95% remaining with their parents rather than coming into care (Welsh Government 2025b). The evaluations of the programme in Northern Ireland evidenced the quality of support for families, the ways in which their involvement

helped to mitigate the risk of children entering State care, and the resultant projected cost savings from the avoidance of potential foster and residential care placements (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020).

Following the success of this intervention in Northern Ireland, the Welsh Government provided £879,000 to the Fostering Network in Wales to pilot the Step Up Step Down programme within Pembrokeshire and Powys local authority areas in Wales over a three-year period (Welsh Government 2025b). The Pembrokeshire and Powys pilots of Step Up Step Down were also supported by the KPMG Foundation who provided a grant of £450,000. This evaluation focussed on the implementation Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, which supported families on the edge of care in Pembrokeshire and Powys, with the aim being to reduce the number of children coming into care and to support the bonds and capacities of families. The evaluation sought to highlight areas of best practice and potential improvements to the model in consideration of the Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme.

- Reduced number of children becoming looked after
- Increased number of children experiencing sustained reunification with their family
- Parents gain capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity, and create safe, stable family relationships
- Children have tools to help them self-regulate; parents are able to co-regulate their children
- Parents and children develop stronger connections to their communities, strengthening the support available to help prevent and address crises
- Increased capacity of parents and children to learn and grow as a family; more parents and children taking advantage of opportunities for learning

The evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure that it would involve both implementation sites of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, Pembrokeshire and Powys. This report focusses on the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. The Step Up Step Down programme was funded by the Welsh Government and the KPMG Foundation for a three-year period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026. This funding period incorporated an initial phase of implementation and engagement with Local Authority partners. Pembrokeshire was the first Local Authority to express interest in early 2023, with a formal partnership agreed in July 2023. This was followed by a preparatory phase focussing on the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers and the development of local delivery arrangements. The programme was formally launched in November 2023 and referrals to the programme were received from February 2024 with full operational delivery beginning in April 2024.

Since its launch, 12 families (23 children) have successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months, supporting children aged between five months and 11 years. Among families who engaged with the programme, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported, maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation.

This report consists of nine chapters that provide the context for the evaluation, the process of the evaluation, the findings of the evaluation and recommendations for further research, policy and practice.

Chapter Two will outline the 'crisis in care' in relation to increased numbers of children entering care, insufficient suitable care placements, recruitment shortfalls and pressures on the social care workforce (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). It also considers the impacts on parents when their children are removed from their care and the challenges faced by children and young people who are placed in care both in the immediate term and their future trajectories (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Mannay et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026; Stevenson 2026).

The context set out in Chapter Two demonstrates the need for new approaches to social care and the consideration of preventative interventions in Chapter Three, which features a discussion of a recent review of key research in this area. This is followed by an overview of the evaluations of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020).

The methods of the evaluation are presented in Chapter Three, documenting the qualitative approach adopted to gain an understanding of the perspectives of those involved in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. Feedback forms that children, parents and Family Support Foster Carers completed after training courses and a Girls Group were analysed and the research team conducted observations in family events and sessions for children. The main methods of data generation were interviews with seven parents, five Family Support Foster Carers, two social workers, two staff from The Fostering Network in Wales and two Local Authority Senior Leads, and eight children contributed their views in creative workshops. The interviews generated 13 hours and 42 minutes of recorded discussions resulting in 151,082 transcribed words. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and the interview transcripts were analysed in combination with fieldnotes and photographs from events and the feedback forms collated by The Fostering Network in Wales following training sessions.

Chapters Six to Eight discuss the findings of the evaluation. Overall, the evidence generated in this evaluation suggests that the combination of all elements of the Step Up Step Down pilot worked effectively to support families who gained capacity, skills and knowledge, and built supportive networks, which contributed to stable family relationships. Parents directly attributed their children remaining in their care or being reunified with their children to the Step Up Step Down pilot and provided positive accounts of their relationship with their Family Support Foster Carer, the wider support within Step Up Step Down, training, family events and residentials, the learning that they had applied to their parenting, their introduction to wider opportunities in the local community, and the sustainability of relationships formed during the programme.

Chapter Nine reflects on the findings of the evaluation in relation to the Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme, and it evidences how these key outcomes were achieved in the Pembrokeshire pilot. The chapter also considers the wider benefits of Step Up Step Down for families, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and the Local Authority. This is followed by a reflection on the future of the Step Up Step Down in Wales, with reference to the requirement for funding and strategic decisions for sustaining the programme and extending its delivery. A series of recommendations are presented for future research, policy and practice. This final chapter will conclude with a call for more investment in the Step Up Step Down programme, as the evaluation evidenced that the pilot in Pembrokeshire made a crucial contribution to both reducing entry to care and supporting families to flourish.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the context of the care system in the UK and Wales, and it considers key issues including the high number of children entering the care system, the lack of suitable care placements, recruitment and retention of foster carers, as well as the impact of the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce.

The chapter then moves to discusses the impacts on parents who have their children removed from their care, noting the associated economic, emotional, psychological, health-based, social and relational impacts, and difficulties with intergenerational and recurrent care proceedings. It also outlines the range of issues that care-experienced children and young people have to negotiate in terms of their mental health and well-being alongside potential negative outcomes in education, employment, housing instability and pervasive inequalities that can impact on their adult trajectories.

The chapter concludes with reference to the possible harms of unnecessary separation, for families and for the pressured care system. It highlights the importance of family support and introduces the potential of preventative interventions, such as the Step Up Down programme, to assist families to remain together and avoid care proceedings, a theme which is then discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

2.2 Considering the Care System

This section considers the UK care system and arguments that there is a 'crisis in care', drawing from key evaluations and noting their recommendations for future practice. It then provides an outline of the context of the care system within Wales and discusses the relationship between poverty and higher rates of children in care and the commitment of the Welsh Government to reduce the numbers of children entering the care system.

2.2.1 The UK Context – 'the crisis in care'

There have been significant recent reviews of process and practices in children's social care in England (MacAlister 2022), Scotland (Duncan et al. 2020) and Northern Ireland (Jones 2023). These reports have documented a crisis in care with the most consistent feature of this crisis posited across all administrations as the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce. In England three quarters of social workers report working more than their contracted hours, and more than half feel stressed by their jobs (MacAlister 2022).

Social workers with high caseloads are unable to spend sufficient time with individual children or build positive relationships with birth parents, and social workers have noted that the burden of administration prevents them from engaging in effective direct work with children and families (MacAlister 2022). In Northern Ireland, the pressure of unmanageable caseloads has resulted in unallocated cases and unattended cases, meaning that children and families do not receive

assistance in time of need (Jones 2023). High levels of staff vacancies have further contributed to instability in children's social care with a significant loss of experienced social work practitioners. For example, in Northern Ireland, the average social work practitioner vacancy level in February 2023 was 15%, and when combined with other absences, the rate was 25% (Jones 2023).

As a result of these staffing shortages, Local Authorities have an increasing dependence on a newly qualified and agency workforce, which can negatively impact the quality of services and make relationship-building challenging. There are also financial consequences as agency social workers cost more than permanent staff (estimated at approximately £26,000 per worker per year more in England), resulting in a loss of over £100 million annually that could be better spent on front-line activity (MacAlister 2022).

Alongside these issues with staffing, there is a shortage of appropriate, high-quality placements, particularly for children with complex needs or those who need to remain close to home, which has been positioned as a critical failure. In England, this has been referred to as a 'broken care market', characterised by weak oversight, high cost and profiteering, and poor planning (MacAlister 2022). According to the Competition and Markets Authority, operating profit margins for children's homes providers averaged 22.6% from 2016 to 2020, with average prices rising significantly and foster care profit margins for the largest independent fostering agencies averaged 19.4%, with few indicators that higher prices translated into better quality homes (MacAlister 2022).

Within the context of a 'broken care market', it is difficult for Local Authorities to meet their sufficiency duties and find suitable placements. For example, in Northern Ireland, there is increasing demand for foster care and residential care which presents difficulties in finding stable and appropriate placements (Jones 2023). Therefore, children are often placed at a distance from their home communities, which severs their relationships with friends and teachers. In England, 37% of residential placements were further than 20 miles from home in 2020.

Duncan and colleagues (2020) have noted that in Scotland children can be placed in inappropriate settings when the demand for places exceeds capacity, and in England the use of unregulated accommodation has escalated because of pressures elsewhere in the care system (MacAlister 2022; Titheradge 2026). There is a growing crisis in foster care recruitment. In Northern Ireland, it was estimated that 261 foster carers were needed in 2022–2023 (Jones 2023); and within this fragile context the overall number of children needing support has been rising across the UK.

In Northern Ireland, there has been a 37% increase in statutory activity within the last 10 years and there are a higher proportion of children in need within its child population compared to other nations, and a proportionately greater growth in the numbers of children in care over recent years. The demand for children's social care services in Northern Ireland is increasing, with an 8% increase in children in need and a 10% increase in children on the child protection register in the five years up to March 2022 (Jones 2023). In England, the trajectory suggests the number of children in care will approach 100,000 by 2032 without reform (MacAlister 2022).

In addition to the rising numbers of children requiring state intervention and the issues with the provision of care placements and the social care workforce, there are also difficulties with systemic fragmentation and bureaucracy, which prevent cohesive and effective service delivery. The care system in Scotland has been described as cluttered, complex, and fragmented, spread over 44 pieces of legislation, 19 pieces of secondary legislation, and three international conventions, which makes cohesive operation impossible (Duncan et al. 2020). Whilst in England, it has been argued

that whilst families are complex and relational, children's social care is often rigid and linear, geared toward managing risk and gatekeeping access to services, and therefore, disconnected from family and community relationships (MacAlister 2022).

2.2.2 Context in Wales

Many of the challenges identified in the wider UK literature are also evident in Wales. The Welsh Parliament's Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry (2023) concluded that children's social care in Wales faces significant pressures relating to workforce sufficiency, caseloads, placement availability and increasing demand for support. Wales has one of the highest numbers of children in care per head of the population across the UK nations, despite the apparent long-term reduction in the annual incidence of child maltreatment (Wilkins 2023). There are significant differences across the different local authorities in Wales, with Torfaen having 209 children in care per 10,000 children under 18 years, and Carmarthenshire only 45 (Care Inspectorate Wales 2023).

It has been the policy of Welsh Government to safely reduce the number of children in care in Wales for many years (Wilkins 2023). There are however many confounding difficulties within Wales. Around a third (28%) of all children in Wales were living in poverty in 2022 (Welsh Government 2022), and there is a link between poverty and higher rates of children entering care (Elliott 2020). Using linked administrative data from Wales, Warner et al. (2026) found that poverty remained a significant predictor of care entry even after controlling for a range of parental risk factors. These studies illustrate a 'social gradient' (Marmot and Wilkinson 2005) in likelihood of becoming looked after, with an increase in likelihood for each step increase in area level relative deprivation.

Scourfield et al. (2021) found that child welfare intervention rates are higher in Flying Start areas even after controlling for multiple deprivation. Thus, as has been found in England (Bywaters et al. 2018) attempts at preventative work often place a spotlight on poorer families, who are drawn into children's services. Another significant reason for the high rates of children in care is that Wales has a higher rate of care orders placed at home and more children per head of population in kinship foster care than any English region (Hodges and Scourfield 2023).

There is a lack of robust data collected on the care system workforce, and children with care experience, which could render the extent of poor experiences in care inaccessible (Welsh Parliament 2023). Nonetheless, aligning with 'the crisis in care' in the UK more widely (section 2.2.1) there is evidence of similar difficulties within Wales. For example, vacancies in children's social care in Wales increased by 38.3% in 2022 to 639 posts (Welsh Parliament 2023). There is also a capacity crisis in foster care, shaped by recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers, and qualitative evidence from exit interviews with foster carers indicates that they leave for multiple, cumulative reasons, including insufficient support, pressures associated with the role, and wider system strain (The Fostering Network 2024b). In Wales, sector estimates suggest that additional foster families are needed to meet demand and keep children supported in their communities (The Fostering Network 2024a).

A shortage of local placements in Wales leads to the use of out-of-area placements at a much higher cost and there have been issues with the use of unregistered placements, with Welsh expenditure on children looked after services increasing by 67.3% in cash terms between 2012–13 and 2021–22. The Welsh Government's commitment to eliminate private profit from the care

of children looked after, implemented through the Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025 and associated implementation governance, reflects concerns about commodification and the appropriateness of profit extraction from children's care, while also reshaping the provider landscape and future commissioning environment (Welsh Government 2025; Care Inspectorate Wales 2025). However, it is too early to see if this commitment can resolve the current difficulties with the numbers of children entering care, the lack of suitable care placements and the pressure on social care services.

As well as outlining the context of the crisis in care, it is also important to consider the impacts on families and children when children are removed from their parents and enter the care system. Accordingly, the following sections document these impacts, beginning with an overview of the range of adverse consequences that parents experience when they are separated from their children.

2.3 Impacts of Care Proceedings on Parents

Using linked administrative data, Warner et al. (2025) found that increases in parental depression and anxiety were associated with rising rates of care entry in Wales. Whilst these patterns are likely shaped by wider social, economic and service pressures, it suggests that parents whose children are placed in statutory care may also be negotiating issues with their mental health prior to their children being removed from their care.

Accordingly, when a child is taken into care this can have profound and enduring impacts on their parents, who were already negotiating inequalities, financial and health issues, and complex histories prior to care proceedings (Stevenson 2026). As documented in the following subsections, when children are placed in care their parents can experience a range of negative emotional, psychological, social, legal, and economic changes; and as these consequences are often compounded by pre-existing vulnerabilities, this can contribute to parents' repeat involvement in care proceedings (Broadhurst and Mason 2020; Alrouh et al. 2022).

2.3.1 Legal and Economic Impacts

The removal of a child has significant legal impacts on parents, often extending far beyond the immediate court proceedings. A key consequence is the creation of a non-erasable family court record, which can lead to legal stigmatisation and influence future interactions with the child welfare system (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). This record can result in pre-judgment in new cases, particularly when parents reappear in court with a subsequent child (Turnell et al. 2007; Enlander et al. 2021).

Parents frequently report a profound lack of understanding of legal terminology and the complex court process, which alienates them and hinders their meaningful participation in decision-making (Smeeton and Boxall 2011; Marsh and Leamon 2019). The adversarial nature of care proceedings, where professionals often present evidence against parents and focus on their failings, intensifies feelings of injustice and can be re-traumatising (Enlander et al. 2021). Furthermore, economic disadvantage can severely restrict parents' access to quality legal representation, especially when legal aid for challenging decisions or adoption is subject to means and merits testing, thereby perpetuating inequality within the legal system (Enlander et al. 2021). A lack of parental advocacy

has also been posited as a difficulty as birth parents report that they are not heard and are not involved in decision making and do not have the necessary support to enable them to understand the terminology used in court processes (Welsh Parliament 2023).

Beyond the immediate case, this legal history can lead to civil disqualifications, limiting parents' ability to rebuild their lives, notably in employment (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). For example, gaining employment in care-based services often requires consent to soft disclosures of child protection or family court involvement, which many employers view cautiously, sometimes implementing a blanket policy of only accepting 'clean certificates' (Baldwin 2012).

Economically, after child removal parents often experience reductions in welfare and housing entitlements that exacerbate pre-existing financial vulnerabilities (Broadhurst and Mason 2017, 2020). Parents may be reliant on welfare benefits (Bywaters 2016a) and face significant income reductions and threats to their housing security once children are no longer in their full-time care (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). This can directly lead to homelessness or housing instability, as measures like the 'bedroom tax' reduce housing benefits (Gibb 2015), forcing women into precarious living situations such as hostels (Enlander et al. 2021), which in turn increases the risk of experiencing violence (Broadhurst and Mason 2017) and struggling with substance misuse (Enlander et al. 2021).

The emotional devastation and stress of child removal can also impair a parent's ability to work, leading to unemployment and further financial hardship (Neil et al. 2010). Frequent court appointments and mandated contact arrangements can make it extremely challenging to maintain stable employment, creating a cycle of poverty and hindering rehabilitation efforts (Lewis and Brady 2018). These economic impacts are layered upon existing disadvantages, as poverty is a prevalent factor for many birth parents even before their children are removed (Lewis and Brady 2018; Enlander et al. 2021). The ongoing cycle of repeat appearances in care proceedings also places a considerable economic burden on children's services and the courts, underscoring the financial inefficiency of a system that often fails to provide sustained rehabilitative support after removal (Broadhurst and Mason 2013, 2017).

2.3.2 Emotional, Psychological and Health-Based Impacts

The loss of the parenting role can be devastating, leading to enduring impacts on self-identity and sense of purpose for those who experience child removal (Broadhurst and Mason 2013, 2020). Motherhood is often central to women's identity, and its loss can lead to feelings of emptiness and hopelessness (Broadhurst and Mason 2020), and parents experience intense and long-lasting grief following child removal (Stevenson 2026). This has been described as 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka 2002) as it not socially recognised, legitimised or supported by the wider community (Janzen and Melrose 2017), which may lead to impaired grieving as the parent does not have access to social sympathy or the permission from others to grieve (Darlington et al. 2023; Stevenson 2026).

The parent's loss can be particularly traumatic when children are removed through adversarial court proceedings, exposing the details of parents' lives and failures (Smeeton and Boxall 2011; Broadhurst and Mason 2017). Parents may feel immense emotions over their failure to care for or protect their children leading to feelings of guilt and shame (Philip et al. 2021), which are often compounded by an awareness of public disapprobation (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). Additionally, parents may feel intense anger towards others, leading to conflict and meaning that

they withdraw from those who could support them and lose or damage relationships (Philip et al. 2021; Roberts 2021; Stevenson 2026).

Parents involved in care proceedings often have complex health and social care needs that frequently predate their involvement in the system (Johnson et al. 2021; Grant et al. 2022). Pre-existing conditions such as severe mental illness and learning disabilities are common among mothers in care proceedings (Griffiths 2021). Poor health is often significantly exacerbated by child removal, triggering a deterioration in health conditions, especially mental health-related issues (Grant et al. 2022) and may even contribute to avoidable mortality (de Backer et al. 2025).

Furthermore, child removal often triggers an immediate psychosocial crisis, leading to a significant decline in parents' mental wellbeing (Crawford et al. 2009 [cited in Alrouh et al. 2022]; Darlington et al. 2023). This can manifest in increased drug and alcohol use (Broadhurst and Mason 2017, 2020; Honey et al. 2019; Darlington et al. 2023), depression and anxiety (Roberts 2016; Brandon et al. 2017; Philip et al. 2021; Darlington et al. 2023) suicidal ideation or attempts (Devaney et al. 2014; Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Honey et al. 2019; Enlander et al. 2021) and self-harm (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst and Mason 2020; Enlander et al. 2021; Philip et al. 2021; Darlington et al. 2023). Parents who have experienced the removal of a child show a significantly higher use of emergency healthcare services compared to a matched comparison group, often indicating a crisis and a potential failure in timely access to primary care or specialist support (Johnson et al. 2021). This highlights the critical need for targeted, timely, and trauma-informed interventions for parents, recognising that these health issues are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic disadvantage and can impair parenting capacity (Pearson et al. 2020; Grant et al. 2022).

2.3.3 Social and Relational Impacts

The removal of a child can lead to intense social isolation and stigma that isolates parents from their immediate families, friends and communities. Parents often experience suspicion or hostility from those around them and may struggle to explain the absence of their child to others (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). Consequently, parents may adopt strategies of concealment, such as pretending to leave work at school time to pick up children, which further deepens their isolation from potential sources of informal support (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). This can contribute to experiences of profound loneliness (Darlington et al. 2021), which may be made more severe by a lack of trust in professionals and the child welfare system, as parents may feel betrayed after removal, making them reluctant to engage with services or confide in others (Kenny and Barrington 2018; Colvin and Howard 2022).

Moreover, child removal can damage personal and intimate relationships and significantly disrupt wider family networks. Conditions set by the local authority, such as requiring parents to live apart from a partner to retain custody of a child, can fracture relationships that previously provided support (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). The formal restructuring of parental responsibility when children are placed with kin can also lead to family rifts, with parents being excluded from networks that were once vital (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). Even if kinship care placements are seen as more amenable, restrictions on contact with children placed with relatives can reinforce feelings of loss, stigma, and confused parental identities, excluding parents from family support (Broadhurst and Mason 2017). Partners can separate (Philip et al. 2021; Sobo Allen 2022) and, when this occurs, fathers are frequently forgotten in the care planning process (Philip et al. 2020). This cumulative impact of social and relational adversity, in addition to existing disadvantages,

makes the process of negotiating grief particularly challenging for parents (Broadhurst and Mason 2020).

2.3.4 Intergenerational and Recurrent Impacts

A significant concern is the recurrent nature of child removal, where parents who have a child removed will frequently experience successive removals (Alrouh et al. 2020; Alrouh et al. 2022). Alrouh and colleagues (2022) found that approximately 1 in 4 women in England and Wales are at risk of returning to court within 10 years of their first set of proceedings; and the intervals between proceedings are often too short for parents to recover from problems like mental health or addiction (Alrouh et al. 2020). There is a considerable evidence base for the intergenerational nature of child removal, particularly for care-experienced mothers (Winterburn 2015). For example, 17% (approximately 1 in 6) of care-experienced mothers had their own children placed in care (Doebler et al. 2024). Children of care-experienced mothers are often removed as newborns or infants and are more likely to be placed outside their family networks and for adoption (Doebler et al. 2024). Accordingly, parents who were themselves in care are at a substantially higher risk of losing their own children to the care system (Bilson and Bywaters 2020).

2.3.5 Systemic and Policy Gaps

Despite the profound impacts, there is currently no statutory mandate for providing tailored rehabilitative support to parents following child removal (Alrouh et al. 2020; Bilson and Bywater 2020). The child protection system often focusses on detecting and managing risk, and 'strengths-based' approaches may not sufficiently differentiate between mothers and fathers, overlooking the unique challenges men face (Brandon et al. 2017; Philip et al. 2021). There is a tendency to postpone the inclusion of fathers and lack of professional curiosity about fathers' wider lives and circumstances can limit effective engagement and assessment (Brandon et al. 2017; Sobo Allen 2022).

Furthermore, austerity policies and cuts to preventive services have led to insufficient investment in supporting families to address underlying socio-economic and health needs (Bilson and Bywaters 2020; Bywaters et al. 2020). The absence of systematic data on parents' circumstances further hinders understanding and effective intervention (Bywaters et al. 2016b). Effective interventions require a trauma-informed, relationship-based, multidisciplinary, family-focussed, and long-term approach to break these cycles of adversity and loss (Johnson et al. 2021; Grant et al. 2022; de Backer et al. 2025).

Parents who have a child removed from their care often do not receive support from services, due to services being structured around the needs of the child rather than that of parents (Devaney et al. 2024). There are some specialist services such as Reflect in Wales, which aims to provide practical and emotional support to women and their partners who have experienced the compulsory and permanent removal of a child from their care (Roberts 2018; Stevenson 2026). However, these services do not reach all parents who have experienced child removal and the Step Up Step Down programme, as discussed in Chapter Three, intervenes at a much earlier stage with the aim of averting the separation of parents and their children.

Having established the significant detrimental impacts on parents following the removal of a child, the following section focusses on the challenges negotiated by children and young people within the care system.

2.4 Impacts of Care Proceedings on Children and Young People

When a child is at immediate risk of significant harm, they are removed from their parents or other caregivers and placed under the care of a Local Authority. These placements are necessary to safeguard children, and many children achieve overall positive outcomes, defined by stable placements and positive engagement with education (Burch et al. 2018). However, there are still significant challenges for children in care in Wales and, as documented in the following subsections, there can be enduring impacts on their wellbeing, education, employment, housing stability, and future trajectories.

2.4.1 Mental Health and Trauma-Related Outcomes

The estimated prevalence of mental health disorders among young people in care ranges dramatically, from 1% to 82% (Cummings and Shelton 2024). Nonetheless, it has been consistently reported that care-experienced young people exhibit poorer mental health compared to the general population (Ford et al. 2007), and their emotional and behavioural challenges are often conceptualised as trauma-related outcomes (Mendes, Baidawi and Snow 2014).

According to a study by Karatekin et al. (2018) young people who were maltreated were over two and a half times more likely than matched peers to be diagnosed with a mental illness. Young people who have been in care are more likely than the general population to experience mood and anxiety disorders and suicidality (Karatekin et al. 2018) and are also more likely to have multiple mental health related diagnoses (Keeshin et al. 2014). They also experience high rates of conduct disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Cummings and Shelton 2024). Furthermore, Gomez et al. (2015) report that rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are twice as high for young people ageing out of care compared to American war veterans.

The presence of poor mental health has multiple consequences, including behaviours like self-harm (Wadman et al. 2018) and attempts to self-medicate symptoms of complex trauma through alcohol and other drug use (Mendes, Baidawi and Snow 2014). The rate of attempted suicide by care-experienced young people is over four times higher than in non-care populations (Evans et al. 2017); and a UK longitudinal study found that individuals who have been in care have excess mortality in adulthood up to 42 years later, with this increased risk being linked to self-harm, accidents and other mental health and behavioural factors (Murray et al. 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in additional impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced children and young people, with studies in Northern Ireland, Ireland, and Wales reporting elevated levels of psychological distress and mental health difficulties becoming more pronounced (Kelly et al. 2020; Roberts et al. 2021a, 2021b ; Gilligan et al. 2022). In Wales, a study exploring the views of young people, carers, and social care professionals found that both prior to and following the Covid-19 pandemic there were barriers to mental health and wellbeing support including a lack of awareness of available services and difficulties accessing services both in person and online (Mannay et al. 2022a; Evans et al. 2023; Stabler et al. 2024).

2.4.2 Education and Employment

Young people in care frequently experience significant and pervasive educational disadvantages that impact their attainment and overall trajectory (Mannay et al. 2015; Bayfield 2023). There is a persistent and widening gap in educational achievement across all Key Stages in England and Wales, with children looked after attaining statistically worse educational outcomes than their non-looked-after peers (Bayfield 2023). For example, Mannay et al. (2017) reported that in Wales, in 2015, only 18% of children in care achieved five GCSEs Grade A*-C (including English or Welsh first language and mathematics), compared to 58% of the total student population. This gap is further exacerbated by placement instability and frequent school moves, which have been identified as major barriers to educational success (Mannay et al. 2015; Clemens et al. 2018).

Children with more placements tend to have lower GCSE achievement, and short-term placements remain prevalent, leading to missed lessons, difficulty forming friendships, and a constant challenge to catch up (Mannay et al. 2015). Additionally, many young people in residential care report a lack of interest from care workers in their schooling, an absence of essential learning resources like books, computers, and quiet study spaces, meaning that completing homework and engaging in consistent learning is difficult (Davey 2006); and not all foster carers are not equipped to provide adequate academic support (Mannay et al. 2015).

The quality of the educational environment and available support further compounds these inequalities. Children in care are often more likely to attend lower-performing schools and are disproportionately placed in schools for children with special educational needs or other educational settings with significantly poorer outcomes (Mannay et al. 2015). A high percentage of children in care are identified with Special Educational Needs (SEN), yet the support provided is often insufficient or misunderstood, leading to worse outcomes compared to other children with SEN (Cassen and Kingdon 2007). Research has also highlighted that some schools show a resistance to admitting children in care, have high exclusion rates, and that limited capacity in schools leads to administrative delays in resourcing support for special educational needs and disabilities (Harrison et al. 2026).

A significant impact stems from the low expectations and stigmatisation faced by young people in care (Bayfield 2023). Many express feeling seen as different by peers and teachers and receiving messages that they are potential failures or problems (Mannay et al. 2015; Mannay et al. 2019). This can lead to them being treated with pity or leniency, where teachers and carers assume they needed additional support, meaning they are not academically challenged (Mannay et al. 2017). This status of being positioned as in need of support can unintentionally restrict opportunities for academic achievement. Additionally, frequent care-related meetings and reviews during school hours, often in visible locations, are disruptive and contribute to feelings of being singled out and embarrassed (Mannay et al. 2015; Mannay et al. 2019). Furthermore, disputes between local authorities over funding for educational arrangements like transport further delay schooling and damage self-esteem (Mannay et al. 2015).

Despite often holding similar aspirations for future careers and higher education as their non-looked-after peers (Henderson et al. 2016), many care-experienced young people lack confidence in achieving these ambitions (DCSF 2010). Career advice is frequently absent or pitched at a very low level, steering them away from their potential (Mannay et al. 2015). Care experienced young people have a lower rate of participation in higher education with around 6% attending these institutions, compared to approximately 43% of the general population (Evans 2024), however,

these figures may not account for those who return to education as older adults (Brady and Gilligan 2019). Nonetheless, care experienced young people and adults who do pursue higher education can face challenges including having limited information about the higher education system, financial constraints and reduced support networks (Geiger and Beltran 2017; Harrison and Waller 2018; Brady and Gilligan 2019, Evans 2024).

Upon graduation, many face the loss of local authority support, which can end at age 21 or 25, creating financial insecurity and forcing them to return to areas with negative past associations or limited job opportunities (Baker 2024). Care-experienced graduates are also less likely to achieve top degrees and, although they are more likely to pursue postgraduate study, often to extend a period of stability, they are less likely to attend higher-status institutions for this study (Baker et al. 2022). On leaving education, care leavers often face considerable financial distress and employment challenges (Courtney et al. 2011; Melkman and Benbenishty 2018; Evans 2026). Care-experienced young people also earn less on average than their non-care-experienced peers (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011) and unemployment and underemployment rates are high compared to same-age peers and youth from other disadvantaged backgrounds (Kovarikova 2017).

Following the Mannay et al. (2015) study of the education of care-experienced children and young people in Wales, the Welsh Government developed key strategies and guidance documents to address some of these barriers and inequalities (Welsh Government 2016; 2017a, 2017b). However, Lowthian and colleagues (2026) examination of educational pathways and outcomes over a 16 year period for care-experienced children born in Wales between 2000 and 2003 found that care experienced children had lower attainment at age 11 compared to all pupils in Wales. Children with short- term experiences of care were also more likely to 'be suspended or excluded, move school, or experience household poverty, of which contributes towards the lower attainment observed at age 16' (Lowthian et al. 2026, p. 2). These pervasive issues in educational pathways can have a detrimental impact on the trajectories of care experienced adults.

2.4.3 Housing and Residential Instability

Care experienced young people often encounter difficulties in securing stable, affordable housing during their transition to independent living (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011). For example, they experience significantly higher rates of homelessness (Mendes, Baidawi and Snow 2014; Melkman and Benbenishty 2018; Lalonde et al. 2020); and estimates of homelessness among young people previously in foster care range from 22% to 37% (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011). Even those who are not homeless frequently experience significant housing instability (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011; Kovarikova 2017; Lalonde et al. 2020), characterised by multiple moves, eviction, couch surfing, and being forced to seek less expensive options (Curry and Abrams 2015). Adults who were in foster care show a higher likelihood of living in neighbourhood with higher poverty levels (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011). Factors increasing the risk of homelessness post-care include having a pattern of running away from care, placement in group care, and a history of physical abuse (Kovarikova 2017); and housing options may also be limited for youth with special needs or substance abuse issues (Curry and Abrams 2015).

2.4.4 Criminal Justice Involvement

Care leavers are highly over-represented in the justice system, with increased levels of involvement compared to the general population (Mendes, Baidawi and Snow 2014). Young people in care are

detained at higher rates than those not involved in care (Kovarikova 2017), even though there is often limited evidence suggesting they commit more frequent or severe crimes (Lee et al. 2015). In sentencing, judges often factor in a history with child protection, which can result in more frequent commitment to detention or residential programs compared to peers who are not care-experienced (Lee et al. 2015; Kovarikova 2017).

2.4.5 Transition, Social Support, and Parenthood

Arnett (2000) posits a period of 'emerging adulthood', which affords individuals more choice and opportunity to experiment with their identity, relationships and professions, however, this position fails to acknowledge the diversity of young people's lives and the inequalities that care experienced young people have to negotiate (Roberts et al. 2021). Care-leavers transition to adulthood is often abrupt and characterised by relational challenges and a lack of the financial and emotional support that many young people rely on in this important transitionary period (Courtney and Dworsky 2006; Lalonde et al. 2020). For example, Stein (2019, p. 400) considered practice across 11 European countries and found that the majority of young people left care by 18 years of age and transitions were 'more accelerated, compressed and linear' with no opportunity to return to the care of corporate parents if initial decisions proved problematic.

In Wales, legislation provides that state support is available to care leavers up to the age of 21, or 25, for those in education or training (Welsh Government 2018) and 'provisions such as the 'When I'm Ready' scheme seek to counter such disadvantage by supporting young people to remain with their foster carers post-18' (Roberts et al. 2021., p. S81). However, on leaving care, young adults are often left with fragmented social networks and limited support resources (Perry 2006; Melkman and Benbenishty 2018) and may experience deep loneliness and isolation (Kovarikova 2017). Care leavers are less likely than their peers to be able to return to the parental home (Berzin, Rhodes and Curtis 2011) and are often prematurely expected to live independently (Batsche et al. 2014). In qualitative studies, care-experienced young people have also reported that they felt unprepared for life post-care and service providers have agreed that the care system lacks emphasis on teaching necessary life skills (Lalonde et al. 2020).

Furthermore, care-experienced young people face higher rates of early pregnancy and parenthood (Kovarikova 2017). This is significant as young parents often experience discourses of stigma and blame and intensive forms of surveillance of their parenting practices (Brady and Brown 2013; Mannay et al. 2018). For care-experienced young people who become parents, these forms of judgement and surveillance are even more significant, and they often do not have the support networks and assistance that other parents can draw from their families (Roberts 2017, 2019). Early pregnancy can also be linked with the removal of children from their parents and intergenerational and recurrent care proceedings, which were discussed in section 2.3.4.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has considered the social care landscape and literature that points to a 'crisis in care', related to the rising numbers of children entering care, issues with a lack of suitable care placements, recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers, and the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce. The Welsh Government's commitment to eliminate private profit from

the care of children, also raises questions about ongoing capacity and where children will be placed on entrance to the care system. This chapter has also documented the impacts of separation and potential adverse consequences for parents and for children and young people in relation to their mental health and wellbeing, education and life course trajectories.

Whist it is necessary for some children to enter the care system because of risk of significant harm; it is also important to move away from a reliance on crisis intervention and consider earlier interventions that can prevent avoidable entry to care and unnecessary separation. It is within the context discussed in this chapter that edge of care services have become increasingly central to both policy and practice. Evidence from inspection and review-based literature suggests strong support among both birth parents and professionals for services that work intensively with families to address challenges such as domestic violence, mental health challenges, and the wider impacts of poverty (Welsh Parliament 2023a).

Such support is widely understood as integral to reducing the number of children entering care, rather than simply managing risk once thresholds for removal have been reached (Welsh Parliament 2023b). Importantly, qualitative accounts indicate that some mothers were able to have children returned to their care following targeted support, while others were able to retain care of subsequent children, demonstrating the potential of preventative interventions to disrupt trajectories of repeat removal (Welsh Parliament 2023b).

Programmes such as Step Up Step Down are designed to support families 'on the edge of care' through targeted, intensive intervention, explicitly aiming to reduce the number of children entering care and improve outcomes by strengthening family capacity rather than defaulting to placement (The Fostering Network n.d.; Welsh Government 2025b). Therefore, as a background to the development of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, the following chapter, Chapter Three - Preventative Family Interventions, will consider earlier interventions that have been put in place with the aim of supporting families and preventing the avoidable entry of children into the care system.

3 Preventative Family Interventions

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the pressure on the social care workforce, high numbers of children entering care and difficulties with securing suitable care placements, which has contributed to a 'crisis in care'; as well as considering the impacts on parents when their children are removed from their care and the potential life course outcomes for care-experienced children, young people and adults. Chapter Two summarised by emphasising the importance of considering services and interventions that can support families 'on the edge of care' through targeted strategies, which can improve outcomes by strengthening family capacity and reducing the prospect of children entering care.

This chapter reports on a systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions for families involved with child protection services, noting some alignments with the studies reviewed and elements of the Step Up Step Down programme. It then introduces the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland and reflects on the findings and recommendations from two evaluations of this programme, and their relevance for the related work with families in the Welsh context.

3.2 Review of Psychosocial Interventions for Families

This section focusses on the work of Oliviera and colleagues (2025) who conducted a recent overview of key literature in this field. Oliviera et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis, examining psychosocial interventions for families with young children from birth to five years who were involved with child protection services. The review aimed to evaluate the 'effectiveness of psychosocial interventions delivered to these families in reducing the risk of harm, improving parenting quality, and supporting parental functioning' (Oliviera et al. 2025, p. 1). The review involved a systematic search of databases to identify randomised controlled trials between 1990 to 2024. Eligible studies were assessed for risk of bias using the Revised Cochrane Risk-of-Bias Tool and fifteen randomised controlled trials (n = 2,232 families) were included in the review.

The Oliviera et al. (2025) review demonstrates that programmes tend to produce stronger effects on parenting processes and parent–child relationships than on reducing maltreatment itself (Bernard et al. 2012; Barlow et al. 2019; Oxford et al. 2016). A substantial proportion of the evidence base is grounded in attachment theory, which conceptualises early caregiving relationships as central to children's socio-emotional development and resilience (Bowlby 1969). Interventions such as Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up and Infant–Parent Psychotherapy explicitly target caregivers' responsiveness and reflective functioning, with studies demonstrating significant improvements in attachment organisation, attachment security and parental sensitivity among families involved with child protection systems (Cicchetti et al. 2006; Moss et al. 2011; Bernard et al. 2012). Similarly, relationship-based and video-feedback programmes, including Promoting First Relationships and the Attachment Video-Feedback Intervention, use observational learning and reflective dialogue to support parents in recognising and responding to children's emotional cues, with evidence indicating improvements in parental sensitivity and interaction quality (Oxford et al. 2016; Eguren et al. 2023).

Alongside attachment-based approaches, several interventions drew on behavioural and social learning theories, which emphasise the role of modelling, reinforcement and structured skill acquisition in shaping parenting behaviours (Bandura 1977). Parenting programmes such as Parent–Child Interaction Therapy and SafeCare focus on teaching positive parenting strategies, discipline skills and parent–child communication through coaching and practice. Evaluations of these interventions report improvements in observed parenting behaviours and parental responsiveness, suggesting that behaviourally oriented approaches can effectively enhance parenting competence among high-risk families (Whitaker et al. 2020; Villodas et al. 2021; Skowron et al. 2024). Similarly, the Reminiscing and Emotion Training programme targets parents' ability to discuss emotions with children, promoting emotionally supportive communication that is associated with improved child regulation and attachment processes (Valentino et al. 2019).

However, despite these positive changes in proximal parenting outcomes, the evidence that such interventions reduce child maltreatment or child protection re-involvement remains inconsistent. Large-scale evaluations of home-visiting and child welfare programmes, including Healthy Families New York, nurse home-visiting interventions and Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams, report limited or non-significant reductions in official maltreatment reports (MacMillan et al. 2005; Lee et al. 2018; Hall et al. 2021). In some cases, effects appear contingent on contextual factors; for example, reductions in re-reports to child protection services were observed only for families without prior involvement or where parents did not report clinically significant depression (Jonson-Reid et al. 2018). Interventions targeting parental substance misuse, such as Parenting Under Pressure and Family Behaviour Therapy, demonstrate improvements in parental functioning, emotional regulation and substance use outcomes, yet again show limited evidence of direct reductions in maltreatment risk (Donohue et al. 2014; Barlow et al. 2019).

These findings suggest that while psychosocial interventions can meaningfully improve proximal mechanisms associated with maltreatment risk, such as parental sensitivity, emotional regulation and parenting competence, the translation of these changes into reductions in abuse or neglect is far less certain. This may reflect the multi-layered nature of maltreatment risk, which is shaped not only by parenting behaviour but also by structural factors such as poverty, mental health difficulties, substance misuse and social isolation (Belsky 1993). Consequently, parenting interventions alone may be insufficient to address the broader ecological contexts in which child protection involvement occurs; and Oliviera et al. (2025) suggest that future research may benefit from integrating relational interventions with broader structural supports, while employing larger and methodologically consistent trials capable of detecting changes in maltreatment outcomes.

Despite the promising findings regarding parenting outcomes, several methodological limitations constrain the strength of conclusions that can be drawn from the existing evidence base. As Oliviera et al. (2025) highlight, a key limitation across the studies is small sample sizes, with several trials involving fewer than 100 families (Moss et al. 2011; Donohue et al. 2014; Eguren et al. 2023), reducing statistical power to detect changes in relatively rare outcomes such as substantiated maltreatment. Additionally, there is substantial heterogeneity in intervention models, outcome measures and follow-up periods, which complicates comparison across studies and limits the reliability of meta-analytic estimates (Bernard et al. 2012; Oxford et al. 2016; Villodas et al. 2021). Many studies also relied on administrative child protection records as outcome measures, which may underestimate maltreatment due to under-reporting or differences in reporting thresholds across jurisdictions (see MacMillan et al. 2005; Lee et al. 2018; Hall et al. 2021). Furthermore, attrition rates and difficulties maintaining engagement with highly vulnerable

families pose additional challenges for research validity, particularly in interventions targeting parents experiencing substance misuse or multiple adversities (see ; Donohue et al. 2014; Barlow et al. 2019). These methodological challenges highlight the need for larger, multi-site trials with consistent outcome measures and longer follow-up periods in order to more robustly assess whether improvements in parenting behaviour ultimately translate into reductions in child maltreatment.

Despite these critiques there were positive impacts from these interventions, in terms of parental sensitivity and interaction quality, and the activities in these interventions relate to key components of the Step Up Step Down programme. For example, aligning with Step Up Step Down, there was a focus on the importance of early intervention (Cicchetti et al. 2006; Barlow et al. 2019; Brown et al. 2021; Eguren et al. 2023); intensive, relationship-based support for families with complex needs (Barlow et al. 2019; Eguren et al. 2023); enhancing both parenting skills and relational dynamics (Cicchetti et al. 2006; Moss et al. 2011; Oxford et al. 2016); family-based in-home interventions (Donohue et al. 2014); and multi-agency coordinated support (Hall et al. 2021). Therefore, the interventions reviewed by Oliviera and colleagues (2025) have alignments with the Step Up Step Down programme, but it is important to consider direct evaluations of Step Up Step Down, which will be the focus of the following section.

3.3 Evaluations of Step Up Step Down - Northern Ireland

The Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland is jointly delivered by The Fostering Network and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. It was funded through the National Lottery Community Fund between 2016 and 2023. Each family typically involved with Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland receives between 12–15 months of tailored, consistent support, averaging 674 hours (around 90 days) annually. This support encompasses three key dimensions:

1. Direct support for parents – mentoring, practical parenting advice, and structured training programmes such as *Bond* (attachment-based) and *Embrace* (nurturing parenting).

2. Direct support for children – including short breaks, therapeutic nurture groups, and access to local community activities.

3. Whole-family support – such as family residentials, school holiday activity programmes, community connection work, and activities that strengthen relationships and resilience.

Partnership working between The Fostering Network Northern Ireland and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has been central to the delivery of Step Up Step Down, with Family Support Foster Carers and programme officers collaborating closely with statutory services to coordinate care and monitor progress (Flood and Thompson 2020). The Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland has been evaluated by Flood and Thompson (2020) and O'Reilly (2020).

3.3.1 Evaluation of the Step Up Step Down Pilot in Northern Ireland (2020)

A mixed-methods evaluation conducted by Ruth Flood Associates combined outcome data with qualitative interviews involving four parents, four Family Support Foster Carers, three staff from

The Fostering Network, and five South Eastern Health and Social Care Staff (Flood and Thompson 2020). Despite delays in recruitment and early challenges in programme setup, the evaluation found strong evidence of impact across several domains.

Firstly, there was a reduction in risk and statutory involvement as of the 28 families who completed the Step Up Step Down programme, 19 (68%) achieved a positive shift toward lesser social services involvement. In relation to the children in the families, 15 of the children were prevented from entering care, eight children remained safely at home despite previous plans for care admission, and 16 children on the Child Protection Register were supported to stay within their families.

However, it is important to note that since this evaluation (Flood and Thompson 2020), the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland has continued to support children and young people to remain at home with their birth families. In the Step Up Step Down update (The Fostering Network n.d.) it was reported that 150 parents and carers had been supported during the Northern Ireland pilot and of the 205 children supported, five entered foster care, seven entered kinship care (supported by Step Up Step Down) and the rest of the children remained with their birth parents. Accordingly, both the Step Up Step Down pilot in Northern Ireland and the Pembrokeshire pilot in Wales achieved a 95% success rate in terms of keeping families together.

Secondly, the Flood and Thompson (2020) evaluation provided evidence of improved family functioning as the Outcome Star data indicated significant improvements in family routines, boundaries, and keeping children safe. Parents also reported enhanced self-efficacy, reduced stress, and stronger emotional bonds with their children.

Thirdly, there was evidence of community and educational engagement, as 85% of participating families engaged in community activities. Parents demonstrated improved capacity to support children's learning, with many developing sustainable local support networks post-programme. Following the evaluation by Flood and Thompson (2020), community and educational engagement has increased to 97% of families in the Northern Ireland pilot, and families have received 'community, skills-based or practical supports, such as food, fuel, furniture, training, regulation strategies, employment support, driving lessons, electronics to support online learning, and crafts, toys, and sports 'equipment to support development and health' (The Fostering Network n.d.).

Fourthly, there was qualitative evidence of transformation as parents described Step Up Step Down as life-changing, citing newfound confidence, reduced isolation, and better communication with their children. It was noted that Family Support Foster Carers' non-judgemental approach was key to building trust and achieving systemic change within families.

It is important to note that the Flood and Thompson (2020) evaluation also identified ongoing challenges. A key challenge was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining Family Support Foster Carers, due to the intensive nature of the work. It was also recommended that a manualised model, a formal step-by-step guide to ensure consistency, reproducibility, and rigorous adherence to evidence-based practice, should be developed to support replication and future scaling. This recommendation was adopted and guidance was developed in Northern Ireland to support future iterations of the Step Up Step Down programme (Irwin 2026).

3.3.2 Cost Analysis of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland (2020)

Maureen O'Reilly quantified the financial value of the Step Up Step Down model, and the findings were shared in a Briefing Paper titled 'Potential Cost Savings to Government through Participation in the Step Up Step Down Programme'. The annual Step Up Step Down programme cost was £191,999 per annum, funded by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (£54,000) and the National Lottery Community Fund (£137,999). This equates to an average annual cost of £4,682 per family as a total 122 children received support either directly or indirectly across 48 families when co-parenting families are included.

There were 114 children involved through family contact with the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland at the point of the O'Reilly (2020) cost analysis. These children were referred in relation to their involvement with social workers on either voluntary (family support) or compulsory (child protection), with concerns linked to the risk of or initiated pre-proceedings for care placement, the risk of foster care and the need for intensive family support. O'Reilly's (2020) analysis focussed specifically on 28 children who had completed the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland. O'Reilly (2000, p. 3) noted that if these 28 children had been placed in Kinship or Foster Care the 'annual cost to government would be £622,020', rising to a figure of '£8 million annually' if the 28 children went to a residential care placement in Northern Ireland.

O'Reilly (2020, p. 4) calculated the benefit–cost ratio and surmised that for every £1 invested in Step Up Step Down, including the statutory social services costs that form part of social services supports to children, the government saves approximately £1.50, primarily through avoided residential placements, largely through the removal of the risk to children being referred to residential care. Therefore, despite putting in additional social care supports with additional associated costs, the support provided by Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland means that 'the government will make savings because of the costs avoided, largely in the very expensive care provided in residential placement care' (O'Reilly 2020, p. 4).

In relation to cost avoidance, at the time of O'Reilly's (2020) assessment, the annual cost of one residential placement in Northern Ireland was £285,330, but it should be noted that these costs have since increased (Irwin 2026). The annual cost of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland was £191,999, meaning that if the programme prevents even one child entering residential care this offsets the entire programme cost. This was evidenced with case study evidence of an 11-year-old boy who avoided residential care due to the intervention of the Step Up Step Down Programme (O'Reilly 2020). The estimated annual investment of support for this child and his family from the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland 'amounted to £27,696 over an 18-month period or £18,464 over a year' (O'Reilly 2020, p. 4). However, as a residential care placement was avoided because of this family intervention, and the cost of a child's residential care place in Northern Ireland is £285,330 per annum, in this particular case the £18,464 annual investment through the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland 'led to a net cost saving to government of £266,866' (O'Reilly 2020, p. 5); suggesting a benefit to cost ratio of £14.50: £1. The child was removed from the Child Protection Register with a potential further cost saving of £9,500 per annum (O'Reilly 2020, p. 16).

O'Reilly (2020) also highlighted wider long-term economic benefits associated with better educational outcomes, lower mental health service use, and reduced numbers of young people

being Not in Education, Employment or Training. These potential benefits were proposed in relation to reported outcomes for care-experienced young people in Northern Ireland.

O'Reilly (2020) again drew on the case example of 11-year-old boy who avoided residential care due to the intervention of the Step Up Step Down Programme to illustrate these long-term economic benefits. It was noted that the case child had been self-harming prior to engagement with the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland, and that instances of self-harm hospital admissions (£809) and psychological assessments (£392 per session) could have been avoided (O'Reilly 2020, p.17).

Additionally, the case child, in not being placed in residential care, is more likely to achieve five A* to C graded GCSEs and less likely to become Not in Employment or Education, at a cost of £4,235 per annum for 18-24 year olds. Not entering care similarly reduces the risk of suspension from school (18% for a child in residential care versus 1.4% for children who are not in residential care in Northern Ireland), and they would be less likely to be cautioned, convicted and involved in the justice system (O'Reilly 2020, p.17).

There is a significant cost to the government and society when children enter the social care system. The Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland is focussed on reducing the number of children coming into care and O'Reilly's (2020) report provided essential insights into understanding the cost implications of children entering State care in Northern Ireland and the potential of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland to support children and families, and in doing so reduce or change the costs to government and society of supporting these children at risk. The outcomes of O'Reilly's (2020) review have significant implications for the role out of Step Up Step Down beyond Northern Ireland and its implementation within the Welsh context.

