



Activity Days for Fostering evaluation report

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Service: Activity Days for Fostering

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1. Executive summary

Background

Since 2016, Coram has run eight Activity Days for Fostering in England, three of which were pilot events. Activity Days for Fostering (AdFs) provide young people and foster carers with the opportunity to find each other. AdFs enable prospective foster carers and children to meet in a safe, fun environment, giving them the chance to explore whether they have a connection or ‘chemistry’, something that may be missed in the standard fostering matching process. AdFs are events delivered to local authorities, including event organising (including venue, catering, and entertainment), briefing sessions (to social workers, foster carers, family finders, and managers), a profiling workshop, management of referrals, consultation, feedback, and evaluation. The Theory of Change is that where young people and carers play an active role in the matching, any placement is more likely to be sustained. Activity Days act as an addition to the existing range of matching and family finding practices, and are considered particularly appropriate for harder to place children, who may be: part of a sibling group, five years old or above, of a Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) background, or with a disability or a complex health need.

Previous evaluative activity

Feedback gathered by the AdF team from the three pilot events was positive in terms of the experiences of the children, foster carers, and agencies involved. Previous evaluation by the AdF team has also identified barriers, which include local authorities’ own reticence to enable foster carers to ‘choose’ (even though there is the potential for improved stability and outcomes for young people) because of the shortage of available foster carers.

Method

This independent evaluation, conducted by Coram’s Impact and Evaluation team and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Hadley Trust, focuses on the five full-scale events delivered since 2018 (4 in 2018, 1 in 2019). We intended to focus on whether AdFs improve the stability of foster care placements and the extent to which AdFs result in faster, longer lasting/permanent, and cost effective matches compared to the foster care matching system as usual. We **analysed monitoring data** from the five full-scale AdF events held in 2018 and 2019, including attendance, characteristics of attendees, expressions of interest, and number of matches. We also sought follow-up data on the sustainability of the matches made following AdFs, including length of matches, reasons for break-down, and characteristics of matched children. We collated and **analysed qualitative responses on feedback forms** collected from children, prospective foster carers, current carers, social workers, and event volunteers, and **carried out 6 interviews** with one foster carer and five social workers who attended activity days.

Days, attendees, characteristics and preferences

No AdFs have been delivered since the start of the covid-19 pandemic. At the five pre-pandemic activity days, 57 children and 65 prospective foster carers attended, with an additional 15 children profiled but not attending on the day. Children who attended in person were aged 4 to 15 years and were predominantly male (65%). Almost half (48%) of these children were from BAME groups, which is higher than the proportion of children in care in the UK. 16% of the children had a disability and 26% were part of sibling groups. For the prospective carers, there was no available demographic information beyond their ethnicity; the vast majority (86%) of those attending the AdFs were White. Information on the preferences of prospective foster carers was available from one activity day; the majority of foster carers had no preference with regards to gender (83%) or ethnicity (92%), but half expressed a preference about fostering sibling groups, with 2 foster carers preferring to foster siblings and 4 foster carers preferring single children. With regards to age, fewer foster carers expressed a preference for older children.

Expressions of interest and matches

There were 93 expressions of interest; 1.3 per child. The majority (71%) of children referred for an AdF received at least one EOI, ranging between 1 and 5 EOIs per child. The majority of prospective carers (62%) also made at least one EOI. Not attending in person did not seem to be a barrier to children receiving an EOI, with 17 EOIs (18%) made about children who did not attend but whose profiles were available at the events. Receiving an EOI was not associated with a child's gender, ethnicity, or whether they were a member of a sibling group. However, children who received an EOI were statistically significantly younger than those who did not, an average difference of two years. Of the 93 expressions of interest, 29 translated into actual matches – a conversion rate of 31%. This means that 51% of children who attended an AdF in 2018 and 2019 were matched. Data on whether these matches were sustained and the stability of the placements were either not available in full or at all.