3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has considered Oliviera and colleagues' (2025) systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions for families with young children who were involved with child protection services. The review suggested that psychosocial interventions have the potential to meaningfully improve parental sensitivity, emotional regulation and parenting competence. However, they noted that it is more difficult to evidence the extent to which these changes translate into reductions in abuse or neglect, considering how maltreatment risk is shaped not only by parenting behaviour but also by structural factors such as poverty, mental health difficulties, substance misuse and social isolation.

However, it is important to note that many of the interventions reviewed by Oliviera and colleagues (2025) were limited in scope, for example, they concentrated on teaching positive parenting strategies, discipline skills and parent–child communication through coaching and practice, or they were targeted specifically on promoting emotionally supportive communication between parents and children. Consequently, Oliviera and colleagues (2025) suggested that it would be beneficial to explore interventions that integrate relational interventions with broader structural supports.

The Step Up Step Down programme aligns with some aspects of the interventions reviewed by Oliviera et al. (2025), in relation to training and a focus on supporting parenting practices. However,

Step Up Step Down has a much wider programme of interventions, including direct support for parents, with mentoring, practical parenting advice, and structured training programmes; direct support for children, including short breaks, a nurture programme, and access to local community activities; as well as whole-family support in the form of family residentials, community connection work, and activities that strengthen relationships and resilience.

The combined evaluation and cost analysis position the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland as a high-impact, cost-effective preventative model that both improves family wellbeing and delivers tangible savings to government (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020). The effectiveness of Step Up Step Down can be linked to the following key interrelated features.

- Relational focus – sustained, non-hierarchical relationships that build parental trust and empowerment.
- Comprehensive support package – a range of training, activities and interventions for children, parents and families over a sustained period of time.
- Collaborative governance – partnership between statutory and voluntary sectors ensuring integrated, holistic support.
- Economic efficiency – prevention of care admissions generating significant cost savings alongside human benefits.

Chapter Two considered the social care landscape and literature that points to a 'crisis in care', related to the rising numbers of children entering care, issues with a lack of suitable care placements, recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers, and the overwhelming and unsustainable pressure on the social care workforce (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). It also discussed the detrimental immediate and life course outcomes often faced by parents who have experienced compulsory child removals (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Enlander et al. 2021; Stevenson 2026), and by children in the care system in relation to wellbeing, education, employment, housing stability, and their future trajectories (Curry and Abrams 2015; Mannay et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026).

The evaluations of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland suggest that this intervention has the potential to directly address the 'crisis in care' and its associated detrimental outcomes by supporting children and families and mitigating the risk of children entering State care (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020). It is important to note that these evaluations involved a relatively small numbers of families and the estimates of financial savings were based on assumptions about the potential trajectories of children in the absence of their involvement with the Step Up Step Down programme. However, these limitations are to be expected in the evaluation of new and developing services, particularly where opportunities for participation may initially be limited and where outcomes are influenced by a range of factors across the wider social care system, making it difficult to attribute change to a single intervention. Consequently, whilst the findings from the evaluations conducted by both Flood and Thompson (2020) and O'Reilly (2020) are encouraging, further research and analysis is required to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes and outcomes of the Step Up Step Down programme.

Nonetheless, the available reported evidence documenting the accomplishments of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland directly influenced the piloting of the programme in Wales, which aims to replicate these positive outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate the initial pilot in Pembrokeshire to ensure that points of best practice and learning are taken forward in future

iterations of Step Up Step Down in Wales. Accordingly, the following chapter, Chapter Four – Methodology, will set out the research design and methods that were adopted to evaluate the Step Up Step Down pilot programme in Pembrokeshire.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research design for the evaluation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. It documents the participants involved in the evaluation and the methods adopted to generate data. It also discusses the related ethical procedures and practices and documents the approach to the analysis of the data.

4.2 Research Design

This study was an evaluation of the implementation Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, which supported families on the edge of care in Pembrokeshire and Powys, with the aim being to reduce the number of children coming into care and to support the bonds and capacities of families. Step Up Step Down offers families a comprehensive package of support with the aim of preventing problems escalating, improving relationships and building networks of support.

The evaluation sought to highlight areas of best practice and potential improvements to the model in consideration of the Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme.

- Reduced number of children becoming looked after
- Increased number of children experiencing sustained reunification with their family
- Parents gain capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity, and create safe, stable family relationships
- Children have tools to help them self-regulate; parents are able to co-regulate their children
- Parents and children develop stronger connections to their communities, strengthening the support available to help prevent and address crises
- Increased capacity of parents and children to learn and grow as a family; more parents and children taking advantage of opportunities for learning

The evaluation was conducted in two phases to ensure that it would involve the two implementation sites of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales, Pembrokeshire and Powys. This report focusses on the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. The Step Up Step Down programme was funded by the Welsh Government for a three-year period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2026. This funding period incorporated an initial phase of implementation and engagement with Local Authority partners. Pembrokeshire was the first Local Authority to express interest in early 2023, with a formal partnership agreed in July 2023. This was followed by a preparatory phase focussing on the recruitment of family support foster carers and the development of local delivery arrangements. The programme was formally launched in November 2023 and referrals to the programme were received from February 2024 with full operational delivery beginning in April 2024.

The Pembrokeshire programme of work was extended for a further year with funding from the KPMG Foundation April 2026 to March 2027. The KPMG Foundation had supported Step Up Step Down over the three-year period, but they provided an opportunity for remaining funding to be used

for this additional year (Irwin 206). This report focusses on the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire in its initial period of funding, focussing on the period of full operational delivery between April 2024 and March 2026. However, the research team were involved in this evaluation between the launch of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire in November 2023 and March 2026 to understand both the development and implementation of the Pembrokeshire programme. The Step Up Step Down programme was not implemented in Powys until 2026, and the evaluation of this phase will be presented in a separate report.

The research was designed to facilitate an understanding of the subjective experiences of those involved in the Step Up Step Down programme and their recommendations for future practice, services, and interventions. Accordingly, it was important to include the perspectives of children (C), parents (P), Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC), Local Authority Senior Leads (LASL), and social workers (SW) and staff in The Fostering Network in Wales (TFNW) that were involved the delivery of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. Therefore, a qualitative approach was adopted involving interviews, observations, creative methods workshops and an analysis of feedback from parents, children and Family Support Foster Carers that was collated by The Fostering Network in Wales.

4.3 Participants

All of the participants in the study were involved with the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. Accordingly, before introducing the participants it is necessary to provide an overview of the number of families and children involved in the programme, the numbers of referrals, completions and ongoing support, and the rationales for referrals to the Step Up Step Down programme.

Since its launch, 12 families (23 children) have successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months, supporting children aged between five months and 11 years. Among families who engaged with the programme, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported, maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation. The children receiving support ranged in age from birth to 16 years.

In the evaluation period the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire received 47 referrals involving 105 children. The referrals were received from the Childcare Assessment Team, Childcare Management Team, Children with Disabilities Team, the Parent and Baby Programme and the Special Guardianship Team. The referrals were related to a wide range of concerns including;

Children's Behaviours: children displaying challenging and aggressive behaviours or behaviours linked to trauma, neurodevelopmental conditions or attachment difficulties.

Risk of Placement Breakdown: breakdown between children and caregivers and concerns that some children may become looked after.

Parental Health and Capacity: parents experiencing significant health difficulties impacting their ability to provide consistent care.

Domestic Violence and Substance Misuse: incidents of domestic violence witnessed by children and parental substance misuse contributing to chaotic home environments.

Limited Support Networks: families isolated with minimal practical or emotional support.

Impact on Siblings: siblings affected by challenging behaviours and parental focus on one child.

Safeguarding Concerns: Section 47 investigations, allegations of physical harm, and risks linked to unsafe behaviours

Referral outcomes for families who did not progress included:

- 5 families (12 children) where referrals did not proceed due to non-engagement or changes in circumstances.
- 5 families (11 children) disengaged after initial involvement.
- 3 families (8 children) were deemed inappropriate for the service.
- 4 families (5 children) declined support following referral.

Having outlined the Step Up Step Down programme referrals and the families involved, the sample of participants can now be introduced. The evaluation involved children, parents, and Family Support Foster Carers, as well as staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads who were involved in the commissioning, organisation and delivery of Step Up Step Down. In total eight children, seven parents, five Family Support Foster Carers, two social workers, two staff from The Fostering Network in Wales and two Local Authority Senior Leads were involved in the evaluation interviews or creative workshops. As illustrated in the following Tables (1-6), in Pembrokeshire eight children were involved in creative workshops, seven parents were interviewed and three of these parents also engaged in an additional follow-up interview, and interviews were also conducted with five Family Support Foster Carers, two social workers, two members of staff from The Fostering Network in Wales and two participants from the Local Authority. There were also observations of event days and an analysis of feedback forms collated by The Fostering Network in Wales, but these involvements were not a direct form of participation.

In relation to Table 1, it is important to note that six of the seven participants were parents, and one participant was a grandparent. Kinship care is an integral, yet under researched, area of out-of-home care and there are differences in kinship arrangements that should be considered (Stabler 2025). However, given the small sample size and the ethical tensions around providing anonymity and confidentiality, all seven participants were assigned the codename ‘Parent’ to reflect their parenting role. This coding process has issues of representation and re-framing identities (Heaton 2022); however, it was important to ensure that the grandparent was provided with an additional layer of anonymity in assigning an appropriate codename (see section 4.5).

Codename	Role
P1	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P2	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P3	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P4	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P5	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P6	Parent - Pembrokeshire
P7	Parent - Pembrokeshire

Table 1: Parent Participants Pembrokeshire

Codename	Age	Role
C1	5	Child - Pembrokeshire
C2	6	Child - Pembrokeshire
C3	7	Child - Pembrokeshire
C4	7	Child - Pembrokeshire
C5	6	Child - Pembrokeshire
C6	7	Child - Pembrokeshire
C7	8	Child - Pembrokeshire
C8	11	Child - Pembrokeshire

Table 2: Child Participants Pembrokeshire

Codename	Role
FSFC 1	Family Support Foster Carer - Pembrokeshire
FSFC 2	Family Support Foster Carer - Pembrokeshire
FSFC 3	Family Support Foster Carer - Pembrokeshire
FSFC 4	Family Support Foster Carer - Pembrokeshire
FSFC 5	Family Support Foster Carer - Pembrokeshire

Table 3: Family Support Foster Carer Participants Pembrokeshire

Codename	Role
SW1	Social Worker - Pembrokeshire
SW2	Social Worker - Pembrokeshire

Table 4: Social Worker Participants Pembrokeshire

Codename	Role
LASL1	Local Authority Senior Lead - Pembrokeshire
LASL2	Local Authority Senior Lead - Pembrokeshire

Table 5: Local Authority Senior Leads Participants Pembrokeshire

Codename	Role
TFNW1	The Fostering Network in Wales - Pembrokeshire
TFNW2	The Fostering Network in Wales - Pembrokeshire

Table 6: The Fostering Network in Wales Staff Participants Pembrokeshire

4.4 Methods

This section provides an overview of the research methods that were employed to evaluate the Step Up Step Down programme.

4.4.1 Observations and Creative Workshops

Ethnography is interested in participating in the community, documenting patterns of life, and exploring webs of meaning, involving forms of observation and participation, and it is a key tool of data generation in social research (Atkinson 2013; Mannay 2019). Drawing from ethnographic approaches the researchers participated in events held for families in the Step Up Step Down programme and took reflective fieldnotes about the related activities and interactions between children, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff members from The Fostering Network in Wales involved in Step Up Step Down. Building trust with communities is an essential aspect of qualitative research (Costas Batlle and Carr 2021) and attending activities, where it was suitable and ethical to engage, enabled us to connect with families, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff who were involved in the Step Up Step Down program. The events and activities attended included:

- Step Up Step Down in Wales Launch – 28 November 2023
- Nurture Group for Children - 15 July 2024

- Christmas Event for Families at Picton Castle - 21 December 2024
- Event for Families at Picton Castle - 26 June 2025
- Children's Summer Scheme – 13 August 2025

In the activities with children, the Nurture Group and the Children's Summer Scheme sessions, observations were also conducted with the use of a camera to document arts-based outputs created by children in situ or in previous sessions, and fieldnotes were taken in situ to record children's reflections on these activities and their perspectives on the Step Up Step Down programme.

Attending, observing and participating in the Nurture Group and the Children's Summer Scheme enabled a period of familiarisation with different aspects of The Fostering Network in Wales's work with children. Additionally, it offered an opportunity to build rapport with some facilitators, Family Support Foster Carers, children and, in the Nurture Group, also parents who were involved in the interview stages of the evaluation.

Creative methods are often used in research with children as they have the potential to destabilise adult-centric ways of seeing the world (White 2020) and these approaches have been effective in engaging children in previous studies and evaluations (Mannay et al. 2019; Boffey et al. 2021; Chicken et al. 2024). Therefore, in the evaluation of the Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme, the researchers offered children an opportunity to engage with some creative activities, including photo and object elicitation, drawing and stickers, the plate mapping method and sandboxing where children represented experiences through the use of figures and a box filled with sand, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Sand scene created in the Nurture Group (Pembrokeshire - July 2024)

Photo-elicitation involves discussing photographs with participants to gain an insight into how they understand what is represented in the image (Harper 2023). Object elicitation is a similar process but rather than being based on photographs, the object created, selected or presented to the participant is the focus for the discussion (Grant et al. 2018; Mannay 2020). In the evaluation of the Nurture Group, some sessions had photographs displayed. These photographs provided opportunities for discussion as they featured the children involved in activities in the previous

sessions mounted on the wall. The object elicitation also involved discussions about the materials that children had created in the previous Nurture Group sessions, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Heart paintings created by the children (Pembrokeshire - July 2024)

We were also able to draw on an emotions chart designed by The Fostering Network in the evaluations of the Nurture Group. The chart featured emojis and this supported children to discuss how they felt when they attended the Nurture Group sessions, as illustrated in Figure 3.

The children engaged in differential ways in both the Nurture Group and the Children's Summer Scheme, and as in previous studies with young children that have taken a participatory approach (Chicken et al. 2024), children decided when and how to contribute. Accordingly, even where activities did not follow the set purpose of the evaluation, they retained usefulness in creating relationships with children, their parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network staff members, and they confirmed the potential of creative methods for enabling children to direct conversations. The points that children raised in relation to their experience of being involved in the Step Up Step Down programme and the observations from additional events and activities will be discussed in Chapter Seven.



Figure 3: Emoji chart – 'I am feeling' (The Fostering Network)

4.4.2 Qualitative Interviews

Interviews are commonly used in in qualitative research to provide an insight into the perspectives and experiences of participants (Kvale 2007). The interviews were semi-structured and interview schedules were developed to ensure that the conversations would address the required areas to evaluate the Step Up Step Down programme, whilst ensuring that there was flexibility for participants to describe their experiences more widely and discuss information that was relevant to the study.

Interviews were conducted with parents, Family Support Foster Carers, staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads involved in Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. The interviews were held in accordance with the preferences of the participants as it was important that the participants felt comfortable and that the arrangements were convenient for their schedules. Therefore, aligning with other studies in the field of social care participants were offered in person, telephone or online interview (Roberts et al. 2021a, 2021b ; Sprecher et al. 2021). Two interviews with one parent were conducted on the phone, two interviews with two parents were held online and five parents were interviewed once in their own homes at their request. Two of the interviews with Family Support Foster Carers were held in their own homes and two Family Support Foster Carers chose to be interviewed online. All

of the staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads chose to be interviewed online. Some of the participants also selected to be interviewed together and this was arranged to facilitate their preferred way of engaging with the evaluation.

All of the interviews were audio recorded and the length of the interviews ranged between 29 minutes and 1 hour and 28 minutes, with a total of 13 hours and 42 minutes of audio recording from the set of interviews, and there were 151,082 words of transcription from the audio recordings. The data generated in these interviews will be discussed in chapters Five, Six, Seven, Eight and Nine.

4.4.3 Feedback and Evaluation Forms

The Step Up Step Down programme offered training session for parents and Family Support Foster Carers, and a Girls Group for those over the age of 12 who did not attend the Nurture Group because this was aimed at younger children. There was not adequate space within these sessions for researchers to generate feedback directly with the participants and the nature of these sessions meant sensitive topics such as emotions and personal experiences were discussed. Therefore, the presence of unknown researchers could have disrupted the safe space of the Girls Group and the training sessions, and the trustful relationships built with the facilitators. As the research team were unable to attend these sessions, however, the completed feedback forms distributed by The Fostering Network in Wales were provided for analysis from the following activities.

- The Girls Group was delivered between 5 September and 17 October 2024 with four children both attending and completing the feedback form.
- The EMBRACE Parents Group Monday delivered between 9 September and 21 October with eight parents both attending and completing the feedback form.
- The BOND Parents and Family Support Foster Carers Group delivered between 13 January 2025 and 10 March 2025 with eight parents and four Family Support Foster Carers both attending and completing the feedback form.
- Safeguarding training was delivered on 3 February 2026 with three Family Support Foster Carers and one project worker attending and completing the feedback form.

The analysis of the feedback forms provided further insights into the data generated in the interviews, which will be discussed in chapters Seven and Eight.

4.5 Ethical Practice

The potential vulnerability of children on the edge of care and the support needs of parents informed the research design (Shaw and Holland 2014). Therefore, children and parents were recruited via The Fostering Network in Wales, to ensure both the appropriateness of participants to take part in the project and continued access to support for children and their parents. The project team all had combined experiences of working with care-experienced children and young people, foster carers and health and social care professionals. As such, they were aware of the associated sensitivities and best practice ethical protocols.

All adult participants, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales, social workers and Local Authority Senior Leads involved in Step Up Step Down

were informed that their participation was voluntary and notified of intended efforts to protect and anonymise data. Information about the project and a consent form were provided in advance of the interview via email (see Appendix 1) and were discussed at the beginning of the interview. Participants chose whether they gave consent for their interviews to be audio recorded and for anonymised quotations to be used in reporting the findings. The participants agreed to both these voluntary permissions.

Before children participated in the evaluation their parents were provided with information sheets and a consent form (see Appendix 2), and the purpose of the researchers' visit was explained to children in relation to a pre-prepared information sheet (see Appendix 3). If the children were happy to be involved, they signed an assent form (see Appendix 4). As in previous studies involving young children, assent was treated as an on-going process and the researchers remained alert to children's verbal and non-verbal communication in this regard (Chicken et al. 2024). When children were consulted in the evaluation, we ensured that there was continued access to support for children from their parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales team.

Previous studies have offered participants a token of appreciation for their contributions (Mannay et al. 2022; Roberts et al. 2021). This approach was adopted, children who participated in the evaluation were presented with a gift bag containing items such as arts materials, books and games, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5 which feature the gift bags from the initial session with children. Importantly, these gift bags were only presented at the end of sessions, to ensure that the children did not feel any pressure to engage with the researchers based on being the recipient of a gift, and all children were provided with a gift bag whether or not they were involved in discussions with the research team.



Figure 4: Example of the contents of gift bags presented to children



Figure 5: Example of gift bags presented to children

The interviews were audio recorded and interviews were anonymised at the point of transcription. All data, audio recordings, fieldnotes, images of creative activities, and evaluation feedback sheets, was stored securely in the Cardiff University shared drive system. Participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any point and that they could withdraw their data from the study.

Participants were allocated codenames to protect their anonymity. Codenames were selected rather than pseudonyms, as although codenames using numerical index terms can be seen as de-personalising, there are several issues with replacing participants' names with pseudonyms in terms or representation and re-framing identities (Heaton 2022). In selecting alternative names as pseudonyms there was also the risk of using the name of a different child, parent, Family Support Foster Carer, The Fostering Network in Wales staff member, social worker or Local Authority Senior Lead in Pembrokeshire, which could potentially create misleading associations.

Therefore, an advantage of employing codenames rather than pseudonyms is that they meet requirements to anonymise participants without imposing new names and associated identities. Accordingly, codenames were assigned to all of the participants. As noted in section 4.3, the codename parent with a numerical figure was assigned to all of the participants that were in a parenting role. This is a re-framing of the identity of the one grandparent participant (Heaton 2022); however, this decision was made to provide an additional layer of anonymity given the small sample size in this study.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by Cardiff University's Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

4.6 Data Analysis

The interviews generated a rich seam of data; there were 13 hours and 42 minutes of recorded discussions that generated 151,082 transcribed words. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and the interview transcripts were analysed in combination with fieldnotes and photographs from events and the Nurture Group and the Children's Summer Scheme sessions, and the feedback forms collated by The Fostering Network in Wales following training sessions. Transcripts were read over several times to create a familiarisation with the data set, and an inductive and deductive approach (Fereday 2006) was taken to analyse the data. The data set was coded to draw out key themes and points of interest. The data was examined both in relation to the experiences of participants and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions within the Step Up Step Down programme, focussing on areas of best practice and potential improvements to the model.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter documented the methodological approach drawn on in the evaluation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. It outlined the methods of data generation, namely observations, analysis of feedback forms, creative activities and semi-structured interviews. The chapter also considered the ethical protocols of the evaluation and the analysis of the data. The following chapter sets out the findings of the evaluation.

5 Initiation of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire

5.1 Introduction

This chapter, the first of the four findings chapters, considers the initiation of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. It draws on interviews with staff working directly for The Fostering Network in Wales (TFNW), Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC), social workers (SW) and Local Authority Senior Leads (LASL) who were involved in the commissioning, organisation and delivery of Step Up Step Down. The following chapters will offer an evaluation of different aspects of the Step Up Step Down programme and highlight its affordances and potential areas for development. However, it is useful to first provide further background context by examining how Step Up Step Down was introduced and adopted within Pembrokeshire. The chapter initially examines the motivations of the Local Authority for adopting the Step Up Step Down pilot before considering the themes of staffing capacity, the role of the Family Support Foster Carer, the suitability of families referred for this pilot, and the key differences between the model of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland and its implementation in the Welsh context.

5.2 Motivations for Adopting the Step Up Step Down Pilot

This section focusses on the motivations of Local Authority Senior Leads and social workers for engaging with and working within the Step Up Step Down programme. In the interviews, participants were asked about their rationale for the decision to pilot Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire and they explained that this was linked to the funding model, the Local Authority's commitment to engaging with new developments and projects, the success of the programme in Northern Ireland, and the aim of enabling children to remain with their families rather than entering the care system.

5.2.1 Funding

In a context of ongoing austerity and cuts to services, funding is an essential consideration in adopting new programmes of work. LASL2 explained that they had seen the opportunity advertised by The Fostering Network in Wales, and that the '*value base of the programme*' struck them '*as absolute common sense*'. However, for both LASLs the funding from The Welsh Government and the KPMG Foundation was crucial in enabling their Local Authority to work with The Fostering Network in Wales and pilot Step Up Step Down.

> This was a project that was coming with funding, gives us an option to do something different (LASL1)

> So, those sorts of things [preventative services] have been chipped away at over the years, and I guess a project like this, particularly, as I say, because it was funded, meant that we could do something in the preventative space that otherwise we wouldn't be able to get into (LASL1)

> I'm also really interested in kind of good practice developments and opportunities really, and particularly as it was a funded programme, so there was not going to be any major risk for us… we were in the middle of a kind of bit of a cost crisis, but the fact that there wasn't any cost to this for us initially to start with, it was more just about allocating resource… So, it was something that we could do (LASL2)

When asked directly if the Local Authority could have adopted the pilot of Step Up Step Down if it had not been funded, LASL2 responded:

> We would never have got approval for funding to start this… the overall cost of the programme I think is quite deliverable now, but at the outset without having any a real gauge as to whether this could help or not. We would never have been able to find it in existing budget to test it (LASL2)

The topic of funding in no way dominated the conversations about the motivations to pilot Step Up Step Down. Nonetheless, both LASLs discussed funding in the early stages of their interviews, and this has been introduced as the initial theme in this section as the adoption, delivery and sustainability of the Step Up Step Down programme is reliant on sufficient investment and financial support. A point that will be returned to later in the report when drawing out key recommendations from this evaluation in Chapter Nine. These findings are particularly relevant in the context of the wider 'crisis in care', where rising care numbers and placement costs have reduced capacity for preventative investment (Welsh Parliament 2023).

5.2.2 Investing in New Opportunities

There was also a commitment from the LASLs to be aware of and seek involvement in novel areas of best practice and opportunities for service development.

> I've always been keen that we get involved in anything new at the ground floor. I like us to… like my service to… be on the frontline really in terms of developments and understanding new things, new concepts, new projects… And so, I said to [LASL2], we need to put our hands up for this (LASL1)

> I've always been quite keen to grab opportunities to push practice or push developments (LASL2)

> I think everybody missed a trick, you know… when they put this out for advert and people didn't go for it. I think they… missed something. And I'm glad I grabbed it with both hands (LASL2)

This openness to different approaches to service delivery was salient in this Local Authority's involvement in the Step Up Step Down programme. However, in considering the reasons why this opportunity may not have been taken up by other Local Authorities there was an acknowledgement of the associated barriers.

> I think maybe the social service just can't get their heads around doing something new, something radical, you know, because they haven't got the headspace, the capacity to do it in their heads… if that's the reason, I understand that, people are under enormous pressure now (LASL1)

This acknowledgment resonates with the literature presented in Chapter Two, which outlined the 'crisis in care' across all administrations that has contributed to the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). Accordingly, investing in programmes such as Step Up Step Down relies not only on funding opportunities and enthusiasm, but also on services having capacity to engage in new ways of working.

5.2.3 The Reputation of Step Up Step Down and the Role of Foster Carers

Chapter Three introduced the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland and an outline of its evaluations was presented (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020). The existing model in Northern Ireland provided some assurances to the LASLs that this could be a viable model to adopt in Pembrokeshire.

> I suppose, no, it wasn't something that fitted with anything that we'd done before particularly, but it was an opportunity to just think, could we try this? And the fact that it had already been running in Northern Ireland, albeit slightly differently, but it was running and there was an opportunity to already learn from what had gone before (LASL2)

O'Reilly (2020) quantified the financial value of the Step Up Step Down model, and this was acknowledged.

> Belfast is the place that we've looked to, and you look at the stats there, and the money they estimated they've saved versus placements for social care placements, it's enormous (LASL1)

As well as engaging with the reported financial benefit–cost ratio and wider long-term economic benefits, both the LASLs and SW1 had visited Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland and spoken to parents. LASL1 noted speaking to a mother of an 11 year old boy and a newborn baby. The mother '*had a very negative view of social services*' (LASL1) but had become involved with Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland. The mother discussed how her Family Support Foster Carer had looked after her son for the weekend, as short breaks are a component of the Step Up Step Down model. This supported the mother but LASL1 was interested in the ways in which the Step Up Step Down also enable the establishment of supportive networks between parents.

> But then, what she said struck me more, and she said, *"And then, what happened is, the other mums came round to mine."* So, while he [her son] was away, the other mums came and they rallied around her, and they came round and made her a cup of tea, and brought a cake around… she needs a break from the boy, but then, she's left on her own with a baby… that's still a difficult situation for her to be in… And that network that the program had created, because it wouldn't have been there otherwise, that came round to her. And it'll be her turn one day to go and support one of those other mums when they have a bad day or a bad weekend or a bad evening maybe. So, that's the thing that really struck me about it, was the relationships (LASL1)

In addition to the Pembrokeshire LASLs and SW1 visiting Belfast, a Step Up Step Down representative in Northern Ireland visited Pembrokeshire at an earlier point to discuss the programme with members of the Local Authority team.

> [Step Up Step Down representative] came over from Northern Ireland and did a bit of a presentation about it. And I remember thinking everyone was so positive about it and so enthusiastic. And I was thinking, can this be genuine? Can they actually feel that… it makes the difference that they're saying it does… And I remember thinking that for a couple of months thinking, do they really feel this passionately about it? And now, yes, I understand that they do because so do I (SW1)

SW1 also noted that the visit to Northern Ireland enabled '*seeing it in person and meeting families*', which made a difference to Pembrokeshire Local Authority's '*understanding of*' and '*commitment to*' Step Up Step Down. Accordingly, this engagement with Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland was valuable as it provided an opportunity for the team in Pembrokeshire to gain a nuanced understanding of the programme and its outcomes, motivating an engagement with the process of adopting and implementing the first pilot of Step Up Step Down in Wales.

The involvement of experienced foster carers in the role of Family Support Foster Carers in Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland was also a feature that was valued. For LASL1, Step Up Step Down provided an opportunity for foster carers who were considering retirement to transfer to the role of a Family Support Foster Carer, so that their skills and experience would be retained in the Local Authority, a point that was also noted by one of the social workers.

> So, by being a little bit creative, we were able to pull resources that we would have lost in fostering otherwise. So (foster carer) would have retired or would have done very minimal work and we were able to kind of pull that in. And… one of our foster carers was doing a small amount of respite, but to be honest, had had very little fostering work over the previous 12 months. She wasn't in a position where she wanted a full time placement and didn't really know where she was at with fostering and what her journey was going to look like in the future. So, we were able to get in there and kind of use that situation to be like, look, this is something new, this is something different. And (other foster carer) is doing more work for us now than she's done for a very long time (SW1)

Similarly, LASL2 was cognisant of both the skills of existing foster carers and the needs of children and young people having access to wider networks of support.

> So, one of the things that we had kind of considered or thought about some time before was using foster carers in a slightly different way to provide kind of daycare respite or to provide kind of those opportunities to do something different. And I knew that a lot of our foster carers… not only did they have the right value base, but they had a lot of the skills and the knowledge and the understanding that could be shared differently other than just within the confines of their role (LASL2)

> What we'd said for years as a kind of anecdotal commentary was what some of these young people really needed was a corporate grandparent, never mind the corporate parenting role, we need a corporate granny or corporate auntie. And actually, the whole ethos of this programme almost enabled that opportunity for children that have experienced care experience to have somebody still in their corner and still fight their corner even if they were no longer undertaking that role, but they could still mentor them. They could still be there to provide that really consistent low level support, which for me was a kind of a critical part of our jigsaw puzzle that we don't offer in statutory services (LASL2)

Accordingly, the success of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, and particularly the central role of Family Support Foster Carers, were key motivations for adopting the programme in Pembrokeshire. The enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by practitioners involved in the Northern Ireland programme was notable, particularly within the wider context of workforce pressures and increasing demand across children's services. In addition, the model was seen as a way of making better use of the skills and experience of foster carers, whilst also strengthening informal networks of support for parents and children, helping families build sustainable relationships beyond statutory services.

5.2.4 Preventing Entry into Care

The evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland evidenced a reduction in risk and statutory involvement as children were prevented from entering care, remained safely at home despite previous plans for care admission, and those on the Child Protection Register were supported to stay within their families (Flood and Thompson 2020). This resonated with a key motivation for Pembrokeshire adopting the Step Up Step Down pilot.

> Yeah, very broad outcome at the start, and that is keeping children out of care (LASL1)

As noted in Chapter Two, Wales has one of the highest numbers of children in care per head of the population across the UK nations (Wilkins 2023) and sector estimates suggest that additional foster families are needed to meet demand and keep children supported in their communities (Fostering Network 2025a). These concerns around of rising numbers and limited capacity were fundamental considerations in the decision to adopt the Step Up Step Down pilot.

> Our admissions into care were just climbing and not being able to kind of just slow down… and it was for me, the ethos of the programme looked at an opportunity for us to just try something and try something different… in an environment where it was really difficult to find those opportunities (LASL2)

> We can't recruit enough care to meet the need. We've got lots of foster carers or people that have talked about fostering, but actually because of our country's dynamics, finances, houses are not big enough, you know, all of those reasons why people don't decide to become foster carers… all of those things potentially lead us back to we need to reevaluate what do we deliver to children and families and how do we do things differently. (LASL2)

As noted in Chapter Two, there are a range of detrimental impacts for parents whose children are removed from their care (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Enlander et al. 2021) and there are still significant challenges for children in care in Wales in relation to wellbeing, education, employment, housing stability, and their future trajectories (Curry and Abrams 2015; Mannay et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026). The LASLs were well aware of this context and the potential for the Step Up Step Down programme to be a vehicle for keeping families together, an alternative that could be '*better for everybody*' (LASL1).

> The nature of the project really, and it was about keeping kids out of care. I'm really passionate about… even though so much of my work when I was Head of Service was about kids in care, actually, we'd all rather kids didn't have to come into care in the first place. If we can keep them at home safely, then that's better for everybody. So, I was also interested in the opportunity it gave us to do more of that type of stuff (LASL1)

> In my experience, very few children really need long term care away from their families. There is always going to be a place for long term foster care. There's always going to be a place for adoption, but actually the majority of children are best served within their families. So therefore, how do we deliver care in a different way? And I think for me, the Step Up, Step Down programme opens the door to that because there's that element of just thinking about things differently. (LASL2)

It was also noted that although later opportunities for '*grants to undertake preventative work*' (LASL2) became available after the Step Up Step Down pilot was adopted, before this there had been a reduction in preventative services for families in Pembrokeshire.

> I was excited by it was because we didn't have very much preventative services, I think, for a number of years. We'd been more really a reactive service, as lots of services are, you know? Across the country from years of austerity… just to give you an example, up until about 2012… and I wasn't in Pembrokeshire at that time… Pembrokeshire had about eight or nine family centres dotted round the county. And in one fell swoop, all nine of them were shut to save money. So, you lose a massive layer of preventative opportunity (LASL1)

Accordingly, the opportunity to pilot Step Up Step Down enabled a move away from reactive practice to a more proactive model focussed on preventing children entering the care system and being removed from the family home.

> I'd hoped that the families we got involved, that we'd be able to prevent this. And I know it's difficult to prove a negative, if those children never went into care, we can never prove that they would have ended up there had we not been involved. But we get a good sense of these kinds of things and the likelihood of those things happening. So, that… overwhelmingly that was the outcome I was after, is that kids we were involved with… that perhaps were on the trajectory to going into local authority care, were diverted away from that with a positive outcome of staying with a family member (LASL1)

As LASL1 notes it is difficult to '*prove*' the efficacy of family interventions, and as discussed in Chapter Three, the wider literature has discussed concerns with measuring the translation of interventions into concrete changes, and interventions alone may be insufficient to address the broader ecological contexts in which child protection involvement occurs (Oliviera et al. 2025). Nonetheless, the evaluations of Step Up Step Down (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020) provided compelling evidence for its potential and the LASLs were encouraged by the potential '*positive outcome of* [children] *staying with a family member*'.

This section has outlined the motivations that influenced the adoption of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire, which were related to availability of funding, the opportunity to invest in an alternative and more preventative approach, the success of the model in Northern Ireland, and a conviction that the '*majority of children are best served within their families*' (LASL2). Whilst participants recognised that it is difficult to evidence when children have been prevented from entering care, they were persuaded by the programme's potential to reduce risk, strengthen family support and help families remain safely together. These factors led to the adoption of Step Up Step Down. However, there were a number of practical aspects that needed to be considered to ensure that this partnership would become operational, and the next section discusses the critical question of capacity.

5.3 Negotiating Staffing Capacity

Chapter Two documented the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce, with social workers reporting working more than their contracted hours and being stressed by their jobs, leading to sickness absence and vacancies in children's social care (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). This was a factor that LASLs had to consider alongside the potential opportunities of piloting Step Up Step Down.

> Whilst people were tired and overworked, and, you know, under enormous pressure, I also understood that people still had capacity to be excited about something, and people's services values were about doing the right thing for children and families (LASL1)

> I was talking about it and, you know, people were saying, we just haven't got enough foster carers. We can't possibly release four foster carers to do this programme. And realistically, neither could we... my team [colleague] at the time when I'm coming along all excited going, oh, here's another project, let's do this. He was just going; '*I can't do this. I haven't got enough staff. I haven't got enough capacity to make this work'* (LASL2)

Reflecting the wider literature on the crisis in care, capacity was an issue in Pembrokeshire, but the potential outcomes of piloting Step Up Step Down remained a significant motivation for its adoption.

> I was confident that people in the service, however pressured they might have been, would find that a little extra because of the nature of the project. You know? Different than saying, "*Can you take another child protection case*?" ... if you're asking them to do extra work where the payoff is positive outcomes for children more frequently than would otherwise be the case, then I felt that my service and the people in it were good for that (LASL1)

> Well, we just on the very basics, isn't it? We know how much it costs us to accommodate a child. We know how much it costs that child in terms of trauma and all of the impact of then struggling to return children back to their birth families, even after a short period of care, you know. All of those challenges were very, very much forefront of my mind (LASL2)

> Yeah, against a backdrop of everything else that we were up against, we certainly didn't have enough foster carers, and we certainly didn't have enough staffing resources. But somehow, we managed to test it. And I just thought that the possibility, the payoff was worth the risk (LASL2)

In considering the issues of capacity alongside reflecting on the costs of accommodating children in State care as well as the costs to children '*in terms of trauma*' (LASL2) and the potential '*positive outcomes for children*' (LASL1), the Local Authority made the decision to be involved in Step Up Step Down. Nonetheless, members of The Fostering Network in Wales were also cognisant of issues of capacity in relation to the social workers involved with Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire.

> [Social worker] has a massive juggle between like demands of the service themselves that they sit within, their family team, and with all the issues that come up with families or meetings that occur (TFNW1)

Resonating with the accounts of LASLs, staff at The Fostering Network in Wales were appreciative of how '*people in the service, however pressured they might have been, would find that a little extra*' (LASL1)

> It's just that they kind of keep on, they don't fully release their social workers on the programme. They are still juggling other work in the family team. So, I think maybe that's just reflective of just my opinion now of children's services, the fact that they work to capacity and beyond sometimes (TFNW1)

A change in circumstances meant that the initial social worker (SW1) was later replaced by a social worker colleague (SW2) and both social workers discussed negotiating the Step Up Step Down role alongside competing commitments.

> So, the plan was that I would do it stand alone. So, I would have a secondment, and I would just do this role. It hasn't actually worked out like that. So, it's meant that I'm extremely busy. And that I'm trying to do pretty much two full time roles in one, but it's worth it because I love it. So, I'll just get on with it, it's fine (SW1)

> I was already working in the family placement team, already had ongoing assessments, already had a full caseload, and because of, you know, we've had four people go on maternity leave, we've had a couple of people retire, there was nowhere else for my caseload to go. So up until now, I have had to try and learn the role alongside managing my caseload. My caseload has now started to go, so I've been doing introductions to the new supervisory social worker for the kinship and foster carers. I just will hold on to the assessments that I'm undertaking at the moment alongside the project. I think that will continue... So, it'll be more of, "*right, okay, when I've got a spare five minutes, I can crack on with that*" (SW2)

As discussed further in section 5.5, in Northern Ireland the social worker is dedicated to Step Up Step Down, but a compromise was made in Pembrokeshire that a caseload of standard foster carers would be retained alongside the work of Step Up Step Down. Issues of capacity also engendered delays in establishing the Step Up Step Down pilot.

> It's slow to implement in the beginning, as in the build-up from recruiting social workers... the foster carers and then getting to delivery, that can take time (TFNW1)

The Fostering Network in Wales staff were -

> Keen to make sure we get the foster carers coming through with the values of the programme within the current practice really, or in the value base so that we can continue to offer the support in the best way possible for the families (TFNW2)

However, the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland noted that a key challenge was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining Family Support Foster Carers (Flood and Thompson 2020). In Pembrokeshire there were similar issues with recruiting foster carers to take on the role of Family Support Foster Carers.

> We're not in a position where we've got foster carers that are empty and to be honest, most local authorities are not in that position. We're in a real dire situation at the moment. So, I was just thinking at the start I was like, I don't know how I make this work because we

> haven't got foster carers who are free generally, who just kind of are sitting around waiting for a project to come along (SW1)

A small cohort of Family Support Foster Carers were recruited through creative approaches, which included inviting foster carers who were planning to retire from the role (see section 5.2.3) and by amending the criteria in the Northern Ireland model, which will be discussed in section 5.5.

> We've started with a small cohort of like carers, you are limited, but I guess this would happen in any programme, you are limited to the skills of those carers (TFNW1)

This could be mitigated to some extent with the provision of training for Family Support Foster Carers and engaging with wider forms of support available in the local community, but it was noted that a larger team would have been preferable.

> So, for every sticking point, there hopefully is a solution that we could work through it with, but I think expanding the programme, so having a wider, slightly larger team, gives you that capability (TFNW1)

Central to the delivery of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland was partnership working between The Fostering Network and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, with Family Support Foster Carers and programme officers collaborating closely with statutory services to coordinate care and monitor progress (Flood and Thompson 2020). Similarly, a key element of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire that helped to mitigate the challenges of capacity was the partnership model between the Local Authority and The Fostering Network in Wales.

> Fostering Network as well, and actually it's not just a statutory service, you're working in conjunction with a charity and does provide an opportunity for them to take responsibility for sorting out all the training and the grant funding and all of that kind of stuff. So, it's not all sat on my shoulders as a service manager. You know, I can deliver the approval stuff, the panel stuff, the foster carers, the social workers, but then being able to bring all of this richness and all of the evidence-based programme stuff. Yeah, that kind of collaboration I think is something that's really helpful (LASL2)

> I think the fact that it's a partnership model is important element of this... It keeps it, keeps us kind of accountable to each other, I would say, like in terms of what you know their expectations of us and delivery are, and yeah, what they hope to get from the service in terms of benefit, and the families and children in their county too (TFNW1)

> I feel like we've grown as a team and we've grown the project as a team, you know. Which has been really nice (SW1)

> [The Fostering Network team] are really supportive and helpful, so if there's anything that I'm unclear of, or vice versa, we get in touch with each other (SW2)

The strength of the relationship between the Local Authority and The Fostering Network in Wales, and the shared commitment to effectively support children and their families meant that issues of capacity were negotiated to enable the implementation of the pilot of Step Up Step Down.

> We just need to be a little bit more creative with what we've got sometimes. The structures don't easily enable us to do that… it comes back to that kind of taking a risk or pushing the boundaries or redirecting a resource in a different way (LASL2)

This section has explored the capacity challenges associated with implementing the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. Whilst it is commendable that staff were willing to '*find that a little extra*' (LASL1) and '*work to capacity and beyond'* (TFNW1) to support the pilot, participants' accounts suggest that funding alone is insufficient to facilitate service innovation. The wider workforce and capacity pressures associated with the 'crisis in care' continued to shape the implementation of Step Up Step Down, despite the availability of dedicated funding. At the same time, the pilot represented a rare opportunity to move beyond crisis response and invest in a more hopeful, preventative approach to supporting children and families. The positive reflections on the partnership between Pembrokeshire Local Authority and The Fostering Network in Wales suggest that collaborative working was an important enabler of this process, helping to create capacity and sustain momentum despite the wider pressures facing children's services.

In addition to considering capacity, it was also important to ensure that the families referred to and accepted on Step Up Step Down would benefit from their engagement with the programme activities. Consequently, the suitability of referrals to the Step Up Step Down pilot will be discussed in section 5.5. However, given the centrality of the role of the Family Support Foster Carer, it is important to outline their recruitment and the values and skills that they brought to the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire.

5.4 Family Support Foster Carers

As noted in the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, the Family Support Foster Carer role 'is fundamental to the success of the programme' and individuals in this role were 'able to build relationships, mentor parents, provide practical support and advice, and model and teach good parenting skills' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 7). The previous sections highlighted the opportunity for Step Up Step Down to retain the skills of foster carers considering retirement (LASL2; LASL1); and emphasised that it was essential to recruit Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire who had the appropriate '*value base*' (LASL2; TFNW2). This section explores these themes in further detail by drawing on interviews with the Family Support Foster Carers who were involved in the pilot of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire.

5.4.1 Family Support Foster Carers' Motivations for Involvement

In section 5.2 there was a discussion of the motivations of Local Authority Senior Leads (LASL) and social workers (SW), which led to them engaging with and working within the Step Up Step Down programme. In the same way, Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC) discussed their rationales for taking on this new role, one of which was a desire to find a way to continue to provide support for children and families, when a traditional foster carer role no longer aligned with their individual circumstances.

> Well, I decided I was going to give up fostering, I had still a child at an adoption placement, so I didn't actually finish then, but when she did, I didn't have any more children, a fostered child. I was doing this for [number] years… and I fostered [number] kids, and to keep giving

> away kids that you love is like having your arms and legs chopped off… when they go…. because you can't keep doing that as a human being. It's not normal, is it, to keep giving children away that you love… And then I was sent an email about this project, and then someone said can you apply for this… And I didn't do anything about it, and then a manager sent me this, they went, this email, are you interested in this? I really think they want me to do this. I didn't know really what it was about, you know, because you don't, do you? It sounded like a good idea. So, yeah, I said I'll do it (FSFC1)

> I went to a coffee morning that I run every so often for carers in our local authority and I didn't know there was going to be a presentation about this, but [SW1] was there to speak to us and I thought it sounded really interesting and we got to a juncture with our full time caring where… we didn't think we could [have] another full time placement or an open-ended placement, that we were trying to think, what could we do? I didn't want to step away from fostering all together. But I also, you know, I knew that it wouldn't be right to go into another situation like that. And so, hearing about this, I thought it sounded… really good, really interesting (FSFC3)

As discussed in section 5.2, Step Up Step Down provided an opportunity for foster carers who were considering retirement to transfer to the role of a Family Support Foster Carer, so that their skills and experience would be retained in the Local Authority. These accounts illustrate this shift from ending engagement to moving into a different role, for foster carers who did not want to '*step away from fostering all together*'(FSFC3). As noted earlier, rather than the Local Authority losing the experience and skills of these foster carers, some newly appointed Family Support Foster Carers were '*doing more work for* [the Local Authority] *now than… for a very long time*' (SW1).

Family Support Foster Carers were also motivated by the '*enthusiasm*' (FSFC4) and reputation of SW1, who coordinated recruitment for Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire.

> [SW1] enthusiasm of things they promoted it… we're able to do that because of her support, you know… We know she's not going to recommend a placement to us unless she knows that, one we're able to do it, and two, that she's going to give us the support for that (FSFC4)

> [SW1] a good social worker, she works hard, she is very insightful. She is really positive, she's very encouraging and she knows how to succeed, so she wouldn't want to match something that she knows isn't going to work. She knows that success breeds success and that's why we really like working with her… she matches people and places and situations up really, really well (FSFC5)

The trustful relationships that SW1 had built over time with foster carer in the Local Authority and their confidence in the potential of Step Up Step Down to improve outcomes for local families, were enabling factors in the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers. The experience and knowledge of SW1 were also an asset in ensuring that those recruited to the role of Family Support Foster Carer had values that aligned with the ethos and aims of the Step Up Step Down programme.

5.4.2 Family Support Foster Carers' Value Base

As Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 32) noted, in Northern Ireland the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers was time-intensive and complex because 'the skills needed to be a FSFC are unique and not all foster carers possess them, so it was not simply a case of any interested foster carers

applying for the roles, rather they had to be screened to find the specific required skills'. This was also the case in Pembrokeshire as there was an emphasis on the skills and experience required for the Family Support Foster Carers role; and as TFNW2 noted in section 5.3, it was crucial that anyone appointed aligned with the '*values of the programme… to offer the support in the best way possible for the families'*.

The Step Up Step Down programme in Wales aimed to reduce the number of children coming into care by supporting the bonds and capacities of families through a comprehensive package of support, which would prevent problems escalating, improve relationships and build networks. The accounts of the Family Support Foster Carers were cognisant of these aims. Furthermore, in relation to their experiences of witnessing the impacts of family breakdown and child removal as foster carers, they were invested in contributing to a project which focussed on keeping families together.

> It sounded like a really exciting project because… I've had so many families… in the past, you know, with a bit of help, with a bit of a tweak, these are really good people, these parents, but they just need a bit of help. And they would do it. I mean, they have, you know, drugs and alcohol problems… But kids should be with their mums and dads, or whoever their long-term person is to look after them, because that's the right place to be, isn't it, for kids… and it's much better if they don't come into care in the first place. So, that's what I want for these people. Because the kids really just want to be at home with the people that love and care about them (FSFC1)

> There's a reason that these families have got a social worker, isn't there? So, something in that family isn't quite right. Okay, it's not bad enough that they need to come into care, but there's something not quite going the way it should be, and if we can get in then, then maybe it will be a different outcome. (FSFC2)

> We don't just look after the children; we like to look after families. So, wherever family members are involved… we've always been in a position where we want to help them as well and help them in the system. So, we saw this as a positive way of one, actually trying to keep children out of the system but actually offering them the support when they're best needed it, you know, at that crisis moment before things totally fall apart. Actually, it's just silly that you know you don't offer that that help at that time and of course it's just all about resources and things and this was like yeah it's not right you know it's not rocket science, you offer it now when they need it, and you've got a better chance of keeping that family together (FSFC4)

Chapter Two outlined the detrimental impacts for both parents whose children are removed from their care (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Enlander et al. 2021) and for children within and leaving the care system (Curry and Abrams 2015; Mannay et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026). As section 5.2.4 highlighted, Local Authority Senior Leads were well aware of this context and Family Support Foster Carers were also experts-by-experience, having witnessed the effects of separation on children and their families in their roles as foster carers. Accordingly, they too were invested in supporting families 'on the edge of care' to reduce the number of children entering care. Family Support Foster Carers were also clear that their role would be focussed not simply supporting parents but also on empowering them so that they would have the skills and confidence to manage beyond the time frame of this targeted intensive intervention.

> Trying to give the parents their power back, basically. Because they haven't got it. But it's hard, because emotionally, they can't do it, because they're down here, and I'm trying to get them up here, to give them the strength and boost their confidence, and tell them, "You've got this… You're doing an amazing job, you've got a lot on your plate but keep at it" … I don't want them to feel like a failure, because they're not, they've just been dealt the wrong set of cards, for whatever reason. And maybe their parents got dealt the wrong set of cards. You don't know, do you? Because it's a vicious… you have to stop the cycle (FSFC1)

> I just knew that there were lots of families struggling, and probably could keep their children if they just… if somebody just said you're doing alright, you know, keep going, and they just needed somebody there, and I'm quite happy to do that (FSFC2)

> We foster because we want to support families, we don't necessarily want them in foster care. We want them to succeed, and that's what Step up Step down is. It's just simply really encouraging people and saying you can do this and we'll give you the help that you need. And you know, from a family point of view, it's so much better to keep people together… And that's what Step up Step down is all about, keeping the family strong, you know, healing wounds and giving hope. So [SW1] knew that about us, that's pretty much where we're at with it. (FSFC5)

The accounts of the Family Support Foster Carers resonate with both the aims of the Step Up Step Down programme and its underlying value base. However, as noted in section 5.3 there were issues of capacity which meant that some Family Support Foster Carers were already fostering a child and had other competing commitments. This does not align with the best practice advice in Northern Ireland, as it is recommended that Family Support Foster Carers only have this role and do not continue to foster children. However, there were cases in Northern Ireland where Family Support Foster Carers had other children in their care, and this topic will be revisited in more detail in section 5.6. This section has illustrated the motivations of Family Support Foster Carers to be involved in Step Up Step Down and their suitability for this role in relation to their aligned value base, the following section will consider the suitability of referrals to the programme.

5.5 Considering the Suitability of Families for Step Up Step Down

The evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland reported that there were some families referred that were not suitable in terms of their potential to benefit from the programme (Flood and Thompson 2020, p.33). Accordingly, in the research interviews for this evaluation participants were asked if there were '*any particular families, or particular situations, that Step Up Step Down is more or less suited for*'. As a general principle, it was suggested that the programme could be of benefit to all families, with a range of complex histories, if they were effectively matched with appropriate support.

> If you were to reframe the question as to say, can you think of any situations where it wouldn't be suitable, I'd struggle to answer that (LASL1)

> The kind of families I think that we were targeted at are families that have complex family histories, like maybe not so much a network of support around them, or if they do have a support network... mental health, substance and drug misuse history... families that kind of affected by poverty (TFNW1)

> You don't want to get to a position where you're just cherry picking who comes onto the programme, because that doesn't give you a good picture either, does it? Because, you know, you can fall into the trap of only bringing the only bringing the light lights, high, you know, low level stuff... So yeah, it's just kind of unpicking that really a little bit. And I think one of the challenges with that is the each of the fostering families brings different skills and different abilities. And what we've always said with fostering, you know, you get one foster carer that's not fazed by anything, but then they might have their Achilles heel, which is something that somebody else wouldn't think twice about, you know. So, it's always about kind of what makes a good match. (LASL2)

Nonetheless, there was an appreciation that the timing of a referral was a factor in deciding whether or not Step Up Step Down was an appropriate intervention for families.

> I think maybe the timing of the referral into the programme was wrong. If that, if the Step Up Step Down could have got involved a few years earlier than actually before the child became so systemic in their behaviour... there's some thoughts around that kind of unpicking that referral process. (LASL2)

> I think it's just because we haven't got really... everyone keeps asking us for clear criteria. I mean, in my own head, I feel like the criteria is clear in the sense that they need to want to be engaged in the programme. I mean, that's the biggest, because, like I said, if they're not, like some families they try referring in, you know, relationship is already completely broken down. You're like, "*No, that's not going to work*" (TFNW2)

> It is catching families at that point where they are ready to make those changes, they are going to engage with it, because the ones that I think we do see that benefit from the programme the most, and make those changes, are the ones that engage with all elements of it (TFNW1)

> The motivation needs to be there from families. They need to really want to be on the project... So that's the biggest thing I think is they need to want to... And one of our questions that we wouldn't have asked necessarily at the start, but we absolutely do now is, is there room for change? Is there room for improvement? Because sometimes there's not and people are in desperate situations, but there's not really anything that can change and then, you know, the project's not going to do anything for them then (SW1)

As noted in Chapter Three, referrals for Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire were received from the Childcare Assessment Team, Childcare Management Team, Children with Disabilities Team, the Parent and Baby Programme and the Special Guardianship Team. These referrals were related to a wide range of concerns including children's behaviours, risk of placement breakdown, parental health and capacity, domestic violence, substance misuse, limited support networks and safeguarding concerns. The range of referrals illustrates the flexibility of Step Up Step Down in addressing diverse and complex areas; and the broad applicability of Step Up Step Down may reflect the service's emphasis on relationships, connection and community support. Participants

suggested that these elements have value for many families experiencing adversity, meaning that suitability was often determined less by the nature of presenting difficulties and more by factors such as readiness to engage and the availability of an appropriate match with a Family Support Foster Carer.

However, there were barriers to assisting families whose primary concern was accessing respite, a provision that enables parents to have a break from caring while the child or children that they care for is looked after by someone else.

> I think like really the biggest part is, can we make a difference? Can we… what we offer, will that actually support and help the family? Because I do think quite often, we will get referrals coming in where things are either, it's from the [Disability] team where they need respite, or things are at breaking point and they need respite, and by that point it's probably just too late for us to actually make very much of a difference. We're not going to take a referral in that needs immediate respite and then hope that we can fix everything at that point (TFNW2)

> Children with Disabilities team… they're desperate to access immediate respite for families that are struggling. So, it's a constant reminder to them that this isn't a fast track to a respite service. We need to be working with families that, you know, want to make a change in how they parent or how they cope, rather than just being like, "*right, okay, now I get monthly respite*"… And we don't have that readily available in our service (SW2)

There is a '*short break element*' (TFNW1) of Step Up Step Down where Family Support Foster Carers will take children out for the day or have children overnight, however, as TFNW1 explained, '*we don't offer that level of respite'*. The Fostering Network in Wales participants explained that there was a lack of respite care available and waiting lists for respite care.

> There's no respite available, and that's why these referrals come to us (TFNW2)

This lack of capacity in respite services again reflects the crisis in care reported in the wider literature (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023), and issues were also raised in relation to the available support for families with children with elevated behavioural and sensory needs.

> It's generally neurodivergent children that we get through, but the referrals that are a little bit more difficult are where the children have extreme meltdowns and are non-verbal, and actually have really, really high sensory needs, because we're not specialists in any of those areas… This is the problem in Pembrokeshire. There is a massive lack of support for children (TFNW2)

> It is just really tricky when we get those referrals through, because they are not going to be able to benefit from everything we offer. Like even the family activity days, she [mother] can't get him to leave the house (TFNW2)

> We're not designed to be a specialist disability support service. The only reason we are probably seeing those referrals is because, yeah, the families are desperate for support, the teams that go out to see them are desperate to be able to offer them something (TFNW1)

The Fostering Network in Wales participants emphasised with the difficulties that these families were facing but it was essential to consider the question '*can we make a difference*' (TFNW2) and to only accept families in cases where Step Up Step Down was appropriate and equipped to effectively undertake intervention activities with families.

> It's really hard, because... we've met so many families... and it's been really sad, but they've... as I've described the programme to them, they've sort of said, "*Yeah, that's not going to help us. Like we need something more that just isn't available in Pembrokeshire*", and it is, it's really sad, but yeah, it's just trying, it is, it's trying to weigh up where we can actually try and make a bit of a difference (TFNW2)

This section has illustrated the necessity to consider the principles and activities of Step Up Step Down in relation to which families have the potential to benefit from their engagement, and although the remit of provision is extensive, there are some instances in which this programme is not a suitable intervention. The absence of access to alternative, more appropriate, services can be considered as an artefact of the wider issues of underfunding and capacity issues that characterise the crisis in care (MacAlister 2022). Nevertheless, Step Up Step Down has relevance for a wide range of families in diverse circumstances. Having outlined the referral process and its challenges, the chapter will now outline some of the ways in which the model applied has been modified in the Welsh context.

5.6 Differences Between Northern Ireland and Pembrokeshire

The Flood and Thompson (2020) evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland recommended that that a manualised model, a formal step-by-step guide to ensure consistency, reproducibility, and rigorous adherence to evidence-based practice, should be developed to support replication and future scaling. In the Welsh pilot, key elements of the Northern Ireland model were retained, however, as this section explores, some adaptions were necessary.

Overall, the activities in the Pembrokeshire pilot mirrored the delivery of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland.

> Fundamentally, it's the same, isn't it, like in terms of delivery? We made certain tweaks along the way maybe in the beginning, getting it set up with families, I would say (TFNW2)

> We're offering very much the same programmes and the same... groups for the parents, giving the same information, same stuff for the children. We've done all the same sort of training (TFNW1)

It is worth noting that the PACE sessions were delivered before the BOND sessions for parents was introduced, which differs from the ordering of the training modelled in Northern Ireland, and some materials were slightly adapted. These changes were made in consideration of the parent group and the potential for some content of the BOND course, focussed on attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), being emotionally difficult for parents to negotiate early in the programme. The rationale

for this decision will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight, which focusses on training and education.

An overarching difference was the rural geography of Pembrokeshire in contrast to Belfast, where Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland was located.

> There isn't anything massively different culturally apart from like the distance… Belfast is a lot smaller, I guess, in that everything is easier to get to, closer together. Transport's pretty good, whereas down here, our transport system is horrendous. Taxis are horrendous, and yeah, it's a lot more travelling. It takes a lot longer to get about (TFNW1)

> It's [travel] an added cost, I guess, to the overall budget (TFNW2)

> Geography has been a difficult consideration… for example, [Name] has got a lot of families who are like out in the sticks and that she has to do a lot of travelling for… So that's another consideration is how you match up kind of geography wise as well… if they've got families who live an hour away, then you've got a two hour travel before you even do a visit, you know? So, we've got to kind of try and balance that… so it's complex (SW1)

Accordingly, it is essential to consider the financial requirements and logistical landscape when implementing Step Up Step Down in a new geographical area. As discussed in section 5.3, capacity in terms of the availability and workload of social workers and Family Support Foster Carers also necessitated a divergence from the Step Up Step Down model in Northern Ireland.

> Well, we didn't strictly apply the model in that what you're supposed to have is, the social worker should be dedicated to Step Up Step Down, and [the social worker] wasn't… that was a compromise we made. She had a caseload of standard foster carers that she was managing as well as managing Step Up Step Down, and that's not strictly what the model says. But again, that was about capacity and challenges with recruiting social workers (LASL1)

Section 5.3 noted how the social worker attached to Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire was '*still juggling other work in the family team'* (TFNW1). In the Northern Ireland model the social worker is dedicated to Step Up Step Down, and they do not have other responsibilities within their workload, but in Pembrokeshire a compromise was made because of issues of capacity. This suggests that despite Flood and Thompson's (2020) emphasis on consistency, the locality and the capacity of staffing mean that some flexibility in the model is required as it is implemented in new geographical areas.

Flexibility was also needed in recruiting Family Support Foster Carers because of the issues of capacity outlined in section 5.3.

> The kind of initial briefing we were given, I suppose, was that the foster carers needed to like be 'empty', to not have any kids in the house, and they needed to be available full time to support the families and not to have another job, I suppose, or not to have another role (SW1)

This best practice guidance from the Northern Ireland model was not followed as two foster carers were fostering a baby full-time when they were recruited to a shared role as Family Support Foster Carers for Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. This does not align with the best practice guidance

in Northern Ireland, but this divergence was essential in securing sufficient Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire and there have also been cases in Northern Ireland where Family Support Foster Carers were fostering a child alongside this role.

> [Name] works part-time, they have a baby full-time and they manage, Step Up Step Down between them full-time. So, they both are on the project rather than one named carer, and they juggle visits, they juggle kind of all of the elements of the programme that they need to alongside the baby. So, by being flexible, we made it work. If we'd have absolutely replicated the Northern Ireland model and not been able to change anything, it wouldn't have come off the ground (SW1)

One further point of divergence was the structure and setting of the initial meetings, which The Fostering Network in Wales participants reflected on in relation to the model in Northern Ireland.

> Formalised meetings, because I think our initial planning meetings with the families are formal, but they tend to happen in the family home (TFNW2)

> I think that we're potentially a little bit more laidback with our like initial meetings and things here. Like generally here, I will go out, meet the families, introduce the project to them, and then meet with them again and set goals and things like that, and then we do the initial planning meeting, whereas I think in Northern Ireland, it's the social worker that goes out to introduce the project and then they do the IPM [Individual Provision Map] straightaway and sort of set the goals at the initial planning meeting. So, the way that we do it I think is a bit more relaxed (TFNW1)

The initial meetings with families were not always held in their homes as TFNW2 noted that '*we always offer a choice'* so parents could have these meetings in their own home or in alternative venues, which best suited their needs and preferences. However, there were key differences as The Fostering Network in Wales staff led the facilitation of these initial meetings, rather than the social worker introducing the project, and also the absence of a '*contract of expectations*' (TFNW1), which features in the Northern Ireland model.

> I think there's pros and cons for both. So if we get a family that really wants to engage, but might be a little bit nervous, then the way that we do it is absolutely perfect, because it means that they get a very gentle sort of introduction to it, and then they're not really required to sort of speak up in a more formal meeting, because I can just say what we've talked about, and then we can go over like, you know, "*Do we still agree with this?*" ... and then ask the social worker if they've got anything to add, whereas I think the way that they do it in Northern Ireland, it's that little bit more formal, which I would imagine some families it makes them take it more seriously, is the wrong phrase, but do you know what I mean? Like I think because we don't have like a contract of expectations at the moment, so I think that the initial meeting being in the council buildings in Northern Ireland probably does have a bit of an impact on some families, but then I don't know if it might end up being a deterrent for some of ours, because we deal with a lot of families that don't really like to leave the house at all, let alone to be in a room full of people that they don't know, so yeah. I think even the logistics again comes into that (TFNW1)

> I feel like we ease families into it so I think that's the... that's the way I believe is the benefit like that it works, because I do feel like some [inaudible – 07:13] might put them off (TFNW1)

This approach reflected wider practices in the Step Up Step Down programme that were designed to ensure that parents felt comfortable in meeting and their concerns and anxieties were reduced.

> With the Step Up, Step Down reviews we do, we do them in the family home, so we all go up, and we all pitch ourselves on the sofa or whatever, whereas when these meetings happen without Step Up Step Down, they're either in the children's school or in the local council rooms. You've got loads of people on the screen, and it probably can feel really scary and intimidating, whereas if you're sat in a room and you know you've got your foster carer, you've got your project worker, you've got a social worker, you feel more held, and maybe more able to... "*okay, but if I don't communicate this as well as I could, because I am afraid and I am anxious, I've got these three or four people to back me up*." (SW2)

Despite the recommendation for a manualised model to ensure consistency, reproducibility, and rigorous adherence to evidence-based practice (Flood and Thompson 2020), it was necessary to have a level of flexibility with the replication of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. Adaptions were required in relation to the size and rurality of Pembrokeshire, social worker and foster carer capacity, and to ensure that the parents involved could be engaged in a way that The Fostering Network in Wales staff felt that would best support their participation.

5.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has considered the initiation of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. It explored the motivations of the Local Authority in adopting the Step Up Step Down pilot and emphasised that funding, evidence that this model was effective, and a commitment to supporting families and avoiding care proceedings were key factors in the decision making process. Importantly, the chapter illustrated the ways in which a lack of available funding could be a barrier to other Local Authorities engaging with Step Up Step Down.

The chapter also examined issues with capacity in relation to both social workers and foster carers, illustrating how this was negotiated within Pembrokeshire with creative thinking, the involvement of retiring foster carers whose skills and experiences would have been lost, and staff being prepared to invest in Step Up Step Down. Nonetheless, the chapter also noted that the problematic landscape of children's social care in Wales could deter other Local Authorities from engaging with preventative measures.

There was then a focus on the role of the Family Support Foster Carers including a discussion of their motivations for undertaking the role and the ways in which their value base aligned with the key tenets of the Step Up Step Down programme.

The referral process was considered and whilst Step Up Step Down has a wide remit and can support families with multiple and complex needs, there were families that needed specialised support that was beyond the remit of the programme, which again suggested that other areas of children's social care require significant investment.

The chapter then reflected on the differences between Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland and its adoption in Pembrokeshire, and whist there have been suggestions that a manualised model can ensure consistency and reproducibility, some flexibility was essential to tailor the programme to the locality, available staffing capacity and the needs of families within Pembrokeshire. As SW1 noted, *'If we'd have absolutely replicated the Northern Ireland model and not been able to change anything, it* [Step Up Step Down Pembrokeshire] *wouldn't have come off the ground*'. This could suggest that rather than programme fidelity there needs to be an element of programme flexibility when the Step Up Step Down model is transferred to other nations, localities and Local Authorities.

The following chapter will draw on the data generated in interviews with Family Support Foster Carers, social workers, parents and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales. It will examine the centrality of relationships with the Step Up Step Down programme and the key mechanisms of support highlighted by the participants.

6 Step Up Step Down Pillars of Support

6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses how individuals within the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire were positioned as sources of support and focusses on the importance of relationships. Chapter Seven will consider activities and events for children, parents and families within Step Up Step Down and in the wider community, and Chapter Eight will outline the provision of training for parents and Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC). However, it is beneficial to first explore the central role of relationship formation and building. This underpinned Step Up Step Down as not simply a programme of intervention but also as a community. Given the centrality of relationships this chapter is the longest of the four findings chapters. As a member of The Fostering Network in Wales (TFNW) reflected:

> I think most successful is creating a community. For me observing it, I think it's actually bringing those people together is a big thing, because my reflection on society is that a lot of things happen in isolation or in silos (TFNW1)

The accounts of other participants also emphasised the salience of '*support networks*' (FSFC3), a '*second family*' (SW1), '*pillars*' of support and being part of a '*village*' (Parent 4) '*friendship*' (FSFC1), '*bond relationships*' (Parent 1) and '*families supporting families*' (Parent 7). The different aspects of Step Up Step Down all relied to some extent on supportive relationships but this chapter will focus specifically on how Family Support Foster Carers were supported in their role, the ways in which Family Support Foster Carers, social workers (SW) and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales assisted families in relation to short breaks, meetings, phone calls, practical and emotional support and the For Mi App will also be considered. The chapter will then reflect on the networks and friendships built between parents (P) and between their children (C), as well as discussing endings and noting the reestablishment of wider family relationships. There will also be a focus on how those involved in Step Up Step Down gained new understandings of each other through their involvement, challenging some of their initial positions and developing more nuanced and emphatic perspectives. Drawing on the accounts of social workers, Family Support Foster Carers, parents and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, the chapter examines the interpersonal qualities of Step Up Step Down and the support within these relationships.

6.2 Supporting Family Support Foster Carers

This section examines the systems put in place to ensure the wellbeing and scaffolding of the Family Support Foster Carers. Whilst Step Up Step Down focusses its efforts on supporting families, this cannot be achieved without the intensive relational work of Family Support Foster Carers. Chapter Two noted how social workers have reported feeling unsupported, pressured and stressed by their jobs (MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023) and that foster carers have left their roles because of insufficient support (The Fostering Network 2025b). There is also a wider literature documenting the impacts on those working with parents and families who have experienced trauma, and the lack of support for these staff within their organisations, leading to

instances of burnout and vicarious trauma (Maniatt 2004; Stevenson 2026). It is unsurprising then that in the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 35) noted that Family Support Foster Carers 'need a lot of support to help deliver their roles, given the intensity of what they do'; and this was acknowledged in the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down with the provision of pre-arranged peer supervision, individual supervisions and more informal support mechanisms.

6.2.1 Supervision for Family Support Foster Carers

It was important for social workers to build effective and trustful relationships with Family Support Foster Carers, which reflected the model of foster carers supervisions.

> When you supervise foster carers, I think you build good relationships and you trust each other and that takes time to get to that place. So, I already had it with two and that was much easier, but I kind of had to spend the time growing that relationship with the other two foster carers (SW1)

Therefore, SW1 was committed to offering individual monthly meetings with Family Support Foster Carers, allocating protected time for '*growing that relationship*', and this practice was maintained by SW2.

> We do monthly peer supervision… I think it's actually quarterly in Northern Ireland, from what I read on the agreements. I don't think our guys would fare well with quarterly… I feel like as we all come together, they discuss their families, we'll focus on a particular area of support each month, and I think they find that really helpful. I hope they do. I feel like they do. So, I think if it went quarterly, I just don't think that would feel enough for them (TFNW1)

> I have a monthly supervision session with each foster carer on their own. I do that in their own home, so I'll visit them (SW2)

Family Support Foster Carers reported that these individual supervisions were beneficial and provided an opportunity for them to discuss their role and provide feedback on the programme and its activities.

> We've got a wonderful relationship with [SW1], and we do talk about everything and anything… quite often when she does come around… there's not a huge amount on that side, the practical stuff, that's normally sorted itself out. There might be some forms to sign… but then very much it is a discussion of okay, how are things going? How have you found the latest training… So, she's asking us for feedback on those sorts of things… and… how we are doing with the other social workers, the children's social workers and things… it's a really good relationship… it's just supportive is what it is (FSFC4)

> We've got SW1 who comes and talks with us. That's a very strong bit of support (FSFC5)

In addition to individual monthly peer supervision there were also opportunities for group reflective supervision facilitated monthly by social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, which were for all of the Family Support Foster Carers.

> I set up the reflective supervision, which happens monthly as well... We talk about how things have been, how our families are doing... it's an opportunity to... learn from each other and support each other (SW1)

> It's a big shift in their role, but I think that's why now we've got this opportunity to meet with other foster carers (TFNW1)

> All the foster carers come together and have a talk about any issues they're having; kind of problem solve what support we can provide. Just gives them a bit of a safe space to have a whinge or brainstorm (SW2)

These reflective group supervisions were appreciated by Family Support Foster Carers as they provided an opportunity to interact with peers.

> We usually just talk about our families... what we can put in place, how we can help them... obviously confidentiality, we don't talk in too much detail. That would be probably one-to-one with [SW2]... once a month (FSFC2)

> We all get together... So, it's quite relaxed and we chat. So, half of it will be about, you know, just life. And then we do also focus on who we're working with... sometimes [TFNW2] will have a particular question she's asked us to think about in relation to what we do, we normally have a chat about that (FSFC3)

> Then we've got another layer... meetings with [SW1] and [TFNW2] and [TFNW1] comes... That's really nice to be part of that. We're just... seeing what we need... I think we've moved, we're moving, in a nice direction, but if we can get to a an even stronger place of being able to reflect on cases... because I'd really like the insights of the other carers into the people that we are supporting... we're all very different people, we have very different ways of caring and because we're foster carers, we, I think, we're quite confident in in sharing our uniqueness. And I think there's a lot of strength going forward in sharing the issues of these families and yeah, just listening how different people would deal with it (FSFC5)

These opportunities to share experiences as a group and build supportive relationships was extended by offering more informal gatherings.

> We are going for, like, a wellbeing lunch and walk... just trying to promote relationship between the foster carers (SW2)

In addition to individual monthly peer supervision, reflective group supervisions and informal gatherings, there were a range of more ad hoc contacts and support mechanisms, as discussed in the following subsection.

6.2.2 Flexible Support for Family Support Foster Carers

Social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff ensured that they were available when Family Support Foster Carers needed advice or support.

> They do turn to [TFNW] and [SW] ... They'd like to come and ask for support, which is okay, because... I feel like it is still new for them (TFNW1)

> [FSFC] loves to phone me most days, but Wednesday is her favourite day to phone me, because that's when I'm not in work.... But we'll always have a chat on a Wednesday... [FSFC] will phone me whenever. [FSFC] tends to get in touch with problems that she wants resolved quite quickly... I speak to the foster carers every single week, at least once a week, probably more (TFNW2)

> My phone's always on, so if they need me, I'm not obviously 100% available, but I will get back to them. So, they know to either text me or give me a ring... if they need something on that day, but I'm accessible via text message, phone, email, and when I'm not, there's a duty line, or there's [TFNW staff] (SW2)

> My phone is on and I probably speak to most of my foster carers two or three times a week on the phone, I would say, to talk about what's going on, to give advice, to give guidance... so I just really try my best to kind of look after them and coach them through that really (SW1)

There was a commitment to being available for Family Support Foster Carers to resolve queries and also to '*share good news*' (FSFC5).

> [SW1] or [TFNW2], or it's now [SW2]. But I mean, we're in a WhatsApp group, and then I might message [TFNW1], you know... so between us, we sort of work out what to do next (FSFC1)

> [SW1] just there with phone or as you say send text or WhatsApp. You know that kind of message, "help", you know, "what you reckon..." or you can share good news stuff with her that way (FSFC5)

This in person individualised and group support and the remote contact via phone and WhatsApp helped to reduce the issues of burnout and negative impacts on wellbeing that have been reported by others who support families with complex histories (Maniatt 2004; Stevenson 2026). Accordingly, the support put in place by social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, as well as peer interactions, enabled Family Support Foster Carers to undertake intensive relational work with families, which will be the focus of the following sections.

6.3 Respite – Short Breaks

The evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland noted that short breaks were offered to provide respite, and that the children who are referred to the programme have a short break once a month with their Family Support Foster Carers. This respite was usually 'a daytime outing or at the FSFC's home for a maximum of 24 hours, at times this might be an overnight stay' and the short break offered an opportunity for Family Support Foster Carers 'to give the child focussed attention' and provide 'the parent some respite from the challenges they are experiencing with their child' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 45). This arrangement was seen as more productive than other forms of respite offered in social care.

> I think nine times out of ten, when we are looking for respite care or support for children, they're so limited that it's scary for them going into a house that they don't know. Whereas with Step Up, Step Down, they know all the foster carers (SW2)

This existing familiarity seems to have enabled some Family Support Foster Carers to offer both short day time care of children and over nights stays, as well as extended stays when issues have arisen.

> [FSFC] has definitely been open to absolutely everything, long-term, emergency, and just deals with it as it lands on her door (TFNW1)

However, there were some concerns raised that some Family Support Foster Carers wanted a '*slow introduction'* (TFNW1) and further support, which may have resulted in respite not being offered in the time frame that it was provided in the Northern Ireland model of Step Up Step Down.

> They want a slow introduction often, whereas I guess in Northern Ireland, this is the idea that I hear, is that they start those short breaks... pretty much straightaway, whereas our guys, I think, need a bit more coaching with it, which is surprising really, because I guess that's the element of them being foster carers (TFNW1)

> Some of the children's needs on the projects have been quite high. So, it's just us giving the foster carers the confidence that they've got the skills to be able to manage really, has been kind of the tricky bit around respite with a few people (SW1)

> It hasn't been as big a success really as we'd like. I think different foster carers have different approaches to it (SW1)

Nonetheless, in comparing the Pembrokeshire pilot to the model in Northern Ireland it is important to note that Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 45) emphasised the need for sufficient time for Family Support Foster Carers to have built trust with parents and children prior to initiating any short breaks. Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 45) found that 'some parents can be nervous about their child going with the carer at first', because of concerns that the Family Support Foster Carers 'may not be able to manage their child's behaviour' or that short breaks could be a signifier of their 'children becoming 'looked after' and moving into the care system'. It was noted that parents became more trusting of short breaks when their own confidence developed and Family Support Foster Carers in Northern Ireland focussed on building 'up a gradual relationship' with parents and families, enabling time to 'get to know' each other (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 45).

This position of building 'up a gradual relationship' was undertaken by Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire and this seemed to be appreciated by parents, who were supportive of a measured approach to establishing relationships and ensuring that they, and their children were well prepared for any form of respite.

> We're hoping to next weekend to go down to her house for him to be able to just see the place and get familiar with it. Hopefully, before long then he can go down there to stay, so they've only been out once, and they went up to (place) for bowling and then they had lunch and came home (P1)

> We're building up to that. [FSFC]... she wants to get to know the family first to make sure that [child] is actually comfortable with her, to make sure that we're comfortable with [child]

> actually staying away. That is something we're going to be leading up to, but in the summer holidays, [FSFC] is going to come over and spend time with the family, and then when [child] says that she's comfortable with [FSFC], [FSFC] will then start doing days out, which will lead to sleepovers then… we're leaving it to [child] to decide whether that's something she is comfortable doing… Before she even thinks about bringing [child] to her home, [FSC] would love for me and my partner to actually go over just for a cuppa, just to get to know the house and the layout and the people that live there, and she said she's never going to just show up at the house and say okay, [child]'s having a sleepover today… [FSFC] made a point of making sure me and [partner] are comfortable with the decision as well… they're just making sure the family as a unit are looked after, it's not just the one particular child (P7)

> Not yet. That has been discussed. I think what we're doing at the minute, because we've only just… it's only been really six months, you know, we are still trying to build that bond between [FSFC] and our children, and then when everybody feels that… that the children will be okay… that's when we'll probably take that step. But it has been discussed (P3)

> They've [FSFC] been building a relationship with [child] first, and meeting, she's taken [child] out for a few hours over a couple of days now and then so [had] a bit of respite, and it gives [child] a bit of a different experience (P2)

The parents accounts suggest that they did not want children to go for short breaks, particularly where this involved their children sleeping away from home, which parents strongly associated with the term respite, until everyone was ready for this step. Instead, parents emphasised that before overnight respite it was important that parents and children felt '*comfortable*' (P7), that a '*bond*' (P3) and '*relationship*' (P2) had been built between children and Family Support Foster Carers, and that parents and children could become '*familiar with*' (P1) and '*get to know*' (P7) the home of their Family Support Foster Carer via short family visits, and this approach was reflected in the accounts of Family Support Foster Carers.

> We've actually got [child] coming tomorrow for a bit in readiness for hopefully a sleepover next month because I felt it was important that he came to see the house. All the family know where he's coming and then if there are any worries he has, he can talk to his mum about it before he comes next time. We can, well you know, either change things or at least explain why things are as they are so that he's got an answer (FSFC3)

However, for transparency it is worth noting that one parent said that their Family Support Foster Carer '*been busy*' in a conversation about their child having short breaks in the day but no overnight respite at that time. As the rest of this parent's account was extremely positive in terms of the support received from the Family Support Foster Carer, and this one remark was not elaborated, it is difficult to interpret whether this related to a particular period in time or the rescheduling of a potential visit, or a wider issue. Nonetheless, all of the seven parents interviewed were in support of a careful process of familiarisation before their children went out alone with Family Support Foster Carers, and they were particularly wary of introducing any overnight respite before a trustful relationship had been formed and everyone felt '*comfortable*' (P7).

Although the seven parents interviewed emphasised their preference for building relationships and either postponing or not engaging with any overnight respite, one of the Family Support Foster Carers discussed a parent they worked with where overnight respite was their key priority.

> Right from the start, I want you to take child out... I think she's a bit disappointed that it's only one night that's allowed really, I think if she could, she'd send him for a lot longer... if we said yes, she'd have let him come and stay the first week we'd met, you know, she was at that stage, she was so desperate to have a break. And I suppose, unfortunately, she's at a point where she wants her respite more than anything else, which I know is quite common with the families, so she's not engaging in all of the programme, but she's absolutely desperate to have that bit of a break, even though it's only once a month. You know, it obviously means a great deal. So, we're trying to switch things about in the hope that perhaps if she can see that we're willing to do that bit, maybe she'll try a bit more to engage with the other bits we're trying to do with her (FSFC3)

In Chapter Five, there was a discussion of referrals to Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire, and how some families in the Local Authority were desperate for respite because there was a lack of '*respite available*' (TFNW2). As TFNW1 explained, Step Up Step Down '*don't offer that level of respite'*, and there seems to be a misalignment in this case between what the parent would like and the provision of the programme. Nonetheless, in this case the Family Support Foster Carer was hopeful that limited access to some respite would enable the parent to engage more fully with other aspects of the programme. This was the only data from the interviews with parents (*n*=7) and Family Support Foster Carers (*n*=5) where parents were focussed on immediate respite rather than a prioritisation of relationship building that dominated the interview accounts. There were also instances where respite was not wanted because children has been reunited with their parent after being put in foster care.

> So, there's been [a] family on the project where the child wasn't living at home with [parent], she was in foster care, and now... she's gone home. So obviously respite in that situation, there wasn't a requirement for it. And now that she's home, [parent] is a little bit reluctant for her to go on respite to the foster carers because [parents]'s got her back... So, there's been some situations where it hasn't been possible and also some children haven't wanted to do it. So even though there's been encouragement, they haven't been in a position to go (SW1)

> I could have her, but she's very attached to her [parent] at the moment. She's come from care, and she's gone home, which is lovely, and she's been home a year, and she's very attached to her [parent], which is lovely (FSFC2)

> There's the [parent], and the child, that child has been in foster care. So, to add us as another level was going to confuse the child so effectively, she was already being given respite care from [parent] in her foster placement. And we were weaning her off of that. I think as we go forward with them, we are available... if [parent] needs to go to an appointment without her, you know we'll offer that kind of coverage or we'll just take her out for the afternoon or what have you. But at the moment, [parent]'s just bursting with joy and can't get enough of her and just wants to spend every spare moment with her (FSFC5)

> The respite, one of them, the daughter of the [parent], we're only just getting to the stage where she might consider going out of the house with me. We tried it last Saturday and when I got there like we'd anticipated she was, "I don't want to come out, I'm not feeling well", but managed to have a conversation with her and say, you know, are you really feeling unwell or do you think perhaps it's just a bit of anxiety? She said, "yeah, yeah, actually I

> think I am feeling anxious about going out with you." So well, that's okay… we can do it another time, but we had a chat. So, it's little baby steps with her (FSFC3)

Parents experience intense and long-lasting grief following child removal and the separation of parent and child is traumatic for both parents and children (Darlington et al. 2023; Stevenson 2026); and, as noted earlier, parents can position respite as a signifier of their 'children becoming 'looked after' and moving into the care system' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 45). Therefore, it is unsurprising that short breaks or overnight respite were not a valued aspect of Step Up Step Down for families who had previously been separated; and there were other circumstances in which respite was not necessarily appropriate.

> It's about the needs, obviously, of the family… actually they had that sort of help that they needed anyway, so they were close to another family… who lived down the road and the children just swapped houses and the parents just swapped children as they needed… we engaged very well with the children when we were there, but respite in that situation wasn't needed. We didn't get to that stage because actually they just needed practical help around the house (FSFC4)

> They're not looked after children, and it's a voluntary scheme. You know, everybody's got to be happy for the kids to come. If [parent] was actually desperate for respite, then we'd be working towards that. But because she isn't, it's not an issue. And so, we've let it be parent-let really (FSFC3)

> Some of them, certainly at the beginning, that's all they wanted. That's why they came on board, because they only wanted the respite… And that's not what we're about… But now they're not asking for it… severely autistic, and she's protective of him… I go out with them, and we go and do things, but… she would never… I wouldn't have him. [Another child] is autistic … she deals with him quite well. I can't imagine her wanting me to take him away (FSFC2)

In another example, FSFC3 described how differing levels of parental engagement and contrasting attitudes towards the service influenced the child's relationship with the carer. While the resident parent engaged positively with Step Up Step Down, the non-resident parent was described as being sceptical and reportedly advised the child - "*Do you know what? We don't need Step Up Step Down here; they're just meddling in our lives. Don't do anything with them*". As FSFC3 explained, this negatively affected the development of their relationship with the child:

> So that's unhelpful, and so [child]'s been very slow to come around to spending any time with me… We started going in to see [child] in school once a week and I've done four sessions with her now, so she is starting to get to know me. And there are some signs that she is starting to trust me, which is great. So, we're going to work towards hopefully her coming to the house… to have the respite for a couple of hours. You can come and see where I live and then go home and then think about the sleepover… we're on WhatsApp together and, you know, I will check in on her every so often and say how're you doing, what you up to. And sometimes she answers me, sometimes she doesn't. But, you know, I think by just sort of keeping on going and showing how I'm not going to give up, I hope that we might, we might get somewhere (FSFC3)

Accordingly, there were circumstances in which parents did not want overnight respite and Family Support Foster Carers were respectful of parents' and children's needs and priorities, emphasising the '*voluntary*' (FSFC3) nature of the programme, the importance of being '*parent-le*d' (FSFC3).

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down One in Northern Ireland, one staff member participant expressed some 'reservations about short breaks, being concerned that the focus of the programme is to work on family relationships', and they questioned the benefit of taking the child out of the family for a short break and the sustainability of the provision of respite given the time bounded nature of the program (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 46). This disjuncture between keeping families together and the separation associated with respite was also noted by one of the parents in Pembrokeshire.

> Step Up Step Down is so proactive in their involvement with the families and the Local Authority, they get things moving, agree with it, and they want the families together… respite has been offered, but they want to keep the children and the families together (P3)

Earlier in this section, SW1 had queried the extent to which respite had been a success and TFNW1 also noted that the lead-in to respite provision was lengthy. Yet arguably it was successful in responding to the varied circumstances and needs of parents and children and prioritising the establishment of trust and relationship building, and one of the Family Support Foster Carers reflected on the need for fluidity.

> It was a completely new concept [in] Pembrokeshire, and everybody's been finding their way, I think it's been quite fluid in that we've been able to make it what people need rather than it being a set, you know, idea. I know that when I talk to the others and heard about how it works in Northern Ireland, it does seem quite different in some ways. How we do things, particularly how the respite is delivered, and you know the sort of the working week. I suppose it seems a lot more fluid here (FSFC3)

The interview accounts suggest that the offer of short breaks and respite stays was premised on '*what people need rather than it being a set… idea'* and this level of both flexibility and consistency was important to other areas of Step Up Step Down, as will be explored in the following section. The position of FSFC3 reflects earlier conceptualisations of the use of short breaks in family support as a flexible intervention, in which the allocation and use of time is adapted to families' individual circumstances rather than delivered according to a standardised model (Roberts 2017). Furthermore, it is important to note that parents and children often valued these shorter breaks when children went out with Family Support Foster Carers to undertake an activity for a couple of hours.

> She desperately needed somebody to make her feel special and feel like they were there just for her, so that bit has worked really well for her… I started taking [child] out straight away because, you know, as [parent] would happily admit, the other [children] are much easier to manage, and they'll go and spend time on their own. So, [parent] felt like she was having some time off. So that was really good… And [parent] often says… when [child] comes back from a visit, she's full of what we've done (FSFC3)

These short visits offered individual attention for the child and enabled the parent to have '*some time off*'; and as well as children having this dedicated one-to-one time with their Family Support Foster Carers, they were able to offer support for children as a trusted adult.

> One occasion where she's been to the house and we had a session talking about the questions she wanted for her life story book, because that's just being done. And the work[er] that was assigned, he's male. He's quite a bit younger than me. It's not that she didn't feel comfortable with him, but because she doesn't know him, she felt really bamboozled in that moment and didn't know, she couldn't think clearly. So, I said, well, why don't we do some work together? I'll send the questions to him. And then, you know, he can ask you more about those questions. So, she's really enjoyed that. And she wants to do another session (FSFC3)

> This is the first time that we haven't felt judged, and that's important, and it's important to us that the children, they know that... like [FSFC], when they see [FSFC], that she's fun... But the [children] know that if there's anything troubling them, that [FSFC] will listen to them. You know, [FSFC] won't tell us what the children have said to her, because [FSFC]has the children's confidentiality at heart. I mean, if there is something concerning, then [FSFC] will bring it up, but the children know that they can take the mask off with [FSFC], and it's okay to not be okay (P4)

Conducting life story work has a range of benefits for care experienced children and young people (Watson et al. 2015; Watson et al. 2020). However, as noted in the interview excerpt from FSFC3, it can be a difficult process for children when they do not know the practitioner facilitating their life story work. Accordingly, the child benefitted from short sessions with their Family Support Foster Carer so that they felt better supported by a trusted adult. This idea of trust is also underlying in the account from P4, who noted that going out with the Family Support Foster Carer is '*fun*' but also an opportunity to build a relationship where they do not feel '*judged*' and can express their concerns.

There are clear benefits from the individualised time that Family Support Foster Carers spend with children but there could be tensions within sibling groups.

> They all... [take part in SUSD activities] They all love [TFNW2] and [SW1] and [SW2]. They think they're great... the only thing was [sibling] did say, "I want to be bad like [child in SUSD] so I can have the attention." And I said, "It's not attention. [child in SUSD] is different. Not physically, but [child]'s got a bit more complex needs, so that's why she has more one-to-one". "Oh, well, that's not fair. She's always going out shopping and that". But it's therapy for her. But the kids don't see that... So, I've learnt how to handle that as well... So now, I just say, "Well, if they go out, we'll do something in the house" ... So, when [child] goes out, I've learnt to cook with [sibling] on her own (P6)

The Step Up Step Down programme enabled siblings and wider family members to be involved with a wide range of activities and events, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight. Nonetheless, in this case the child in family referred to Step Up Step Down is prioritised in relation to individual contacts with their Family Support Foster Carer. As P6 discussed, this did bring up some issues initially for the other children in the home, which were negotiated; but it is worth noting that respite, short breaks or even a couple of hours with one child and not others can potentially create tensions in family dynamics.

Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of incorporating short breaks within the Step up Step Down model of support. Family Support Foster Carers were able to offer families a combination of short breaks of varying durations, tailoring their use to the needs and circumstances of individual

children and parents. As in Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire prioritised building 'up a gradual relationship' with parents and families, enabling time to 'get to know' one another before introducing more extended periods of care (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 45).

In addition, the Pembrokeshire pilot demonstrated that the timing, duration and purpose of short breaks required ongoing negotiation with families and needed to be responsive to their individual circumstances, histories and preferences. There was an acknowledgement of, and respect for, parents' and children's reluctance to engage in short breaks where these were not viewed as beneficial, particularly following particularly following reunification or where other legitimate barriers to participation existed.

Where short breaks were welcomed, they offered parents time to themselves and created opportunities for children to spend time with a trusted adult in a safe, supportive environment where they could have '*fun*' (P4) whilst also receiving emotional support. Consequently, the provision was positioned as providing '*what people need rather than it being a set… idea*' (FSFC3), and, as discussed in the following sections, demonstrates that short breaks were one component of a broader package of relationship-based family support.

6.4 Supporting Parents – Consistency, Availability and Flexibility

As noted in Chapter Five, the Family Support Foster Carer role 'is fundamental to the success of the programme' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 7) and it was important that Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff were a consistent presence for families, particularly where inconsistency had been a predominant factor in previous interactions with services and support networks.

> I think sometimes the difference they make is very small, as in, it doesn't feel that tangible to them. But actually, that's why we try to keep up the trauma-informed conversations. Actually, that is just about giving families choice, showing up, being there, being that consistent person. It's a basic that you think would be the most obvious thing in the world, but actually, a lot of people don't get that. I mean, they will have had a life full of inconsistencies or push aways… So actually, having the same person show up I think is the important element of the mentoring (TFNW1)

Family Support Foster Carers built up this element of consistency by visiting families every week.

> To get the best outcomes for the families and their children, they need to be meeting with the foster carers on a weekly basis (SW2)

> We had an initial meeting, which we still do on a weekly basis, just to get familiar with each other, just so she can be a part of the family instead of just working with the family… it is a nice gesture thing that they do. It's not so much I'm coming in, I'm going to tick a box, like I want to… help… it was, I want to be a part of the family if you let me… she's really nice (P7)

> I try and build a really good relationship with them. I just see them as really vulnerable people who need a friend, and I do what I can to help them (FSFC1)

> There is progress with all of them, but I can see why there is a real need for a programme like this because you know someone going in and trying to complete a bit of work in eight weeks, in some of these instances is absolutely ridiculous. You're never going to get anything positive come out of it. But by working with the parents and seeing them often and getting to know them properly, you know, I can go in and give advice that's just for them. It's not something that, you know, I've just picked up on a course, it's random and I just thought, oh, well, this works for everybody. You know, you can really know what advice, but also how to give it so that it's taken the best way (FSFC3)

It was noted that in some cases weekly visits did not go ahead as there had been phone calls throughout the week, and parents had said that they did not need an in person visit.

> And also, I think the foster carers are supposed to go out on a weekly basis to meet with their families. Sometimes, the parents are getting in touch with the foster carers, you know, consistently throughout the week, which is great, but then they don't feel the need to have that weekly visit, because "Do you know what? I've talked to you Monday to Friday. Why do you need to come out tonight?" So, trying to implement firm boundaries whilst developing that relationship, really (SW2)

This may be difficult for Family Support Foster Carers to negotiate, particularly in the initial months of relationship building if parents feel that phone contact has been consistent and sufficient and Family Support Foster Carers are prioritising a parent led approach. However, the interviews with parents and Family Support Foster Carers suggested that meetings were mainly weekly, or if not at least fortnightly. Outside of the weekly meeting phone calls and WhatsApp were a consistent feature of relationship building and support. In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down it was reported that 'support is provided around the clock, FSFCs are on call a good proportion of the day (e.g. 8am to 8pm), every day' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 43). This level of availability and flexibility was also apparent in the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down, but phone conversations with parents involved the Step Up Step Down team, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales.

> So, they [FSFC] would offer respite kind of over the weekends and would be available later into the evening for calls and stuff like that and visits with families and a few of our foster carers have found like Sunday nights, for example. They'll get a call to say, oh, we've had a really hard weekend. The kids have been home, and this has happened. So, they're more flexible with their time. But again, they would then not work a Wednesday or, you know, they're kind of board balance their time throughout the week... If we're saying we're here for you, we're here when you need our support, but that only starts at 9, and that only finishes at 5, well that that doesn't meet their needs really. And again, TFNW1 is more flexible with her hours than she probably should be, but we both are very passionate about it. So, I think we try and be as available as we can be really (SW1)

> With the parents, I don't do weekly visits... that's obviously the foster carer, but because me and [TFNW2] do the courses together, we do get to spend quite a bit of time with them. And then when parents are struggling, I just try and be as available as I can be really. So, a lot of the parents have got my phone number. Sometimes, I don't know, they might be

> struggling to get a hold of their social worker, or they might be finding things tricky and they'll contact. If there's been any upsets and a visit from me would be helpful, I sometimes visit by myself or with the Family Support Foster Carer, or me and [TFNW1] will go out and I think that kind of builds on that community element of the programme really. They have their named foster carer, but they also still have me and [TFNW1] and they can reach out to [SW1] (TFNW2)

There were some concerns that lines of communication could become blurred and that it was important to establish the role of the Family Support Foster Carer as the key contact and distinguish the remit of the social worker in relation to the Step Up Step Down programme.

> I think with the families, some of them will want to come directly to me, because I'm a social worker, I have power. So, it's trying to redirect them to the foster carers, because I'm not the child social worker, I can't make any decisions. I'm just there to support the foster carers and make sure that they're given the appropriate support and guidance. I think some families are like, "oh, you're a social worker, I'll get you on my side", sort of thing. So balancing boundaries, really (SW2)

However, aside for this need for elements of clarification in some areas, parents valued the consistency, availability and flexibility of the entire Step Up Step Down team '*at the end of the phone*' (P1).

> Well, if we need support, they'll get it for us, won't they... the people that are running it are amazing you can't beat 'em... they make a difference don't they, no matter what time of day it is... It's not like every job, it's not 9 'til 5 really, is it (P2)

> They've all been so so amazing, I just, yeah, I'd be lost without them, I really would... just they're kind, they're friendly, they're helpful, they're just, they're there at the end of the phone if you need any advice or any problems you have or you just wanna chat really. 'Cos it can be a lonely time, you know, as well as a daunting time. But yeah, they've been amazing. [TFNW1] so [TFNW2] and [SW1] and then our [FSFC], we've met up a few times for some (inaudible), and you know, just for me to go out the house and go out and about. So, they're there to support you, and they understand what you're going through... yeah anything, you know, any help, they're willing to help... you couldn't get anybody better to run it... and they get you... nothing is like too much trouble... I just I honestly can't thank 'em enough... I've grown a really good bond relationship with [TFNW2] and [SW1] ... me and [TFNW2] just click (P1)

> Because my social worker only works Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, so I've been dealing a lot with [SW1] for the Thursday and the Friday, because no one's there to help me... You know, but they're always there to talk any time of the day, weekends... [issue], and I didn't know what to do, and I've got no one to talk to, so I was messaging [TFNW2] and [SW1] outside of work hours, and they... you know, they listened to what I'm saying... they're giving me advice, they're sending me links. I just think it's incredible (P3)

> We've done a lot of therapy, we've seen a lot of, you know, medical professionals, but no one really puts in... time, effort, but consistency as well, they're consistent... They've got a really good team. The consistency of the group... They do have their... obviously their

> working set hours, but they always make it known to us that they're available night or day. They're at our disposal, really, when we need them or anything (P4)

The consistency of The Step Up Step Down team had an impact on some parents in relation to their own engagement and consistency with the wider programme.

> I've got a habit of disengaging with people, cancelling my appointments, when I'm not in the mood, I simply won't attend, but Step Up Step Down has been the only group that I've never cancelled on. I've always attended, even if I'm in a very bad... if I'm feeling upset or emotional, I always attend, and this is the only group that I've been consistent with as well (P4)

Overall, the Step Up Step Down team, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales were consistent, flexible and available in meeting the needs of parents, and they modelled these attributes to the families in the programme. In addition to '*showing up, being there, being that consistent person*' (TFNW1), the Step Up Step Down team also offered emotional and practical support, which will be discussed in the following sections.

6.5 Emotional Support for Parents

In the previous section it was noted that in Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, Family Support Foster Carers ensured that they were available to speak with parents when support was needed (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 43) and in Pembrokeshire this accessibility was also prioritised by the Step Up Step Down team. Many of these conversations were positioned by parents as a mechanism for working through issues and their associated emotions and for feeling heard and listened too. This was established as early as in the initial meetings with The Fostering Network in Wales and the social worker.

> I met [TFNW2] first with [SW1] .... and it was really good. I was still emotionally spinning in that point in time. I remember having a rant at [TFNW2], undeservingly so... because again, it had nothing to do with her, what happened to [child] and I in the past by some other social worker that didn't want to listen, but she listened... that's the first time that somebody actually listened to my entire rant without saying, "Look, let me stop you there" ... So, you know, it was mega, and so meeting [TFNW2] with [SW1] ... that was like comfortable for me right away, and it was a pleasant conversation (P5)

Introductions to assigned Family Support Foster Carers happened at a later stage, and once these relationships developed, Family Support Foster Carers were central in providing support for wellbeing and emotional health.