Feedback from children, foster carers and social workers

Feedback from children was limited, with evaluation forms available from four children (a return rate of 7%). These children seemed to enjoy the activities at the AdF, but one child commented that they found the day scary. This is reflected in how these children rated their enjoyment of the day on a scale of 1-10, with two children rating the day 10 (excellent), one with a score of 6 and the other a 4. Feelings of anxiety were also noticeable in the feedback from some current foster carers who attended the events. Some carers noted challenges in preparing their children for the activity day, including supporting their child's anxiety and concerns around feelings of rejection. Many of the foster carers relished the opportunity to meet the children face-to-face. Across all groups of respondents, there were concerns about providing age appropriate activities for older children and engaging them in interactions with prospective carers. Feedback from social workers was positive. Social workers reported positive experiences for children, and speculated about positive effects for the children, including inclusion and empowerment from being included in the process. Improvements in profiling was spoken about by social workers following their involvement in AdF, and one local authority started running their own version of the event afterwards. Social workers observed that there was an increased move towards making existing placements more permanent, and they described placements being achieved for harder to place children.

Concluding thoughts

Our findings are mostly positive. Many of the children who attended belong to groups that we would typically consider 'hard to place' and almost a third of the expressions of interest led to provisional matches. The social workers were enthusiastic about AdFs and had learned from them. However, it is difficult to make any further conclusions about the benefits of the activity days given the difficulties we experienced in obtaining data on children's longer term outcomes and placements.

Our evaluation covers AdFs which have taken place, not efforts to expand the service to continue during the pandemic, so our conclusions and recommendations are limited in scope.

Recommendations

For future activity days:

- 1) Coram AdF team should review the age-appropriateness of activities on offer at AdFs and consider additional steps to engage older children and encourage interactions with prospective foster carers;
- 2) Coram AdF team should ensure that social workers, prospective foster carers, and current carers understand the ethos and rationale behind the AdFs, particularly the importance of not having access to details about the children prior to the event.

For future evaluation:

- 1) Coram should take a pro-active approach to future evaluation, ensuring buy-in to follow-up data gathering from all stakeholders (e.g. local authorities) ahead of time;
- 2) long-term outcome data should be collected by Coram's AfF team as opposed to relying on local authorities in order to ensure high data quality; and
- 3) age-appropriate feedback should be sought directly from children and young people through means that are acceptable to them.

2. Introduction

Background to Activity Days for Fostering

Of the total number of looked after children in England, the majority (71%) are looked after by foster carers (DfE, 2021), so foster carers play a vital role in providing looked after children with safe, loving, and supportive environments to help them go on to lead happy and healthy lives. Over the last 6 years, the general trend has been a slow increase in numbers of foster places - it is estimated that total places in England may have increased by 4% since 31 March 2015 (DfE 2021b). The number of foster places filled has also been slightly increasing over time, with 51,585 placed filled in 2016 to 56,500 places filled in 2020 (DfE 2020).

However, the increase in foster carers is not keeping up with the rise in demand for places. There is still a shortage of foster carers, particularly those offering permanent placements which is at just 33% (DfE 2021b). With record numbers of children in care and around 13% of the foster carer workforce retiring or leaving every year, [The Fostering Network \(2020\)](#) estimates that fostering services across the UK need to recruit at least a further 8,600 foster families in the next 12 months alone. It is hard, when faced with shortages, to ensure that children and young people are appropriately matched with foster carers. Evidence reveals significant levels of instability that is suggestive of poor placement matches due to a lack of effective capacity. Almost half (47%) of foster placements that ceased in England in the year to the end of March 2021 lasted for less than six months and one in ten (10%) lasted less than a week (DfE, 2021). Placement breakdowns create further instability for children who have already had unstable and traumatic experiences (Schofield et al., 2005). They also result in foster carers taking a break from, or leaving, fostering, leading to even fewer available foster homes for children who need them (Rock et al., 2015).

Coram's AdFs were designed to help address these problems by helping to find loving and stable homes for children who have a plan for permanent (long-term) foster care. Permanency has traditionally been prioritised through adoption, but in 2015 long term fostering was given legal status in the Children Act 1989. Activity days were recommended in Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers's 2018 review of foster care for the Department for Education as a way to increase long-term placements.

About Activity Days for Fostering

They allow prospective foster carers to directly meet children waiting for permanence in a safe, supportive and fun environment. In particular, AdFs are a helpful way to match children who may wait much longer for a permanent foster family (for example older children, large sibling groups, children with additional needs). Current foster carers, prospective foster carers (some may be approved adopters who are considering permanent fostering) and social workers attend the events. Prospective foster carers attend from both local authority and independent fostering agencies. A promotional video providing further information about Coram AdFs is linked [here](#).