> I'll never forget seeing [FSFC] come walking up towards my house... they're wonderful people... if you're going down the road, and you don't know where the bends are, or what to expect, you're going to be kind of nervous, especially it might be dark at night or a bit foggy, but you got somebody saying, "Listen, I've been done this 1000 times. You're going to go another 150 yards and you're going to make slight bend to the right", and you're like, "Ah, okay". Immediately, just because that person sat next to you, even if they're not saying

> anything, your anxiety is going to be less, and it's like, "Thanks" … I really appreciate that (P5)
>
> I could ring [FSFC] and be like, "Look, I'm struggling", and she was like, "Right, okay. Let's talk through it. Let's see what we can do next" … So, we do have like a massive flare-up in the house, which obviously then affects everyone, but then, as soon as that's happened, I'm on the phone to [FSFC], "Like this has happened. This is what I've said. This is how I've reacted". And then, she's like, "Okay". And then, we sort of work though it again. So, it's… I'm never left alone long enough to go down a spiral of not being able to come back up (P7)
>
> Yeah, just to be there, a chat, whether it's just to see how I am or day-to-day conversation, you know it doesn't necessarily have to be that anything is wrong, just another voice to me (P1)
>
> [FSFC] comes here to help me, and she's understood [child]… which is good because she can understand… she understands me, and I tell her like, you know, "[child]'s not well, she's had a wobble." All that. And she says, "Right, we'll talk through it". And then, she explains "This is what probably has triggered it" … And then, I can phone her up and she supports me as well. So, she's always on the end of a phone (P6)
>
> [FSFC]'s come to my house and I've been upset, and she's just said to me, I'll do your dishes. You know, I've got the kids some popcorn, you know, go and have a shower… Yeah, the first thing [FSFC] will say is right, I'm coming to your house at this time, alright get out of the house, we're going to go for a coffee, we're going to go for a walk, you know, and that's what we need… She'll be abroad, and we'll be WhatsApping each other, you know? She's always available. She is… I have never met a woman like [FSFC] in my life, and she is the most amazing woman in the world… honest to God… We don't have to mask, we can be ourselves, and that's alright, that's okay. You know, we can be… we can have a day where we don't want to speak. We can have a day where we will physically cry, and that's okay (P3)

These accounts from parents illustrate the ways in which the emotional support of the Family Support Foster Carers was highly valued because they '*understood*' the children and the parents (P6). Where appropriate, they were able to respond to phone calls with a visit, enabling parents to have a break or a encourage them to leave the house, but also facilitating a space where parents can '*cry*' or not '*speak*' (P3). Additionally, Family Support Foster Carers offered an opportunity for parents to '*work though*' (P7) issues and ensured that they did not feel '*alone*' (P7) and that they could be a supportive presence by simply being '*sat next to you*' (P5) or offering '*another voice*' (P1)

Accordingly, Family Support Foster Carers were a cornerstone of emotional support. In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, parents similarly discussed these forms of support, and they positioned their Family Support Foster Carers as 'altruistic, engaging, warm, empathetic, supportive, non-judgemental and caring' as well as helping 'the family appreciate that they can change the issues they are dealing with' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 43). In Pembrokeshire, these attributes were evident not only in parents accounts of their Family Support Foster Carers, but also in their discussions of the wider Step Up Step Down team.

> [FSFC] comes once a week, and if she doesn't come once a week, she'll ring just to catch up. So, it's nice to be able to vent to her about stuff that's on my chest… [with Social Services], I always felt like I needed to be careful about what I said in case it was twisted the wrong way. But with Step Up Step Down, it doesn't matter who I've spoken to, whether it was just another parent or [TFNW2] or another [FSFC], like it doesn't matter. I have just said how I felt, and not once felt judged or scared that what I've said is going to backfire on me (P7)

> The support has been phenomenal, not just for us, but for the children, and just for us to know that we've got that sort of… that pillar that we can lean on, that extra pillar… We know we can… and we do, we talk to [FSFC] about all of our issues and she's aware of everything. She's aware of… and she just wants to help and just be. She's lovely, she can't do enough. And the same with [TFNW2] and [SW1], they really cannot do enough, and it's alien to us (P4)

> But for me, it's like the changes, I don't feel so overwhelmed when my daughter is having an episode, because I know that I can phone [FSFC] or I can phone [TFNW2] and [SW1], I can moan to them, and… so I'm not holding like, any negativity inside (P4)

> And you know, [TFNW2] said, you know, "Let us be your village." She was the only one who was communicating with me, her and [FSFC], how am I mentally? How was my mental health? She was even messaging - do I want her to come round with pizza? We have very open, honest, emotional conversations about my [health issue], and you know, she [TFNW2] never puts pressure on me, she never has a go at me about it, and when she explains how it affects the family, she does it in a way she doesn't come at me, she's not aggressive, she's not forcing her own views of… my [circumstances], and how it affects the family… [TFNW2] … Step Up Step Down have helped me a lot more than any other service. They have helped me more than Social Services, they've helped me more than my local mental health team (P4)

These accounts reinforce the ways in which Step Up Step Down provided parents with the opportunity to '*vent*' (P7), discuss their '*issues*' and '*mental health*' (P4) and be the '*pillar that* [they] *can lean on*' (P4), rather than holding '*negativity inside'*. A clear distinction was drawn between the support offered by the Step Up Step Down team and the previous experiences that parents recalled with Social Services and local health teams. As discussed in Chapter Two, parents who have been involved in a referral to Social Services or had their children placed under a care order often have a severe by a lack of trust in professionals and the child welfare system, making them reluctant to engage with services or confide in others (Kenny and Barrington 2018; Colvin and Howard 2022). This was reflected in the parents' accounts, with Parent 5 noting '*I always felt like I needed to be careful about what I said*' in relation to Social Services, whilst in interactions with Step Up and Step Down they did not feel '*judged or scared*', instead parents could have '*honest, emotional conversations*' (P4).

The extent of the support across Step Up Step Down team was particularly valued when parents were negotiating a crisis point with their physical and mental health, as illustrated in this account from one of the parents.

> A significant incident… led to me being hospitalised, and my children being removed for a period of time. My mentor [FSFC] came to visit me in hospital. The support was 24 hours a day. When I was released from hospital, I had my mentor coming round to check up on me. If I had a bad day, she would still come over and just sit there, and like, you know, just listen to me while I moaned or while I cried. When my children needed somewhere to sleep, my mentor, she stepped in and offered… some beds for my children to stay. The support from [TFNW2] was phenomenal, she was just always on the phone if I needed her. They were with me when I was at my lowest, but then, they stayed with me, and they saw the change, and they were there when the children's transition did coming back home. And the support didn't stop then. It was like, "Okay, you've got the children back. Are they okay? Do they need anything? Do you need anything? Can we help you?" You know? The support off Step Up… and even other people in the group that aren't necessarily working with me, other people were just like, "Hey, how are you?" You know, "How are the kids? Can we do anything?" And it's literally having a bunch of friends that you didn't know you needed (Parent identifier withheld)

This account details how the parent's Family Support Foster Carers undertook hospital visits, provided respite and continued high levels of emotional and practical support for the family following the parent's return from hospital. TFNW2 was also available to offer extensive emotional support, described as '*phenomenal*', and SW1 and TFNW2 were able to assist with ensuring that the parent's children were later able to return home. The ethos of '*second family*' (SW1), '*friendship*' (FSFC1) and '*community*', meant that even the wider group of Family Support Foster Carers checked in with the parent about their wellbeing, and the Step Up Step Down team as a whole became the '*bunch of friends that you didn't know you needed'*.

In Chapter Eight, there will be a discussion of wider community connections, but it is worth noting here that as well as offering direct support with emotional wellbeing, specialist services were introduced where professional assistance was seen as beneficial for the families.

> They are looking at me having some counselling as well, just to help me through some stuff. And then, eventually after I've had a bit of counselling, we're going to… or they're going to try and get me and [child] into a therapy session together, to help us with our relationship that way (P7)

An engagement with wider services and community supports is also an integral element of the Step Up Step Down programme and social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff were able to recognise where specialist provision would be of benefit to families. Therefore, whilst the Step Up Step Down team were integral in supporting the emotional wellbeing of parents and families, there were also links made with specialists where necessary, and as well as emotional support, Step Up Step Down were also a key source of practical assistance as outlined in the following section.

6.6 Practical Support for Parents

This section focusses on the ways in which Step Up Step Down provided practical support to families, economically in relation to ensuring that their basic needs were met, functionally with gardening, home improvements and providing transport, and in terms of advocacy and assistance in negotiating with other services such as schools, health professionals and the social care sector. The Fostering Network in Wales staff explained that they had factored practical support into the budget for the programme and they also made use of other grants that could be accessed to support families.

> There are obviously other charities that exist, and actually, [TFNW2] will look to other services as well that might be able to alleviate some of that without having to use our budget, just to kind of tap into other things as well… practical supports has got another budget attached (TFNW1)

> I can apply for grants for furniture, white goods, stuff like that, so that that doesn't end up coming out of our budget… Or if they're a bit short on cash, and they're struggling with food or whatever, I'll sort out a Tesco shop, stuff like that, taxis to events, things like that. I guess that comes under practical support… [families can] struggle at the end of the month, so yeah, I think the idea behind it is that if we can take off a little bit of the load financially, it leaves a bit of space for them to be able to not have that strain on top of everything else to try and help them change things a little bit at home (TFNW2)

The families involved with Step Up Step Down were already negotiating complex circumstances, leading to their referral, and as TFNW2 explained, being able to contribute financially and ensure that families had basic equipment and provisions enabled '*space for them to be able to not have that strain on top of everything else*'. Parents who had received this form of support expressed how this was able to meet their needs when they had no one else '*to reach out*' (P4) to for assistance.

> My fridge/freezer just completely died, and I left it for a couple of days thinking that it may come back to life again, and my food… my frozen food went off, and I contacted my social worker at the time, and then, I had an automatic email informing me that she's out of the office for the week. So, that sent me into complete spiral, because I had no-one to reach out… I had no food, I had no money, I had no fridge/freezer, my social worker was on leave, which I wasn't aware of. So… [TFNW2] completed a DAF [Discretionary Assistance Fund] grant for me and was able to get me a fridge/freezer. And then, she provided me with some Aldi vouchers so I could get some food for the children (P4)

> [TFNW2], [SW1] and [FSFC], they all came round on separate days to give me their support. They've helped us out, you know, when we struggled, they put us in touch with like, food banks. Helped financially (P4)

There were also instances where Family Support Foster Carers bought small gifts for the children in families they were assigned to, and as in the following interview excerpt, children assigned to other Family Support Foster Carers.

> He's really interested in the solar system, and I bought him… he was with [other FSFC] … it's like a glass thing, but it's got all the planets in it that lights up and spins round for

> Christmas, and [SW1] said that was the first thing he showed her when she went to see him, because he liked it so much (FSFC1)

In addition to the provision of material items, families were supported with transport, improving their living conditions and in having a helping hand to negotiate everyday activities.

> I said, how are you getting to the hospital? Because she lives right out over that way. She said, probably drive herself. I said, don't do that. Just ring me, because I'm only 10 minutes away, I'll come and get you (FSFC1)

> I made some friends there that I know that I can rely on. It's like [FSFC] and [other person], they came around to give me a hand Tuesday for the move [house move], and that was very kind of them... Being as I don't have family, I'm sure there's going to be a lot of other people in the UK that are in a similar position to mine... and they don't have immediate family support network around. That doubles down the importance of Step Up Step Down (P5)

> Single [parent] of four quite busy little people, and we literally just helped her for a week. We popped in every day just to help her get the children to school. It was like, bit of a tower, if you could manage to sort the little one out then the rest of them all fell in line, but if the little one wasn't sorted out, it was complete chaos. And I think we by the end of the week, we just kept saying your children are lovely and they were, they're really helpful. They're very polite. Because initially it looked like complete chaos and she was very organised, but if she didn't tackle the little one first it was chaos and we just helped to do that. And suddenly, by the end of the week, she kind of, you know, she stood up taller and she really gained from us saying your children are lovely, which she kept, "are they, are they?" You might have little tussles with them, but actually they're just little tussles and they're lovely, they're really nice and they were being really helpful. And she was just like 100% better because somebody had come in and said, do you know you're okay, you can do this, it's okay. And by the end of the week, she'd got her little one to school. Her aim was to get him into school for the last week before he changed schools and we managed 4 out of five days. I think that was really good because she wasn't getting there and so she was very happy. She, you know, she'd given him a last good week in his nursery school. And she's very proud of herself, it was really good (FSFC5)

> You could see that the backyard had got into a mess just because of her circumstance and we quietly and just efficiently tidied up the backyard. And just her attitude and her well-being, she seemed to lighten up because suddenly she had a backyard that she didn't have to worry about. And you can see how just removing some simple obstacles off people actually can make a big difference to their lives (FSFC4)

As Parent 5 noted, many people do not have an '*immediate family support network'* that can assist with essential activities such as moving home, and for them this '*doubles down the importance of Step Up Step Down*'. These forms of assistance were highly valued and as one of the Family Support Foster Carers remarked, '*just removing some simple obstacles off people actually can make a big difference to their lives*'. Family Support Foster Carers also spent significant time helping families to negotiate with wider services and organisations.

> I've rung the solicitors, I've rung WDP (DWP?), I've rung the GP [General Practitioner], you know, spoken to CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], those sorts of things... [parent] shows me a lot of official letters and I help [parent] understand those and make decisions about what's best to do... So, it's really quite varied what I do when I when I visit them (FSFC3)

One key area where parents felt they needed '*back up*' and someone to '*speak up*' for them (P6) was in negotiating with their children's schools.

> [FSFC] comes to the school for support with me, so I can have a backup with the school... And like then she comes to the school meeting, you know? She'll speak up for me, because she knows what they're on about (P6)

> My daughter, really, she's been struggling in school, because I had a meeting last Thursday, and [FSFC] came to the meeting with us. You know, she is... you know, or my LAC reviews, [SW1] will come to my LAC reviews just to make sure... I just feel more confident, and like, starting to trust again, which is... we've had a big issue with trusting, but it's... we are starting to trust these people... The minute I asked them, you know, please can you help me... I need to know more about this, who can I speak to about this, boom, they're straight on it... if I get an email when I'm in group and I say [SW1], my daughter's got detention, and she's like, no, open it up, what's detention for? Right, no, we have a meeting, I'll come with you, they can't do it (P3)

Family Support Foster Carers and social workers also played a key role for families trying to negotiate access to diagnostic services and effective health care.

> Anything that we need support with outside the group, they have for me certainly put me in touch with other people. So, that's things like GPs, mental health, dieticians (P3)

> They've been helping to push for a diagnosis and stuff, they've been (inaudible) letters, trying to get a diagnosis for [child] so we can get a bit more help, they've been great with that (P2)

> When [child] was in a mainstream, they also sent quite a few letters to bump him up the list and that's been a big help. So, I think next month he's got an appointment with the ADHD specialist nurse, and I've heard that that is like the diagnosis time (P1)

> So, we're waiting for another appointment to come through so she can see the same doctor, which [FSFC] 's going to come with me to as well, as sort of like a backup to be like, "No, we've seen it" ... [FSFC], when she does stuff with [child], or we have our weekly meetings, does do like little reports of what I've said, what I've noticed. She'll write down if she's taken [child] out for a couple of hours, how [child]'s like acted around her, if she's seen certain things. If I have meetings at the school to talk the school about her, [FSFC] will come if she can. And then, when it comes to like appointments and stuff, if I can't, then they will make them for me. And if I don't want to go by myself, then they will come as well. And if I can't get to appointments, they will actually bring us to our appointments as well (P7)

Parents felt that with the support of Family Support Foster Carers writing letters, attending appointments and speaking on their behalf, they were either able to access health services and treatment, or they felt more confident that they would be able to negotiate access. Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff were also able to act as a '*bridge*' (P5) between parents and Social Services.

> I didn't realise how important that was going to be, because it did. It bridged the gap between me as a parent that's gone through a whole bunch.... But they made that bridge between me and Social Services, because, you know, they're foster parents themselves. They deal with Social Services on a regular basis, and they know what Social Services is looking for (P5)

> Well, yeah, because I had trouble with my [child]... I put her into foster care... and long story short, they'd say you can have her back this day, and then that wouldn't happen, this day, that one, then I got involved with Step Up Step Down. [SW1] started coming to my meetings and I think [SW1] came to the second or third meeting, and they were like, you can have her today (P3)

> I had to have supervised contact, and [FSFC] was who I leant on for that. And she would come to my house every day, and then, sometimes she'd bring her dog, who my girls absolutely adored, and we walked from the house to the school. [FSFC] would stay with me then until the children's father would come to the house to pick up the children. And she'd contact me when she got home, because she knew how difficult that goodbye be. And this went on for a few months... the support from Step Up Step Down helped me keep my cool, because I was having Care and Protect meetings, I think, with Social Services. And either [TFNW2], [SW1], or [FSFC]... they'd attend the meetings with me, and they'd sort of be my voice, if you like, and they would voice my concerns and issues. But you know, through having the support of Step Up Step Down, after a couple of weeks, my children were returned to me full-time, and everything kind of tapered off... they are our village, even the mentors [other FSFC] within the Step Up Step Down when we would attend like the groups, or the activities days, they would come over to us, and they would ask us if we need any support (P4)

Support in interactions with Social Services was appreciated by parents as they were aware of the experience and knowledge base of Family Support Foster Carers, because they '*deal with Social Services on a regular basis*' (P5). Parents also reported that social workers were able to negotiate the return of their children, when this had not been possible without Step Up Step Down, reflecting earlier studies which have found that parents who have had children removed from their care are not accorded the same consideration as those in professional roles (Stevenson 2026). In advocating for parents, the Step Up Step Down team were able to '*be* [parent's] *voice*' and '*voice* [their] *concerns and issues*', as well as providing emotional support and focussing on the wellbeing of families throughout these processes.

These practical forms of support made a tangible positive difference in the lives of the families and assistance was often offered rather than waiting for parents to make case for their needs to be met.

> When I got with [Step Up Step Down] … I've gone into this group with them going, "You're here for a reason. Let's see what we can do." Rather than me going, "please help". So, it was nice (P7)

As this section has demonstrated, parents and families benefitted from a number of practical supports including financial assistance, advocacy, home maintenance, accompaniment to appointments and transportation. However, beyond emotional and practical supports there was an underlying relational foundation of care that was built to support families, which will be the focus of the following section.

6.7 Enabling Supportive Relationships

Prior to the establishment of respite, short breaks, and emotional and practical support, it was important for Family Support Foster Carers build relationship with parents and families. It can be difficult to initiate relationships with parents, particularly when they have had negative relationships with previous services (Kenny and Barrington 2018; Colvin and Howard 2022). Assertive outreach is a key feature of trauma-informed practice, and it is a parent-led approach that requires practitioners to step into the parents' world rather than expecting the parents to come into the world of the practitioners (Elliott et al. 2005; Wright et al. 2022). Assertive outreach, or proactive engagement, with parents, has been an effective mechanism in services such as Reflect, which support parents who have had children removed from their care (Mason and Wilkinson 2021; Baxter et al. 2024; Stevenson 2026); and in the evaluation of Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland a participant noted that it was essential that Family Support Foster Carers had the '*ability to engage parents and get alongside the parents*' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p.50). This proactive approach was also adopted by Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire.

> Some of them [FSFC] are really, really good at being quite flexible in their approaches. So rather than being like, they've had families that have been like, "oh, no, I'm busy. Like, no, you can't come around". They're like, "oh, we're going to Spoons for breakfast, do you want to come? Or we're going to go to Costa for a coffee, do you want to come?" And then they're more likely to engage and they do come out, and then when you've built that relationship, then they're more likely to be like, "right, okay, yeah, you can come into my home now, you can sit on my sofa, we can chat" (SW2)

> We've got a mentor, [FSFC]… she works for Step Up Step Down… she'll phone us and say, do you want to go bowling, do you want to go to the pictures, do you want to do this, you know, I'll come and see you once a week (P3)

> We've got a mother who… has [illness], so she's got a lot of hospital appointments, and her husband is either busy working, because they've got their own business, or he's busy, you know, with transport, with supporting his wife. So, we have had foster carer go in and, you know, be there at breakfast time, and get the children to school, and still be there at the end of the day for collection and pick up. That has been happening when families have been really, really struggling with challenging behaviours (SW2)

> We have a WhatsApp group as well, so we can message each other about things. And (FSFC) just set up a group so that the parents and workers can message each other. If anyone's going somewhere in the holidays or at a weekend and wants some company, you know, she had this idea to say I'm going to be at such and such today if you want to come and find me, as another way of supporting each other, which I think is great (FSFC3)

This illustrates a level of flexibility in where, when and how Family Support Foster Carers initiate contact and build relationships with families. Family Support Foster Carers often visited families in their homes, but as noted in section 6.3 in relation to preparing for respite and short breaks and to encourage more balanced relationships, Family Support Foster Carers also invited parents and children to their homes.

> I invite them into my home, because I feel like we're on an even keel then. Because I'm always going to their home, and I want them to come to my home. So, if they want to, they haven't got to, just so, you know ... this is where she lives, and this is what this looks like (FSFC1)

As discussed in section 6.3, Family Support Foster Carers also ensured that parents felt relaxed and that time was allocated to developing relationships.

> I go in very gently. I, you know, just chat about everyday things... I think because we spend time with them. We've got time, we are very... not leisurely, but laidback. We've got more time to sit and talk... we've got more time with them, be more social. I do loads of coffees with my parents, I do, you know, loads of... spend lots of time, let them talk, and then they're free to phone me when they want to... Mostly I think it's just offering a little bit of advice and holding their hand. I think it's just giving them confidence... empowering them, I think is the best thing we can do. And you can see it happening. It's about being there, listening, telling them they can do it. Showing them that they can do it, I think that's what it is (FSFC2)

> We go in and just try and talk to them as people. We don't go in from day one and try and think, okay these are the goals that have been set for them, these are the objectives I've got to, you know, try and get something ticked straight away. It's really just going in, and you know, I've had conversations about all sorts of things, often nothing to do with the children and the problems they're experiencing, but just trying to gain some insight and I was quite lucky that I've got a good memory for things about people. I mean, I make notes while I'm with each family anyway, but also, you know, so if you remember that, I don't know, if somebody likes rugby or somebody particularly likes dogs. You know, if you can remember that it gives you that kind of link to talk to them. And I think that if you can remember things about people... they'll start to trust you because they think it won't matter because this person's remembered that about me (FSFC3)

This dedicated commitment to being there and spending time with, and gaining an understanding of, parents and children facilitated a space in which parents were open to advice, support and potential changes in their approach.

> You know, foster carers have gone out and sort of modelled appropriate behaviour... so the families can see, "well, actually, hang on, that works". And I think that's been a really, really good way of modelling appropriate techniques with the families is when we're all together, and, like, you know, they may see how I interact with the children or the foster carers

> interact with the children and go, "oh, hang on, that worked". And I might try that, and then you can see people changing the way that they, you know, initially maybe like, "no, stop doing that" to "oh, why don't we try this?" You know, which is really, really positive (SW2)

These changes that developed through the relationship with parents were discussed by Family Support Foster Carers.

> [Parent] dealt with [an incident], and she was amazing, and she said, [FSFC2], thank you so much for being there, you just gave me the confidence, and that's all I needed. I knew I was right, and that's... and I just think, yeah, that's really good, that's... if that's all it takes, is somebody to say you're doing alright, I can do that... when I met [parent], she couldn't go out, she couldn't communicate with [child], she couldn't do anything, and now she's... so much more confident. It's lovely to see. And I think of [parent] back... when I started... to how she is now, it's amazing (FSFC2)

> [Parent] has started to implement some of the things that I've suggested. He'll always be three or four weeks later, and he'll never come to turn around and say, "oh, [FSFC], you know that thing we talked about? Well, I've tried it, and it worked". He'll tell me about it in a story. So, you know, he's never going to start and recognise that I've given him that help, which is fine because that's not what I need. It's just good that he's doing it (FSFC3)

> I think I was lucky with her as well that the first few things that I suggested she try to do really worked for her and so I think because of that, she thought, oh, okay, well, [FSFC] knows what she's talking about. And I think it's part of the delivery, you know, like we've, with [parent], she likes to have it related to real life, so I couldn't say for instance, you know, oh, you know, it's really good to use PACE every day because... and just give the answer from you know from, you know from a written bit of advice. If I say to her, well, I used to do this with my daughter and I found this really worked and if I could, you know, give her an instance of a positive outcome from something then she would think about using it because you know that's important. But it's not just as she said, you know, this airy fairy modern day thinking... when I can give her an example, she's much happier to try things. But it's trying things which is good and we haven't had any more of the episodes with [child] that brought them to Step Up Step Down in the first place, which is you know, which is great, and I guess that's what we're there for is to try and stop things breaking down (FSFC3)

Similarly, parents acknowledged how the advice offered by their Family Support Foster Carers had helped to implement small changes in either the behaviours of their children or their parental responses to their children's actions.

> You know the morning routine where she's [FSFC] advised me and maybe to tweak a few small things, which I have done. They may not have worked but you know it's just trial and error... There's some things that seem to work, like give them time. Like as a child my mum and dad would say come off the tv you come off the tv. So, give them time and give them a countdown to it all, things like that they [FSFC] would advise, and it does work sometimes. Sometimes it's like world war 3, it's just like the end of the world. But they do work sometimes.... what they advise us (P2)

> I've become more to the point like when we go out, if [child] has like an episode, I've come more to understand he can't help it and you just gotta go with the flow kind of thing, and the changes at home, obviously we've tried different styles and ways of you know, calming and dealing with different bits and pieces. No, I wouldn't say there's been a massive change [in the child] (P1)

> So, we try and do things now, which I've learnt through Step Up Step Down how to cope with her... It is very good. And when [FSFC] takes them out, like she notices what [child]'s ability is, so she helps me program her and tells me, right, you know, give her this, give her a bit more money, let her go in just for a pint of milk, so, I've learnt to do that. Whereas before I wouldn't. Which she does on her own, and that's through like [FSFC] giving advice, just go in and let her... giving me confidence to let her go in on her own (P6)

The trustful relationships built with Family Support Foster Carers provided a foundation for this sharing advice, which centralises the importance of these regular interactions and relationship building. However, there were some points to consider in this process that were raised by Family Support Foster Carers. For example, whilst Family Support Foster Carers were more than happy to visit families in their own homes, they were unsure about whether these visits should be logged in advance as they felt there was a lack of clarity about the existence of any lone worker policy and the related issues of safeguarding. Home visits were central in building and maintaining relationships with parents and families, but Family Support Foster Carers suggested that an official lone worker policy needed to be put in place and communicated across the Step Up Step Down team. However, The Fostering Network in Wales later confirmed that rather than a written policy, a number of practices were put in place for lone working, these included shared calendars, the Family Wall feature on the For Mi App, WhatsApp messages, and the advice to also inform a family member prior to and at the commencement of visits. Some Family Support Foster Carers also indicated that '*if you're near your other families there's more likely for you to be able to make connections between them*', and the dispersed geography of Pembrokeshire and its impacts on Step Up Step Down were also highlighted in Chapter Five.

This section has illustrated the importance of the establishment and maintenance of trustful relationships between Family Support Foster Carers and families, which provides a platform for the sharing of advice and the provision of forms of emotional and practical support outlined in the preceding sections. The following section will discuss the ways in which parents supported each other through their connections with Step Up Step Down.

6.8 Parents Supporting Parents

In Chapter Five, one of the Senior Local Authority Leads discussed how they were impressed by the ways in which the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland had initiated networks of support between parents. Similarly, the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland reported that an 'added value to the training' was 'the establishment and continuation of friendship groups afterwards where parents keep in contact and share via Facebook, WhatsApp or by meeting for coffee' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 42). This aspect of building of friendships and supportive relationships was also noted by social workers in Pembrokeshire.

> It was really, really nice to see how the families have come together, and almost they've built bonds and relationships with each other. They were helping each other out with each other's children... they are supporting each other, and that a lot of that's likely to continue as well, because they have built those relationships through attending those groups, attending the parenting courses, and also, you could see the link between the foster carers supporting the families as well. So, it felt like just natural, like, family day out, rather than it being families that are needed to be supported by foster carers. Everyone kind of was alongside each other (SW2)

> It's really nice to see, everyone's chatting, people are actually opening up about, you know, things that have been difficult, are difficult to talk about. And they're chatting amongst themselves and they're building relationships and you can see parents kind of sitting together or going for a coffee after, meeting up outside of what we've arranged and it's really nice to see that community's actually building now. And they've got the support of each other as well as us (SW1)

> We did like a gratitude circle at the end [Family Residential] and one of the mums said, I feel like you're my second family. I feel like I've got another family who supports me and you know when you're just like, oh, this is so lovely (SW1)

Family Support Foster Carers also highlighted the ways in which parents were forming communities both within and outside of the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire.

> And it's good to see them when they just, I suppose, feel like they're being themselves and they're just talking to other parents... the friendships that are that are starting to form is great... [parent] has really clicked with another woman... and they're starting to meet on their own, I know there's a couple of other little groups where they they've got things in common are getting together and that is really part of the ethos of Step Up Step Down is to help them create their own support networks (FSFC3)

> When we heard from the Irish Group about how Step up Step down was for them, the thing that the parents were saying was how much they loved the support from the other parents. And we're only just seeing that and that's really wonderful, this, you know this mutual support (FSFC4)

As FSFC3 emphasised, '*the ethos of Step Up Step Down is to help them create their own support networks*' and this was evident in the accounts of parents.

> They're very welcoming.... they don't look down at you... any problem that you've got, you know, you don't feel scared or anything or ashamed to not ask them (P1)

> The last one I went to, they were very welcoming like I say, the children were great and we were all chatting there and getting different points of view off them. Well, they're all in the same boat as us, aren't they? They've all got some sort of different need... yeah 'cos when you go out normally, you go to a meal somewhere or a play place, everyone, well not everyone looks, but you know they're looking when things are happening, it's out of our control cos what can we do, but when it's there, (inaudible), they understand, it's different then I suppose... different needs, but they all understand what's (inaudible), yeah it's really helpful there (P2)

> Everyone that we've met so far has been friendly and understanding, and sort of they're there for similar reasons we're there, so there's no judging… So, we've met a couple of parents and sort of bonded over the difficulties of raising the kids that we have…. We've gone from sort of being the outsiders new to the group… not knowing where we stand with people. To now when we go out, I mean, the kids have made really close friends with the other kids, so because they're close, we've gotten to know the parents… it's nice being able to walk into a room, and the kids are running off with the other kids, and then, we can sit down and have a chat with the other parents (P7)

> Having [FSFC], [TFNW2] and [SW1], having [SW2] and the other mentors, and the other parents as well… who have gone through what I was just going through, it lessened the pain, and it helped with the process (P4)

In these accounts, the parents discuss other parents as '*welcoming*' (P1; P2) and '*friendly*' (P7), which are useful attributes in relationship initiation. However, a central component of these connections was that all parents were in '*the same boat*' (P2) and '*there for similar reasons*' and '*going through'* (P4) comparable issues. Accordingly, they could '*understand*' each other, which created a community within which there was '*no judging*' (P7) and parents were not '*scared*' or '*ashamed*' in sharing their situation (P1), asking questions and initiating conversations, and parents '*bonded over the difficulties of raising*' their children (P7). These connections and feeling of safety because of shared backgrounds and circumstances has also been reported in studies with parents who have had their children removed from their care and with care experienced children and young people (Mannay et al. 2015; Stevenson 2026).

As well as discussing the friendships forged within Step Up Step Down activities, parents also discussed how these networks were strengthened further in meetings arranged independently by parents.

> And I have made friends through Step Up Step Down, other parents. We've got numbers, and there's even now a sub-group. Well, there's like six of us that go to Step Up Step Down that do our own activities without Step Up Step Down…. One of them just put a bell out this morning, it was more common during the summer, "We're going to Broadhaven Beach. Any of you guys interested?" and so it's just as simple as that. So, it's nothing to do with Step Up Step Down, but it's the friendship, the community, it's helped build, and that's always a winner, and I love that, because immediately I know that I'm going to be surrounded by people that I can trust, and [child]'s safe with… And I never would have had that (P5)

Parents were also able to informally share ideas and experiences, which offered parents opportunities to try out strategies that others had found beneficial.

> It's nice that we're already sort of picking up what other parents are doing as well within the group, that we're trying with the kids, and like I said, nothing's forced. It's not you have to try this so we can tick a box to say that you've tried it. We're just picking up on other people's conversations, or other people are like, I mean, on the off chance you haven't already tried this, we have, and then we will (P7)

When asked in their interview for some examples of the types of information and practices that were shared, parents were able to recall concrete examples of becoming aware of and incorporating techniques with their own children.

> One of the parents... one of her sons is severely autistic. So, wherever she goes, she brings like, beads on a string or like, shiny things... so her son has a distraction if whatever he's doing is too much. And it's so simple, literally beads on a string or flashy things, and it's such a simple thing to do. And it wasn't a conversation she had with me, just sort of like, with someone else that I've overheard, it was just sort of, I do it, because if what we're doing, he doesn't enjoy anymore, I know that he enjoys the beads. So, I'll bring the beads, so if he's done with what we're doing, he'll go over and play with the beads, and then once he's regulated himself, he'll come back to it, and... I was like, something that simple, why wouldn't you think of something that simple? So... when I take the kids out now, I'll bring one of their toys, or like, just something small, so if they're like, I'm not enjoying myself, I don't enjoy doing this or I don't know these people, I feel uncomfortable, I'm like, this is a toy from home, they're like, thanks, and then it sort of like, distract them from feeling that way (P7)

Even in cases where parents explicitly reported not wanting to make friends with other parents in Step Up Step Down in their initial issues, their position had shifted by the time of their second interview.

> We don't like having friends, we don't want friends, so we just choose to sort of... you know, we're polite, respectful and courteous in group (P4 - Interview 1)

> Well, without sort of forcing it and pushing ourselves out there, we've made friends with the other parents, and our children made friends with their children... We don't let people in. But with Step Up Step Down, it was a really natural progression... to make friends, to be honest... none of the mentors or facilitators were like, "Right, you've got to sit with this parent, you've got to sit with that one". It was just during the groups, the adult group sessions, it was just talking about our own experiences and other parents talking about their experiences, and everybody had that mutual connection. And we've... built our relationships on our struggles, to be honest. But being around people who are going through very similar things that you're going through, and they're not judging you... we are living in a community with Step Up Step Down... And that's what it is. They are our village, it's just been a wonderful experience (P4 - Interview 2).

For P4, an initial wariness was overcome by being in a group of parents where they did not feel judged and recognised the shared struggles common across the experiences of all parents. Therefore, later in the programme, other parents had become a Step Up Step Down '*community*' and '*village*' (P4). This pattern was also seen in the account of P3.

> What we don't want is to form a friendship in a group with a parent, and then outside the group, something happens, and then we bring it into group. We don't... we put boundaries in place (P3)

However, by their second interview, P3 had made friends with parents in the group and was seeing them outside of Step Up Step Down, sharing that they were attending a birthday party organised by another parent later that week.

The value of the parental network initiated through Step Up Step Down was summarised by one of the parents, P7, as '*families helping families*'.

> Step Up Step Down to me, it feels like families helping families. So, it's not an organisation where there's a bunch of professionals telling you how you should be raising your children, it's other families with similar or even completely different outcomes to their own kids, letting you know how they get on day-to-day, or even how they're not getting on, like they're not doing okay, and it's good to hear that… I've always been a little bit iffy with people coming into my home and telling me what I should be doing with my children when they either don't have children, or they don't have children with the same needs as mine. Because I've never understood how someone can tell me what I should and shouldn't do, when they have no idea about the circumstances that I'm in. But again, with Step Up Step Down, there's such a variety of kids there, where if someone goes, have you tried this with your kid or this is what my kid's done today, I'm like, no, you can understand them, like you do get when I've said I've had a bad day, I've had a bloody bad day. So, it's… less pressured, it's more open, it's families helping families, it's working for us. It's definitely something that I'm going to hold onto for as long as I can (P7)

The networks built between parents were an important source of social support, advice and shared understanding, premised on the welcoming space of Step Up Step Down activities and carried beyond the formal programme in parent led networking opportunities and techniques on parenting that were shared and put into practice. Therefore, the connections with other parents were an element of the Step Up Step Down programme that parents wanted to '*hold onto for as long as* [they could]'. However, not all aspects of Step Up Step Down were regarded as positively across all of the participants, as will be discussed in the following section, which focusses on the For Mi App.

6.9 For Mi App – Connection and Disconnection

This chapter has focussed on central role of relationship formation and building, which positioned Step Up Step Down as a community. Therefore, as the For Mi App was intended to strengthen networks and connections, it is important to include it in this chapter, despite its more mixed reception and engagement levels.

The Fostering Network in Wales team and social workers noted that the For Mi App had potential to be a useful communicative tool but that it had received differential levels of interest and engagement.

> It's only as good as the people inputting into it… So, if that isn't happening, then we're not going to see what we need to see, which is a shame, because yeah, it could be a wonderful thing (TFNW1)

> We were getting really good at like encouraging parents to use it… others would just look at the meetings but… our new… group of families just have no interest in it at all (TFNW2)

> App called For Mi, so that should be used by families, but some families use it, some families don't, and some families are very good at using it and some families aren't… I think that we could push the App more, I think that the App isn't as much of a focus as it could be. And I think it would be really beneficial to have it as more of a focus, but it's just trying to do everything (SW1)

> Certain families love it and use it, whereas some just don't use it at all. It's quite inconsistent (SW2)

In the interviews, one parent stated, '*I didn't know there was an App*', suggesting that knowledge was a barrier. However, confidence with using technology and time were key deterrents for both parents and Family Support Foster Carers.

> I'm not very good at computers. I'm useless… I just never used it [the App] (P6)

> It's hard for me to get on it to start with. I'm no technology minded person… I just write it down… A lot of the old parents don't use it either (FSFC1)

> I don't think it fitted in really with… [parent]… she's so busy with the four children anyway and just needed practical help (FSFC4)

> [Parent] not interested at all. You know, it's on [their] phone. But as far as I'm aware, [parent] never looked at it (FSFC3)

> It's okay. Not that, I'm not very tech savvy, but it was nice, because I could immediately share with… but I already had [TFNW2]'s number and people at Step Up Step Down, so for me, I just WhatsApp them and say, "Hey, look what we're doing". But I get that it was nice to have that, and when it came to poignant moments, I used to try and put a picture up there, an expression or something like that… but like, I don't know how to use my Instagram, so if you ask me how to use my For Mi, I can't. It's the same thing (P5)

There were also aspects of the system that did not work well for The Fostering Network in Wales staff.

> The only thing at the moment which is a little bit difficult is the foster carers write their [notes] on the App, and because [TFNW1] is external to the local authority, [TFNW1] has to download them and then send them to me, and then I have to upload them. So that's a bit of a nuisance at the moment (SW2)

Family Support Foster Carers who were confident with the technology of the For Mi App did upload their notes from meetings, which were then available to parents. SW2 felt that this level of transparency was useful in the relationship building process.

> I do think it's quite nice that the families get instant access to what notes the foster carers are writing, because you can go into families' homes as a social worker or any professional, and you go home and you write up what's happened, they don't have instant access to that. So, it's more the feeling of coming alongside, knowing where I am, knowing there's no sort of judgement. I think that helps build that positive working relationship then (SW2)

However, Family Support Foster Carers had concerns about their notes being available to parents and felt that the For Mi App to be more effective there needed to be separate parts accessible to different users.

> I'm very wary about what I write on there, because I know the parents can read it… as a foster carer, we get day books… where we write… what's happened during the day, and we know that it's between me and the social worker, and I think possibly we need something

like that… it's usually face-to-face, or a phone call to [TFNW2] or to [SW2]. That's where I would share my information. But it's not written down anywhere… I think it definitely needs tweaking… it's good that I suppose management… can see that we're doing our job, that we are going, we are visiting… But yeah, I just think sometimes there's things that I'd like to say that I don't feel I can say (FSFC identifier withheld)

I always make notes while I'm there, because the way the For Mi app works is that it's available for the parents to see as well, you're supposed to write it as, it's a bit like a child's story… that they might read it and it needs to be appropriate. So, I write my notes out, but I also write my observations and my thoughts, which may not be right to put out there for parents to see… if I'm concerned about something… but also, I can message [SW1] and say look that there's potentially this going on, so that you know, it's out there. But also, I feel like I've covered myself a bit, if anything were to come from that I can say well, I did mention this you know. Because with [parent] that I am working with his [child], she has self-harmed a little bit, and… she's said I'm going to… kill myself. So just being really mindful about the safeguarding around that and making sure that everybody knows what they should know (FSFC identifier withheld)

The one thing for me that I still don't like is that, within the App, I've said it a couple of times, that I wish there was a part of it that was just for workers… because I might come back and thought… [parents]'s house is really dirty today, but I might not want to write that in there that's accessible to [parent] or in the way that I want to write it… it would be really good if I could go and write that somewhere because I feel that for the success of Step Up Step Down to be recognised, I'd like my observations and thoughts about things to be out there and not just be perhaps assumed by [TFNW1] and whoever else is monitoring the App. And I feel partly… it's covering my back that if something were to happen, I could say, well, I did write that down… we write these notes about things, but it's not quite the same as, you know, writing out your diary when you've got a child full time. But I just think that would be really helpful and I think it would be helpful to [SW1] … this extra bit in the App where she could read what everybody's saying… she could scan it and think, well, yeah, I do need to do something about that. But actually, you know, I'm glad [FSFC]'s noticed that, but we don't need to do anything further, whereas at the moment you know, I think, oh, crikey, you know, I'm really worried about that, I'll ring [SW1], I'll message [SW1]. And I just think it would be useful in lots of different ways if that could be incorporated (FSFC3)

Therefore, the recommendation from Family Support Foster Carers would be to retain the transparency in the For Mi App that enabled families, both parents and children, to read updates, but to have a different section of the App that enabled them to record additional information that was accessible to social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff. More broadly, the findings highlight the delicate balance Family Support Foster Carers sought to achieve in maintaining openness and transparency with families whilst also fulfilling their professional responsibilities to record observations, communicate safeguarding concerns and support social work decision-making. The shared nature of the App encouraged collaborative and non-judgemental relationships, but it also constrained carers' willingness to record more sensitive observations for fear that these could undermine trust or be experienced by parents as criticism.

In cases where there was engagement with the For Mi App, this was generally in relation to goal setting and the sharing of photographs and updates about activities with children.

The setting of goals is really... nice, because you can actually see those graphs improving... when a mother or father says, you know, "oh, well, I'm not sure if this is working", you can go back to your goals and be like, "well, actually this date you were feeling like 2 out of 10, and a couple months later we were 4 out of 10. So we are on the right tracks, and we just need to keep on going". And just that sharing of the pictures, you know, I think that's really... nice (SW2)

I'm kind of on every family's profile as a supporter. So again, I try my best to support whatever's put on the App, so I don't know, families might put photos, 'We had a great weekend doing this', so I will like their post and say, oh it looks like you had a nice day. So, I just try and kind of keep in touch and for them to know that we're thinking about them and we've got their back and we're kind of cheering for them from the sidelines I suppose (SW1)

[Parent], she uses it a lot. I didn't appreciate to start with, but she mentioned something recently when she said oh, I know you wrote something there that you'd asked me about it, so I'm aware now she uses it all the time. The [other parent] I work with... I think she asks her [child] to bring it up sometimes. Yeah, I've taken [child] out. I've always posted about what we've done, you know, on the story part of the App. So, I think [child] looks at that (FSFC3)

For Mi, yes we use that I think quite effectively. [Parent] that we're working with, he's quite good if he's out and about with his daughter putting up a little picture of them, you know, having a great time and then everybody sort of, it's a bit like Facebook, you like it and then that feeds back quite a nice little feeling. But alongside that storytelling mode, there's a goal setting and so every week when we see him, I write up a little thing about what we've talked about and then look at the goals and you can rate them, you know, how close you are.... there's a nice feeling of a good sense of tick going on. You know, hey, we've done it. And then. You know, to have a time then when we come back and review that with [TFNW2] and [SW1] and the families and say, right okay, this is what we set out to do, what do we need to add to this, what do we need to change? I think that makes it really powerful (FSFC5)

[TFNW2] puts a comment for our [parent] when [parent] turned up at one of our family gatherings and we've all made comments and like that as well and it's just, suddenly it's there on [parent] phone and in [their] memory that actually two or three people who were also there didn't see any problems with [parent] and [child] you know he remembers the stresses of [child] on the Family Day. Well, actually, [child] had a wonderful time and nobody else noticed the stresses that were going on. And so, it's reminding [parent] of that, that actually it was a lovely time and the stresses were inconsequential.... And to have that down on a memory board, as it were, was really helpful (FSFC4)

I have goals that me and [TFNW2] have set that we're going to work with, or like, alongside with each other, and then it's if pictures are being taken of our family, then they will actually put them onto my profile to give them to me... But otherwise... I don't use it. It's not something that's needed to be used every day, it's not what I thought it was going to be. As much as the idea's there and it's nice being sent the photos, I otherwise don't see the point in it (P7)

These accounts suggest that the goal setting aspect of the For Mi App was useful for parents to see how they were progressing and to inform future goal setting. The sharing of photographs and information about activities with children was also a valuable aspect in building the Step Up Step Down community. However, although there were some relational aspects in this feature, some parents felt that this could be extended so that there was an area of the For Mi App that was more similar to the social networking sites they were familiar with to enable conversations between parents.

> I thought I was going to be something that all the parents could access, so it's sort of like Facebook but just for Step Up Step Down… a closed group… so like parents can talk to each other or update each other on what our kids are doing… but it's not like that… Because at least then like if I'm having like a specific issue which I know another parent has already spoken about, I can get a hold of them on the App. Or they… like I can be like, "Oh, I had a good day today, because I managed to like derail this argument by doing this". And then someone will be like, "Oh, cool, I'll try that". Because as much as obviously the parents are getting to know each other and we do talk to each other and stuff like that, otherwise… there's nothing until the next group unless you're like externally meeting up with them, which I don't do. So, apart from being with the group… I don't actually leave the house unless it's for other appointments. So, it's not unless I'm with the group itself, I actually interact with the other parents… I think for the App… like I said [it should be] essentially Facebook for Step Up Step Down (P7)

This account resonates with P5 earlier point about preferring the functionality of WhatsApp to communicate with others in Step Up Step Down; and suggests that for some parents, the For Mi App does not provide an effective space for social networking between parents.

Therefore, whilst the For Mi App may be useful for goal setting and to share photographs and messages to the individual profiles of parents, the opportunity for wider relationship building and information sharing between parents was inaccessible. For Family Support Foster Carers, there were also issues with the For Mi App, as whilst again it enabled goals setting and the sharing of information with families, they reported a need for a closed space on the For Mi App where they could record more sensitive material that they wanted to share with social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales team. A consideration of these aspects and the development of the For Mi App could potentially increase engagement and make this a more user friendly and useful tool. The following section will consider how the Step Down phase of the Step Up Step Down programme was negotiated.

6.10 Negotiating Endings

Previous interventions with care experienced children and young people and foster carers have raised concerns from participants about endings, and questions from facilitators around 'what happens to them now… it feels like something has ended' (Mannay et al. 2022b, p.13). Similarly, the length of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire and the embedded support of the Family Support Foster Carers was queried.

> Although we're doing these mentoring sessions for the best part of a year or more, sometimes it just feels like that's just not long enough almost for some families, because it takes so long to get in the door with them, or so long for the foster carers to build up a relationship where they feel comfortable (TFNW2)

> I don't know what I genuinely would do without them [FSFC]... same with [TFNW2] ...I genuinely, from the bottom of my heart, I don't know what I'd do without them if they were to say we've only got six months left with you, I don't know, genuinely I think I would fall apart.... I need them (P1)

However, the difficulty of endings was negotiated by the Step Up Step Down team to ensure that they offered 'soft endings' that still enabled families to be part of the wider programme of support, even when their time with a dedicated Family Support Foster Carer had come to an end; and the close of this individualised Family Support Foster Carer support was also negotiated sensitively.

> "Oh, actually, no, I'm not ready for anyone to step away", and when that happens, we will sort of like hold on for a little bit longer, or, you know, I will keep in touch more often to try and support. One of our mums is really struggling with anxiety about going to the shops... so I'll meet her at the shops and help her... so it's not a complete drop off, and that's the nice thing, I guess, about me having those relationships with the parents after having done the groups and things with them, is that they are losing their closest sort of foster carer, but they still have the rest of us as familiar people... I'm still available, like I talk to quite a lot of our older families. One of them was really concerned about her son in school, so I ended up going and meeting with the school, and reassuring mum that actually, everything was alright. If things come up or they're not sure how to manage things, they check back in with me pretty frequently. But most of our families are still coming to all the events that we hold, our family activity days. A few of them come back along to the groups again, the parent groups. So yeah, the main sort of thing that ends is the mentoring, the week-to-week thing, but even the foster carers stay in touch with their families. We don't sort of have that expectation, but they do check in with them, and, you know, they're all really happy to see each other at the events and things again (TFNW2)

> So, rather than meeting with the foster carers on a weekly basis, that might reduce to every two weeks, might reduce to every three weeks, because that's what's going to come away, the fostering mentorship will stop, but they can still access the family days out, they can still access the parenting courses if they want. They can still contact [TFNW2], if they want. So, it's not like it's a goodbye (SW2)

> They've finished with me now, and they went, I really wanted to ring you the other day. I went, well, you can. It's okay, you know? I've not dropped out of your life forever, you know? They went, thank goodness for that... And... we had a craft day the other day, and they still came to that, because these people need people...People who get them (FSFC1)

> It just started off with [TFNW2] coming to the house with a cup of coffee, very casual, asking how everything's going.... What place are we and the children in now? And then, it wasn't a case of like, "Well, we think we've come... you know? We can't do much more with you". It was a case of, you know, "How do you feel if we took a step back?" It was very natural, and it wasn't... you know? She gave us the option, because she said, you know, if we don't want to, you know, by all means, we can stay. But we... said to [TFNW2], we feel that now

> is the time, that we can take a step back, so then, our mentor is more available then to help other people who need that little bit more support… and the door isn't closed (P3)

There were also adaptions put in place when parents needed an extension of time with their dedicated Family Support Foster Carer.

> We'll always have access to them, so if I ever did need to talk to someone, I can speak to her. But she won't be sort of for us anymore. So, [FSFC] has spoken to [TFNW2] … and then, [SW], and just asked whether we can sort of extend how long we have [FSFC] for. So, I think at the minute, we're playing it month by month to see what [child] needs, what we're going through… whether [FSFC] can stay on for like a couple more weeks. So, as I say, at the minute, nothing's definite, but we know that the year's up in [month], but we are trying to… not so much fight to stay on, because, like I said, [FSFC] is… like she has said that she's always here if I need to talk to someone, and the… Step Up as like an organisation said that no matter what stage we're in, because we've already been with them and we're known to them, if we ever need anything, if we get in touch, they'll see what they can do… (P7)

This parent felt that their Family Support Foster Carer had '*done everything they can possibly do now*', which they were '*100% grateful for*'; but they hoped that they could retain their Family Support Foster Carer while one of their children transferred to a new school. They explained that there were a '*range of different needs, different outcomes, different appointments*', which she would need to address as that she would need to manage these as a parent. However, P7 was confident that regardless of the decision on the extension of individualised Family Support Foster Carer, Step Up Step Down had said '*We're not going to let her just go into this* [school] *without any help*', and they had already put in place meetings and communicated with the school.

In Chapters Seven and Eight there will be more detailed discussion of parents ongoing engagement with family activities and training, as some parents repeated the training sessions that they had previously undertaken. However, the continuation of access to The Fostering Network in Wales staff, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers, and events, activities and training was highly valued by parents and children as the following interview excerpts from parents illustrate.

> As far as [child]'s concerned, it's the same thing, like once a month, we end up meeting all the friends and that (P5)

> And that [direct support from FSFC] probably will stop now when Step Up Step Down officially ends with me, but I can still be involved with the activities… They've said they don't just dump you, which is really good. They just don't cut you off, you know, but the services with the one-to-ones, I think, go elsewhere, with more priority children. But they're always there at the phone if you need to talk to them, which is reassuring for me… when they said, you know, it's going to stop… because… you need a social worker to be in Step Up Step Down… I'm sure that's how it works. But I won't be under a social worker… Because [child] has met the targets, which is good… Not having her labelled under a social worker, but they're still there to support me if I need help, which is a relief really (P6)

> The support now has died down, taken a step back, but [TFNW2] and my mentor, you know, "You've got our numbers, you know still… you know? Still communicate with us, you know, still come to…" We still attend the groups, we still attend activities, even though we're not

> officially part of Step Up. But yeah, even though we've taken a step back, we've got them. So, it feels no different, to be honest with you (P3)

There were parents who were initially distraught about their individualised support with a Family Support Foster Carer coming to an end, describing this as '*my backbone had been ripped away from me*' (P4) but this distress was resolved because of the continued access to the wider range of support within Step Up Step Down.

> I was really upset about having… being sort of withdrawing from Step Up Step Down. I mean, my case with Social Services has actually been closed in the last couple of weeks, and I feel really upset. I feel like… I initially felt like my backbone had been ripped away from me, and it sent me in a bit of a spiral, and a bit of an upset. But [TFNW2] and [FSFC] reiterated that we have their numbers, we're still more than welcome to attend the parenting group sessions, we're more than welcome to attend the family activities. And if we need any support, we've got [TFNW2] and [FSFC]'s numbers (P4)

In this case, the Family Support Foster Carer had also supported P4 to reconnect with her wider family network.

> [FSFC] just kept saying, you know, "You've got one family, and you know, just don't hold onto grudges" … It took a long time, because a lot of things have happened… I mean, now, the relationship with our extended family is… brilliant. And our children now see their grandparents… I believe that if Step Up Step Down hadn't been involved, I don't think we'd be where we're at now (P4)

This wider support network enabled P4 to transition from a reliance on their Family Support Foster Carer.

> During the last six months, our relationships with our own family has just improved a lot… So, we have got other avenues and other sort of supports that we can lean on, which again, frees up sort of the other mentors. Because I know they're having new families onboard now, and we see that, you know, it is important. Because we're on the receiving end of it, we know how important and how invaluable the involvement of Step Up Step Down is, and if we can see them helping other families, and working with other families… It'll take a while, but we know they are going to be okay (P4)

Parent 3 had also reconnected with family members with the support of their Family Support Foster Carer and other parents had developed networks of ongoing support with other parents because of their involvement with Step Up Step Down.

For transparency, it is important to note that two parents were not sure about the length of the Step Up Step Down program and how long they would have individualised support from their Family Support Foster Carer. This could indicate that there may be need for more clarity around or reiteration of the Step Up Step Down process.

However, overall, the problematic aspects of intervention endings reported in earlier studies and evaluations (Mannay et al., 2015; Mannay et al. 2022b) were effectively negotiated in the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire. The building of relationships between parents, families, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, and the

ongoing access to events, activities and training was central in families continuing to feel supported. However, the safety net of remaining involved with activities and events will only be available to future parents if Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire retains funding. Additionally, if parents were involved long term, this would also impact on the numbers of families attending activities, events and training and the associated organisational costs and logistics. The establishment of networks with other Step Up Step Down parents, as discussed in section 6.7, and the reconnections with wider family networks also helped parents to transition, so again relationships were key, but these relationships have potential sustainability outside of Step Up Step Down. The final section of this chapter will consider one further relational aspect of Step Up Step Down, its ability to change perspectives, overcome biases, and develop a deeper level of empathy for and understanding of others.

6.11 New Understandings of Each Other

The preceding sections have all discussed relationship building and support across the Step Up Step Down programme. These relational aspects provided new insights and perspectives for Family Support Foster Carers and social workers, whose roles had changed, and for parents.

Family Support Foster Carers had transferred from the role of foster carer, in which they were predominantly concerned with the children in their care and did not have extensive contact with parents except in particular phases such as contact visits or in preparation for the child returning to the family home.

> I had empathy for the parents, but you only know what you're being told by Social Services... But now you find out more by being involved in the family (FSFC1)

> There's also some nice opportunities for us as foster carers to grow because we've been involved in quite a lot of training, but also that connection that we now have with the family, you know, helps us to really grow as carers and understand particularly trauma, but also in a difficult circumstances and how then gently, to ease people through their pain. So, we I think we're stronger two years on than when we started. We understand things differently, I think we can tackle things better (FSFC5)

> I think it's harder than I thought it was going to be, because... there's a lot of people with lots of different mental health... I haven't come across that much in my fostering... a lot of families struggle with that, and that's been quite an eye-opener... Because I suppose you do go in, and you think, why haven't you done that ... And actually, now I perhaps realise that they just can't do it. So, yes, probably a ... much better understanding (FSFC2)

When asked if they would recommend the Family Support Foster Carer role to other foster carers, FSFC2 replied '*I personally would like to see every foster carer doing it. Just a little bit*', because of the way that it enables an appreciation of the significant challenges and barriers that parents need to negotiate. Social workers also valued the additional time spent building relationships with families, which provided a more nuanced understanding of their everyday lives.

> I think that I know more of the backstory and the daily difficulties and experiences of the families being in Step Up, Step Down, because... when we're on days out, they come to me

> and they speak to me. I've had messages today from parents saying, "can you please give me a call, touch base with me? I've got this going on"... I think maybe they feel that they're able to approach and share that information with me, because they are seeing me a lot more. Whereas sometimes social workers, they swoop in, see the child, swoop out every six weeks, and, you know, maybe they aren't as contactable... I wouldn't say my judgement has changed. I'd just say that I feel like I've got more of an awareness of what is actually going on, whereas before... some of those care and support plan meetings would be every six months, and a lot of the time, sometimes parents won't even turn up, or I'd hear what was going on through the child social worker or through another professional, whereas you're kind of hearing it from the here and now, from the parents, about what they are struggling with... I think it's really helpful that... you're the one that's going to be there presenting that training. You're going to see the people at the start and the end of their Step Up, Step Down journey, whereas sometimes in the fostering side of the world, children, placements break down, children move on, children may return home, whereas this is more, like, a direct, long-term support for the families (SW2)

As well as discussing the ways in which their own views had changed Family Support Foster Carers noted the '*acceptance*' (FSFC4) that they had experienced with parents. In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 50) noted that parents were 'generally wary and distrusting of social workers as they are concerned that they will remove their children' and that they found 'it much easier to build a trusting and open relationship with the FSFCs'. The Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire were keen to communicate to parents that they were not social workers, and they quickly gained the trust of parents.

> I went, it's alright, I'm not a social worker (FSFC1)

> We were seen as Social Services, even though we're not... But these parents are more open... Because we've all got something to offer (FSFC2)

> Once they started to realise they could trust me and I wasn't 'social worker' and I wasn't going to go running off after every little thing and that would, you know, get fed back, they've started to open up a bit and asking for more help (FSFC3)

> One of the big things has come across has actually been our acceptance... they've always had social workers involved in various levels, so sadly, but it's the way it is, they have they have a very straight opinion of social workers and the Council. And sadly, not a very not a positive view at all... and very much more about them interfering rather than actually helping. And when we got over the initial bit and with the children as well, that actually we're just there to help and we're not there to report back on them, we're not social workers we're just there and with them... it was an honour from our point of view to be accepted into their house (FSFC4)

> Step up Step down is quite different because you're not the enemy, you're the help. Although they're a little bit sceptical of you because you are Social Services, which is the enemy. Actually, they've quite quickly begun to realise... we're actually here to help... So, it's very different (FSFC5)

FSFC4 noted, it was an '*honour from our point of view to be accepted into their house*' and Family Support Foster Carers were pleased to be able to gain acceptance and trust, despite the parents'

previous negative experiences with Social Services. The interviews with parents confirmed that prior relationships with Social Services were '*adversarial*', resonating with earlier studies as noted in section 6.4 (Kenny and Barrington 2018; Colvin and Howard 2022). However, they had formed positive understandings of Family Support Foster Carers, The Fostering Network in Wales staff and social workers involved in Step Up Step Down.

> We've been involved with them for less than a year, but it feels like that I've known everybody for years and years. We're all just like a very close family (P1)

> My relationship with Social Services was quite adversarial.... They took that all away. "Let's just go have breakfast, [FSFC]" and that was... you know, Social Services won't do that (P5)

> I always forget that [SW1] is actually a social worker, but she doesn't come across as... she just comes across as [SW1] ... It's just [SW1], and I haven't got to, oh, she's a social worker, you know? Yeah, it's just made me appreciate my social worker a bit more, and, you know, just seeing [SW1] there is like, well, actually, you know, they are just normal people, and all this stigma around social workers... being with [SW1] has literally dropped all the stigmas on my part. They are normal people who do genuinely care for the children and the home environment that they're in, and they just want to help (P3)

> When I was told I'd have a social worker or Social Services involved, it was shame initially, because, you know, nobody wants Social Services involved, but by having their involvement and being referred to Step Up Step Down, I don't feel ashamed at all... I feel a bit lighter knowing I'm getting more support, and my children are getting support... But honestly, the support that I personally have had from Step Up Step Down supersedes any support that Social Services think they give. My perception of Social Services is very, very poor, very negative. And Step Up Step Down, I can't speak highly enough of their support, you know, for me, for the children, for us as a family, for me. Honestly, they have supported us in almost every aspect of our lives... And during our rock bottom moments, they've never not been there. They've never taken a step back, and they've been invaluable, honestly (P4)

> Whereas the social workers within Step Up Step Down, you don't even know... You literally do forget. And you're talking with them and think, "Oh, my... I shouldn't talk to you like this, because you're a social worker". "No, no, it's fine". I mean, [SW2] she's so normal. And again, she genuinely cares... that's why I keep, "Are you really a social worker?" because the social workers I know, they don't want to help... they don't really care (P3)

> This woman with, honestly, the nicest smile... she had a really warm sort of disposition about her, and she wasn't egotistical... [SW2] was just so warm and welcoming... she has proven herself to be well worthy of the role that she's been covering... she is integrating into the Step Up Step Down family really well. And the children, my girls especially... adore her (P4)

As noted earlier in this section, the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, found that parents found it easier to connect with Family Support Foster Carers because they were distrusting of social workers (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 50). However, despite previous negative encounters with Social Services, Family Support Foster Carers, The Fostering Network in Wales staff and social workers were accepted by parents and their children. Parents discussed how their views of social workers had changed, explaining how they put aside the '*stigma around*

social workers' and recognised them as '*normal people*' (P3), and were able to move from a position of '*shame*' (P4). Our research observations at family events and the accounts of the parents positioned Step Up Step Down as a '*very close family*' (P1) and it was evident that social workers had integrated '*into the Step Up Step Down family*' (P4). Accordingly, through being involved in the relational aspects of Step Up Step Down, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and parents all gained more nuanced and informed understandings of each other.

6.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter documented the supportive relationships that formed the bedrock of Step Up Step Down, as it was important to outline these relational qualities before introducing the activities, events and training elements of the programme.

Family Support Foster Carers undertake intensive relational work with families, and section 6.2 outlined how previous research with practitioners who support families with complex histories have evidenced burnout, vicarious trauma and other negative impacts on wellbeing (Maniatt 2004; Stevenson 2026). In the Step Up Step Down programme this was mitigated by providing in person individualised and group support for Family Support Foster Carers, as well as remote contact via phone and WhatsApp. The support put in place by social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, as well as peer interactions between Family Support Foster Carers were effective in supporting wellbeing. Accordingly, future iterations of Step Up Step Down should retain these support systems to ensure that they continue to feel supported in their role.

Section 6.3 discussed the combination of overnight respite and short breaks of different time periods, that Family Support Foster Carers adapted to the needs and circumstances of both children and parents. As in Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, Family Support Foster Carers in Pembrokeshire also focussed on building 'up a gradual relationship' with parents and families, enabling time to 'get to know' each other (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 45). This provision was positioned as '*what people need rather than it being a set… idea*' (FSFC3), and Family Support Foster Carers acknowledged, respected and responded to parents' and children's individual circumstances and requirements. Short breaks with Family Support Foster Carers were regarded as valuable to parents, offering opportunities for time to themselves and the involvement of a trusted adult with whom their children could have '*fun*' (P4) and also support with their wellbeing.

Section 6.4 highlighted the importance of the Family Support Foster Carers demonstrating consistency and reliability for parents. Section 6.5 demonstrated the ways in which the Step Up Step Down team were integral in directly supporting the emotional wellbeing of parents and families, as well as drawing in specialists where necessary. Step Up Step Down were also a key source of practical assistance as outlined in the section 6.6, which documented how parents and families benefitted from a number of practical supports including financial assistance, advocacy, home maintenance, accompaniment to appointments and transportation. Whilst section 6.7 focussed on the establishment and maintenance of trustful relationships between Family Support Foster Carers and families, which provided a platform for the sharing of advice and the provision of forms of emotional and practical support outlined in the preceding sections. In section 6.8, the networks built between parents were evidenced as an important source of social support, advice

and shared understanding, both within Step Up Step Down activities and beyond the formal programme in parent led networking opportunities.

The For Mi App, considered in section 6.9, proved effective for goal setting with parents and as a relational tool to share photographs and messages to the individual profiles of parents. However, there were mixed levels of engagement with the For Mi App and some technological and time barriers. Additionally, parents wanted the opportunity for wider relationship building and information sharing between parents within the For Mi App, and Family Support Foster Carers requested a separate closed space on the For Mi App where they could record sensitive material that was restricted to social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff. This suggests that the For Mi App could benefit from some development to increase engagement and ensure that it meets the needs of everyone involved in the Step Up Step Down programme.

In relation to endings, section 6.10 outlined how the soft endings approach adopted by Step Up Step Down was useful in averting the problematic aspects of intervention endings reported in earlier evaluations (Mannay et al. 2015; Mannay et al. 2022b). The continuing relationships between parents, families, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, even when the arrangement of individualised support from a dedicated Family Support Foster Carers ended, as well as ongoing access to events, activities and training was central in families continuing to feel supported. The establishment of networks with other Step Up Step Down parents, and the reconnections with wider family networks also helped parents to transition, and these relationships offered a level of sustainability outside of Step Up Step Down.

Lastly, section 6.11 offered an insight into the ways in which the relationships formed between parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, changed their perceptions and preconceptions, fostering more nuanced understandings of the circumstances of others.

This chapter has documented the salience of relationships and relational, emotional and practical underlying forms of support that characterised the Step Up Step Down programme. Whilst these aspects were a constant across Step Up Step Down, the next two chapters will focus mainly on planned and scheduled activities, with Chapter Eight being concerned with training for parents and Family Support Foster Carers, and the following chapter, Chapter Seven, outlining nurture groups for children, family events and residentials, wellbeing sessions for parents, and wider connections with organisations within the local community.

7 Activities for Children, Parents and Families

7.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three it was noted that Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland offered direct support for children including the Dinosaur Club, which was a 16-week nurture programme (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 5). This chapter focusses on the activity programme in Step Up Step Down in the Pembrokeshire pilot, in which, corresponding to the Dinosaur Club, a Nurture Group was offered for children. In Pembrokeshire, a Girls Group was also facilitated for older children. As in the Northern Ireland model (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 5) residentials were also held for families in Pembrokeshire, the first of which was held in March 2025; but they also facilitated Family Days in each of the school holidays and wellbeing sessions for parents. This chapter initially discusses the views of children (C) in relation to their experiences of the Nurture Group, Girls Group and Children's Summer Scheme. The perspectives of The Fostering Network in Wales staff (TFNW), social workers (SW), Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC) and parents (P) are then considered, regarding their understandings of the Nurture Group, Children's Summer Scheme, Girls Group, residentials, Family Days and wellbeing sessions for parents. The chapter will then examine the ways in which families engaged with wider activities and supports within the local community.

7.2 The Perspectives of Children

Aligning with the Welsh Government's formal commitment to children's rights in Wales there is a national basis for facilitating children and young people's direct participation in research studies (Welsh Assembly Government 2004). This commitment to involving children in research and consultations, so that policy can respond directly to the requirements of children themselves was adopted in the evaluation of the Step Up Step Down Programme in Pembrokeshire. This was particularly important as in the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland no children contributed their perspectives (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 4). Accordingly, there have not been any evaluations of Step Up Step Down to date that have directly sought children's reflections on their experience of being involved with the programme. This section outlines how children contributed to the Pembrokeshire evaluation, before providing an account of what children shared about their involvement in a Nurture Group, a Girls Group and a Children's Summer Scheme that were part of the children's activity programme within Step Up Step Down in the Pembrokeshire pilot.

7.2.1 Involving Children

Chapter Four provided a detailed discussion of the methods of data generation, and this section simply provides a brief outline of the research activities that provided access to the perspectives of children in their own words as a background context to section 7.2.2. which explores the accounts of children.

As documented in the Interim Report for the Evaluation of Step Up Step Down (Rees et al. 2024), the Nurture Group was a ten week programme designed to support the learning, regulation and relational skills of children on the edge of care and it was delivered by The Fostering Network in Wales in conjunction with SW1 between May and July 2024. The programme had nine weeks of topic based sessions that ran between 3.30 and 5.30 pm on consecutive Mondays cumulating with a celebration event in week 10. The topics of weeks one to 10 are presented in Table 7 and a more detailed overview of these topics and their associated activities is provided in Appendix 5.

Session	Topic
1	Forming the group
2	Listening well
3	Focus time
4	Feelings detectives
5	Ways to relax
6	Cool and calm
7	Solution builders
8	Being a friend
9	Being a team
10	Celebrate

Table 7: Nurture Group Session Themes

As discussed in Chapter Four, the evaluation of the Nurture Group involved four children who provided assent and engaged with creative activities and reflected on their experiences with two members of the research team. The four children were aged between five and seven years old. The detailed findings of this evaluation can be found in the Interim Report (Rees et al. 2024), but key themes will be outlined in section 7.2.2.

Four children, who identified as girls and were aged 12, did not attend The Nurture Group because this was aimed at younger children. Therefore, The Fostering Network in Wales provided an additional Girls Group for these four children which was delivered between the 5th of September and the 17th of October 2024. Each session ran for two hours between 3.30 and 5.30pm on a Thursday and children were provided with food. The session themes and activities are outlined in Table 8.

Session Number	Session Theme	Activities
1	Getting to know each other	The children played games and were introduced to a scrap book activity where they used pictures from magazines to make an 'all about me collage'.
2	What makes us feel good	This theme focussed on activities we enjoy and activities that help us to relax and feel better.
3	Grounding ideas	The children painted stones, to use as grounding stones, and discussed techniques that can help in times of high stress, for example, the exercise of five things we can see, four things we can hear, three things we can smell, two things we can touch, which can bring us back to the present moment.
4	Breathing exercises	Various models were introduced to the children, including balloon breathing and finger breathing.
5	Kindness, friendships, and positive thinking	The children explored the questions 'What does being kind look like and feel like?' and 'What do we want in friendships?'.
6	How the brain works	The hand model of the brain was introduced, including the term, "flipping your lid", and a fizzy bottle of pop was used to illustrated to the children how things can build up and cause explosions. Techniques such as gently "opening the bottle" to prevent the spill were discussed as metaphors for managing emotions.
7	Ways to relax	This theme focussed on what feels good and calms our brain, and the benefits of music, spending time with friends and family, and art activities were considered.
8	Movie night	Film with snacks, face masks, nail painting and pumpkin painting

Table 8: Session Activities in the Girls Group

The Girls Group was not visited by the research team because The Fostering Network in Wales did not feel that there would be adequate space within the sessions for researchers to generate feedback with the children. Additionally, attendance was variable, and the nature of the programme meant sensitive topics such as emotional regulation were discussed. Therefore, the presence of unknown researchers could have disrupted the safe space of the Girls Group, and the trustful relationships built with the facilitators, TFNW1, TFNW2 and SW1. However, two of the four children completed feedback forms for The Fostering Network in Wales. These were shared in an anonymised format with the research team and feedback from the Girls Group will be discussed in section 7.2.2.

The Children's Summer Scheme ran over three days between 11th and 13th August 2025 and each day began at 10am and finished at 3pm. The Children's Summer Scheme offered a range different indoor and outdoor activities. There were a cohort of 15 children aged between 6 and 13 years, who engaged with the Children's Summer Scheme. Activities included building a model village, creating Tie Dye t-shirts, baking and making their own lunches, a sandcastle competition, rock pooling, outdoor parachute games, Forest School and playing in the park. One of the research team

attended the Children's Summer Scheme on the 13th of August 2025, the final day, and four of the children aged between six and 11 years signed an assent form and contributed to discussions, enabling their views to be analysed and shared in this report. The following section will discuss the key themes that children shared with the research team in relation to these three sessions and the Step Up Step Down programme more widely.

7.2.2 What Children Shared

The responses of the two children who completed the feedback form following the Girls Group are documented in Table 9 and Table 10.

Closed Scale Response Question	Response 1-5 (5 most positive ranking)
I have enjoyed coming to the group?	Participant one – 5 Participant two - 5
I have made friends I hope to stay in touch with?	Participant one - 5 Participant two - 5
I have found coming along to the group helpful?	Participant one - 5 Participant two - 5

Table 9: Scaled Responses to Pembrokeshire Girls Group Evaluation October 2024

Open Text Response Question	Free Text Response
What have you enjoyed most about the group	Participant one – Talking about my feelings Participant two - Playing
I there anything you haven't enjoyed?	Participant one - No Participant two - No
Are there any topics you would have liked to have covered?	Participant one – How feeling[s] work Participant two – IDK [I don't know]
If yes, would you like to attend another group in the future?	Participant one – Yes, I would. It help[s] me find my feelings and not get angry at things Participant two – YES!

Table 10: Free Text Responses to Pembrokeshire Girls Group Evaluation October 2024

The feedback indicated that these two children enjoyed the group, found it helpful and were able to make friends. They also valued opportunities to play and to discuss their feelings and they were both interested in attending future sessions. This suggests that the experience of attending the Girls Group was positive and that alongside the provision of The Nurture Group, additional groups to support the learning, regulation and relational skills of older children on the edge of care should be considered in future Step Up Step Down programs.

In the Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme, children discussed their emotions, activity preferences, the curtailment of the Nurture Group and the provision of refreshments within the

sessions. The emoji chart proved an accessible visual prompt in aiding children to consider how they felt during the Nurture Programme. For example, when C2 was asked to put stickers on the emojis to say how she felt about the group, she chose loving and happy. C3 and C4 also selected loving to represent how they felt about the group (see Figure 6). This suggests that the facilitators had created an environment in the Nurture Group where the children felt valued and secure. Corresponding with C2's sticker placement on the emoji representing happiness (see Figure 7), C1 and C4 also annotated the happy emoji with a sticker, with C1 first selecting the smiling 'cheeky' emoji but swapping to 'happy' when the researcher read the caption.



Figure 6: Sticker placement on the loving emoji – C4 and C3

In the process of considering the emoji chart, C4 also chose the emoji representing worry, explaining this selection by saying –

> I was worried, but I stopped being worried when I could play football (C4, aged 7)

As noted in the Interim Report for the Evaluation of Step Up Step Down (Rees et al. 2024), C4 initially prioritised playing with a football in favour of engaging with any of the research activities. This may have reflected C4's preference for this form of play, but it could also be indicative of an initial nervousness in engaging with the researchers. This also suggests that the provision of active play materials is beneficial to the process of children settling into the initial sessions, and that Step Up Step Down facilitators should continue to provide these options in future Nurture Groups.



Figure 7: Sticker placement on the happy emoji – C2

The happiness indicated by C2 in the emoji chart sticker activity was confirmed by the attending family support foster carer who noted, '*she [C2] loves coming, she calls it 'fun hall, are we going to fun hall tonight?*'. SW1, TFNW1 and TFNW2 similarly noted the enjoyment expressed by the children in informal discussions with the researchers. C2 also considered how other children may feel on joining the group in response to a prompt from the researcher who asked C2 what they would say if someone new was coming to the group and they were a bit worried, C2 replied '*I'd say it's okay*'.

In the Children's Summer Scheme C7 said he had '*loved everything'* he did with Step Up Step Down and '*all the fun places they go to*', and in creating arts-based representation of a house, C6 reflected on enjoying that '*we can do everything*'. Similarly, in the Nurture Group, C1 said that they enjoyed all of the activities equally in reflecting on the photograph montage and during the object elicitation activity. However, there can be a tendency for children to initially reflect on all activities in a project as equally liked and valued, and further discussion is needed to get an understanding of children's preferences (Boffey et al. 2021; Mannay et al. 2023). For example, during the sandboxing activity C1 told the researcher that they preferred making cookies to painting their heart picture.

> What did you like best cooking the cookies or making the picture of the heart (Researcher)
>
> Cooking the cookies (C1)

C2 was able to discuss her preferences in relation to the wall mounted photograph montage reflecting different sessions within the Nurture Group programme, pointing to a photograph of her laying on the floor with an eye mask and explaining, '*I loved doing yoga'* (C2). In considering a photograph of herself and the other children building and playing in a tent there was a more complex remembering and articulation of this activity.

> We made a tent; the boy's rule was that there was a girl's side and a boy's side [scrunched up her face and looked annoyed]' (C2)

C2 later shared that her favourite part of the Nurture Group was building the tent, but she did not like the rule that boys were on one side and girls were on the other side. It was not clear whether this was because of the gendered split, or because she had wanted to work with a child on the other team, or whether this may have been associated with the boys completing their task ahead of the girls. However, C2 was able to negotiate any related discomfort in the distribution of the reward stickers associated with the activity as because of this disliked 'rule', and the activity outcome, she gave the girls a sticker before allocating them to the boys. The data generated with the children cannot reliably be directly related to any of the Nurture Group activities. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that session four, 'Feelings Detectives', which preceded the tent building activity, focussed on helping children to regulate their emotions, and this form of intervention may potentially be useful for children who feel conflicted in group activities.

In the Children's Summer Scheme, C8 said that she had particularly enjoyed playing with the slime. C5 shared that she had enjoyed '*making stuff*' in the Children's Summer Scheme and that the length of the sessions was '*just right*', enabling her to take part in all of her preferred activities. The relational aspect of being part of the Children's Summer Scheme was important to C5, who explained that she had '*made a friend*' in the group.

Relational aspects were also discussed by C7 who considered the relationships with adult facilitators, '[TFNW1] *is the boss but she's not bossy*'. C7 was also able to reflect on wider aspects of the Step Up Step Down programme and he made a representation of a Premier Inn, explaining that he had once stayed at a hotel with his Family Support Foster Carer (see Figure 8). This short break with the Family Support Foster Carer had been part of C7's birthday celebrations and reflecting on the stay he shared '*I love it so much*'. Both the activities in the Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme and the relationships within these sessions were important to children, but they also discussed the salience of the provision and sharing of food.



Figure 8: Model of the Premier Inn hotel

The ways in which the communal provision of food can facilitate bonding reported in previous research (Rees 2019), was evident in the researchers' observations of the children's groups. Parents, facilitators, the Family Support Foster Carers, the associated social worker, and the children were provided with a table of refreshments and as well as taking their own separate items and plates. The chairs around the table enabled people to eat together. There were also instances of the active sharing of favourite foods. For example, C1 offered one of the researchers, and some of the facilitators, access to her bowl of crisps and a chocolate doughnut, asking if we would like to try her selected snacks. In accepting the invitation, one of the researchers was able to engage in the associated pleasure of tasting these items with C1.

The centrality of food was confirmed in the children's engagement with this topic in discussing the foods that they liked to eat. For example, when talking to one researcher C4 noted that his favourite foods were '*pancakes, doughnuts and cucumber*'. In conversation with the other researcher and SW1, C4 expanded on this list of preferred foods provided at the Nurture Group.

> Doughnuts, sandwiches, crisps, chocolate cake, best of all cucumber and then strawberries (C4)

Some of the sessions that involved the preparation and cooking of food items were listed as preferred experiences, with C3 sharing that his favourite foods were '*pancakes*', as he pointed to an image in the wall mounted photograph montage that depicted the children making pancakes, also saying that he liked biscuits. As documented previously, C1 also reflected on her enjoyment of making and eating cookies. C4 said that he enjoyed '*making pancakes and building the tent'*. The tent was associated with the consumption of food as C2 explained to one of the researchers that once the tent was constructed it became the venue for eating their McDonalds delivery, '*we had a McDonalds in the tent*' (C2)

The food from McDonalds was also discussed by C1 when they engaged with the plate mapping method (Sharp 2016). As illustrated in Figure 9, C1 drew fries, nuggets, a burger and ketchup on the paper plate to represent the meal from McDonalds that she explained was provided in one of the sessions '*as a treat*'. C1 positioned this meal as her favourite food in the Nurture Group. The sharing of the McDonalds meal within a tent may have added to the novelty and enjoyment of this experience. As well as engaging with the plate mapping method and positioning McDonalds as her favourite meal, C1 listed her favourite foods of that day, '*crisps, doughnuts and sausage rolls*' (C1). When asked about their favourite food in the world, if they could choose one food, they said that this would be '*chocolate cake'*.



Figure 9: McDonalds – C1's favourite meal at Nurture Group

This importance of food was recognised by The Fostering Network in Wales facilitators who focussed in on its relational aspects (Rees 2019) and were careful to remember children's preferences and ensure that their favourite snacks were available at all of the sessions. There was also of an understanding of the tensions between offering healthy choices and catering for children's individual preferences. This had been a point of contention in a previous project involving The Fostering Network in Wales, where the catering element was led by a different partner organisation (Mannay et al. 2018, 2022). However, in the Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme this tension was circumvented by providing a range of options including fruit and salad vegetables, including the favoured cucumber that was often a component part of the children's self-selected plates.

At the end of the session, C1 and C3 looked through their gift bags provided by the researchers (see Figure 5) and the present from The Fostering Network in Wales facilitators. C1 was conversing with C3 about the gifts, which they were pleased with, and then said -

> C3 this is the last group, we won't be coming anymore (C1)

In response to C1's comment C3 appeared tearful and asked one of the researchers –

> Why do we have to go now? We haven't been here long, I don't want to go now, I'm still hungry (C3)

The distress of C3 in not wanting '*to go*' and the reference to being '*still hungry*' appears to reinforce the importance of food for children in these sessions. However, it is likely that C3's disappointment was not exclusively related to access to favoured foods but to the overall curtailment of the Nurture Group, emphasising the problematic nature of time bounded interventions that has been raised in previous studies (Mannay et al. 2015; Mannay et al. 2022b). In terms of programme endings, C2 said she was '*sad*' that it was the last session of the Nurture Group and noted:

I haven't been coming here for many days though (C2)

The researcher explained that they would write C2's comment down, and they were supportive of their reflection being recorded and communicated stating:

Yeah, tell them we haven't been coming for many days (C2)

This statement indicates that C2 has some expectation that by sharing their views with the researchers they can feed into future practice or potential changes. This has been an expectation of children involved in previous research, who have asked that their views are passed on to decision makers such as the Welsh Government (Chicken et al. 2024). However, in most cases, any potential response to the feedback of participants is more likely to benefit future cohorts of children and young people, rather than the participants themselves.

Similarly, in the Children's Summer Scheme C7 had reflected that '*the sessions are too short'* and he would like them to do more camping. C8 really enjoyed the Children's Summer Scheme and said that they would like Step Up Step Down to '*do more*' of these sessions. C8 also thought there '*should be more groups like this*', that she would '*like sessions to be longer'*, and she also mentioned a desire for sessions with '*swimming*' and '*horse-riding*'.

These comments resonate with those of the children and young people involved in previous activity days who have wanted these opportunities to continue (Mannay et al. 2015); and data from project facilitators in earlier studies who were concerned with how to negotiate the ending of intervention programmes with children who have built group friendships and benefitted from arts-based activities (Mannay et al. 2018).

The Fostering Network in Wales facilitators and SW1 noted that there were local activities that the children could attend outside of the formal Step Up Step Down programme. However, these activities necessitated an engagement from their parents, which may not be possible in all cases. Nonetheless, in addition to the Nurture Group and Summer Scheme there were Family Days and other activities. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter Six, networks built between parents also sustained relationships between both parents and children. For the children though, endings were sometimes difficult to negotiate.

It was important to create opportunities in the evaluation to listen to the views of children and recognise them as experts by experience (Preston-Shoot 2007), and competent contributors (Malaguzzi 1993). Accordingly, this section foregrounded the perspectives of children and considered their experiences of participating in the Girl's Group, Nurture Group and Children's Summer Scheme. Only eight children contributed directly to the study, and two indirectly through a feedback form. Therefore, the sample size was limited, which was mainly due to the sensitivities around visiting group sessions, children not providing assent, or children providing assent but then becoming distracted by other activities in the settings. However, as the previous Step Up Step Down evaluation did not include the views of children (Flood and Thompson 2020), their participation offers crucial insights into the understandings of children.

Overall, the children were extremely positive about the activities, the refreshments and the relationships they built in the sessions, using phrases to communicate their experiences and emotions including '*loved*', '*happy*' and '*fun*'. The children's enjoyment of the sessions was also made apparent in their sadness when sessions ended and their requests for further activities and

opportunities to have further group sessions. The following section will consider the accounts of adults, drawing on the interviews with The Fostering Network in Wales staff members, social workers, parents and Family Support Social Workers.

7.3 The Perspectives of Adults – Nurture Groups and Girls Groups

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, a description of the 'nurture programme' was provided and this was run twice a year for a 'cohort of six children at a time' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 5). The nurture programme sessions covered themes around 'communication, problem solving, making and keeping friends, teamwork, understanding and detecting feelings and self-regulation' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 5). These themes are similar to those in the Pembrokeshire Nurture Group and Girls Group, which were outlined in the previous section in Table 8 and Table 9, with a more detailed overview of the Nurture Group topics and their associated activities made available in Appendix 5.

It was vitally important to consider the views of children in relation to their engagement with the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire, as their perspectives are often overlooked in evaluative research. However, as well as exploring the experiences of children, as evidenced in section 7.2, it was crucial to include the views of adults involved with Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. This section presents the accounts of The Fostering Network in Wales staff and social workers who designed and implemented the Nurture Group and Girls Group, before considering parents' perspectives on what they and their children gained from these sessions.

There was a reflection from TFNW2 on the initial Nurture Group, which the research team visited as discussed in section 7.2.

> We sort of discussed between us and Northern Ireland that actually those Nurture Groups that we were doing, although we did provide like a very peaceful environment and it was very nurturing, it was really, really difficult to get the children to engage in the things that we wanted them to engage in, about sort of discussing emotions and working out how to manage things, because they were coming to us after a day at school. So generally, those groups felt like really quite manic, although we could see... like at the end of the 10 weeks, we did see the benefits in the kids, and we did see in the ways that they were speaking was how, you know, we had been speaking to them, so that was really reassuring (TFNW2)

This account from TFNW2 discusses the difficulties of engaging children with set activities because they were coming after a day in school, meaning that the sessions could be '*quite manic*'. This resonated with the research teams experience of visiting the Nurture Group and as noted in Chapter Four, the children engaged in differential ways, and as in previous studies with young children that have taken a participatory child-led approach (Chicken et al. 2024), the children decided when and how to contribute and the planned activities did not always follow the set purpose of the evaluation. However, TFNW2 emphasised that the children still benefitted from the Nurture Group and that they had begun to incorporate some of the key learning points. These benefits were evidenced in the accounts of children, and their enjoyment of the Nurture Group, '*loved*', '*happy*' and '*fun*', were detailed in section 7.2. Additionally, in section 7.2 it was also

tentatively suggested that C2 could have been drawing on their learning in the 'Feelings Detectives' session to help to regulate her emotions. This aligns with TFNW2's position that the children were '*speaking*' and using the language around emotions and other topics that they had been introduced to by TFNW2, TFNW1 and SW1 during the Nurture Group sessions. Following the initial Nurture Group some adaptions were made in consideration of the timing of the sessions and how best to engage and focus the children to ensure that key learning points were communicated.

> We've changed it now, so we do... it's called... it's based on Relax Kids, so there's like a seven-step programme now, so we do it all through movement, basically. So when the children come in, every week we'd have like a bit of a chat about how your brain works, and how it works together, but very simply, like I use like little animal puppets and stuff, and then when we discuss it as the weeks go on... we do it at the start of every session and then we sort of encourage them to play big games... they are sort of realising that through all each of these steps are ways for them to be able to regulate themselves, so it might be that, you know, they could be feeling really stressed out about something in school and they don't have space to go and run around, but they could do the breathing exercises that we've done, or, you know, the stretching, or even the more gentle movements... Affirmations is part of it as well. So we do a lot of, like... and again, to start with generally, our kids can't say nice things about themselves so we'll start by giving other people compliments, or I'll give them little cards that they can then take home... and they've written, you know, lovely things like, "I'm strong and I'm brave, and I can do this", and so it's been really nice to like see, I think you see the clearer progression with relaxed kids because the sessions are very focussed... different activities, but it's the same seven things (TFNW2)

The new approach to the Nurture Group, drawing on the Relax Kids model [https://relaxkids.com/training/] was positioned as more suitable for the children because of the embodied physicality and movement embedded in the learning. The exploration of Relax Kids and the decision to take this approach was established in discussions between Northern Ireland and Wales; and it was adopted in both contexts (Irwin 2026). The focus on '*the same seven*' themes through '*different activities*' to reinforce and scaffold children's knowledge and understanding, was also described as beneficial. A similar account was provided from SW2, who was also involved in facilitating this Nurture Group.

> I have been working alongside [TFNW2], to give her like a pilot of Relaxed Kids. So, we've been running like a six-week Nurture Group with the children just to figure out what works well, what doesn't...what age range should we invite... So, we had a little pilot, and it was actually quite fascinating to see how much they actually learnt from the sort of like the play and movement of how to manage their emotions a bit better. The feedback was really, really positive. They all really, really enjoyed it. It was quite difficult. It wasn't your standard, "right, let's go in and have a stretch and breathe". These children are likely to have experienced trauma, you know, struggle with their emotions. It was hard for me and [TFNW2] to facilitate it, but I think as the children came in and realised, "right, this..." and we did the same thing every week, but sort of different movements, different themes, they knew what was coming, so by the end of it, they knew what was going to happen. So, they're prepared, so they're more relaxed straightaway, and there's younger children that haven't gone off anywhere other than being with their parents before, they were straight in, because I think they see me and [TFNW2] on the family days, at their homes, so maybe

> see us as a safe adult, perhaps… and I think with [TFNW2], they've built a really, really positive relationship with her. Like, they see her as a really, really fun person, which is nice (SW2)

Again, SW2 emphasised the benefits of reiteration and consistency with the '*same thing every week*' but '*different movements*' and '*different themes*'. In addition to the affordances of the set programme for the sessions, the children were also engaged because they felt comfortable with TFNW2 and SW2 as '*a safe adult*' and they had '*built a really, really positive relationship with*' (TFNW2). This is resonant of the focus on relationship building, which was the key theme of Chapter Six, where the relational aspects of Step Up Step Down were suggested to be foundational in the effectiveness of these activities. SW2 noted that the children's '*feedback was really, really positive*', which was also communicated by TFNW2.

> The feedback from them with that has been great, like they really enjoy it. They enjoy having a space to come, and generally all of them apart from one has wanted to come every week (TFNW2)

The enjoyment and engagement of the children was facilitated by taking a flexible approach that recognised children's agency.

> [Children] pick the parts of the session that they want to join in with, and then the other parts, it's absolutely fine for them to just sit and chill out on their mats and not join in… So, it's nice. That's been great, because it gives the kids the flexibility to do a little bit of what they want. There's no real pressure (TFNW2)

Parents provided feedback to TFNW2 about what the children had learned at the Nurture Group and how they had implemented this at home, and parents also discussed this with the research team in their interviews.

> Nice feedback from parents as well, about how they've continued using those techniques at home, especially like random little… they love like bits and bobs… So, I'd found like little breathing whistles, and the first group had taken home like the yoga mats with them, and like blowing… like breathing activities… I just let them take those bits and bobs home, so they use them at home then. So, lots of parents have said that it's just been nice for them to come together with little friends after school and do stuff like that that they can take home and use (TFNW2)

> My [age]-year-old will quite often tell me when she's feeling stressed, and that's… you know, she would just normally have a meltdown, and she'd be screaming, I'd be crying, and we wouldn't get anywhere. But now she's able to tell me, I'm feeling really stressed, I need some quiet time, and then we'll leave it for five minutes, and then I'll talk to her and sort of calm her down. That's something, that like, we can talk more openly about our feelings, and I can explain to the children that, you know, it's… every emotion and every feeling is normal, whether it's a good one or a not so good one (P4)

> They are more open, my [age]-year-old is more open with her feelings. Like I said, like the friendship element is there. They're more confident. And also, as well, they're more comfortable with other people from Step Up, so they'll go off with people from Step up Step Down… And we haven't got to worry about that. Whereas before, they were a bit, oh, stay

> with mum, stay with mum… But I think by us reassuring that it's okay, you know, you can… they've built up that trust as well (P3)

These accounts suggest that children in Pembrokeshire both continued to use equipment from the Nurture Group sessions and that the learning within the sessions had contributed to their ability to discuss and regulate their emotions. The one Trust stakeholder who provided feedback on the Dinosaur Club in the Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland evaluation also mentioned that children who attended this nurture programme learned to 'listen and not always being reactive' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 47). The one parent who discussed the Dinosaur Club in their interview in Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland evaluation noted that their children 'bonded so much' with the facilitators and 'they just loved it' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 47). These points resonated with those of parents in the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down, who discussed their children's enjoyment, the relationship building with facilitators and other children, and having some time for themselves whilst the children attended the Nurture Group.

> Amazing. Loves it. She really does enjoy it. All I've got to do is mention it, and she's all over it. And that was great… when there's Step Up Step Down meetings, you know, she knows all the other kids there on a first-name basis, and they're all kind to her (P5)

> And she made friends, and my daughter finds it very hard to make friends, but with Step Up Step Down… and every time she sees [SW1], it's just an automatic hug. It's just… you know, she really struggles, but you know, with Step Up Step Down, she's made a few friends there… Yeah, they can just be themselves. Yeah, just for that hour or two hours a week, you know, just you haven't got to worry… You know, they can just be themselves in a safe environment with people that they're trusting (P3)

> It gives me… a bit of breathing space, but for the children, it's also a safe adult that the children know they can talk to, that they're not judged. I'm struggling with my [age]-year-old… she keeps complaining of tummy pains, and the doctor says it's anxiety and worry… but Step Up Step Down… they're fun with the girls, but the girls know they can talk to them… it's a fun, safe environment where the children can relax and they can be a child… The children are all in the same boat, and they know they can take their masks off (P4)

> If my other two are going off with Step Up Step Down to do stuff, it then gives me a chance to spend time with my youngest (P7)

Parents reported a number of benefits for themselves when their children were in the Nurture Group, such as having '*a bit of breathing space*' (P4) and an opportunity to '*spend time*' with their younger children (P7). The Nurture Groups were also a space for children to make and build friendships with other children in similar circumstances, create stronger bonds with TFNW2 and SW1, and '*relax*', '*be a child*' (P4) and '*be themselves*' (P3). Aligning with the discussions in section 6.5, Practical Support for Parents, TFNW2 also ensured that the Nurture Group was accessible to all children by ensuring that suitable transport was provided.

> As soon as [TFNW2] says, "Oh, this is on offer". I'm like, "Yeah, cool". Take it immediately, kids will be there. And then, if I can't actually get them there [TFNW2] … she's actually amazing, she'll make sure either a taxi is provided, or if someone is sort of passing us or is close enough to us to pick the [children] up then that's provided as well. My kids actually never miss out on anything, because… if I can't get them there, someone [will] (P7)

Despite the positivity of these accounts, for transparency it is important to highlight that FSFC3 discussed an incident in the Girls Group, which had a negative impact on one of the children in Step Up Step Down.

> [TFNW2] and [SW1] ran a Nurture Group for the older girls [Girls Group], ran for about six weeks. And unfortunately, it turns out that [child] got a bit bullied at one of them. She identifies at the moment as [inaudible]... she bought her masks and was talking to them about when she dresses like the animal that she identifies as, and one of the other girls started being really mean about it, and it kind of went under the radar, I think that, you know, they were doing it in a way that [TFNW2] and [SW1] weren't aware of, but [child] ended up in tears. So, she went home, said I'm not coming again, which is totally understandable. Yeah, so that was a shame because I know that [TFNW2] and [SW1] are thinking about running another set sometime. So that would be good if we could, if we could get her to that (FSFC3)

Peer and popular cultures introduce hierarchies that young people need to negotiate, and girls are often balancing attempted performances of acceptable forms of identity within these hierarchies (Ringrose 2008). Therefore, there can be a tendency for some young people to exclude or taunt children and use relational aggression in maintaining their own social status or ideas of group belonging. In FSFC3 account the child has shared information within what has been set up as safe space, but this was met with an inappropriate response from others in the Girls Group who were '*really mean*' to the child. Unfortunately, this '*went under the radar*' as it can be difficult to instantly recognise aggressive interactions when no shouting or violence is involved and remarks being made can simply look like chatting if the conversation is inaudible.

Therefore, whilst the feedback from the two 12 year olds who attended the Girls Group for all the sessions suggested that they enjoyed the group, found it helpful, were able to make friends and valued opportunities to play and to discuss their feelings (see Table 10 in section 7.2), the account from FSFC3 indicates that the experience of attending the Girls Group was not positive for all of the children. FSFC3 noted that the child could potentially engage with a Girls Group in the future, which suggests that there may be an opportunity for a more positive experience with peers. However, the potential for unpleasant interactions may be something to be a particularly aware of when working with children in this age range in Girls Group activities where children do not have the additional support of their parent or Family Support Foster Carer, as they would in Family Days and other activities.

In the data set only this one negative interaction was raised in relation to the Girls Group. Overall, the feedback from children in section 7.2.2 was positive, with all of the children noting their enjoyment of Nurture Group and Girls Group, where there were opportunities to have fun, make friends, play, engage in activities and learn. TFNW2 and SW1 also discussed how children enjoyed the Nurture Group and were able to incorporate the learning about managing emotions into their everyday lives, and these benefits were also evidenced in the accounts of parents of children who attended the Nurture Group. Adaptions to the programme were also discussed by TFNW2 and SW1, which illustrate the ways in which facilitators are responsive to the needs of children and innovative in designing and modifying activities to encourage engagement and learning. The following section will discuss the family events and residentials and wellbeing sessions designed to support parents.

7.4 The Perspectives of Adults - Family Activities and Parents' Wellbeing Sessions

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 5) outlined the summer residential, where families were invited to participate in a 3-day family break together. This included 'games, arts and crafts, movies, dance, beach walks, visit to local attraction' as well as 'resilience sessions which the whole family take part in together' focussed on improving 'self-regulation skills, communication skills and capacity to cope with stressful or challenging situations'. In the pilot of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire there was also a similar '*residential*', the first of which ran between 21st March and 23rd March 2025 as well as a '*Family Day*' event in every school holiday (TFNW1), which offered a range of activities.

> We've done the arts and crafts, we've done the clay pot moulding, we've been to Picton Castle, we've been down to Broadhaven Beach with Newgale Beach, Canaston Woods walkies, you know, a lot of places. I'm forgetting some. St David's for a camping weekend (P5)

> We were invited to (adventure farm), we've been to a Halloween party… Christmas party, we're due to go in February half term to a fun day at the hall to do some activities and bits, then in March we're doing like a long weekend… So, everything that they've been doing… they've invited us. It's just nice when we've got something like that to look forward to, like the Christmas party or the weekend in March (P1)

> They've done a weekend away, which was really good, the kids loved all that. And then, they do like Picton Castle… they thought that was great. They've done Heatherton, which they loved, which they wouldn't have done if it wasn't for Step Up Step Down (P6)

> Step Up Step Down, they always put something on, like a Halloween party, Christmas party. They've got a weekend in March, and then that gives everybody a chance then to come together. And that's really nice to see (P3)

These types of activities can be inaccessible to families and the Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 5) evaluation observed that many of the families in Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland had never had the opportunity to enjoy a family break together, which they attributed to 'financial pressures and anxiety around managing family challenges in a new setting'. Both TFNW2 and parents discussed how previous concerns around managing family challenges were reduced on the Family Days and the residentials in Pembrokeshire because there is '*not going to be any judgement about behaviour*' and everyone '*supports each other*' (TFNW2).

> I think the parents appreciate having somewhere that they can come with their children that they know that there's not going to be any judgement about behaviour. I think some of them still worry about it a little bit, but I think it's really reassuring that actually, all the families experience it. When they come out with us, it's not like anyone's going to be shocked and horrified, you know? Everyone sort of supports each other, which is really nice, and our first lot of families built a really nice little community (TFNW2)

> We've gone through a lot of people… the professions, and at the minute Step Up Step Down are the only people we've been with that my kids have communicated to straightaway, who

> haven't felt pressured into joining, who me and my partner actually feel relaxed about like, talking to them... this is working for us, this seems like a good fit. Everyone we have met has either understood why we're there, or have similar backstories, or similar additional needed children. So, on days when we're all meeting up as a group are the days me and my partner can like, completely relax into the day, because if one of our children have a meltdown or we need to leave abruptly or anything like that, we are never judged. If anything, we're looked after a lot more than we would in a normal social setting... it's a very lovely group of people so far, and I've not felt judged (P7)

> There was a [parent] there who really lacked the confidence of taking her children out, and she was really apprehensive about going to [venue]... she was like, "I'm not going to cope. I can't do it. I've only got two hands, and I've got three children. I've got a child with, you know, profound learning difficulties". And she stayed the full day with the three children. And she felt really, really good, and really, really proud of herself, and she was able to do that from the support of others... That was one of her goals, was to increase her confidence, and she came with the, you know, "I'm going to have to leave" and she didn't... and she really enjoyed herself (SW2)

> All ages, doesn't matter what disability or whatever you wanna call it... they can adapt... even with this [child] they've adapted stuff for it to be safe for him as well (P1)

These accounts emphasise how the '*support of others*' (SW2) and families knowing that they would '*never judged*' (P7) enabled them to take part in activities which they would not have done without Step Up Step Down. As well as the barriers of children's additional needs and behaviours being significantly reduced, the Step Up Step Down residentials and Family Days also alleviated parents' financial concerns and parents '*feeling bad for not being able to do stuff*' (P7) with their children.

> A lot of children... that maybe come from families that haven't got the income to be able to go on days out like that. So, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves having that quality time with their parents or grandparents, which is nice (SW2)

> So, before, I mean obviously with money and everything and transport, and how my kids are as a whole, we've very rarely done any activities or planned days out, or done anything within a group of people, because... we couldn't get there, or we couldn't afford to do it... But with [Step Up Step Down] ... we've stopped feeling bad for not being able to do stuff with the kids, because we know... [TFNW2]'s planned something for the kids in the group... feel less pressured into making sure the kids are having fun holidays or having days out they can tell their friends about, because [TFNW2] will make a point of doing something for the kids, so the kids feel more safe and understood as well. Step Up Step Down giving us opportunities to leave the house as well, it did... I mean, I think out of all the years, it was probably the chillest summer [holiday] (P7)

> Christmas last year was difficult, because I came out [of hospital] ... second week of December... and if it wasn't for Step Up Step Down hosting a Christmas party, my girls wouldn't have done anything for Christmas... So, the group sort of enabled my children to have like, a day full of Christmas activities, which was really good (P4)

Financial barriers can severely impact on families' access to activities, and the Step Up Step Down activities meant that children were '*having fun holidays or having days out they can tell their friends*

about' (P7). This was beneficial for children and for their parents who did not have to carry the guilt of not being able to provide these experiences.

In the evaluations of the Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, a positive programme attribute was that it 'operates on the basis of providing support to the whole family', not only the referred child or children, which was appreciated by parents (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 44). This was also the case in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire as the Family Days and residentials were open to the whole family as well as wider family networks and friends where appropriate.

> [Step Up Step Down] is making sure that the whole family as a unit are looked after, and it's the first lot of people we've been involved in that have made sure the family as a unit are being looked after, rather than, okay, you're having trouble with this one specific child, we're just going to do what we can for her. So, it has been nice actually being recognised as a struggling parent or like, it's like, siblings are struggling, or... family life isn't always great... I feel like we're all being looked after, and all of our emotions and needs are being like, taken into account. So, they've never singled out any of us or like, removed any of us from a situation just because [one child] is the one that initially needs the help. They've always made sure that all of us as a whole are included in anything that they do (P7)

> And they also get involved, our teenagers. So, they're coming on the weekend away and they're as much part of it, like the other families are with, you know, we're in it together, really (FSFC5)

> They've even said on this weekend they're going to next month, you know if [partner] couldn't come, I could bring a family member, you know, everybody seems welcome to it [residential family stay] (P2)

> And because my friend is the one taking us places, [TFNW2] will make sure that she feels appreciated as well in the fact that like, my friend will do most of the running around for us, so [TFNW2] doesn't have to order taxis. So, as sort of like, a thank you for helping this family out, [TFNW2] will always make sure that my friend feels grateful and welcomed as well (P7)

> We've had fantastic days out... and I got lovely photos, you know. And their [relative] comes with them when we do... they include him as well... But whatever they've done with the children, you know, we've been on all the trips, everyone's included in everything (P6)

The openness of the family activities meant that parents could invite and be supported by their immediate and extended family and friends. However, there was no requirement to attend as a whole family, and these decisions were made in collaboration with parents to ensure that the arrangements best supported their individual circumstances and goals.

> [TFNW2] has organised families to go to [venue] for like a residential thing, like staying overnight, which me and my eldest are doing together, as the whole family were invited, but because me and me eldest are trying to sort of build bonds again, it's just us going to sort of have that time away with each other.... And because it's with [Step Up Step Down], it's sort of like a secure place as well (P7)

A further theme in the discussions about the family activities was that these afforded opportunities for children to build relationships with other children and to try out and enjoy different experiences.

> 12-, 13-year-olds that came along to that, they were like, "Oh, train modelling…" they were happy to tuck themselves in a windowsill initially, hide behind a curtain and look at their phones, but then actually, when they were encouraged into it, they all, like, got really into the activity, and I think when they allowed themselves that space or permission to do it without that kind of judgement (TFNW1)

> They're [children] happy yeah. That's what they enjoy. There's lots of different activities they can do and learning different things… and children with the same sort of needs (P2)

> [Child] has played with a few of the other children. [Another child] has just done his thing. But yeah, [child] has managed to go off and play with a few of them (P1)

> All of my kids have already started actually making friends within the group of kids that go as well. So, even my kids seem settled in the people that are going (P7)

> And they're meeting children of the same abilities and children… the siblings know they're not the only ones that have got children with a bit of difficulty… Because they're all mingling together… so, the families don't feel left out (P6)

> My daughter, as soon as we pull up, she's like, I'm not going in, I'm not talking to nobody, I don't want to do this, blah blah blah. She sees [SW1], gives [SW1] a hug, and then she's off with her friends (P3)

> I think when we think of how they were with it, like yeah. I mean, some of the kids, like I said, well, you were there on the last day, they just wanted it to last a bit longer (TFNW1)

These accounts from adults about the children's engagement, enjoyment and friendship building align with the accounts of children that were presented in section 7.2.2; and TFNW1's comment that the children '*just wanted it to last a bit longer*' also resonates with what children (C2, C3, C7 and C8) told the research team. In addition to the bonds built between children, there were also discussions about connections between children and other adults, such as Family Support Foster Carers and social workers, and between parents, and as a Step Up Step Down community, corresponding with the relational aspects of the programme that were outlined in Chapter Six.

> It's all just opportunities for connection, isn't it? It's connection with other people, whatever it is that they're doing, and I think they do, for the most part, all really enjoy that (TFNW2)

> They've got a weekend booked in March… [FSFC] came to my house on Tuesday, and she said to me… you know, well, there's loads of people… we'll take the kids, you know, and you can have a break… at the Christmas party, my [child]… was with a lady called [Name of different FSFC] … I've never seen him so focussed in my life, and… it was amazing, because they just take the children as if they're their own… and that's what I love about it (P3)

> Some of these activities, the mentors [FSFC], all of them sort of come together. They start, you know, talking to the children, and then they'll take the children off and do activities, and we're just kind of sat there twiddling our thumbs because we've got no children to

> supervise… I mean, it's nice to watch the children engage with other children and other adults, and to watch that relationship sort of grow (P4)
>
> I find the parents are communicating as well, so, we're helping through the… it's helping through that as well (P6)
>
> I think for benefits, big benefits are the family meet ups. You know the family days where everyone can come together and just have some fun and really see that they are not the only parent who's going through this (FSFC3)
>
> We've done various you know activity days as well, so we've got to know who the children are, who the parents are and I would like to get to a place, I mean, particularly because we take our foster people with us as well, where the parents felt that they were helping us, where there's a neutrality, and I would, I would like to grow and I think it's happening in Step up Step down, a very level playing field where there isn't anyone that's, you know, the chief carer or the senior whatever, we're actually we're all just there trying to look after children trying to, you know, seek a happy, successful kind of day. And I think that that's looking very, very positive (FSFC5)

These accounts suggest that the Family Days and residentials were '*opportunities for connection*' (TFNW2), which fostered a strong sense of community, with a '*very level playing field*' where everyone was looking '*after children*' and contributing to '*a happy, successful kind of day*' (FSFC5). These events were positioned as an occasion where '*everyone can come together*' (FSFC3), '*parents are communicating*' (P6) and '*children engage with other children and other adults*' and families can witness these '*relationship*[s]… *grow*' (P4). These forms of connection and the development of a supportive community were aspects that TFNW1 had aspired in her previous work in the sector, which she had seen actualised within Step Up Step Down.

> We did activity day recently and those families came back, like, you know, two of the girls wanted to meet up, like they were really keen to, like, come together and meet up, which is great… when I think of work that I've done with families in the past, I wouldn't have even thought of that, but I would have, that would have been my dream to get families to do that, like, you just sort of meet one family in isolation and another family in isolation. If only I could get them together, whereas this programme does that, and that's what I love about it. It brings people together that you think actually, if they could spend a bit of time with somebody else, then maybe that would be great, because I know adult relationships are hard as well, aren't they? Like parent relationships, meeting new people, it's a tough world of judgement out there, isn't it? And I think for some of the families, they would face that all the time (TFNW1)

This all points to the success of the Family Days and residentials, and there were further reflections on how the residential had worked in its initial iteration in March 2025.

> We're more or less keeping it the same. We kind of know what worked well last time. We're definitely having it in the same location, because I think when we thought about it, we kind of agreed where it was, and having access to that space that was just for us and then being up the road from the beach, we thought about the activities that seemed to work well as well, so I feel like there was nothing about the format that needed changing, because it seemed the kids responded really well to it (TFNW1)

> I couldn't of anything to say to make it any better, because every time you walk into a room, there's always a brew there, and a pastry, and a smile and a friend waiting to talk to you, and then they say, “Let us know how we can make it better” (P5)

> It overlooks the sea… It was very well organised; the food was all prepared for us (FSFC1)

However, for transparency it is useful to note that Family Support Foster Carers did raise ‘*a few teething problems*’.

> Clearer instructions from (TFNW identifier withheld), because… like car seats… she said, well, I’ll put you with these children, and you with these children… And then we go and do these activities, and then that child doesn’t want to come to do that with this adult. So, they would stay, and then we didn’t actually know what was going on. It was a bit of a muddle (FSFC identifier withheld)

> I think they’re really well-run. We had a few teething problems, I suppose over the three-day one, but nobody had ever done it before. The children were happy, and that was the main thing, and they’re happy and safe… I think we learnt from that and probably will go forward in a different way next time… I think we… us foster care or family support; I think we would need to be more aware possibly of what was going on. That’s all, you know, that was information, just always information, isn’t it? We did have a bit of a meeting afterwards and aired some things. So, yeah, there was an opportunity. They would make an opportunity to talk about these things… I mean, it’s all a learning curve, isn’t it? We’re all learning (FSFC identifier withheld)

These issues seemed to be relatively minor, and no parents or children were impacted to the extent that this was raised in their accounts, and it was emphasised that the children were ‘*happy and safe’*. A three-day residential with multiple activities attended by a range of families necessitates significant planning and preparation, and there are organisational challenges to delivering a perfect stay. It is useful that Family Support Foster Carers felt able to share issues with car seats and the need to clearly communicate information. The accounts note that this was discussed with The Fostering Network team and social worker, and that everyone was on a ‘*learning curve’*, indicating that these concerns were taken on board and responded to; and The Fostering Network in Wales confirmed that adaptions were made following these points which then featured in the design and implementation of the later family events.

In addition to the residentials and Family Days, wellbeing sessions for parents were also developed.

> We're looking at having a more informal coffee morning every so often, so the parents still get the chance to meet up. [TFNW2] also done a couple of sessions just for parents, like we had a wreath-making session in the lead up to Christmas. I think there was something else as well that I couldn't go to. But again, it's nice for there to be things that are just about the adults as well, and about them as people. I think sometimes you can get so caught up, can't you, in being… a parent, but you forget you’re actually a person as well (FSFC3)

> We did a sound bath, but we did that with the parents as well. So just to promote that inclusivity, really, that we're all in this together. I think they appreciate that (SW2)

> We've done wellbeing, we did sound bath, it's for parents, but we all tagged along… a big gong… lying down with facemasks on and blankets… it was amazing, really amazing (FSFC2)

The '*coffee morning'* (FSFC3) was a planned event and the '*sound bath*' (SW2; FSFC2) was later in the Step Up Step Down programme, when SW2 was in place, and as such with the timing of the interviews, this may reflect the absence of parents' perspectives on this session. However, bringing together the adults involved in Step Up Step Down, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and The Fostering Network staff, in a social event focussed on wellbeing, rather than only in the training sessions discussed in Chapter Eight, promoted a sense of '*inclusivity… that we're all in this together*' (SW2). This resonates with the earlier accounts of a Step Up Step Down community where there is a '*very level playing field*' (FSFC5) where '*everyone can come together*' (FSFC3). Furthermore, as FSFC3 noted, social events for parents can provide an opportunity for parents to be reminded that as well as being a parent they are '*actually a person as well*', with their own needs and wellbeing to consider.

Overall, the Family Days, residentials and wellbeing sessions for parents received positive feedback. They provided new opportunities and access to experiences for families that had not been previously available, encouraged the development of friendships and support networks and created new memories for families and children that they could share with their wider networks. In addition to the events facilitated in the Step Up Step Down programme, families were also introduced to wider community activities and supports, which will be the focus of the next section.

7.5 Community Activities and Supports

In the evaluation of the Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 47) noted that there was a 'focus throughout the programme to ensure that families have a connection with their local community where at all possible'. This was also a feature of the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down, and it is important to note that some of the enrichment activities that formed part of the Family Days, residentials and Step Up Step Down events were carried forward by parents outside of the programme.

> You know, we went to our first pantomime ever… [Child] and I, I'd never been to a pantomime… with Step Up Step Down and, you know, within a week, I bought us another set of tickets. It all changed, because we had a blast. It was absolutely fantastic… places to take [child] as well that I wouldn't have been aware of (P5)

> We did a weekend in the summer last year up near St David's, and it was interesting. Well, the one pointed thing for me was we got to do more of that, we need to do more camping, because that's the first time in our lives that we went to bed at the same time, and in the same room. Well, we slept in the same room when she was a baby, but you know, it's the first time we looked at each other and said, "Goodnight, [child's name]." Goodnight, [parent]. Love you". Love you too", off goes the light, and I was like, "That's what it's going to be like every time we go camping". [Child] and I will be camping there this summer, yeah, because she loves it there, and we've gone there. We have gone there on our own, and

> after going up there with Step Up. See, they brought us there, and then we went back on our own... It's like a little bit of heaven (P5)

Parent 5 noted that without going with Step Up Step Down, they '*wouldn't have been aware of*' places to visit such as the theatre, but they then adopted this practice and bought '*another set of tickets*'. Similarly, the Step Up Step Down camping trip introduced the parent to '*a little bit of heaven*' and a return visit had been planned. Continuing to engage with these types of activities is particularly important given the reported benefits for families of engaging both the arts and the natural environment (Gordon 2019; Mannay et al. 2022b)

Earlier in this section it was noted that the Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 5) evaluation suggested that 'financial pressures and anxiety around managing family challenges in a new setting' were barriers to families having a short break, and this was also apparent in Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. However, the account of Parent 5 suggests that a further barrier is a lack of awareness of local activities that are suitable for children and families, and the introduction to new experiences in Step Up Step Down broadened awareness, enabling these activities to be adopted as aspects of the families, now expanded, leisure interests. Accordingly, the experience of being part of Step Up Step Down had a direct positive influence on the families ongoing engagement with enrichment activities in the local community.

In reference to Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 5) documented that the programme identified 'sources of support for the children within the local community' and that a budget was 'available to assist families to access provision' such as 'a resilience scheme through Sports Changes Life, sports clubs..., Lego build club, YMCA Youth Clubs and holiday schemes'. This was also a feature of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire.

> So, it could be play therapy, it could be counsellors for the parents, it could be Tai Chi classes, it could be dance classes, gymnastics, whatever. One of our little ones has just been going to like Stagecoach drama and singing classes to try and help their confidence. Just basically if the families want to get involved in anything, or they feel that there is anything that would support them, like the mum that said that actually she feels a lot better after she's done a bit of Tai Chi, she feels, you know, a bit calmer and able to manage things, if we can support with anything like that, we will, like guitar lessons, drum lessons, or anything really, anything that comes up, and then practical support. As an example, [FSFC] yesterday was calling us all about trampolines, because one of her families, she thinks they'd like a trampoline. So, we'll sort out a trampoline [TFNW1]
>
> Driving lessons [TFNW2]

Importantly, these activities were supported by a budget that was embedded in the initial proposal, and a justification was made for why these funds were required, and the overall benefits of investing these funds to achieve more positive outcomes for families and avoid children being removed from the family home.

> We've got the budget ... really keen, that we kind of hold those things in our budget for those reasons, because I think they get stripped out of services a lot... I see it in [different LA] they have to go for resource panels, then a big group of like senior leaders all make a decision about like whether this child can have therapy... I like that this programme comes with all of that embedded in it, and that's why when we hope to sustain the programme

> that, you know, the Local Authority will still invest in that, because I still feel like even if sometimes in my head, I think, “Oh, it sounds like a really large budget”, it's probably not in the grand scheme of things of what we're trying to achieve. Like I said, if we can keep the children out of care, which for some of our families, you know, potentially there is one mum, I could say she's teetering on the border, that's four children that need to be placed of all different ages. That's a huge amount of money, so actually, what we're really asking for them to invest is nothing in the grand scheme of things, and all of those things are really important, because they don't have like equity of access to after-school groups [TFNW1]

The provision of play therapy through Step Up Step Down funding was discussed by Parent 7, who had found this particularly useful given the delays and barriers to accessing free to access provision.

> [Child]’s been referred to CAMHS three times, and three times have completely refused to see her, and they’re the people we need her to go to see… So, we’re at a standstill at the minute, but like I said, Step Up Step Down, like [TFNW2] has arranged for [child] to start play therapy. She done that for us, we’ve met the therapists, and she… we were saying she’s starting her first session today, so we’re hoping it’s… [a] foot in the door with something. Anything at this point (P7)

In addition to providing funding for therapies and other activities, the Step Up Step Down programme was also able to introduce families to external support organisations that they had not been aware of before starting the programme.

> Through Step Up Step Down, I’ve been involved with [different organisation], which I had no contact with them. And they’ve [Step Up Step Down] got me in… And we went to Bluestone for the day with them. And that was very good. The kids loved that, absolutely loved it… And I didn’t know anything about them, and through Step Up Step Down, have got me involved (P6)

Parents also reported independently making wider community connections as they moved through the Step Up Step Down programme.

> Yeah, we've got the [Group Name] … every Monday, there's a meeting. That's not Step Up Step Down. That's a completely separate… [parents] that all have kids that are on autistic spectrum somehow, and just talking about that, “How you doing? Grab yourself a brew”, and there's never a schedule of what we're going to be talking about. It's literally just we're going to all sit amongst each other for an hour and a half and natter, and there will be a few books out there that I find quite interesting, educational, and because there's always something else you can do. There's always something else you can learn (P5)

> [Child] got me going to church. The last time I went to church… I was never going back to church… But [child]'s got me going. She kept mentioning it, kept wanting to go, so we go. And we go when she wants to go. We don't go regularly. I say, “What do you want to do today? Do you want to do that or do that?” So, it's always her choice (P5)

> We've got two parents in the group, and they've both got children with disabilities, both really lack confidence, and they've built up a friendship. They'll meet up and they go to autism awareness groups together, whereas before, they wouldn't have done that (SW2)

These wider community connections beyond the Step Up Step Down programme are valuable because they provide families with sustainable networks as they move forward, which can act as a safety net, offering social contact, support, enrichment activities and new experiences for both parents and children.

7.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has evidenced how children valued the Nurture Group, Girls Group and summer residential, noting their enjoyment and how they positioned these activities using phrases such as '*loved*', '*happy*' and '*fun*'. As children were not involved in the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland (Flood and Thompson 2020), it was particularly important to ensure that they were able to contribute their perspectives in the evaluation of the pilot in Pembrokeshire.

The accounts of adults, The Fostering Network Staff, social workers and parents, confirmed the children's enjoyment of the Nurture Group and evidenced how the learning within the Nurture Group sessions contributed to their ability to better understand, discuss and regulate their emotions. The children benefitted from the information shared in these sessions as well as equipment that they took home with them and continued to engage with, such as breathing whistles and yoga mats. The facilitators were also responsive to the needs of children and innovative in designing and modifying activities to encourage engagement and learning. Additionally, parents explained that their children's attendance at the Nurture Group provided an opportunity for them to have some time for themselves and to provide individual attention for their other children.

In relation to Family Days, residentials and wellbeing days for parents, again the feedback from The Fostering Network Staff, social workers, Family Support Foster Carers and parents was extremely positive. The Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 5) evaluation Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, reported that many of the families had 'financial pressures and anxiety around managing family challenges in a new setting', which meant that they had not had family breaks. This was also a challenge for families in Pembrokeshire, but, once involved in Step Up and Step Down, these financial barriers were alleviated and families could enjoy new activities and experiences. Parents' guilt was minimised as their children were able to access similar experiences to their peers and share these experiences at school. Anxieties around managing family challenges were also reduced because of the supportive relational aspects of the Step Up Step Down programme, which was the focus of Chapter Six. Parents discussed feeling supported by the Step Up Step Down community, explaining that they did not feel judged because of their children's neurodiversity or behaviours, and they grew in confidence in engaging together in the varied activities and visits to local attractions.

Family Days and the residentials fostered a strong sense of community, and they helped children and parents to develop their relationships with each other within their family, as well as strengthening bond with other families. These activities were also open to all siblings in the family, wider family networks and where appropriate the friends of parents, and this openness was highly valued by parents. Social events focussed on wellbeing for parents, also promoted a sense of inclusivity, as parents were joined in these activities by Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and members of The Fostering Network in Wales.

Beyond the provision of activities with the Step Up Step Down programme, families were able to access Tai Chi classes, dance classes, gymnastics and therapy sessions because there was a budget within Step Up Step Down to cover these expenses. Parents were also provided with links to other charitable organisations and one parent also discussed independently accessing community support groups and local community provisions. Parents reported continuing with the enrichment activities that they were introduced to in Step Up Step Down such as the theatre and engagements with the natural environment, now that they were aware of these forms of activity and their benefits. These connections with external networks and activities were important in building sustainable supports for families following the Step Up Step Down programme.

There were some very minor points for improvement with the organisation of the initial residential in March 2025 and the related sharing of information. However, these were positioned as part of the learning curve, and The Fostering Network in Wales confirmed that adaption and continual refinement and improvement were centralised and incorporated in later activities. Overall, the Nurture Group, Girls Group, summer residentials, Family Days and wellbeing sessions for parents were regarded positively and beneficial connections were also established in the wider local community. The following chapter, Chapter Eight, will focus on the training provided for parents and Family Support Foster Carers, which was also a central element of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire.

8 Training

8.1 Introduction

This chapter is the last of the set of the four findings chapters and it focusses on the training provided for parents and Family Support Foster Carers in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. The chapter introduces EMBRACE and BOND, two of the central training courses for parents, and outlines the course content and the feedback provided by parents and Family Support Foster Carers in the related end of course evaluation sheets. Data drawn from the qualitative interviews with parents (P), Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC), social workers (SW) and staff from the Fostering Network (TFNW) are then presented to provide more nuanced insights. The chapter considers the organisation and reception of EMBRACE and BOND before reflecting on training more widely. There is a discussion of the importance of creating a supportive learning environment, the style of delivery of training materials, the ways in which parents implemented learning into their everyday practices, and the experiences of Family Support Foster Carers. The chapter evidences the value of the training in relation to parents' development of knowledge, skills and confidence in responding to and supporting their children, as well as illustrating how the training sessions helped to build a sense of connection and community.

8.2 EMBRACE and BOND – Overview and Course Evaluations

The Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire provided a range of training for parents and Family Support Foster Carers. This section will outline two the key training programmes for parents EMBRACE, which is based on PACE (Golding and Hughes 2012) and BOND. The outline descriptions of EMBRACE and BOND will be followed by an overview of feedback collected by The Fostering Network in Wales from parents in EMBRACE following the final session of the training, and from both parents and Family Support Foster Carers at the end of the BOND training.

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, it was noted that Family Support Foster Carers are responsible for supporting the families through 'mentoring; accompaniment for e.g. at residentials, outdoor activities and occasionally meetings with other professionals; provision of short breaks; and role modelling positive parenting' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 17). In relation to training, it was reported that Family Support Foster Carers sometimes accompanied 'parents to the training to introduce them or the Programme Officer' and that The Fostering Network Head of Operations would 'meet parents prior to the training to explain what it is about and make it easier for them to come along' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 41).

Therefore, the extent to which Family Support Foster Carers attend training for parents, alongside parents, was not clear in this evaluation (Flood and Thompson 2020), However, it was clarified that Family Support Foster Carers in Northern Ireland do in fact accompany parents to all training sessions (Irwin 2026). Similarly, in the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down both parents and their Family Support Foster Carers generally attended all of the training sessions together. This

practice was highly valued by parents and Family Support Foster Carers, which will be discussed in more detail in section 8.3, which draws on the data generated in the qualitative interviews.

8.2.1 EMBRACE Parents Group - PACE

The EMBRACE Parents Group was delivered in Pembrokeshire by The Fostering Network in Wales between Monday the 9th of September and Monday the 21st of October 2024. The sessions were attended by eight parents, and the seven sessions were delivered in two hour slots. Parents were invited to stay longer and share food and drinks, and the majority of parents engaged with this social element of EMBRACE. The content of the sessions had an emphasis on the PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) model.

PACE was developed by Clinical Psychologist Dan Hughes, and it focusses on building safe, trusting, and meaningful relationships with children and young people that have experienced trauma or attachment difficulties (Golding and Hughes 2012). PACE is intended to assist parents and carers to stay curious about their children's emotional experiences, to accept and empathise with their children's experiences and to find ways to enjoy their relationship with the children they care for through playfulness (Golding 2020).

In addition to the focus on PACE the later sessions were centred on emotional intelligence and wellbeing. There was an emphasis on recognising emotions, considering the origin of these emotions, and how emotions impact on behaviours. Activities with parents included role modelling emotional management for children to help them develop emotional intelligence. The seven weekly sessions offered parents an opportunity to engage with the following topics.

- Parenting styles and therapeutic parenting
- Introduction to PACE
- Playfulness
- Acceptance
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Emotional Intelligence
- Wellbeing

It should be noted that the final Wellbeing session did not run as long as planned as a number of issues were discussed that had an impact on the group. Therefore, the facilitators finished the session earlier and instead took the group out for brunch. They also provided parents with gifts to encourage them to take time for themselves, and these gifts included hot chocolate, biscuits, bath salts and candles.

The EMBRACE Parents Group was not visited by the research team. The Fostering Network in Wales team felt that there would not be adequate space within the sessions for researchers to generate feedback with the parents. Additionally, the facilitators aimed to create a safe space for parents to share their experiences, and this may have been disrupted if the research team had visited the EMBRACE sessions. However, to record in situ reflections from the parents, the facilitators asked parents to complete an EMBRACE feedback form in the final session and anonymised versions were shared with the research team. The feedback form was completed by eight parents and the numerical responses to the set statements are presented in Table 11. It is important to note that

the numerical identifiers used in the tables in this chapter do not correspond with the identifiers used for interview participants as they were assigned randomly to the evaluation forms.

Closed Scale Response Statements (1 low 5 high)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
I have found the sessions helpful.	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
I have enjoyed coming to the sessions each week.	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
I feel like [facilitators] have been supportive.	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
[Facilitators] have made it easier to attend the sessions.	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
I have learnt a new approach and feel confident putting it into practice at home.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4

Table 11: Parents Scaled Feedback Responses – EMBRACE Training - October 2024

As illustrated in Table 11, there were 40 responses to the statements and five of these were ranked 4 with the remaining 35 ranked with a score of 5. The responses to the statements indicated a high level of satisfaction with the sessions, in terms of enjoyment, helpfulness, the support from facilitators and learning new approaches that parents could implement in their own homes.

Despite the closed scale response style of the questions in the EMBRACE feedback forms, some parents annotated their numerical responses. For example, in response to the statement 'I have enjoyed coming to the sessions each week' parent 2 added '*very much so as it gets me out the house + meet people*', and on the following two statements they added '*very*' and '*very much so*'. In response to the statement 'I feel like [facilitators] have been supportive', parent 4 added '*the amount of support I have received is incredible. Two amazing ladies!*', and in response to the same statement parent 5 added '*incredibly supportive*'. These annotations could suggest that some parents wanted to express that their experiences of enjoyment and support went beyond, and were not effectively represented by, their selection of the highest scale option of 5. There were also positive responses in the free text questions as illustrated in Table 12.

Open Text Response Question	Free Text Response
Could the EMBRACE course be improved?	Parent 1 – [None] Parent 2 – [None] Parent 3 – No, they cover everything, and you can ask if not. Parent 4 – No, for me, I feel I have learnt so much. Parent 5 – [None] Parent 6 – I'm not sure here. Parent 7 - No Parent 8 - [None]
Have you found any aspect particularly enjoyable?	Parent 1 - Socialising Parent 2 – All of it – especially play – I don't do it often enough. Parent 3 – Yes, very good. Parent 4 – Yes, learning about pace and the regulation system were extremely useful. Parent 5 – Learning and understanding PACE, understanding empathy + emotional regulation. Parent 6 – It all became more enjoyable as we went on. Parent 7 – Listening to everyone else and how they deal with problems. Parent 8 – It has been good to be reminded of these skills when life is so busy, and everyone is so tire[d]. It's all easily forgotten. [* this was written at the bottom of the feedback sheet, but it best fitted with this question]
Have you found any aspect particularly challenging?	Parent 1 - Committing Parent 2 - No Parent 3 - No Parent 4 – The only challenging thing is speaking out loud in class. Parent 5 - I've found the social aspect challenging but [facilitators] and others have made me feel at ease. Parent 6 - No Parent 7 - No Parent 8 – [None]

Table 12: Parents Open Text Feedback Responses – EMBRACE Training - October 2024

In response to the question 'Could the EMBRACE course be improved?' none of the parents suggested any points of improvement, and reinforcing the benefits of the course parent 3 commented '*they [the facilitators] cover everything, and you can ask if not*', while parent noted '*I feel I have learnt so much*'. The value of learning was also reported by parents in relation to the question 'Have you found any aspect particularly enjoyable?'. For example, parent 4 wrote '*learning about PACE and the regulation system were extremely useful*', parent 5 mentioned '*Learning and*

understanding PACE, understanding empathy + emotional regulation', and parent 8 wrote that it was '*good to be reminded of these skills'*.

As well as learning from the course content, parent 7 reported the value of '*Listening to everyone else and how they deal with problems*', '*socialising*' was mentioned by parent 1 and parent 2 emphasised the benefits of '*play*'. As noted in Table 11, parents noted a high level of support from the facilitators and other parents, and this may explain why in Table 12, parent 6 felt that '*It all became more enjoyable as we went on*'. This resonates with the responses to the question 'Have you found any aspect particularly challenging?'. Five parents did not report any challenges but parent 1 responded '*commitment*' and parent 4 wrote '*The only challenging thing is speaking out loud in class*'. However, parent 5 stated '*I've found the social aspect challenging but [facilitators] and others have made me feel at ease*', again suggesting that the facilitation of the sessions enable a supportive and safe space for parents to overcome any challenges to working in a group setting.

Overall, the feedback from parents indicated that they both benefitted from learning about the PACE model and from interacting with other parents in a group session. The learning focussed on emotional regulation was also welcomed, resonating with the feedback from one of the participants in the Girls Group (see section 7.2.2), indicating that this is a valuable resource for both children and parents. Importantly, as noted in Table 11, parents reported that as well as learning a new approach, they felt confident about putting this learning into practice in their own homes.

The social element of the group work and the support of the facilitators, as evidenced in Table 12, was key in the success of the EMBRACE Parents Group. The provision of food and drink may also have assisted in building social relationships as this has been reported as a facilitator to bonding in previous studies (see Rees 2019; Mannay et al. 2018) and in the Pembrokeshire Nurture Group that was discussed in the Interim Report for Evaluation of Step Up Step Down (Rees et al. 2024) and in section 7.2.2 of this report. Overall, the written feedback was extremely positive, and EMBRACE training will be discussed in more detail in section 8.3, which introduces data from the qualitative interviews.

8.2.2 BOND

The BOND Parents Group was delivered in Pembrokeshire by The Fostering Network in Wales between Monday the 13th of January and Monday the 10th of March 2025. The sessions were attended by ten parents but only eight of these were present in the final session to complete the evaluation feedback form. The sessions were delivered in two hour slots. Parents were invited to stay longer and share coffee and pastries, and the majority of parents engaged with this social element. The sessions were all scheduled to take place between 10am and 12 noon, but the final session was held between 11am and 1pm due to room booking constraints. Lunch was provided in this final session, and parents were offered adult journals to encourage them to be reflexive, to focus and to consider ideas around gratitude.

The BOND training focussed on attachment theory, building attachment, trauma and brain development, and it aims to 'enhance skills and confidence in responding to complex behaviour and to build nurturing and secure relationships with children' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 41). As with the EMBRACE Parents Group, the BOND training was not visited by the research team but to record in situ reflections from the parents and Family Support Foster Carers, the facilitators

asked them to complete a BOND feedback form in the final session. The feedback form was completed by eight parents and four Family Support Foster Carers. Parents numerical responses to the set statements are presented in Table 13.

Closed Scale Response Statements (1 low 5 high)	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8
I have enjoyed coming to the sessions each week.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
I have found the BOND material helpful.	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
I feel [facilitators] have been supportive.	5	5	5*	5	5+ ++ +	5	5	5 (10)

Table 13: Parents Scaled Feedback Responses – BOND Training – March 2025

As illustrated in Table 13, there were 24 responses to the statements, and all of these were ranked with a score of 5. As with the EMBRACE feedback forms, some parents annotated their numerical responses in the BOND feedback with parent 3 adding '*without a doubt*' to the final question and adding a star to the score of 5. Similarly, Parent 5 added four plus signs to their score of 5 and Parent 7 changed the score of 5, adding 10 in brackets. This positivity was extended in parents' responses to the free text questions as illustrated in Table 14.

Open Text Response Question	Free Text Response
Do you think the BOND course be improved?	P1 – No P2 – I can't think of anything I would change. P3 – No, what [facilitators] have covered has been amazing. P4 – It's very satisfactory. P5 – Very helpful and satisfactory. P6 - No P7 – No P8 – I don't think it can. The topics covered have been so informative and helpful.
Have you found any aspect particularly enjoyable?	P1 – Yes, all of it. P2 – Outdoor group activities. P3 – Blocked care P4 – The ADHD talk was very informative, and the outdoor activities were very enjoyable. P5 – The outdoor activities, very enjoyable, especially paddle boarding, and the ADHD talk was brilliant. P6 – Just meeting up and sharing our experiences, it's good to hear other stories. P7 – All of it. P8 - Blocked care.
Have you found anything particularly challenging?	P1 – No P2 – No P3 – When we was learning about attachments. P4 – Not really. P5 – No P6 – No – Thank you so much 😊 P7 – No P8 – Initially, I found it hard not taking the course content personally. I found it hard to learn about the different types of care and how the child feels internally. This course has given me a new found sense of empathy in dealing with my children.

Table 14: Parents Open Text Feedback Responses - BOND Training - March 2025

In response to the question 'Could the BOND course be improved?' none of the parents suggested any points of improvement and they added further comments that the course was '*very satisfactory*' (parent 4), '*very helpful and satisfactory*' (parent 5) and that the topics covered were '*informative and helpful*' (parent 8) and '*amazing*' (parent 3). The question, 'Have you found any aspect particularly enjoyable?' was responded to by two parents who indicated that they enjoyed all aspects of the course, '*all of it*' (parent 1 and 7). Other parents selected particular aspects of the sessions, including outdoor group activities (parent 2 and 5), '*blocked care*' (parent 3 and 8), and the talk on Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was described as '*very informative*' (P4) and '*brilliant*' (parent 5). Parent 6 wrote that their most enjoyable aspect was '*just meeting up*

and sharing our experiences, it's good to hear other stories'. This feedback comment resonates with the discussions of the importance of 'Parents Supporting Parents' in section 6.7, and these aspects will be returned to in section 8.3.

The responses to the question, 'Have you found anything particularly challenging?', had the response of '*No*' or '*Not really*' from six of the eight parents, with parent 6 adding, '*Thank you so much* 😊'. However, parent 3 found '*learning about attachments'* challenging and parent 8 wrote, '*Initially, I found it hard not taking the course content personally. I found it hard to learn about the different types of care and how the child feels internally'*. Nonetheless, in completing the training, parent 8 reported that '*This course has given me a new found sense of empathy in dealing with my children*'. Therefore, despite the usefulness of the training it is important to consider the previous experiences of the parents and the ways in which discussing theories of attachment may be a difficult topic of discussion, particularly when these trigger associations with parents' childhoods and relationships with their own children. The sensitivities around delivering this material were carefully considered by The Fostering Network in Wales staff and social workers and as discussed in further detail, in section 8.3.1, adaptions were made to both the ordering of training and in communicating an emphasis on building attachments.

Family support Foster Carers also completed feedback forms as illustrated in Tables 15 and 16.

Closed Scale Response Statements (1 low 5 high)	FSFC - 1	FSFC - 2	FSFC - 3	FSFC - 4
I have found the BOND material helpful.	5	3	5	4
I have enjoyed coming to the sessions each week.	5	5	5	5
I feel [facilitators] have been supportive.	5	5	5	5

Table 15: FSFC Scaled Feedback Responses – BOND Training – March 2025

As illustrated in Table 15, there were 12 responses to the statements and one of these were ranked 4 and one was ranked as 3. The remaining 10 were ranked with a score of 5. The responses to the statements indicated a high level of satisfaction with the sessions and the support from facilitators, which were all given the highest rating of 5 by the four participating Family Support Foster Carers. The helpfulness of the BOND material was rated as 5 by two Family Support Foster Carers, with the others rating at 4 and 3.

The slightly lower response rates on the helpfulness of the training, in comparison to the rankings assigned by parents, may reflect that Family Support Foster Carers had already received similar forms of training in their role as Foster Carers. As discussed in section 8.3.4, for some Family Support Foster Carers attending the training was not simply about acquiring new knowledge but reinforcing previous training and being present to support and build relationships with parents. The importance of building relationships was also noted in the free text response documented in Table 16, with Family Support Foster Carer 2 and 3, writing that the most enjoyable aspects were '*Getting*

to know participants better' and '*Getting to know everyone*'. There was a suggestion that '*more videos*' could be beneficial and one of the Family Support Foster Carers was not able to attend the whole session, but it is not clear if this referred to only the final session where timings needed to be adjusted.

Open Text Response Question	Free Text Response
Do you think the BOND course be improved?	FSFC – 1 – Not sure FSFC – 2 - Yes FSFC – 3 – More videos FSFC – 4 – [Blank – no response]
Have you found any aspect particularly enjoyable?	FSFC – 1 – [Name] talking to us about living with ADHD FSFC – 2 – Getting to know participants better FSFC – 3 - Yes FSFC – 4 – Getting to know everyone
Have you found anything particularly challenging?	FSFC – 1 – Trying not to eat all the chocolates and pastries FSFC – 2 – Not being available for the whole session FSFC – 3 - No FSFC – 4 - [Blank – no response]

Table 16: FSFC Open Text Feedback Responses - BOND Training - March 2025

This section outlined two of the key training courses for parents, EMBRACE (with a focus on PACE) and BOND. The feedback collated in the final sessions of this training indicated that parents enjoyed the programmes, gained knowledge and developed new understandings that could support them in their relationships with their children. The relational aspects of social support, developing relationships, getting to know and feeling comfortable with the Step Up Step Down community were also key affordances noted by both parents and Family Support Foster Carers. It was particularly important to create this safe and supported space, through interactions and time to chat and share food at the end of the sessions given the sensitivities around the materials delivered. The following section will draw on the qualitative interview data to provide more nuance to the organisation and reception of the EMBRACE, BOND and other forms of training.

8.3 Qualitative Interview Reflections

Whilst the previous section discussed the responses to feedback forms distributed by The Fostering Network in Wales in situ, this section draws on the data generated in qualitative interviews which reflected on experiences of the training provided in the Step Up Step Down programme. It begins with a focus on EMBRACE and BOND, which were core training courses in both Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland and the Pembrokeshire pilot as outlined in section 8.2. There is then a focus on how training facilitators created supportive spaces for the training, the delivery of the sessions, and how the learning garnered in training informed parenting practice.

Lastly, there is a discussion of Family Support Foster Carers perspectives on the training made available within the Step Up Step Down programme.

8.3.1 Reflections on EMBRACE and BOND

As noted in the previous section, the EMBRACE parents' group had an emphasis on PACE (Golding and Hughes 2012). Therefore, when discussing the training that was the focus of section 8.2, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales generally referred to this particular training and its future iterations as PACE and BOND. This sub-section will focus on these two forms of training before a discussion of training provision more broadly is introduced in the following sub-sections.

TFNW1 offered an overview of the content and applicability of PACE and BOND.

> We talk a lot about PACE, and how parents can use it at home in real life situations and [parent name] and [parent name] are like my favourite people to speak to about it, because they loved it. They took away exactly what you would want parents to take away from it, and they have put it into their lives, and they're seeing it making changes, which is really lovely. PACE is very much one of those things that I think if you're keen to take it on board, you will take it on board, you'll try it and you'll see a difference... So, I think that one makes like a really massive difference to most parents (TFNW1)

> BOND is more about... attachment and trauma and again, brain development, but we talk a lot about adult attachment as well, and it was in that first one that... a few of the parents were just like immediately... when we're talking about attachment theory... "Well, I didn't have my kids for the first couple of years", or, "I was [other issues] the first couple of years, so my kids are screwed up now". So, we'd sort of altered the material a little bit then. So, in the next week, I'd added a lot about, you know, how actually we can build attachments, and the first two years is not the be all and end all for everybody. That's just part of the theory (TFNW1)

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, one Family Support Foster Carer also highlighted concerns about the initial, BOND, training as 'it opened up wounds from the past for some parents which can be very upsetting' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 42). The team in Northern Ireland made changes to the course when these concerns were raised, to avoid parents being overwhelmed by the content (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 42); and as TFNW1 noted adaptions in the delivery of BOND were also made in Pembrokeshire. However, as well as making adaptions, in the Pembrokeshire pilot of Step Up Step Down the ordering of the training was reversed so that as documented in section 8.2, the EMBRACE training (focussing on PACE) was delivered between September and October 2024, two months before BOND was introduced in January 2025.

> TFNW2 made a decision early on that she wanted to reverse the courses. So, the plan in Northern Ireland is that they do BOND, the attachment kind of focussed one first, and then they do the EMBRACE course. And that's like the PACE and the kind of lighter course, I suppose in terms of seriousness and heaviness. But TFNW2 really felt that if the parents didn't know each other and didn't have a relationship, doing the course about their own childhoods and about difficult topics and trauma would be extremely difficult, so she felt quite strongly about that. So, I thought, yeah, let's go along with that. And we changed the

> delivery to do EMBRACE first. And I really feel that that was the absolute best decision we could have made because as I said, the second course, they really opened up and spoke to each other, really were able to reflect and kind of allow themselves to be vulnerable because it was a group that knew each other, whereas we wouldn't have had that experience if we'd have done it the other way around (SW1)

The reversal of the training with PACE preceding BOND was positioned as beneficial, with SW1 noting that it '*was the absolute best decision*' to support the building of group relationships before introducing more difficult material related to childhood experiences and trauma. However, on reflection TFNW1 could also see that there may have also been benefits to beginning with BOND and moving to PACE.

> Really like concerned about deep-diving early, and that's why I did the switch, but then part of me also thinks because we're having resistance from parents about PACE and adopting some of those... maybe actually, on reflection, do they need to go and deep-dive first? I say deep dive. Like it's looking at their own stuff, so I feel like BOND helps them look at their own stuff a bit more, and maybe they'd be slightly better prepared then, to take on some of the elements of PACE (TFNW1)

Yet, some parents discussed undertaking training on multiple occasions, continuing with these courses even when they had moved through Step Up Step Down and no longer had a dedicated Family Support Social Worker.

> And so, again, right from the beginning, grab yourself a cup of coffee and a Danish [pastry], sit down at a table amongst other people, you know, and that felt really good, and I was learning things. And I know that you don't learn everything the first time, every time, or any time. So, when I came back to, after doing a year, I was like, "Well, I want to keep coming back", because even when I'm going back, I still pick up on the things that I might have missed the first time... when they're doing the Step Up Step Down, I'll find out where they're meeting. If they're meeting up there on a particular day, I'll just go jump in on their class... I really appreciate that (P5)

As Parent 5 noted, parents do not necessarily '*learn everything the first time'*, and the advantage of '*soft endings*' was discussed by TFNW2 to illustrate how parents who had maybe not fully understood or engaged with PACE or BOND were able to return to the sessions at a later point in time.

> But I think also the other thing is, because we have the soft endings though, there may become a point in time where, like you've said, you just go back again and almost start that cycle. So, it doesn't really matter if they maybe haven't engaged the first time. There's the potential that they can continue, come again and go that way (TFNW2)

There was also evidence that parents who attended PACE were both learning about and adopting practices from the PACE model. As TFNW1 noted earlier in this section, some parents who engaged with PACE training '*took away exactly what you would want parents to take away from it, and they have put it into their lives, and they're seeing it making changes*'. A parent also described PACE as '*an eye-opener*' (P1):

> Yeah, it [PACE] was like, it was good, it was an eye-opener… I knew there was different like parent styles to be had, so they talked about the different styles of parenting (P1)

Parents' discussions about what they enjoyed and learned in the training provided in the Step Up Step programme will be the focus of sections 8.3.2 and 8.3.3; but the following account from a parent is included here because they explicitly named PACE and BOND, and the difficulties encountered in the BOND sessions.

> PACE is really interesting, knowing about the different… like, how to regulate emotions, especially when you've got children on the spectrum… It was really interesting. The BOND subject is a bit harder for me… to sort of listen to, because there has been a lot of trauma surrounding our families over the last seven, eight years, but the last 12 months have been very difficult… But the group, the way the course content is presented is… doesn't make us feel guilty, but it allows us to actually be, it's okay, it's okay that this has happened, and it's helped us identify things with our children that we've overlooked before… The delivery of the courses, it couldn't go any better. We've been on courses where we're made to feel guilty, and the blame is on us (P4)

The reflections of P4 align with the parents' comments on the feedback forms that were discussed in section 8.2, which also positioned BOND as challenging because of its focus on '*learning about attachments'* and '*different types of care and how the child feels internally*'. The feedback comments in section 8.2 also noted how the BOND course content impacted parents in relation to their personal histories, which P4 emphasises in relation to the '*trauma surrounding our families*'. This account, and the earlier reflections of SW1, suggest that the plan to reverse the delivery of training so that PACE preceded BOND may have better supported parents to engage in a group where supportive relationships had been established; and the ordering of content should be a key consideration in the delivery of training with future Step Up Step Down parents.

P4 did find the training useful as it helped them to better understand their children, and course was delivered in a way that ensured that parents were not blamed or made to feel guilty. Accordingly, the delivery of the courses, not just in terms of their content, but also the relational aspects that make the training a safe space are crucial considerations, which is the focus of the following subsection.

8.3.2 Creating Supportive Spaces for Learning

In section 8.2 it was noted that parents were invited to stay after the training sessions were complete and share coffee and pastries, and the sharing of food is an important aspect of building social relationships (Mannay et al. 2018; Rees 2019). Establishing connections, trust and a '*nice environment*' (TFNW1) and ensuring that parents felt comfortable and supported was the foundational underpinning of the effectiveness of the training and parents' engagement in the sessions.

> We do spend a lot of time drinking coffee and having a bit of a natter and just trying to have a nice environment as well… coming up, we've got one of our mums is going to do like a crochet and chat session at the end of BOND, just to sort of have that bit of decompression after it all, but also to come together and actually just hang out and chat about stuff that isn't attachment and trauma-related, because it is… it's quite heavy stuff, so we do a lot of

> activities with parents to sort of focus on their wellbeing as well, and get the foster carers to check in afterwards (TFNW1)
>
> It's not mundane, the way it's presented… they know the BOND content can be difficult, and they're always asking the parents… are they okay, do they wish to continue, do they want a break, and it's presented in quite a gentle manner, but also in the way where it does sort of hit home to you as well (P4)
>
> [In previous training] you have to speak, and you have to say why… why are you upset, why are you angry? Because we've gone into groups in tears some weeks, we've gone in not talking, we've gone in in tears, and they [Step Up Step Down] give us our time, and they just kind of leave us, and then they know that we'll come round, and they'll always approach us at the end and say like, you know, do you want to talk? And if we say no, like fine, no pressure, that's fine. But if we say yeah, they get the chairs out (P3)

The approach taken in BOND was also adopted across other training programmes and parents described the learning environment as '*informal*' (P3), '*relaxing*' (P6) and '*chill*' (P7).

> It's so informal. You go in, and we're always late to start, because everyone's just chatting, and if someone brings a baby in, it's game over. It's kind of funny, because we've just taken it upon ourselves, so all the parents automatically sit with their mentors. But it wasn't planned, it's just happened like that. And then throughout the whole course then, you know, we'll talk to that table, that table talk to our table, you know, it's just very… it's informal, but it's not chaotic (P3)
>
> Relaxing. It's not like formal [not like] a school. And no-one's any better than you. We're all in the situation, we all understand. They all understand what our children have got, and I think the courses are for them sort of children… You're there because you have got a problem with them… And they're there to help you, which I've never known anything like it (P6)
>
> It was chill as well, it wasn't like… like sit down, study this, have to speak. It was at your own pace, have a cuppa, have a chat, this is what we're going to do today, get involved if you want. Like it was so relaxed, and I didn't feel forced to speak. I was…… after a few of them, I was just being… I sat there and listened… And then, when I got comfortable enough listening I did… me and [partner] then did start sort of like chiming in, which was nice as well (P7)

In addition to the provision of food and attention to the wellbeing of parents, these accounts offer additional insights into how this '*nice environment*' (TFNW1) was established and maintained. As noted in section 8.2, in Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, the extent to which Family Support Foster Carers attend training with parents was not clarified with sufficient detail (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 41). However, in Pembrokeshire both parents and their Family Support Foster Carers generally attended all of the training sessions together. This proved to be an additional source of support for parents in training as they were able to '*sit with their mentors*'. Furthermore, parents were not '*forced to speak*' and they contributed to discussions only when they '*got comfortable enough*' (P7). The voluntary aspect of contributing, or not, in the sessions was also extended to expectations about parents attending the sessions, which encouraged attendance and engagement.

> It's never sort of, you have to come to this, otherwise you don't get to do anything else… I mean, me and my partner have said we're going to go to everything that is always either suggested or planned, but it's nice that… we don't feel like we have to, and because we don't feel like we have to, we're more sort of willing to… it's our decision. So, again, most of the stuff that we were doing with our social worker all through school and stuff, it was sort of no, we've done this, you have to do it, or if you don't do it, it's going to look bad on your part. So, we've always felt judged. But with [TFNW2] and [Step Up Step Down] it's sort of like, well, we're doing this, you can come if you want, it'll be great. This is what it's going to consist of, if you don't feel like coming, that's fine, we'll catch up with you. So… I think because we're given the choice and the option to not go, we're more likely to go (P7)

Parents who have experienced the involvement of social services will often have been in a position where their compliance has been mandated (Stevenson 2026), where '*you have to do it*' (P7). Accordingly, parents valued the agency that they were afforded in Step Up Step Down.

In Chapter Five, section 5.6, TFNW1 stated that whilst '*contract of expectations*' features in the Northern Ireland model, this was not adopted in Pembrokeshire. It is important to note that the '*contract of expectations*' in Northern Ireland in no way mandates parents to engage with all aspects of the programme and it is a voluntary agreement, which does not place any pressure on parents and respects their agency and individual choices (Irwin 2026). However, given the extensive benefits for parents who do attend, SW2 had considered whether it would be useful to have something like a '*contract of expectations*' in Wales that could encourage attendance.

> So, some parents… have felt… that they don't need to come to the courses, "we've done learning, I know what PACE is, so I don't need to engage in the groups", but by not engaging in the groups, they then haven't built relationships with other parents, they then don't feel as confident to come to community stuff and they miss out on other elements as well as that part. And that's quite difficult to kind of get across to them and I think that's why we've had to be a lot stricter from the start now to say you need to come to everything really (SW1)

Yet, the approach suggested by SW1, being '*stricter*' and setting an expectation to '*come to everything*' would not have worked for P7, who wanted to be '*given the choice*'. Therefore, arguably this element of choice enabled parents to have agency in decisions about participation in aspects of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire, including attending training' so that they felt that it was '*our decision*' (P7). Whilst agency and choice were valued, parents were also happy to have the structure of collaboratively agreed ground rules in place to ensure that training was a safe and respectful space for everyone who attended.

> So, confidentiality is a massive thing… what is said in the room stays in the room, because… it can be quite personal. You know, anybody is entitled to their own opinions. [SW1] said, you know, there's never no wrong… you've all got your own opinion… that's fine (P3)

> No mobile phones. Can be kept on noisy but only use them if… it's important… just the normal sort of rules, don't talk over anybody else, you know, be courteous, be understanding of other people's feelings, don't… shoot people's judgements down. If you don't agree with something, that's fine, just… don't be rude about it, and respect other people's feelings and respect other people's situations, and ultimately, we're all kind of in the same boat (P4)

> I mean, we know the sort of chain of command, if you like. We know the sort of organisation… of Step Up Step Down. But there's no egos within the group. There is no hierarchy. Everybody is just so human, and none of the mentors, none of the facilitators, nobody is awkward when it comes to talking with us. And… it just feels comfortable (P4)

The establishment of principles such as '*confidentiality*' (P3), everyone being '*entitled to their own opinions*' (P3), being '*courteous*' (P4) and '*understanding of other people's feelings*' (P4) all contributed to a conducive learning environment where participants felt that there was '*no hierarchy*' (P4). This supportive learning environment was also extended beyond the course sessions.

> If we miss a meeting… [TFNW2]'s made like a PowerPoint, or she's printed out sheets, they keep some for us. So, the next time [TFNW2] comes round to the house for a meeting, she brings the… stuff down that we've missed. So, we don't actually miss a session (P7)

> And then, [FSFC] relays it back to me, because I said that my brain works 20 to the dozen, and then I come home, my mind's fog, and then, [FSFC] says, "How did you get on with this course?" And I said, "Oh, that was really interesting, but I didn't understand so and so". And then, she goes through it with me… So, I'm getting second hand as well. Well, third. Because the person that says it, then [FSFC] repeats it to me… So… if I don't understand something I'll say to [FSFC] about it, you know, "I didn't quite understand that". And she says, "Oh, don't worry" …So, I've got support like that (P6)

> There was another one… it was just on the computer… [FSFC] was explaining, and [SW1]. And they explain it in easy terms, and then you can ask them questions, which they help you then. Like I say, "Oh, I am worried about [child] with so and so." And [SW1] would say, "That's quite natural. That's quite normal. That's nothing… you know? That's their body release, and…" I think, well, yeah, which I wouldn't have known. So, to me, it was a lifeline (P6)

Therefore, if parents missed a training session or did not fully understand the content, they were further supported by SW1 or their Family Support Foster Carer, and because they also attended the training themselves, they were able to offer a supportive individualised space for parents to engage or reengage with course content, which '*was a lifeline*' (P6). These accounts evidence the practices adopted to ensure a safe, respectful, welcoming and supportive environment for parents training sessions. However, it was not only the environment that acted to engage parents but also the approach to delivering the course content, which will be the focus of the following subsection.

8.3.2 Effective Course Delivery

Whilst pedagogy refers to the teaching of children, the term andragogy was introduced by Knowles (1988) to differentiate the teaching of children from that of adults, this position has since been critiqued by scholars positing that similar teaching methods can be drawn on across both groups and the child and adult learner are not as differentiated as Knowles proposed (Taylor and Hamdy 2013). However, it was important for parents to be treated as adults and to have training delivered in ways that supported their understanding, encouraged agency, communicated care, and was not experienced as '*being in a classroom*' with someone '*talking at you*'. Parents had previously engaged in parenting courses with other providers, and they positioned these courses as very different to the training provided in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire.

> I could write a book on parenting courses. I've been doing parenting courses probably since 2007, 2008, and you're just placed with a load of people who nobody cares that they're there, they're there, you know, they get the certificate and that's it. But this one just hits differently, doesn't it? This one… It doesn't feel like you're forced to go there. It's a place where you look forward to going, just because the people are so bloody nice… They genuinely want to be there (P3)

> All the courses I've done are really good. And how they explain it to people… I think it's very clever how they can word it simple for you to understand, because a lot of these courses you go on… well, I don't know, but they… these are just simple terms, you know? It's not hard to understand… (P6)

> They're [previous parenting courses] there because they have to be there, and it's not a group involvement. It's like being in a classroom. And you've got somebody at the front of the class going through PowerPoint slides and there's no engagement, there's no… they don't… there's no real-life experience here. There's no… you can't relate to it. But yeah, the way Step Up Step Down deliver their courses… And you're not being… they're not talking at you. You actually feel that… like the course is about you and they're not there just because they have to be there doing their job (P4)

> I've had people from Social Services from Team Around the Family, Edge of Care, they came and they delivered things to me in my own kitchen, and it's gone in one ear and out the other, because they haven't got the passion. They haven't been through the experience. …They're just being paid to come to my house and read from a sheet… If it was going to be from Social Services, I would have rejected that. Step Up Step Down… because nearly everybody has been through an identical situation, or similar situation, we can all relate to each other… They genuinely care about people. Social Services, they're just getting paid to come to my house and have a cup of coffee (P3)

> I've done a few courses, and I've had a few sessions with various professionals. But… it's all in the delivery… I'm happy to sit in the room with anybody, because I was at a point where I needed help, I needed support, and I would sit in with anyone. But they are doing a job, and that comes across… there's no passion, there's no empathy, there's no compassion, and there's not real life experience…. I just want to say about the way like [TFNW2] facilitates a lot of the parenting groups, and I cannot praise her enough. Her delivery is just… Amazing doesn't encompass it, honestly, because there's no ego with anybody, and she's so human, and it's all natural, and nothing is forced. But she gets it. And she'll bring in her own personal experiences and… tell us, you know, the mistakes that she's made… She's a major credit to the Step Up Step Down (P4)

Whilst parents had an unfavourable opinion of previous parenting classes, they praised the delivery of the Step Up Step Down training and the skills of TFNW2. The delivery of the training was valued because '*personal experiences*' (P4) from the facilitator were shared, they communicated that they '*genuinely care*' and '*genuinely want to be there*' (P3) and presented material in a way that means that it is '*not hard to understand*'. The training provided by TFNW2 in particular, and Step Up Step Down more broadly, was positioned as highly beneficial to the extent that one parent recommended that individuals working within Social Services should '*sit in on the parenting groups to see how they're delivered*' and '*to see how they engage with the parents*'.

> And the Step Up… [TFNW2] is just… the knowledge she has is insane. Like she is one of a kind… She's an asset. And I believe Social Services could learn a lot from Step Up Step Down…. I mean, it wouldn't do any harm for… this is just a suggestion, but for some of the foster carers within Social Services to sit in on the parenting groups to see how they're delivered… And to see how they engage with the parents. Because I think if Social Services could see how… because the relationship then… I know with Social Services and the parents, the relationship is not always great, but if they were to attend some of these parenting groups and just sit in the back… And just observe how they're delivered, observe the relationship between the parents, I think Social Services would actually learn quite a lot from that, and… That would probably help improve the relationship… And the families (P3)

The evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland reported that parents' feedback on the training has been very positive (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 41), and this account from P3, and the other data generated with parents suggests that the delivery of the training facilitated by Step Up Step Down was of an exceptionally high standard and that it involved, supported and engaged parents, and clearly communicated key learning points. There was also a suggestion that external training sourced by the Step Up Step Down programme was beneficial and that it should be made more widely available.

> Also, the people that they brought in for the lessons, you know, are pretty clued up…. we had a lady recently that went through behaviours, accepted behaviours, unacceptable behaviours, you know, and it's good (P5)

> I've had… a video link… it was all about [Foetal Alcohol Syndrome] … which I wouldn't ever have known about… And this lady who done that explained it in such easy terms, it was amazing… So, I got the leaflet printed off, off Step Up Step Down, [TFNW2], and I've been reading through it… I phoned my [relative] to say about this… "Oh, send me the leaflet" … she said, "that's really interesting to know". So, I photographed it, because the woman said you can… It's not private, it's for anyone who… if you know someone who wants the support, I'm there at the end of the line. Well, I thought, why can't this lady go into certain schools and do it from that start? And then, the teachers, or one person in the school, would understand it (P6)

The Foetal Alcohol Syndrome online training referred to by Parent 6 was delivered by an external provider and made available to both parents and Family Support Foster Carers, and this training was sourced on their request.

> They have asked for training on foetal alcohol disorder recently, so that's been sourced… we're completing that in September (SW2)

This evidences a responsiveness to the training needs of parents and Family Support Foster Carers and a commitment to providing access to topics that are beyond the remit of the content delivered by The Fostering Network in Wales. The positioning of the training as '*amazing*' (P6) also suggests that as well as facilitating a high standard of internal training, care was taken in sourcing appropriate, reputable and effective external organisations for additional course provision. A further factor that illustrates the value of the training made available in Step Up Step Down is the development of parents' understandings, and the ways that they have put this learning into practice, which will be the focus of the following subsection.

8.3.3 Learning Informing Practice

In their evaluations of Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 41) noted that the parents involved reported that they had put their learning from training into practice. This was also evidenced in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and social workers and staff from the Fostering Network in Wales discussed feedback from and changes in parents.

> Like I said, I've worked with families for years. For them to actually go out of their way to send a text message, which I said sounds like a simple thing, but I still think it's a big thing to think to do that, especially the position they find themselves in, to then say, "Oh, actually, I've reflected on that, and I found it really useful", huge, like that's like a massive thing, and that has come from one of the recent groups (TFNW1)

> I really noticed a massive, significant change in doing the BOND parenting course that she was really kind of able to open up and reflect on her past and reflect on things that had happened previously and how she's in a different situation now. And... sometimes change is kind of hard to see and you need to look for it in the little areas, but I really felt that with this mum you could just see it on her face. You could see that she understood exactly what was going on and was able to reflect on maybe decisions that she'd made that hadn't been so positive in the past and how she's a different person now. And she's really put the kind of advice and guidance and principles that we've discussed, into practice and that's been so lovely to see, you know, her relationship with her daughter is amazing and it wasn't previously, you know, it was a real challenge for both of them previously. But she's really been able to absorb everything from us and put it into practice, which has been really lovely (SW1)

Parents noted that they had learnt new things and grown in confidence because of the training.

> Through being in Step Up Step Down, the help I've had has been tremendous with them... and like they've taught me things I didn't know... I think they're doing a marvellous job and... I hope it continues for them... Because like I said, if it wasn't for the help, we'd all be stuck... Downhill. I was going right up until [Step Up Step Down] ... It's not teaching you how to look after them, it's the way they teach you to look after their ability, and then, what health problems they've got... because of trauma... That's what they've put it down to. So, I never knew that was going to come with these children... I think... that they've helped me through understanding that at that age their bodies are changing, their head's going somewhere else, and their bodies are not (P6)

> I had zero confidence, because I've never done this before, and [Name] is my only child. If I had confidence, that would have been ignorance. So, you know, I came into it ignorant, and then I left with confidence (P5)

> I started working with Step Up Step Down [date] and I just thought it's going to be a waste of time, it's just going to be another group that I've done, so many of these, and it's just going to be boring. But the first time it's literally been the only group that I've gone to and learnt things, but nobody is judgemental. You know, you can see they genuinely care about you, you know, and your child (P3)

> [TFNW2] with like the parenting group, gives us different scenarios, what we might be able to do different… there are some… we have already tried putting in place in the house (P7)

As well as talking generally about how the training '*taught me things I didn't know*' (P6), that they '*learnt things*' and '*came into it ignorant, and then I left with confidence*' (P5), parents also described particular elements of the PACE and BOND training had changed their understandings and informed their parenting practices.

> Step Up Step Down have taught me a lot about how the brain works as well. So, it's like a steam pot… when she comes home from school… because she's sat in class. And her release is the toilet. She sits on the toilet… And they said, like that's the way they learn to get away from everyone, that's their own space… it's quite hard when there's like five… or four of you in the house… And she's sat there… But I've learnt now as long as none of them want to go, she can stay on until… whereas before, I used to say, "Get out of that toilet". I've learnt to ignore it, instead of keeping on to her (P6)

> We understand why our children act in certain ways, and how we act in certain ways, and coping mechanisms. Because like, in the past… I would be more volatile, less understanding with the children, less patient. But now it's a case of we'll let the children get it out of their systems, we'll just internalise our thoughts and feelings… Take a deep breath and that's when the empathy kicks in… We've learned how to sort of de-escalate situations (P4)

> I think that's the confidence we've learnt from being on Step Up Step Down, the confidence that we were lacking. Whereas before it would be like this, now she goes up there, you know, she can do all this, but I won't match her now, because Step Up Step Down and that PACE, it's taught me that, you know, if I go here, it's game over. So, I need to keep myself here in order to [inaudible 00:30:41]. I'm [age] years old, and I've just learnt that, and I think that's fab (P3)

> I've seen major improvements with the way I parent, to be honest with you. One thing that I've really taken onboard from the PACE group is repair. To repair a relationship… my younger daughter… me and her just couldn't get on…. It was just very difficult. But going to the parent groups, I've learnt how to be a better parent, to be honest with you. It's hard when you… parenting is hard anyway, but when you're parenting with mental health and neurodivergence, it's a whole new ballgame… One of the things we took home a couple of weeks ago was an emotional wheel… And when… my eldest daughter, she's [age], when she just suddenly starts screaming and crying over something, I'm able to actually look at this wheel and break that emotion down to get to her core emotion. And it's not just a random outburst, it's actually, she's actually feeling this. So, it's helped me [be] more empathetic towards my children, and understanding with regards to their emotions and their behaviour. And I think that has helped me be a better mum (P4)

> The repair element is gold, it is gold. But it's made me find my friendship with my [age] year old daughter. But take away from the parenting, how we are with other people now. So, instead of head down, I'm not talking to nobody, not… we will make eye contact and say, "Hi, how are you?" We'll go to school and we'll… just walk past someone, just give them a little smile. It just probably just made ourselves a little bit more confident (P3)

> Now, I've learnt... they've trained me, to, right, if she's not hurting herself, let her do it. And I think it's a pattern now, and they've taught me it's a pattern... So, I'm prepared... Because sometimes when children get to a pitch, that's their release of steam, by singing and jumping. So, I didn't know that... without Step Up Step Down... I thought she was just playing me up, but it's a release of her ways. So, now I understand that I don't say anything... before, I would have gone in and said, "Get all of this tidied up", but now, I don't... but that's another lesson I've learnt... I didn't know that was a release... mechanism (P6)

In section 8.2.1, the EMBRACE training was outlined, and the content of these sessions had an emphasis on the PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) model. In these accounts, two parents refer directly to PACE (P3, P4) and P4 discussed the core element of 'Empathy' in relation to being '*empathetic towards my children*' (P4). As noted in section 8.2.2, the BOND training focussed on brain development, the repair of early trauma and building attachments. This resonated with parents focus on '*how the brain works'*, '*patterns*' and '*release*' (P6), '*understanding with regards to their emotions and their behaviour*' (P4), strategies to '*repair a relationship*' (P4) and how '*the repair element is gold*' and can be drawn on to build '*friendship*' with children with and others (P3). This suggests that parents were able to understand the core elements of the training and directly apply these specific strategies to establish improved relationships with their children, and parents were also able to cascade their learning to wider family networks.

> We do understand a bit more, well a lot more... my parents [children's grandparents] (inaudible) and we all listened, but the rules have changed and things have changed since a long time ago and I don't think that would work with [child] so we would never do it... they [grandparents] understand a lot more, probably, we've explained about the courses as well... we do try to understand what he's going through, but he can't help it and stuff.... we do understand a lot more (P2)

The account from P2 illustrates an understanding of elements of the training and the confidence to explain these approaches to other family members, enabling consistency and better supporting the child with '*what he's going through*'.

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, Flood and Thompson (2020, p. 41) reported that one of the 'greatest benefits of the training is parents realising that they are not alone in going through challenges with their children, they do not feel judged by this group and they are able to learn and discuss issues with what they come to see as a peer group'. Similarly in Pembrokeshire, for parents a key point of connection related to the training sessions was realising that '*you're not alone*' (P7) and the opportunity to share experiences with other parents which was positioned as '*an entire support network*' (P5).

> It was nice to be able to get out and meet with the parents without like the kids running around. Because obviously when we're going out as families, you're more focussed on your own kids and everything else, so it was nice being able just to sit around the table and listen to what other people had to say about their own kids, and then, realise that, I mean, you're not alone. And the things that you have been trying other people have been trying them, so if they haven't worked, that's not you failing, it's just some things don't work for particular kids (P7)

> Education, I guess. Well, I also love meeting an entire group of people together that I can rely on and having an entire support network, which I think was the most important thing. But I was enlightened to a lot of things because by meeting the other parents (P5)

> And I have had so much help from various professionals, but no-one has got any literature on how to parent when the parent has mental health and the parent has neurodivergence, and the children have it. But Step Up Step Down, they've got all of that. They've got neurodivergent mentors, they've got neurodivergent children in the group, and by attending the groups, it's helped me be a calmer mother, it's helped me understand why my children behave in certain ways, and I can understand their behaviour (P4)

> For my mental health. I go on the courses to relieve my stress… So, I can talk to someone that's in the same boat, which I find is really good (P6)

Chapter Six discussed the relational aspects of Step Up Step Down, with 'Parents Supporting Parents' (see section 6.7). However, it is useful to return to these themes in direct reference to training. In addition to learning the course content, parents also realised that they were '*not alone'*, not '*failing*', and that '*some things don't work for particular kids*' (P7). The sharing of parenting experiences helped to alleviate concerns about not effectively implementing strategies and they could better understand neurodiversity and why '*children behave in certain ways*'. Furthermore, because parents were '*in the same boat*', this alleviated '*stress*' and supported better '*mental health*' for parents (P6). Accordingly, parents did not learn and implement strategies based solely on what was communicated by course facilitators, but also in the relational interactions and discussions between parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, who all formed a part of this '*entire support network*' (P5).

This subsection has evidenced how parents learnt new things and developed their understandings in the training provided in Step Up Step Down and, importantly, applied this new knowledge to their parenting practices. As discussed in the next subsection, Family Support Foster Carers also considered how they benefitted from training in the Step Up Step Down programme.

8.3.4 Family Support Foster Carers Perspectives on Training

Family Support Foster Carers discussed attending both training that was provided for parents and training that was provided for specifically for Family Support Foster Carers. As outlined in section 8.2.2, in their feedback on the BOND training that they attended alongside parents, Family Support Foster Carers stated that the most enjoyable aspects were '*getting to know participants better*' and '*getting to know everyone*', and this was reflected in the data generated in their qualitative interviews.

> We are already really well trained so the particular training that we've done recently for Step up Step down has just kind of pulled it all back together again or refreshed, there's a few bits and pieces that are additional new knowledge… it was very much the same, but it was needed and the most helpful bit for me was that increasingly, it was all of us Step up Step down, carers and the supervisors altogether. So, the benefit was getting to know each other, more than being in the knowledge (FSFC5)

> So, you have the parents there and you have us there and actually you wouldn't know who were the ones who were the Step up Step down, people is because actually we're all engaging with the family training together (FSFC4)

Despite the extremely positive accounts of all of the parents that were interviewed and the response from parents in their feedback forms, TFNW1 commented that there were instances where parents appeared to be disengaged with the training. However, even in these cases, the opportunity to build relationships with Family Support Foster Carers was, again, positioned as a beneficial attribute of the training.

> We did have a couple of parents that were just… you could just see that they just weren't taking it in, or weren't interested, and it just depends on kind of where they're at as well. Like I think that if you've got parents that are incredibly burnt out, it doesn't really matter what you're telling them to do at that point. It's more building the relationships with the foster carers that matter (TFNW1)

The evaluation of Step Up Step Down Northern Ireland noted that parents valued Family Support Foster Carers' own experience of parenting and 'respected the knowledge they brought to the role and were open to the advice they gave because they had worked through similar challenges themselves' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 51). Similarly, as well as the '*benefit*' of '*getting to know each other*'(FSFC5), Family Support Foster Carers also reflected on the importance of being able to '*share experiences'* of parenting (FSFC3).

> And also then, parenting groups that you know, it's run very much like, yeah, everybody can see everyone's [inaudible], and that we, as the carers, although we sat through all of this training many times before, you know, we always try and share experiences from either our own lives or other children we've looked after so parents can see that we still struggle, that none of us are perfect and that's not what we're aiming for, we're just aiming to be parents that, you know, get our children through and into adulthood. (FSFC3)

> And I think what I see in lots of our family setups, the whole, the wider group in (LA), is that we probably have quite a lot of undiagnosed special needs, learning difficulties amongst our parents, and probably medical issues as well which are not diagnosed, and which people have, you know, they've come to learn to be themselves, but actually they don't need to be struggling, they can get medical help, they can get, you know, information about how they might learn better or how they might be different. And that's where I think also the power is with the training setups where we have the carers and the parents all together, bouncing off and the people sharing well, actually for instance, you know, somebody might say, well, I'm autistic, this is what I do. And one of the parents will say, oh, I'm like that too. And I know you now so I can see that that's not a weakness. I think very much, you know, to see it, well, that's just my character, how do I work around that? (FSFC5)

Accordingly, the relational aspects of the training and opportunities to share experiences were positioned as meaningful, and for some Family Support Foster Carers the '*benefit was getting to know each other, more than being in the knowledge*' (FSFC5). However, there were aspects of the training for parents that Family Support Foster Carers positioned as useful for their own practice.

> I really thought it was good last year. It certainly helped me with [child], with the PACE… And then you get feedback from the parents saying yeah, we tried that, yeah, that works. And that's really good (FSFC2)

Although it was not clear whether this was delivered in training for parents, or training specifically for foster carers, FSFC5 discussed how training around '*listening*' enabled them to support a parent.

> I think there's a [parent] who I'm supporting at the moment, and maybe the second meeting I had with him, I was going out for walks with him and there was a time we walked along the riverside, and he just completely vented a whole awful experience of trauma for him. And I just listened because the recent training [has] been about listening and I didn't need to say anything, I just listened… in a relationship, that really strengthened it, he thought, yeah, okay, I can say some awful stuff, this is a safe space. And we've only ever come back at it sort of positively… look, you survived, he survived in moving forward and he now has full time care of his daughter, which is a miracle… and he says he's never felt as supported as he does at the moment, which is really good (FSFC5)

Family Support Foster Carers also noted that they had undertaken further training such the Foetal Alcohol Syndrome online course that was also open to parents. They also noted that they had undertaken substantial training for the Family Support Foster Carer role and in their previous, and for some ongoing, position as a foster carer. This training was both in person and online, but some Family Support Foster Carers preferred in person training as it was easier to keep focussed.

Evaluation form data was not provided for the extensive range of training made available to Family Support Foster Carers. However, a training consultant from The Fostering Network in Wales provided a four hour session focussed on developing skills and knowledge in relation to safeguarding on the 3rd of February 2025, and anonymised versions of the evaluation forms were provided to the research team. This in person session was attended by four Family Support Foster Carers.

In the evaluation forms the highest indicator for satisfaction with this safeguarding training was 'very good', and all four attendees selected this option. In response to the question 'How effective was the facilitation style in supporting your learning?', three of the four attendees selected the highest indicator 'very effective' and one Family Support Foster Carer selected the second highest indicator of 'somewhat effective'.

There were also free text comments in a question about how the training would influence Family Support Foster Carers' day-to-day practice when working with families and children, and one attendee wrote '*enormously*' while others noted the importance of remembering that '*the child is at the centre of everything we do*', '*to always be aware and not afraid to raise concerns*' and that following the training they would '*be more curious about the things children and adults tell me*', and '*look out for non-verbal cues'*. While this was only a cursory insight into how one training course for Family Support Foster Carers was received, it does support the positivity of the feedback forms discussed in section 8.2, and the accounts across this chapter.

Family Support Foster Carers were also able to request additional training in areas where they felt this would be beneficial, but there were concerns that some topics were far reaching and training may not be sufficient to gain the necessary knowledge.

> The mental health stuff, I've been offered to go and do some… you know, there is training available. But how can you train on mental health? It's such a big thing, isn't it? It's huge… if I get stuck, I just ask (SW) there's always help there if you need it. I mean, I never feel I'm out of my depth (FSFC1)

However, as FSFC1 noted, Family Support Foster Carers had a support system beyond training provision with access to guidance from SW1, and also in their wider interview reflections, support from SW2, TFNW2 and TFNW1. Therefore, there was '*always help*' when needed so that Family Support Foster Carers were not '*out of* [their] *depth*'.

8.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined two of the key training courses for parents in the Step Up Step Down programme, EMBRACE (with an emphasis on PACE) and BOND. The feedback provided by parents and Family Support Foster Carers in course evaluation forms following this training illustrated that it was highly valued both in terms of its content and the opportunity to build relationships. The qualitative data generated in the interviews with parents, social workers, Family Support Foster Carers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff reinforced these feedback points

The chapter evidenced the careful planning that was put in place to ensure that parents were comfortable and supported. The ordering of content was reversed so that the EMBRACE course preceded the BOND training, and this proved advantageous as although parents found the BOND training beneficial it was also challenging because of the coverage of topics of childhood trauma and theories of attachment. As well as considering the ordering of training, there was a wider emphasis on creating supportive spaces for all of the training sessions. The accounts of parents evidenced that this was achieved with the sessions being experienced as safe, respectful, welcoming and in supportive environment where parents were afforded agency and choice. The delivery of the training itself was positioned as exceptional, and parents described how the sessions offered in the Step Up Step Down programme were more relevant and engaging than those that they had previously attended.

There was also a consideration of how the learning garnered in training informed parenting practice. Parents discussed specific aspects of the training, including brain development, the repair of early trauma, building attachments, emotions and behaviour, which they had gained an understanding of during Step Up Step Down training. They were able to successfully implement aspects of this training in their parenting practices, which enabled them to more effectively manage challenging behaviours, identify patterns and emotions, and build stronger relationships with their children. Parents also noted the ways in which being in the training sessions enabled relationship building within the group, which acted as a source of connection, advice, friendship and support.

Family Support Foster Carers shared their perspectives on the training made available within the Step Up Step Down programme and again emphasised the importance of relationship building in these sessions, between parents, Family Support Foster Carers and the Step Up Step Up Down team more widely. Family Support Foster Carers were also able to put some of the learning into practice with the families that they worked with, providing examples of the ways in which elements

of PACE and training around listening enabled them to better support both children and their parents, and other training, such as the safeguarding course also informed their everyday practice.

Overall, the accounts evidenced that the training provided was of an extremely high standard and that the learning environment was supportive and conducive to both engaging attendees, communicating knowledge and advancing understanding. The Northern Ireland evaluation of Step Up Step Down, noted that training such as BOND, aimed to provide parents with enhanced 'skills and confidence in responding to complex behaviour and to build nurturing and secure relationships with children' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 41); and parents in Pembrokeshire demonstrated that they had both developed and applied these aspects in their family relationships. The training sessions also had the additional benefit of community building within the Step Up Step Down programme.

This chapter and the previous three chapters set out the key findings of the study. The following chapter, Chapter Nine, will draw out key messages from these findings and discuss the affordance of the Step Up Step Down programme as well as offering recommendations for future practice.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter draws together key points from the evaluation of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire. The evaluation sought to highlight areas of best practice and potential improvements to the model in consideration of the Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme.

- Reduced number of children becoming looked after
- Increased number of children experiencing sustained reunification with their family
- Parents gain capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity, and create safe, stable family relationships
- Children have tools to help them self-regulate; parents are able to co-regulate their children
- Parents and children develop stronger connections to their communities, strengthening the support available to help prevent and address crises
- Increased capacity of parents and children to learn and grow as a family; more parents and children taking advantage of opportunities for learning

Therefore, the initial sections of this chapter reflect on what was achieved in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire in relation to the points in this Outcomes Framework. After summarising the evidence generated in the evaluation in respect of each of these points, there is then an emphasis on additional relevant outcome factors, namely, the continuance of relationships established within Step Up Step Down, and the benefits for social workers and Family Support Foster Carers that were involved in the programme. The chapter then considers potential enhancements to the Step Up Step Down pilot before discussing the future of programme in Wales, and offering some recommendations for further research, policy and practice.

9.2 Keeping Families Together

The Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme sets out the aims of a reduced number of children becoming looked after and an increased number of children experiencing sustained reunification with their family. Therefore, this section will focus on evidence generated in this evaluation which suggests that the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire contributed to keeping families together.

Chapter Two considered the ‘crisis in care’, related to the rising numbers of children entering care, issues with a lack of suitable care placements, recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers, and the overwhelming and unsustainable pressure on the social care workforce (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). It also reflected on the detrimental immediate and life course outcomes for parents who have experienced compulsory child removals (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Enlander et al. 2021; Stevenson 2026), and the potential impacts for children in the care system in relation to wellbeing, education, employment, housing stability, and their future trajectories (Curry and Abrams 2015; Mannay et

al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026). It was within this context that the Local Authority in Pembrokeshire were working to address these issues with their Keeping Families Together Strategy.

> I did a three year strategy that got published in 2021… Keeping Families Together Strategy, which was designed to reduce the number of children in care. And we had about a dozen different things that were badged under that… and most of those things we delivered on, we implemented, but our numbers in care skyrocketed. So, it wasn't because the strategy failed, it's because the stuff that was outside of our control, poverty, cost of living, mental health crisis, increase in domestic violence, all those types of things, they were just overwhelming our ability to reduce the numbers. So, you know, we could [see] the numbers of children that we moved out of care back home, that we discharged care orders on… And so, had we not done all of those things in the systematic way that we applied them, our numbers would have been even higher (LASL1)

As noted in Chapter Three, the evaluations of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland indicate that this intervention has the potential to directly address the 'crisis in care' and its associated detrimental outcomes by supporting children and families and mitigating the risk of children entering State care (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020). Similarly, the Step Up Step Down programme in Pembrokeshire is an important element of the ongoing strategy to '*reduce the number of children in care*' and arguably without its adoption in Pembrokeshire, again, the overall entry into care '*numbers would have been even higher*' (LASL1).

In the initial pilot of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire 12 families (23 children) have successfully stepped down from the service, with an average involvement of 14 months, supporting children aged between five months and 11 years. Among families who engaged with the programme, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported, maintaining care arrangements at home. At the end of the evaluation period, the service was continuing to support 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation.

This 95% success rate is an important numerical indicator of the utility of the Step Up Step Down Pembrokeshire pilot in assisting families so that their children can remain in or return to their care, and its success was recognised by Local Authority Senior Leads (LASL), social workers (SW) and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales (TFNW).

> Were the children we got involved with prevented from coming into care? Certainly, some of them, yes. So, we kept the numbers lower than they otherwise would have been as a result of this project (LASL1)

> To be honest I think a lot of them, the children would have come into care, and they haven't, which is great. But I think that that was the path kind of, they were going down, and without the support, that's where we would have been, or still kind of teetering on the edge and really struggling and not having the support that they need… We've got three children who were looked after when we started working with them, and two have returned home and the third is in the process of returning home… And then we've obviously got families who, social workers were very concerned about and were on child protection and who are now not, or who weren't on child protection, but the level of concern was high, and the level of concern is less (SW1)

> We've got a [parent], where his daughter's transitioned back to his care, and they're doing fantastic, and they've built this beautiful relationship, and I know that he will continue to... come to the groups. He's built a massive support network, and it is like a story of success. It's fantastic (SW2)

> Yeah, and like going back to [two parents], they have said to me recently that this is the longest period that either of them have not had a suicide attempt, and they totally credit that to the difference that [Step Up Step Down] has made to them, which again, is massive... They say, no matter what comes up now, they know that they can manage it, and they know that there's going to be ups and downs, but they know that they're doing what they need to do for their kids, and they're going to continue to do that... They are the shining stars for [Step Up Step Down] (TFNW2)

> And we've got children back home... When we think about one of our families that maybe didn't engage fully in a lot of the stuff, that family is back together as a full unit now, which is mum, dad, you know, three children now, and when they came... they hadn't come to a lot of things, but they did come to the wildlife activity, seeing them all together, and it sounds like a ridiculous thing to observe, but they were just walking around like a normal family, as in they were just all together, you know, they didn't feel the need necessarily to check in with anybody that was there, but they had the opportunity to do it, and they did it, and they were there, and that child is like, you know, like the one we managed to keep at home, and the other one, you know, managed to return home, and so that wouldn't have happened without us (TFNW1)

It was also suggested by SW1 that without the intervention of the Step Up Step Down programme, if some of these children were placed in care this would have potentially been outside of Pembrokeshire in a residential placement.

> Some of the children on the project that if they were to become looked after, it would probably not be in [the Local Authority] because of our number of foster carers and matching requirements. Potentially it wouldn't even be with an independent fostering agency, we'd be looking at residential provision so it would be a big change for the children if they ended up becoming looked after, it would be life changing in every way... so I feel like us managing to avoid most of those, or all of those situations so far have been really positive (SW1)

In this account SW1 recognised the impact of these changes for children, and Chapter Two offered a detailed account of the negative consequences of a care placement for both children and parents. As noted in Chapter Three, the cost of residential care placements are not only high in terms of human costs, but also financial costs. O'Reilly (2020) quantified the financial value of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland and in relation to cost avoidance, the annual cost of one residential placement in Northern Ireland was £285,330, whilst the annual cost of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland was £191,999. Accordingly, in the Northern Ireland model, this meant that if the programme prevented even one child entering residential care this offset the entire Step Up Step Down programme cost (O'Reilly 2020). A full cost analysis of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire has not been conducted, but the evidence from Northern Ireland suggests that when the 'very expensive care provided in residential placement care' (O'Reilly 2020, p. 4) is avoided this results in cost savings. This theme resonates with an account

from a member of staff from the Fostering Network in Wales, which was previously introduced in Chapter Seven (section 7.5).

> Like I said, if we can keep the children out of care, which for some of our families, you know, potentially there is one mum, I could say she's teetering on the border, that's four children that need to be placed of all different ages. That's a huge amount of money, so actually, what we're really asking for them to invest is nothing in the grand scheme of things (TFNW1)

The subject of a future cost analysis of Step Up Step Down in Wales will be returned to in the recommendations section of this chapter (section 9.9). However, importantly this evaluation did offer compelling evidence that the programme was effective in keeping families together, as further illustrated in the accounts of Family Support Foster Carers (FSFC).

> I think it's a great scheme, I just hope it gets rolled out everywhere, because children do not have to be in care. If they can stay home safely with their parents or their caregiver, a good caregiver (FSFC1)

> These are my three original families since I started... all my families are still together. So, I guess when you look at that as the remit, it's working (FSFC3)

> The family of four... without that help there, I'm not actually sure how quickly that family would have deteriorated into a place of no return. With the [parent] who's just got custody of [their] daughter, actually his main struggle was with the system and we could fully understand why he struggled with the system, it was not going right, it was taking time, things were not happening and as [parent] says, you know, [parent] hasn't felt at any other time the support that [parent] has in this... I think actually he might have gone and started protesting outside the council offices at some stage... and yeah, you don't know what would have happened (FSFC4)

The accounts from Local Authority Senior Leads, social workers and Family Support Foster Carers and staff in The Fostering Network in Wales, in this section and across the four findings chapters, have emphasised the importance of Step Up Step Down for keeping families together. Parents (P) were also asked directly about the extent to which the programme keeps families together, and there were replies including, '*a million percent*' (P1) '*a hundred percent*' (P3) and '*a very big help*' (P2) as well as more detailed responses, which provide a nuanced understanding of the impact of Step Up Step Down.

> It saved me... and it saved the children as well... It would have been very difficult. They've saved our lives. No doubt about it... Blackest of black that you can imagine, Step Up Step Down were that light... We are advocates for Step Up Step Down... they have supported us through an absolute journey of hell... And our children, and it has been the most difficult journey that we've ever been on, but we have made it... We've come out the other side... And you know, I can't thank the service enough for what they've done for me and my children (P4)

> There's smoke, there's fire," and I was hearing that for years... Anyway, proof's in pudding, right? I got the kindest, most empathic, beautiful, little, happy girl you can imagine. [Child]'s a beautiful little soul, and I want to keep it that way. Night and day [changes in child], but

so have I. Honestly, I was thinking about it earlier, if there was no such thing as Step Up Step Down, it might have been a 50-50 chance of me making it. If I only had me and social services without the middle person to help me with this adversary that I don't know what they want from me, and my anxiety level is up here, and I'm very angry with them, and I don't want to appease them in any way outside of, "You give me my [child] back" I'm so angry... so I honestly... I give myself... it could have been a coin toss of whether it would work for me or not if I didn't have Step Up Step Down, and so not only has it made it work, but it's made it work a lot better. My identity's changed. I take more pride in somebody saying, "Hey, [name of child]'s [parent]," than [Name], because I've always been [Name], and that's not really gotten me far. But [child]'s dad, that's taken me places (P5)

It was [one child] that needed the help... and she is improving, and without Step Up Step Down, I don't think I would have coped with her... I hope it continues for families who need it... I think it's been a fantastic support for myself. I can't praise it enough. And it's not what you're getting out of it, it's what they're giving to you... they've helped me and my mental health... I was really down, I didn't know which way to turn, it was like I was telling her something, and it was going the other way. I thought, well, where do I get help? And I explained to them, and then, it just fell into place, and I was just lifted. Because it was a hard... I thought, I don't want to get rid of her, but that's the way it was going... Because I had the other two, and I was thinking I can't [manage with behaviours]. But then, Step Up Step Down come back to me, and I never looked back again. And I explained all that to Step Up Step Down, and they still helped me... they just work through everything, and they explain situations, that trauma could do it. Where no-one explained things like that before... now I'm understanding... And now, I don't look back, I keep looking forward. I had no-one to turn to, but Step Up Step Down got me through it, and they're still there... But I know without them... [child] wouldn't have been here. [Child] would have gone, because I couldn't have handled it. But with the support and that, she's changed. [Child] has changed as well, because I'm not shouting (P6)

When Step Up Step Down became involved with [parent], all of a sudden, things are moving, and in a matter of months she had her daughter home. They've had another gentleman within the group who's had his daughter returned to him... I probably wouldn't... we probably wouldn't be sitting here talking to you, [interviewer], to be honest. You know? They have. And they saved our families as well. You know? Because at one point we only had Step Up Step Down, so without them, we literally would have had nobody. And then, we wouldn't be here (P3)

The accounts from parents were detailed and poignant suggesting that the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire had contributed to them keeping or being reunified with their children, keeping families together, when they were uncertain that this would be the outcome. In reflecting on the potential consequence without this intervention, P5 noted that there was only '*a 50-50 chance of me making it*' and now they have achieved sustained reunification with their child, the '*kindest, most empathic, beautiful, little, happy girl you can imagine*'. Family reunification was also discussed by P3 in relation to other parents on the programme with a mother who '*had her daughter home*' and a father '*who's had his daughter returned to him*'. In relation to reducing the number of children becoming looked after, P6 was certain that the Step Up Step Down programme has prevented her child going into care, '*but I know without them... [child] wouldn't have been here'*. While for other parents the support of Step Up Step Down was crucial in changing their

trajectories and keeping their families together, '*they saved our families'* (P3) and '*they've saved our lives*' (P4).

> It is important to note that it is '*difficult to prove a negative*' (LASL1) and there can be no definitive proof that all of the children in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire would have been placed in care without this intervention or that the programme has '*fixed everything*' (LASL2).
>
> I'd hoped that the families we got involved, that we'd be able to prevent this. And I know it's difficult to prove a negative, if those children never went into care, we can never prove that they would have ended up there had we not been involved. But we get a good sense of these kinds of things and the likelihood of those things happening. So, that... overwhelmingly that was the outcome I was after, is that kids we were involved with would be... that perhaps were on the trajectory to going into Local Authority care, were diverted away from that with a positive outcome of staying with a family member (LASL1)
>
> I would like to say, yes, of course, this Step Up Step [Down] programme has fixed everything. But, you know, again, you can only look at any programme within the context of everything else that's happening. But we are in a position at the moment where our looked after children numbers are just beginning to drop. I wouldn't hold Step Up Step Down as the only thing, but I do think the families that have gone through the programme on the whole, we seem to have been relatively successful in terms of sustaining those families at home (LASL2)

Importantly, the accounts of all the participants discussed in this section evidence a '*good sense*' that children in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire who were on a '*trajectory to going into local authority care, were diverted away from that with a positive outcome of staying with a family member*' (LASL1) and that it was instrumental in '*sustaining those families at home*' (LASL2). The pilot in Pembrokeshire achieved a 95% success rate and the interviews with Local Authority Senior Leads, social workers, Family Support Foster Carers, staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, and importantly, parents suggest that Step Up Step Down was a key contributor to keeping families together. The programme also has the additional benefits of equipping parents and children with skills and knowledge that supported stable family relationships, as will be discussed in the following section.

9.3 Skills and Knowledge to Support Stable Family Relationships

The Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme had key objectives that parents would gain capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity, and create safe, stable family relationships and that children would acquire tools to help them self-regulate, with parents having the ability to co-regulate their children.

In Chapter Seven, there was an emphasis on how the Nurture Groups, Girls Group and the Children's Summer Scheme assisted children with emotional regulation and relational skills. Children in the Girls Group who completed the course evaluations valued the opportunity to discuss

their feelings, gain an understanding how feelings work, and learn to identify their own feelings. Children in the Nurture Group also discussed their feelings and some accounts indicated that they were using strategies of emotional regulation drawn from the 'Feelings Detectives' element of the programme. The interview data generated with parents, social workers, Family Support Foster Carers and staff from The Fostering Network in Wales also offered a convincing evidence base for children both drawing on the knowledge, materials and strategies from these sessions and the associated improvements in self-regulation, aligning with the Outcomes Framework.

Chapter Eight, focussed on the training provided for parents in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and feedback provided by parents in course evaluation forms, illustrated that it was highly valued both in terms of its content and the opportunity to build relationships. Furthermore, the qualitative data generated in the interviews with parents, social workers, Family Support Foster Carers and The Fostering Network in Wales demonstrated the quality of the training delivered and the ways in which the learning garnered in training informed parenting practice. Parents detailed specific aspects of the training, including brain development, the repair of early trauma, building attachments, emotions and behaviour, which they had gained an understanding of during Step Up Step Down training. They were able to successfully implement aspects of this training in their parenting practices, which enabled them to more effectively manage challenging behaviours, identify patterns and emotions, and build stronger relationships with their children. Accordingly, the Outcomes Framework objective that parents would gain capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity, and create safe, stable family relationships, was clearly evidenced in the qualitative data generated in this evaluation.

The discussions in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight provide a high level of detail on how parents and children benefitted from and implemented skills and knowledge that they had gained from being involved with Step Up Step Down. Therefore, these qualitative accounts will not be revisited in this section. However, in summarising the benefits of Step Up Step Down, at later points in the interviews, some participants again reflected on the benefits of training for parents, and as these points were not included in Chapter Eight, it is worth referring to them in this summarising this section.

> I think that a few of our parents… have left with a lot more confidence about managing challenging behaviours and, you know, not taking things quite so personally, and knowing how to deal with things going forward, whereas before, I think they were potentially a little bit more like, "I just don't know what to do with this, and this is the end of the world," whereas I think that the… long-term support helps them see they're not alone, which is massive (TFNW2)

> We feel like… we're in control now. You know, we are the parents, we are not pushovers no more. You know, we can actually step up, you know, and be the mum that these children need to have (P3)

> Our confidence has grown, and with regards to us as parents, we don't feel as failures… I feel a bit more confident. But it is growing. It's certainly growing. Like, I'm not there yet to do it sort of on my own, but it does make me feel more confident (P4)

These excerpts align with the accounts presented in Chapter Eight, where parents described how the training '*taught me things I didn't know*' (P6), that they '*learnt things*' and '*came into it ignorant,*

and then I left with confidence' (P5), and that they were more '*empathetic towards my children*' (P4).

Accordingly, the data drawn from course evaluations and the interviews with social workers, Family Support Foster Carers, staff from The Fostering Network in Wales, and importantly, parents and children suggest that the training provided in the Step Up Step Down programme built capacity, skills and knowledge that was then applied, which helped to create safe, cohesive and stable family relationships. As discussed in the next section, Step Up Step Down was also a central mechanism in assisting parents and children to develop stronger social support networks and connections to their communities.

9.4 Stronger Networks and Connections to Communities

The Outcomes Framework of the Step Up Step Down programme sets out the objectives that parents and children develop stronger connections to their communities, strengthening the support available to help prevent and address crises and that there is an increased capacity of parents and children to learn and grow as a family, with more parents and children taking advantage of opportunities for learning. There was evidence of these outcomes being met presented in Chapter Seven, section 7.5 - Community Activities and Supports.

In Chapter Seven, staff from The Fostering Network in Wales and parents noted how families were able to access Tai Chi classes, dance classes, gymnastics and therapy sessions and there was a budget within Step Up Step Down to cover these expenses if there was a fee. This enabled families to be introduced to and to access a wide range of activities within their local community and these were opportunities for both children and their parents to learn and grow as a family. Parents were also provided with links to other charitable organisations where they participated in activities such as day trips and support groups, and one parent also discussed independently accessing community support groups and local community provisions. Parents reported continuing with the enrichment activities that they were introduced to in Step Up Step Down such as the theatre and engagements with the natural environment, now that they were aware of these forms of activity and their benefits.

These connections with external networks and activities were important in building sustainable supports for families following the Step Up Step Down programme. Accordingly, again there was evidence in the qualitative data of this outcome being met and parents and children benefitting from developing stronger connections to their communities, accessing wider local support groups and activities, and taking advantage of wider opportunities for learning. However, in addition to building new networks and connections within the local community, an important outcome of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire was the development of relationships between parents and children with other families on the programme and the sustainability of these relationships, which will be the focus of the following section.

9.5 Beyond Outcome Frameworks – Continuing Relationships

Chapter Six was the longest of all of the findings chapters because it documented the salience of relationships and relational, emotional and practical underlying forms of support that characterised the Step Up Step Down programme. Relational aspects were also foregrounded throughout Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight, and the building of relationships was discussed by parents, children, Family Support Foster Carers, staff in The Fostering Network in Wales and social workers.

In the evaluation of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland, it was noted that Family Support Foster Carers developed 'non-judgemental and non-hierarchical relationships with families' and that parents felt 'listened to and cared about by all SUSD staff' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 51) and 'the establishment and continuation of [parents'] friendship groups' was discussed (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 42). This was evidenced in the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and multiple examples were given to illustrate how parents formed friendships with parents and connections with their Family Support Foster Carers that extended beyond the Step Up Step Down programme. Despite this being covered in detail in the preceding chapters, because of the fundamental significance of relationships, it is useful to introduce some further interview excerpts that discuss this '*golden thread*' (LASL1) of sustainable relationships as the '*biggest real success stories*' (TFNW2).

> Like because parenting is lonely, or can feel incredibly lonely, so actually, these guys all coming together and actually being able to share stories and realise, "Oh, actually, we're not alone", like we've seen people form like proper friendships, and now we've got people that are coming back together for the residential this weekend, and they're so excited to see each other again, because they haven't managed to find time, or we've got people at opposite ends of the county. So, things like that… I think they're the biggest real success stories is that actually we've helped people gain like that support network, which is exactly what we wanted, so that when we step away, they don't suddenly feel completely alone again (TFNW2)

> Golden thread - I think that the short answer to your question is, it's the package. But I think the golden thread for me is what the approach does in terms of relationships between parents, children, and foster carers. Because what I think this project does that is unique is that it creates networks that otherwise wouldn't be created… But one of the things that most struck me was its potential to build relationships and networks between parents. Because that's where the sustainability is in the outcomes, because, you know, we might deliver the program to a family for 12/18 months, but it's not forever. Can't be forever. But what happens when we step back then? If you step back and you take all the scaffolding with you, well, the risk is that all the good work could be undone… [TFNW member had] gone out into the car park after the session and saw some parents swapping phone numbers. That's it for me… you're then putting in the scaffolding that's going to be there long after social services step away… So, it's the whole package. It's the package with that golden thread of relationships through it (LASL1)

> Relationships. Yeah, it is the long and the short of it really. You know, all of the practical stuff. There's so many programmes out there delivering practicals, but I think it's that it's

> that relationship and the relational based work that just enables people to fly... people who are happy and encouraged by the programme, but are also keeping in touch with foster carers long after we've involved, you know, and they're not round having cups of tea every five minutes, but they're in touch and it's part of the network then, you know. So, it's that sort of long-term sustainability stuff that is good (LASL2)

> I think that it's not only keeping families together, but it's building upon the family structure in the sense that they meet other families that are in similar circumstances themselves, so don't feel alone. We've got two parents in the group, and they've both got children with disabilities, both really lack confidence, and they've built up a friendship. They'll meet up and they go to autism awareness groups together, whereas before, they wouldn't have done that. So, I think it's, you know, making people realise that, hang on, I'm not alone, I'm not the only one struggling... you have people at the start of the Step Up, Step Down journey and people that are coming to the end, and there's almost like a shimmer of hope, "that could be me", like that... "I can see that there are other people that have done this and made those changes, and that could be me". Whereas when you've got the normal world, you haven't got anybody to compare to, because people probably don't speak about it, because they probably feel judged (SW2)

In Chapter Six, parents discussed '*pillars*' of support and being part of a '*village*' (Parent 4), '*bond relationships*' (P1) and '*families supporting families*' (Parent 7), when reflecting on the relational value of the Step Up Step Down programme. Parents also provided examples of staying in touch with other families and their Family Support Foster Carers outside and beyond the programme. The interview excerpts introduced in this section reinforce the significance and sustainability of these relationships, and the ways in which they not only forged friendships between parents and between their children, but they also provided them with the confidence to engage in wider community activities with the assurance provided by this support network which was formed through Step Up Step Down. Accordingly, relationships can be positioned as the '*golden thread*' (LASL1) of Step Up Step Down because they enable the '*long-term sustainability*' (SW1) required to develop stronger community connections and support stable family relationships. However, it was not only parents and children that benefited from the relational aspects of Step Up Step Down, and the next section will reflect on what was gained by social workers and Family Support Foster Carers.

9.6 Beyond Outcome Frameworks – Benefits for Social Workers and Family Support Foster Carers

In Chapter Two it was noted that the most consistent feature of the 'crisis in care' was the overwhelming pressure on the social care workforce with social workers in England reporting working more than their contracted hours and feeling stressed by their jobs (MacAlister 2022). The pressure of unmanageable caseloads and insufficient time to build positive relationships with families has also been recorded in Northern Ireland and Wales (Jones 2023; Wilkins 2023). However, it was reported that social workers enjoyed their roles within the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire.

> On a positive side, the programme has also kind of reinvigorated social workers' thinking and again, you know, feeling when you can get a little bit disheartened and a little bit

> frustrated and then you have an opportunity to really see families make progress, and, and to see them enjoying life after the initial progress has been made, you know. You're still there to pick up the pieces, but to see them come to community events and be really confident with their kids and all that kind of stuff. Social workers don't always see that stuff… As a senior manager, I'm not involved on the ground so much, but in all of the feedback I get from the social worker, they're talking with smiles on their faces as they're explaining families that have moved on from the programme… and that's sustainability (LASL2)

> I spoke to [SW1] who runs the project, and she said, "Hands down, this is the best thing I've ever done as a social worker" (LASL1)

> I've been in social care for 12 years. I've been qualified for… since… I can't even add up how many years that is. So, this is the best thing I've done, ever. I love my job. I love Step Up Step Down (SW1)

The philosophy of social work is 'grounded on a principle of assisting individuals, both in their individual circumstances and in their collective situations' (Saxena and Chandrapal, p. 1637) and as LASL2 explained the Step Up Step Down programme offered social workers '*an opportunity to really see families make progress*'. One aspect of the 'crisis in care' is that social workers have insufficient time to build positive relationships with families (Jones 2023) but as noted in the previous section, Step Up Step Down was fundamentally relational. This may explain why Step Up Step Down '*reinvigorated social workers*' (LASL2) and was positioned as the '*best thing I've ever done*' (SW1). Chapter Five also noted the rewarding nature of the social work role within Step Up Step Down, enthusiasm for the role, and the collegiality of The Fostering Network in Wales team, which contributed to a supportive working environment, and Family Support Foster Carers provided aligned accounts.

Chapter Two considered the growing capacity crisis in foster care, shaped by recruitment shortfalls and difficulties retaining carers because of insufficient support, pressures associated with the role, and wider system strain (Jones 2023; The Fostering Network 2024a, 2024b). This was discussed further in Chapter Five, where the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers was outlined, but as this was an '*unexpected learning of the programme*' (LASL2) it is beneficial to return to this outcome in this concluding chapter.

> [Foster Carer] was retiring, we were going to lose her, until she found out about this. (LASL1)

> I think the unexpected learning of the programme has certainly been foster carers that we would have lost, who have told us that they were done, they were tired, they were ready to retire or leave fostering, and they've stayed and they've come on to the programme. So those that skill base we've retained, which was unexpected. And I think we've got a couple of foster carers pending at the moment who have now heard about the programme, they're interested in the programme, they want to do it. I've certainly been out to see a couple of foster carers and had a chat with them about it because I know how… their ethics and values work and I want them on the programme. So, it's like… no, don't retire, come and do this. You'll love it… so… the sustainability of care and retaining good people… if we can keep foster carers with all that knowledge and all that understanding and all those years of experience for another couple of years and helping some of the families with all that

> experience and all of that knowledge, you know, we've got an opportunity to just keep pushing something a little bit different. And in that way, it's not an extra resource if they were going to retire. It's just continuing that resource for a little bit longer in a different way... from what foster carers have said to me is they feel a bit more reinvigorated and really feel like they're making a difference to families (LASL2)
>
> [FSFC] says to me, "Hands down, this is the best thing I've ever done in fostering" ... So, it's a really powerful message to see those networks, those relationships, and then, the impact on those people about how they feel about the project, and the outcomes (LASL1)

in Chapter Eight, Family Support Foster Carers communicated the value of relationship building and the positive change in parents' lives, and in Chapter Six, they discussed how they had enjoyed working with parents, gained new insights into the barriers they face, and felt supported by the wider Step Up Step Down team. These aspects can all contribute to the satisfaction in the role, and the positioning of Step Up Step Down as the '*best thing I've ever done in fostering*' (LASL1). However, as discussed in Chapter Five, a significant gain of the Step Up Step Down programme was the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers who had planned to retire from fostering, this new role meant that their substantial skills and experience were retained in the Local Authority, and they continued to offer high quality support to local families.

This section and the preceding sections have considered the noteworthy achievements of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire in relation to the Outcomes Framework as well as considering positive contributions that are not featured in this framework. The following section will discuss suggestions for potential improvements.

9.7 Potential Enhancements to Step Up Step Down

The Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire was modelled closely on the programme in Northern Ireland (Flood and Thompson 2020; O'Reilly 2020), apart from some differences outlined in Chapter Five. Accordingly, it had a foundational base of procedures, activities, and roles that could be built on and developed. However, it was the first time that Step Up Step Down was offered in the Welsh context and none of the delivery team had worked on previous programmes. Therefore, it was expected that the evaluation may bring to light a range of potential enhancements and improvements that were shared in the qualitative interviews or noted in observations; but this was not the case.

The children (C) involved in Step Up Step Down who spoke with us or provided written feedback all enjoyed the programme and communicated their experiences through phrases such as '*loved*', '*happy*' and '*fun*' when discussing activities, relationships, friendships and what they had learned. They did not share any critiques, only the request for more sessions and activities, for example, '*should be more groups like this*' and '*like sessions to be longer'* (C8). As the preceding chapters and earlier sections of this chapter have illustrated, the perspectives of parents were equally as complimentary. They highly valued the Step Up Step Down team, training, activities, support and the ways in which the programme had a positive impact on their lives. Again, corresponding with the accounts of children, parents also wanted '*more groups like this*' (C8), but this was a recommendation for other families in need of support, not just themselves.

> It's great. The organisation. You know? You can't help but thank them a lot… And it's just a pity that you've got to go through so much before you can get that support (P6)

> Yeah. It's sad that they can only sort of access Step Up Step Down through a Social Services referral. I mean, probably that's my only knock. It's not my criticism, to be honest… I can understand that the service… if they were bogged down with referrals… That could put a strain on the service… And then, that could make the delivery of the service not as close as what it is now. Honestly… anybody on the Step Up Step Down program… Life is going to be a lot easier for them (P4)

> Just being there… yeah everything they do… just for the service to be there and I hope it is something that is to be continued because we do need it (P1)

The recommendations were not a '*criticism*' of Step Up Step Down itself, rather an acknowledgement that families would benefit from access to this form of support at an earlier point before the involvement of Social Services. In essence these parents were requesting a broadening of preventative early interventions because they felt that if '*anybody*' was '*on the Step Up Step Down programme*' that '*Life is going to be a lot easier for them'* (P4).

Family Support Foster Carers, again were very happy with their roles, the Step Up Step Down Programme, the relationships built with families and the positive developments that had contributed safe and stable family relationships. As noted in Chapter Seven, there were some small logistical points raised by Family Support Foster Carers around information sharing, clarity on lone worker arrangements, and more consideration of number of car seats and the assignment of children when organising transport at activity days and residentials. However, Family Support Foster Carers emphasised that the children were '*happy and safe*' and that everyone was on a '*learning curve'*. Family Support Foster Carers felt confident to raise any concerns and these concerns were taken on board and responded to in situ, and The Fostering Network in Wales confirmed that adaptions were made, which then featured in the design and implementation of the later family events and processes. It is worth noting that both parents and Family Support Foster Carers made suggestions for improvements in the For Mi App, and this will be returned to in the recommendations on section 9.9.

There were also some points raised by Family Support Foster Carers and social workers about engaging families with the entire Step Up Step Down programme.

> What we've realised is that the families who get the most out of it are the ones that interact with all the tools. We've got For Mi, we've got respite, we've got weekly meetings, we've got training, you know, they're different tools in the bag and the ones, the families that are engaging in all of those seem to be the ones that are really getting the most out… really what they need to do before they sign up… is realise… this is a commitment. I do need to do all of these things because the more they put in, the more they'll get out (FSFC5)

> I think there wouldn't be anything that I would necessarily change at all. I think that the whole thing coming together, so like the parenting groups, the nurturing groups, the days out, the mentoring from the foster carers, all works really nicely. I think that the families need to be using the whole sphere, essentially. So, we have some families that maybe aren't readily available for mentoring on a weekly basis. There are some families that maybe don't want to have respite care or days out. There's some families that work, so

> can't access the family days out or come to the parenting courses. I think you see the most benefit from the families that fully engage in the actual full programme (SW2)
>
> So, we weren't making it as clear to the families, maybe what the project looked like and how they needed to engage with the project as a whole. It wasn't about, you know, kind of choosing one area of the project and thinking, oh, I like the sound of the mentoring or I like the sound of the short breaks so I'll go on the project because I want that, but we're much better now of kind of explaining, this is a whole project and you need to want to be involved, or you need to be involved with all of those elements, not just one. So, there's been, not many, but a few families that kind of came on board and didn't go anywhere because they didn't want to be on certain elements of the project, they didn't want to engage with certain things. So, I think we're much better at making that very clear from the off now. And then we don't run into those issues then (SW1)

These accounts illustrate the benefits for families engaging with all aspects of the Step Up Step Down programme, and how this needed to be made clear to parents. However, this is a difficult balance as encouragement may be preferrable to any prescriptive measures. In Chapter Five, it was noted that the '*contract of expectations*' (TFNW1) for parents, which features in the Northern Ireland model was not adopted in the Pembrokeshire pilot. Parents who have experienced the involvement of social services will often have been in a position where their compliance has been mandated (Stevenson 2026), and parents valued the agency that they were afforded in Step Up Step Down, with some saying they were more likely to engage because it was their choice. In Chapter Five, it was also noted that a '*contract of expectations*' could encourage attendance, but it could also have the unintended consequence of being a barrier to engagement. Accordingly, clarity and forms of gentle encouragement that respect parents' agency, the approach that was taken in the Pembrokeshire pilot and achieved high overall levels of engagement, may be preferrable to a formal contract of expectations where parents feel that '*you have to do it*' (P7).

One further point of tension that was discussed by both social workers and Family Support Foster Carers was not the Step Up Step Down programme itself but relationships with some of the social workers outside of the programme that were involved with the families. The detail in these accounts will not be presented to protect the anonymity of families and participants but there were some issues that are worth consideration. It is important to note that participants positioned their relationship with some family social workers as '*brilliant*' with frequent and effective communications and in some cases the child's social worker was '*good*', and family social workers were '*100% on board*' with Step Up Step Down. However, a lack of contact, '*almost no contact*', and a '*lack of respect*' was also mentioned, alongside a lack of understanding of the Step Up Step Down programme and the role of Family Support Foster Carers. There was one report of a Family Support Foster Carer being asked by the family social worker to relay information to parents that they felt was inappropriate, and this needed to be resolved by the Step Up Step Down team.

There were also some unrealistic expectations that Step Up Step Down could '*fix things immediately*' and a pressure from family social workers to close down cases associated with the programme prematurely, which would have prevented ongoing individualised support from their Family Support Foster Carer. This eagerness to close cases, and a further issue of family social workers stepping back too quickly in terms of contact with the family, was related to the pressures on the social care workforce resonant of the 'crisis in care' that was outlined in Chapter Two. This was the first pilot of Step Up Step Down in Wales, so in fairness social workers were not familiar with the programme and it was suggested that '*more education within the service about what*

exactly… is expected' would be beneficial and help to negotiate instances of misunderstanding. As noted, there were very good working relationships with the majority of social workers and as Step Up Step Down becomes more embedded and familiar this should counter some of the issues raised.

Overall, the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire was well considered and executed, with an exceptionally high level of positive feedback from children, parents, Family Support Foster Carers and the wider programme team. The potential enhancements to Step Up Step Down were minor and were navigated and adopted as the programme became more established, with everyone involved being on a '*learning curve*' and collaboratively sharing perspectives that refined and improved practices and processes. The key recommendation from parents was a continuation of Step Up Step Down and a consideration of similar interventions for families before it gets to the stage of social services involvement, which will be revisited in section 9.9. The following section reflects on the future of Step Up Step Down and considerations of how the programme can achieve sustainability.

9.8 Considering the Future

Aligning with the accounts presented in the preceding section, Local Authority Senior Leads were also pleased with the pilot of Step Up Step Down in Pembrokeshire. They noted that the combination of elements had worked extremely well, only requiring small adjustments as the programme developed, and that the relational nature of the programme and the supportive relationships that were formed were significant.

> I can't think that there was anything that we would have actually drastically changed to start. I think there's learning to go along… there's always going to be opportunities to tweak things… one of the nice things about the programme is it provides all of the different parts of the programme as part of it to a bigger or lesser extent, depending on the family's need rather than us referring out to a parenting programme and or referring out to a community programme or having a foster carer sitting over here. There is a benefit, I think, to that sitting under one umbrella and one coordinator and probably ultimately is a money saver in the bigger picture. And I think for children going through this experience, it's developing that wider network, that wider sort of community and that acceptance of sometimes people need a little bit of help and that's okay. And they… don't disappear, they're still there… And social workers don't always stick around for a year, two years, you know, whereas Step Up Step Down carer might well do (LASL2)

> Maybe at the outset I saw it as a bit of a practical tool… but it feels a lot softer than that… there's a lot more humanity to it than just it being a practical tool where a foster carer helps the parent out of crisis. It's so much more than that. There's so much more humanity and emotion about it, and sensitivity about it, than just a practical tool that will help the parent out when they're having a bad day… And then, you've got parents saying, "This is the best thing I've ever had" (LASL1)

These accounts indicate that the Step Up Step Down model was an effective intervention in Pembrokeshire, and that there was an investment in retaining the key elements of the programme and its relational qualities.

In Chapter Five, there was a focus on issues of capacity in relation to both social workers and foster carers. In Pembrokeshire, this was negotiated with creative thinking, the involvement of retiring foster carers whose skills and experiences would have been lost, and staff being prepared to invest in Step Up Step Down. However, the problematic landscape of children's social care in Wales could deter other Local Authorities from engaging with preventative measures.

> And that doesn't go away... a couple of years into the project and we still haven't got enough foster carers, we still haven't got enough staff. But things, once they start becoming embedded and they're becoming in practice, it starts to become something that we have to do rather than something that we want to do (LASL2)

> I think the most important thing to think about is how you can be flexible in order to get foster carers on board... I've spoken to a few different Local Authorities about Step Up Step Down. People are very interested and they say, oh, we haven't got any free carers. So that's kind of that really. And I was saying, well, we were in the same position at the start, but by being flexible and thinking about our pool, we've been able to make it work. And in terms of considerations, finding people who want to do it is so important because it's not a job that would be easily done if you didn't enjoy it... It's not kind of not a tick box job... some jobs you can just kind of get through the day and that's that. I feel like if there wasn't the passion and the care in the project then the project doesn't work because that's what it's all about, it's relationships and being there for each other and modelling kind of peaceful therapeutic behaviours. So, if you're not in the position where you're able to do that, I don't think the project would have the same outcomes (SW1)

In Northern Ireland the recruitment of Family Support Foster Carers was time intensive and complex because 'the skills needed to be a FSFC are unique and not all foster carers possess them, so it was not simply a case of any interested foster carers applying for the roles, rather they had to be screened to find the specific required skills' (Flood and Thompson 2020, p. 32). This was also the case in Pembrokeshire, and it was not simply about finding creative ways to recruit to the Family Support Foster Carer role, but it was also making sure that their values aligned with Step Up Step Down. Again, it was emphasised that '*relationships*' are key and without this relational foundation '*the project would have the same outcomes*' (SW1). This is a crucial consideration for future iterations of the Step Up Step Down programme.

A further essential element for the sustainability of the programme is funding. In Chapter Five, it was noted that in the context of the wider 'crisis in care', rising care numbers and placement costs have reduced capacity for preventative investment (Welsh Parliament 2023). The Step Up Step Down programme is reliant on sufficient investment and financial support. Chapter Five explained that without the initial funding investment from the Welsh Government and the KPMG Foundation, Pembrokeshire Local Authority would not have been able to adopt Step Up Step Down, and funding was a key concern in terms of future proofing the sustainability of the programme. The importance of securing adequate future funding was discussed with Local Authority Senior Leads, who emphasised the requirement to quantify the value of the Step Up Step Down pilot.

> In terms of our sort of sustainability, we've got, I think we've got another couple of years of funding. And for us, if we can research - reduce our care population, our informal research, as opposed to your formal evaluation, is if we can stop one child coming into care, that would pay for a programme for a year or two years. So, for me, it's a bit of a no brainer if we can if we can sustain this and evidence this. The cost, as it stands at the moment, is minimal to what it's delivering. And if that was all to stop, the only way that I'd be happy if it was kind of stopped is if it became a national model that we could actually sustain all the way through fostering services so that actually foster carers can be used in a multitude of different ways (LASL2)

> Evidencing the benefit. Because if you've got a funded project, and I'm going to be doing it here... and I'm going launch it in [different Local Authority]. So, what will be key for me is, saying I want the authority to "lend me" this amount of money for the next two years, and I will evidence a return on that benefit by showing you that X number of children avoided residential care and/or foster care, and this is how much it would have otherwise cost us, and therefore, we've spent £100K on this and we saved ourselves £1 million. So, that's to make... making it core. I think it's evidencing the kind of cost benefit of the pilot and the project, because if you can do that, it's an absolutely... it's shooting fish in a barrel for the people that hold the budgets (LASL1)

There is a significant cost to the government and society when children enter the social care system, but prevention interventions can reduce these costs. A documented in Chapter Three, O'Reilly (2020) quantified the financial value of the Step Up Step Down model in Northern Ireland. O'Reilly's (2020) report provided essential insights into understanding the cost implications of children entering State care in Northern Ireland and the potential of the Step Up Step Down programme in Northern Ireland to support children and families, and in doing so reduce or change the costs to government and society of supporting these children at risk.

O'Reilly (2000, p. 3) suggested that if the 28 children in the Northern Ireland Step Up Step Down programme had been placed in Kinship or Foster Care the 'annual cost to government would be £622,020', rising to a figure of '£8 million annually' if the 28 children went to a residential care placement in Northern Ireland. As the cost of the Northern Ireland programme was £191,999 per annum, the potential cost savings to government are substantial. At the end of this evaluation period in March 2026, the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire has a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported, maintaining care arrangements at home, and a full cost analysis of this Welsh programme is likely to yield similar results. Accordingly, alongside this report, a quantification of the financial value of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire would be an effective mechanism for illustrating the value of the programme and securing future investment.

In addition to securing funding, there was also a consideration of how Step Up Step Down could go forward in an expanded and potentially nation-wide programme.

> I think one of the things that we have been needing to strengthen is the kind of the strategic planning around where we're at in the programme and where we're going next, just really for that sustainability. I don't know whether you keep it tight under the Step Up Step Down model... you could rebrand it, call it something else, make it a national deliverable.... some of the beauty of this is that the project starts, they take away barriers and develop relationships and if we could find some way of doing that, I think there's an opportunity to remodel care services... I think we need to be a bit more ambitious and take account of a

> changing social structure within the country and think about... what does out of family care look like for the future? And this provides us an opportunity to just think about things differently... The challenge, I think, is for the future of this sort of programme is whether it sits as a programme and if it sits within statutory services or does it sit elsewhere (LASL2)

However, as was noted in Chapter Five, there was also a recognition of the significant benefits of the involvement of The Fostering Network in Wales and the value of the model in its initial pilot.

> I do think one of the things that's been helpful... working with the Fostering Network as well, and actually it's not just a statutory service, you're working in conjunction with a charity and does provide an opportunity for them to take responsibility for sorting out all the training and the grant funding and all of that kind of stuff. So, it's not all sat on my shoulders as a service manager. You know, I can deliver the approval stuff, the panel stuff, the foster carers, the social workers, but then being able to bring all of this richness and all of the evidence-based programme stuff. Yeah, that kind of collaboration I think is something that's really helpful. I don't think a Local Authority could just deliver all of this on their own because it wouldn't have... sufficient resources applied to it when you balance up against every other statutory service. Whereas having a collaboration with the Fostering Network... means... we're contractually obliged and therefore we crack on with it (LASL2)

It was also emphasised that any new Local Authorities who adopted the Step Up Step Down programme would need to understand what it aims to achieve and embrace the model at all levels.

> I think for them, it's understanding how it works within their fostering service, and where it sits, like how it's sort of positioned as a model, because I think the complexity in it, or some services understanding it, is that it almost does act as an early intervention model that could sort of sit within like a family intervention team or a long-term team, but it does in terms of referrals, but actually, it sits under the fostering team, because, you know, the nature of the delivery being foster carers that are delivering it and I think it's making sure that they have the buy-in on the ground as well, so like not just at like senior level, that all levels understand what difference the model is going to make and how it works. So, I think it's like sort of understanding of the model and what its aim is, and how that works, and what makes it work in the best way (TFNW1)

There are also some key points from the previous chapters that are worth considering. LASL2 noted that in the Step Up Step Down model the organisation and delivery are shared so that the programme is not '*sat on* [the] *shoulders* [of the] *service manager*'. Beyond the organisation of training, family activities and nurture groups for children and the intensive work in securing grants, as noted in Chapter Five, social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff supported each other in the delivery of the programme, and relied on the time, skills and expertise of this combined team. Similarly, Family Support Foster Carers were supported in the same and differential ways by social workers and The Fostering Network in Wales staff, and parents and children highly valued the Step Up Step Down team and the contributions of Family Support Foster Carers, social workers and members of The Fostering Network in Wales.

Parents also made stark comparisons between Social Services and Step Up Step Down. The absence of a contract of expectations enabled them to have a level of agency that they had not experienced in service interventions, the relational nature of Step Up Step Down also led to high levels of trust, engagement, reflexivity and positive change. Parents wanted this model to continue

in this form, and if the model is modified to sit within statutory services alone then there would need to be a careful consideration of whether or not this could retain the relational aspects that have been centralised throughout this report and were a major contributor to the success of the Step Up Step Down pilot.

9.9 Recommendations

Drawing across the chapters presented in this report this evaluation has some key recommendations for future research and analysis, policy makers and the ongoing delivery of the Step Up Step Down programme.

In terms of future research, the recommendations are as follows:

1. A full cost analysis quantifying the financial value of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and the potential cost savings to the Welsh Government through families' participation in the programme should be undertaken.
2. Future iterations of Step Up Step Down should be evaluated, and these evaluations should include the perspectives of children, parents, Family Support Foster Carers, social workers, The Fostering Network in Wales staff and Local Authority Senior Leads. It is particularly important to involve children as their experiences have been absent in previous evaluations.
3. It would be useful to undertake a longitudinal study that revisits families who have completed the programme so that the long term benefits of engagement with Step Up Step Down can be examined.

There are also key messages for policy makers.

4. The continuation and expansion of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales requires a dedicated investment of funds so that the success in the pilot in Pembrokeshire has the potential to be replicated in other Local Authorities.
5. Given the current 'crisis in care' the continuation of the Step Up Step Down programme in Wales offers one strategy to attend to these pervasive issues but as recommended by parents and Local Authority Senior Leads, a wider investment in similar preventative interventions and support mechanisms for families, before the involvement of Social Services, is necessary, alongside Step Up Step Down, to better support safe and stable family relationships.

The recommendations for the Step Up Step Down programme are as follows.

6. All core elements of the Step Up Step Down programme worked together effectively to create positive change. Therefore, future programmes should provide training for parents, Nurture Groups for children, family event days and residentials, funding for practical support and enhancement activities, the For Mi App, the forging of connections with local communities and access to support from a Family Support Foster Carers.
7. The For Mi App was a beneficial tool for some families and the wider Step Up Step Down team. However, given the differential levels of engagement and feedback from parents and Family Support Foster Carers it would be advantageous to explore if modifications can be made to improve the utility of the For Mi App.

8. Whilst overall there were strong alignments, there were some differences in the delivery of Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland and the pilot in Pembrokeshire. Fidelity to the core elements of the programme is important to maintain but some discretion to be flexible is necessary to best respond to needs of families and geographical location of the programme.
9. The relational aspects of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire were integral to its success and any proposed changes should be carefully considered to ensure that there will not be unintended consequences that would impact on the supportive and relational communities that were built through the programme roles and its design and delivery.
10. Parents valued the voluntary nature of the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and the ways in which they were afforded agency across all aspects of the programme. Future iterations of Step Up Step Down should ensure that parents feel that their perspectives are valued and that they have agency and that they are supported to be empowered to make positive changes on their own terms.
11. In the Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire families were able to continue to engage with training and family events once their time with the individualised support of a Family Support Foster Carer had ended. This extended access was important for families, and it should be made available in future Step Up Step Down programmes.
12. The training provided was positioned as exceptional by parents who were able to engage, gain knowledge and skills, and apply these to strengthen family relationships. Parents recommended that this training could be made available more widely or that The Fostering Network in Wales could offer sessions where others involved in training for parents could be informed by these best practice models, which they positioned as more beneficial than the wide range of parenting courses that they had previously attended. Although outside of the Step Up Step Down programme, this could be a consideration given the strength of the parents' endorsement of the quality of the training and their recommendations about cascading this approach.

9.10 Concluding Summary

This report offered a background to context within which the Local Authority in Pembrokeshire adopted the Step Up Step Down programme in Chapter Two. Characterised as a 'crisis in care' (MacAlister 2022), the sector has seen increased numbers of children entering care, insufficient suitable care placements, recruitment shortfalls and unsustainable pressure on the social care workforce (Duncan et al. 2020; MacAlister 2022; Jones 2023; Welsh Parliament 2023). This chapter also outlined the detrimental immediate and life course outcomes for parents who have experienced compulsory child removals (Roberts 2016; Broadhurst et al. 2017; Enlander et al. 2021; Stevenson 2026), and the potential impacts for children in the care system in relation to wellbeing, education, employment, housing stability, and their future trajectories (Curry and Abrams 2015; Mannay et al. 2017; Evans et al. 2023; Lowthian et al. 2026).

It is in this context that preventative interventions have been adopted to address these issues and Chapter Three discussed these programmes with an emphasis on the Step Up Step Down Programme in Northern Ireland. As discussed in Chapter Four, the purpose of this evaluation was to facilitate an understanding of the subjective experiences of those involved in the Step Up Step

Down pilot in Pembrokeshire and their recommendations for future practice, services, and interventions. The evaluation focussed on the period of full operational delivery between April 2024 and March 2026 in which time 12 families (23 children) had successfully stepped down from the service. Among families who engaged with the programme, the service achieved a 95% success rate, with 22 of the 23 children supported, maintaining care arrangements at home and at the end of the evaluation period, the service was supporting 11 families (26 children), with an additional five families awaiting allocation. The evaluation drew on observations of Nurture Groups and family event days, course evaluation feedback sheets and eight children, seven parents, five Family Support Foster Carers, two Social Workers, two staff from The Fostering Network in Wales and two Local Authority Senior Leads were involved in the evaluation interviews or creative workshops.

As documented in Chapter Five, the Step Up Step Down pilot was able to go forward in Pembrokeshire due to funding from the Wesh Government, and creative approaches to allocating social workers and recruiting Family Support Foster Carers, and the Local Authority and The Fostering Network in Wales worked effectively as a cohesive team to set up and deliver the programme. Chapter Six reflected on the supportive relational aspects of Step Up Step Down, which were a foundational element of the success of the pilot programme with a focus on the role of Family Support Foster Carers and strength of the relationships formed between everyone involved in the programme. Chapter Seven examined the Nurture Groups, family event days and residential short breaks, which were positioned as an excellent resource for families and relationship building, and families also forged links with the wider local community. Chapter Eight documented perspectives on training for parents, and the sessions provided by The Fostering Network in Wales were regarded as exceptional both in content and delivery, and there was clear evidence of this learning being embedded in family practices.

Overall, the evidence generated in this evaluation suggests that the combination of all elements of the Step Up Step Down pilot worked effectively to support families who gained capacity, skills and knowledge, and built supportive networks, which contributed to stable family relationships. Parents directly attributed their children remaining in their care or being reunified with their children to the Step Up Step Down pilot. Accordingly, the Step Up Step Down pilot was crucial in changing the trajectories and circumstances of the parents and children involved in the programme, keeping families together who may well have been separated with children being placed in foster or residential care.

The efficacy of Step Up Step Down pilot in Pembrokeshire, the positive evaluations of all those involved with the programme, and its success in supporting families to stay together are key indicators that this intervention should be continued and expanded. Given the current ‘crisis in care’ it is important to invest in programmes that have clearly demonstrated that they can support families experiencing difficulties and prevent children entering the care system. The evidence generated in this evaluation positions Step Up Step Down as a valuable programme that can meet these aims and make a crucial contribution to reducing entry to care and supporting families to flourish.

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Appendix One: Example of Information Sheet and Consent Form for Participants

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Evaluation of The Fostering Network's Step-Up, Step-Down programme

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the purpose of this research project?

This research project aims to evaluate the Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme in Wales. SUSD is a new service in Wales, and the research team want to find out what people think about it, whether it is helpful and how families are supported. The research has different parts, and you may be invited to take part in a different way at a later date.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are a family support foster carer who is supporting families in the Step Up Step Down programme.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part. Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, we will discuss the research project with you and ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons, and it will not affect your legal rights. Your decision to take part or not to take part will not affect your involvement in the Step Up Step Down programme.

You can also change your mind about taking part in the research project. We won't ask you to give a reason and you can tell us you've changed your mind up until two weeks after you have finished with the service. If you would like to withdraw from the research, please contact Louise Roberts or Dawn Mannay.

4. What will taking part involve?

Involvement in the project will take many forms and will be spread over different project phases. This information sheet and accompanying consent form relates to the first phase only, further details for the rest of the project will be sent out before the next phase commences.

In phase 1:

- We would like to analyse the data that is input into the Here to There app. This will include the meeting notes made by yourself, the family's goals and outcomes, and the information completed in their profile. This report data will be anonymised.

This part of the research will not involve any contact with researchers. With your permission, this information will be sent to us by members of the SUSD team. However, you are free to contact

the research team at any point with any questions or concerns. The contact details are provided at the end of this information sheet.

5. Will I be paid for taking part?

There will be no payment for taking part.
You should understand that any data you give will be as a gift and you will not benefit financially in the future should this research project lead to the development of further services.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you from taking part, however your contribution will help us to understand how the Step Up Step Down programme works in Wales.

7. What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are no risks for you in taking part, however whilst your information will be anonymised, you may still be identifiable to persons known to you.

8. Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?

All information collected from (or about) you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information. There may be circumstances in which the research team may be legally and/or professionally required to over-ride confidentiality and to disclose information obtained from (or about) you to statutory bodies or relevant agencies. For example, this might arise where the research team has reason to believe that there is a risk to your safety, or the safety of others.

9. What will happen to my Personal Data?

The personal data that will be collected will comprise of your name (provided on a written consent form). If there are any details about yourself on the family's referral form, this information will be redacted and anonymised before being shared with the research team.

The consent form and anonymised data (information from the app and referral form) will be kept for a minimum of 5 years, or at least 2 years post-publication.

Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. Further information about Data Protection, including:

- your rights
- the legal basis under which Cardiff University processes your personal data for research
- Cardiff University's Data Protection Policy
- how to contact the Cardiff University Data Protection Officer
- how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office

may be found at https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection

Accessible printed copies of this documentation can be made available upon request.

10. What happens to the data at the end of the research project?

At the end of the research project all anonymised and personal data will be held for 5 years before being deleted.

11. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The research team will want to share the results of this research project in reports, academic journals and at conferences and events. Participants will not be identified in any report, publication or presentation, however verbatim quotes from meeting notes and app data may be included. The research team will provide you with a copy of the results if you would like one.

12. What if there is a problem?

If there is a problem or you have any worries or concerns, please contact Louise Roberts or Dawn Mannay – details below.

If your complaint is not managed to your satisfaction, please contact the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences ethics committee: socsi-ethics@cardiff.ac.uk

13. Who is organising and funding this research project?

The research is organised by Louise Roberts and Dawn Mannay, Cardiff University. The research is funded by The Fostering Network.

14. Who has reviewed this research project?

This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University.

15. Further information and contact details

Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact us during normal working hours:

Louise Roberts **RobertsL18@cardiff.ac.uk**
Dawn Mannay **Mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk**

Glamorgan Building, Room 2.05, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3WA

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records.

CONSENT FORM

Title of research project: Evaluation of The Fostering Network's Step-Up, Step-Down programme
SREC reference and committee: SREC 654
[Link to: SREC 519 AND 610]
Name of Chief/Principal Investigator: Dr Louise Roberts

	Please initial box
I confirm that I understand the nature of the research and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any adverse consequences. I understand that if I withdraw, information about me that has already been obtained will be deleted. I will be able to withdraw up to two weeks after participation in an interview.	
I understand that data collected during the research project may be looked at by individuals from Cardiff University, where it is relevant to my taking part in the research project. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data.	
I consent to the processing of my personal information (name and job role) for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be held in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation and in strict confidence, unless disclosure is required by law or professional obligation.	
I understand who will have access to personal information provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.	
I consent to being audio recorded for the purposes of the research project, and I understand how it will be used in the research.	
I understand that anonymised excerpts and/or verbatim quotes from my interview may be used as part of the research publication. I understand that I may be identifiable to people known to me.	
I understand how the findings and results of the research project will be written up and published.	
I agree to take part in this research project.	

Name of participant (print)	Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent (print)	Date	Signature
Role of person taking consent (print)		

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR RESEARCH
YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM TO KEEP

Appendix Two: Parents Information Sheet and Consent Form for Children's Participation

Evaluation of The Fostering Network's Step Up Step Down programme

Principal Investigators: Louise Roberts and Dawn Mannay





Who are we?

We are Dawn Mannay, Louise Roberts and Sylvia Stevenson.

What is the project about?



This research project aims to evaluate the Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme in Wales. SUSD is a new service in Wales, and the research team want to find out what people think about it, whether it is helpful and how families are supported. The research has different aspects, and you may be invited to take part in a different way at a later date. For this part of the project, we would like to speak to your child(ren) about their experiences attending the Nurture Group.



Why has my child been invited to take part?

The Nurture Group sessions are a key part of the Step Up Step Down programme for the children of families who are involved. As part of the evaluation, it is important to find out what they enjoyed about the sessions

and what they would change. We would like to hold a workshop where we will explore the children's feelings about the Nurture Group through creative activities such arts and crafts. Children will be able to take part as much or as little as they would like.

Where will the research take place?

We will hold the workshop during the Nurture Group celebration event on 15th July 2024. It will be held in the same community building as the previous sessions.

How can my child help with the project?

We would like to explore how your children have experienced the Nurture Group, and if you are happy for your child(ren) to be involved, we would like to:

- … come along to the celebration event on Wednesday 13th August 2025
- … carry out fun activities such as arts and crafts. There will be no pictures taken of the children or anyone else at the celebration event, but we would like to take pictures of anything the children make. Children will be able to keep anything they make if they would like to.
- … take audio recordings of the conversations with the children or take notes of what they say whilst they take part in the activities. These recordings will only be listened to by the research team. Any transcription of these recordings will be anonymised. Children will be invited to choose a name for themselves and will be encouraged to choose a fictional character. These names will be used in any information that is written up. All recordings will be kept secure and will not be shared with The Fostering Network or anyone else involved in the project.
- … publish our findings as part of a research report about the evaluation. We may also publish aspects of our findings in relevant journals. Published work will not contain identifiable information.

Taking part in this part of the research is completely voluntary, and anyone taking part can change their mind at any time up until 30 October 2025.



What happens to your information?

All of your information, and that of your child, is kept confidential unless either yourself or someone else is at risk of harm, and you will be told if this is the case.

Information we hold about you and your child will be kept in a secure folder that only the research team can access. This will be kept for a minimum of 5 years.

Any information that is shared in our written work will be anonymous. This includes personal information about your child.

At the end of the sheet, there is a link to more information about data protection at Cardiff University, and we can provide you with a paper copy or in an accessible format if you would like us to.



Are there any benefits or risks if your child is involved in the project?

Your child(ren) will not receive payment for being involved in the workshop, however being part of this project can help find out how children feel about the Step Up Step Down project, and this feedback can help The Fostering Network make decisions on how best to support children on the programme.

There are no risks for your child(ren) in taking part, however, should they get upset during the creative activities, they will be able to leave the activity with yourself or one of the Nurture Group facilitators.



What happens next?

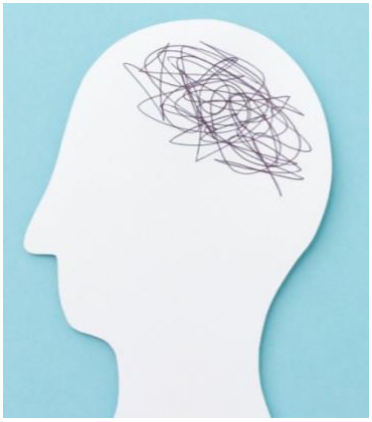
If you are willing to be involved with the project, you will be given a consent form by your Family Support Foster Carer which you can sign before your child(ren) is/are involved. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact us.

Do I have to give consent for my child to take part?

No, you do not have to give consent for your child to take part. Yours (and their) participation in this part of the research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you, and them, to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to consent, we will ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to allow your child to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons, and it will not affect your legal rights. Your decision to allow your child to take part or not will not affect your involvement in the Step Up Step Down programme and it will not affect your child's involvement in the Nurture Group. The children will be asked for their consent during the celebration event and before any research activities take place. They will be given the choice to either:

- …take part in the activity and contribute to the research,
- …take part in the activity and not contribute to the research,
- …not take part in the activity and go and do something else instead.

You can also change your mind about taking part in the research project. We won't ask you to give a reason and you can tell us you've changed your mind up until two weeks after the workshop. If you would like to withdraw from the research, you can either contact Louise Roberts or Dawn Mannay, or you can tell your mentor, who can notify us on your behalf.



What if you're worried about something in the project, or you want to make a complaint?

You can contact us on the email address above or you can contact your Family Support Foster Carer. You can also contact Rhian Smith at The Fostering Network at: Rhian.Smith@fostering.net

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project.

Link to further data protection information: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection

Contact Details

Louise Roberts - **RobertsL18@cardiff.ac.uk**
Dawn Mannay – **mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk**

CONSENT FORM

Title of research project: Evaluation of The Fostering Network's Step-Up, Step-Down programme

SREC reference and committee: Link to: SREC 519.

Name of Chief/Principal Investigators: Louise Roberts and Dawn Mannay

	Please initial box
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 10.06.24 version 1.0 for the above research project.	
I confirm that I have understood the information sheet dated 10.06.24 version 1.0 for the above research project and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that participation of my child is voluntary and I am free to withdraw this consent at any time up until 31st July 2024 without giving a reason and without any adverse consequences relating to my participation in the Step up Step down programme. I understand that if I withdraw, information about me and my child that has already been obtained will be deleted.	
I understand that data collected during the research project may be looked at by individuals from **Cardiff University** where it is relevant to my taking part in the research project. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my data and that of my child.	
I consent to the processing of mine and my child's personal information (names) for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be held in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation and in strict confidence, unless disclosure is required by law or professional obligation.	
I understand who will have access to personal information provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.	
I understand that anonymised excerpts and/or verbatim quotes from the workshop with the children may be used as part of the research publication.	
I agree for my child to take part in the research activities in the workshop on July 15th 2024.	
I understand how the findings and results of the research project will be written up and published.	
I understand that the conversations that take place during the activities will be audio-recorded or that notes will be taken about what is said and I agree to this.	
I agree that pictures will be taken of anything my child makes. I understand that my child can keep these things if they would like to. I understand that no pictures will be take of my child.	

Name of parent/guardian (print)	Date	Signature
Name of child (print)	Date	Signature

**N.B there must be individual consent forms for each child in a family*

Name of person taking consent (print)	Date	Signature

Role of person taking consent (print)

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR RESEARCH

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM TO KEEP

Appendix Three: Information Sheet for Children

Evaluation of The Fostering Network's Groups for Children and Young People





Who are we?

We are Louise Roberts, Dawn Mannay, and Sylvia Stevenson, researchers from Cardiff University.

What is the project about?



This research project aims to evaluate the Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme in Wales. We want to find out what people think about it, whether it is helpful. For this part of the project, we would like to speak to you about your experiences attending this group.



Why have you been asked to take part?

These sessions are a key part of the StepUp Step Down programme. As part of the evaluation, it is important to find out what you have enjoyed about the sessions and what you might want to change. We would like to ask about your feelings about sessions. You can choose to do different things such as arts and crafts or just talk to us. You will be able to take part as much or as little as you would like. You can keep any art pieces you make.

These are some of the areas we would like to ask you about:

- What was it like attending?
- Most enjoyable and least enjoyable things
- Other things you would have liked to have done
- Did you like how long the group went on for?
- Did you like the time of day the group was held?
- Too many or not enough sessions?

We would like to record your voices talking about the sessions, or make notes about what you say, and take photos of your artwork. All recordings will be kept secure and will not be shared with anyone else involved in the project. We will write up some of the things you say in a report, but we won't use your name.

You don't have to take part at all, or you can choose which bits you would like to do. Even if you take part, you can change your mind later and ask for us not to include anything you said or any of your artwork up until 30 October 2025.

Where will the research take place?

We will hold the workshop during the session on Wednesday13th August 2025. It will be held in the same community building as the previous sessions.



What happens to the information we collect?

Everything will be kept private and safe.



Next steps…

Please contact us if you would like to ask any questions. You need to sign an assent form if you would like to take part.

Thank you for reading this 😊

Louise, Dawn and Sylvia

Louise Roberts - RobertsL18@cardiff.ac.uk

Dawn Mannay – mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix Four: Assent Form for Children

Step Up Step Down



ASSENT FORM

Child/Young Person (or if unable, parent/researcher on their behalf) to circle all they agree with:

- Has somebody else explained this project to you? Yes/No
- Do you understand what this project is about? Yes/No
- Have you asked all the questions you want? Yes/No
- Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand? Yes/No
- Do you understand it's OK to stop taking part at any time? Yes/No
- Are you happy to take part? Yes/No
- Are you happy for your voice to be recorded? Yes/No
- Are you happy to have photographs of any of your artwork to be taken? Yes/No

If any answers are "no" or you don't want to take part, that's OK! No one will be cross with you.

If you do want to take part, please write your name below

Your name _____

Date _____

The researcher who explained this project to you needs to sign too:

Print Name _____

Sign _____

Date _____

Remember you do not have to take part in all of the things, and you can change your mind afterwards.

Thank you!

Appendix Five: Overview of the Nurture Group Sessions

STEP UP STEP DOWN

NURTURE GROUP OUTLINE

Supporting the learning, regulation and relational skills of children on the edge of care

SESSION 1: FORMING THE GROUP

Key themes: Welcome and inclusion

Context: Each child should feel that they have a place and a space within the group. They should understand the structure of the sessions and experience the predictability of the programme.

Beginning to build psychological safety and routines.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. A container for each child. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 mins)
Introductions including mascot (15 mins)
Agree jobs (10 mins)
Share news (15 mins)
Teach 'shake sillies out' song (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - container names (20 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 2: LISTENING WELL

Key themes: How to listen and show that you are listening.

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity with listening skills to assist them in school, at home and in their communities.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 mins)
Name game to support remembering each other (5 mins)
Introduce 'All the feels' (10 mins)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (15 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
'Spot the listening' role play (15 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - listening ears (15 mins)

Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 3: FOCUS TIME

Key themes: How to listen and show that you are listening.

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity with focus and concentration skills to assist them in school, at home and in their communities.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Name game (5 mins)
All the feels (5 mins)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (15 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
'Spot the listening' role play (15 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - showing our listening ears (20 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 4: FEELINGS DETECTIVES

Key themes: Understanding feelings and learning to detect them in ourselves and others.

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to recognise feelings in order to regulate themselves and empathise with others.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (15 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
All the feels (5 mins)
'Spot the feeling' role play (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - feelings wheels (20 mins)
Introduce 'compliment crew'
(10 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 5: WAYS TO RELAX

Key themes: Learning self-regulation skills and how to use them effectively.
Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to regulate in ways that are readily available to them in every context.
What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).
Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins) All the feels (5 mins)
Balloon breaths (10 mins)
Chill zone (15 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - design our chill zones
(15 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 6: COOL AND CALM

Key themes: Building on regulation skills to learn how to calm down when feeling really angry or frustrated
Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to regulate when feelings are so big that they feel hard to handle and could lead to risk or harm (or self or others).
What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).
Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
All the feels (5 mins)
Snail house (10 mins)
Take the heat down (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - thermometer (20 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 7: SOLUTION BUILDERS

Key themes: Understanding what solutions are and how to work them out

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to regulate when feelings are so big that they feel hard to handle and could lead to risk or harm (or self or others).

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins) All the feels (5 mins)
Solution machine (10 mins)
Spot the solutions role play (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - solution machines (20 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 8: BEING A FRIEND

Key themes: Growing friendship skills and applying solutions to situations of conflict

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to relate to their peers, to understand healthy friendships and to find safe solutions in conflict, avoiding escalation.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins) All the feels (5 mins)
What a friend is like (15 mins)
Friendly role plays 1-1 (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins)
Craft - friend flowers / rainbows (15 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Count tokens & give prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 9: BEING A TEAM

Key themes: Building on friendship skills and applying these to doing good teamwork

Context: Supporting children who have experienced trauma and adversity to relate to their peers, to understand how to work together and to promote positive, collective action.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers (optional).

Session outline (2 hours):

Welcome children & bring to their seats (5 min)
Agree jobs (5 mins)
Share news (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
All the feels (5 mins)
Friendly role plays - group (10 mins)
Team challenge - towers / puzzle (10 mins)
Snack and break (15 mins) Team Craft - display for celebration (20 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Calm games (15 mins)
Tokens & prizes (15 mins)

SESSION 10: CELEBRATE

Key themes: Refresher of all strategies and inviting significant adults to attend to celebrate and support the children

Context: It is helpful for parents, carers, teachers, social workers and other significant adults to know these strategies, in order to support the children to utilise them in all their contexts.

What you need: Accessible, comfortable venue. Seats / mats for each child. Named containers. Buttons, marbles or tokens. Prize bag filled with small prizes. Art & craft materials. Games. Laptop, screen & speakers. Certificates, medals & bigger prizes.

Session outline (1.5 hours):

Welcome everyone (5 min)
Facilitator presents overview of nurture group (10 mins)
'Shake sillies out' (5 mins)
Each child takes a turn to present a strategy, supported by facilitator (30 mins)
Compliment crew (5 mins)
Certificates & prizes presented (5 mins)
Food reception & chance to engage with games and look at displays etc (30 mins)



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