In terms of the rollout of the AdFs, the delivery of the events through Coram involves a number of stages. The project begins with an initial meeting with the steering group approximately 4-7 months ahead of the activity day. 1-2 more steering group meetings would follow this prior to the activity day, as well as a profiling workshop and a briefing event for social workers and prospective foster carers. Approximately 2 months after the activity day, a feedback meeting is held.

AdFs were first piloted in the South of England (May 2016), West Midlands (December 2016) and Berkshire (March 2017) funded by Big Lottery (Table 1). Each event required finance of around £8,000 to run, covering event costs and staffing. These pilot events produced a range of learning compiled by Coram-i (Yong, 2017), including ensuring that future events are cost-effective, adapting existing activity day materials to reflect the older age of children at AdFs, and encouraging prospective fosterers to bring other children in their household to the events.

Table 1: Outcomes of pilot AdFs delivered 2016-2017

Pilot activity day	Children attending	Prospective fosterers attending	Matches
South of England (2016)	8	3	2 (1 sibling group)
West Midlands (2016)	14	10	0
Berkshire (2017)	9	12	7

Since the pilot AdFs, 5 larger scale Activity Days have taken place which are the focus of this report (Table 2).

Table 2: Where and when AdF have taken place (excluding pilot events)

Area	Dates
Northamptonshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17th March 2018 • 17th November 2018
Manchester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13th May 2018
Southwark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15th September 2018 • 18th May 2019

Aims of Activity Days for Fostering

AdFs aim to:

1. Speed up and improve the process of matching children with foster carers
2. Increase the number of children matched who typically wait a long time for matching (e.g. those who are older and disabled children)
3. Help prospective foster carers to get to know the child in person, rather than just reading about them in a referral form
4. Save costs for local authorities by avoiding the need for residential homes and short term foster carers (for example residential provision is £3,500 to £400 per week versus £850 per week for an Independent Fostering Agency)
5. Help children to be a part of their own family finding (usually when aged between 9 and 15)

3. Background to the evaluation

3.1. Objectives

The report is structured around our five key research questions:

1. Have AdFs improved the matching process for children in care with a plan for long term fostering, particularly those who are harder to place?
2. Have the placements for children who were matched through AdFs sustained?
3. How stable are the placements that have been sustained?
4. What are the experiences of those attending AdFs (children and young people prospective and current foster carers and social workers)?
5. Are AdFs cost-effective compared to foster care as usual?

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Secondary data analysis

We reviewed information on targets and achievements from Coram's Performance Against Targets spreadsheets between financial year 2017-18 (when the first targets were set regarding AdFs) to the most recent release (Q3 2021-22). We carried out secondary data analysis on monitoring data from the five full-scale AdF events held in 2018 and 2019. This data includes attendance, characteristics of attendees, expressions of interest and number of matches collected after each AdF. The analysis in this report has been carried out on the total data to assess the overall impact of the AdF so far, rather than outcomes of each individual AdF. Data analysis methods were largely descriptive. We also conducted used t-tests and chi-square tests to assess differences in children who did and did not receive EOIs following AdFs.

We also sought data on long-term outcomes following the activity days, including the characteristics of children with permanent matches, length matches were sustained, reasons for break-down, and length of time for the child to be placed after the event. This was initially requested from local authorities in September 2021. We drew on care as usual benchmarks drawn from government sources and other publications including:

- Children looked after in England including adoption: 2020 to 2021 (DfE, 2021)
- Fostering in England 2020 to 2021: main findings (DfE, 2021b)
- Unit Costs of Health and Social Care (Jones and Burns, 2021)

Data analysis included attendees at the five AdFs held in 2018 and 2019. The intention was to analyse activity days delivered up to March 2021, but two events planned for 2020-2021 were cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and another March 2022 event also cancelled. The sample for this research therefore included 70 children who were referred to AdFs in 2018 and 2019. This includes two children who were referred twice to separate events. Fifty seven children and young people attended AdFs in person and 15 were profiled but did not attend the events. These children were aged 4 to 15. A breakdown of the demographic characteristics of this group is provided in section 4.1.2. A total of 65 prospective carers attended the activity days. Whilst monitoring data was available, we were unable to obtain data from local authorities on long-term outcomes of matches following the activity days.

3.2.2. Feedback forms

We analysed qualitative comments written on feedback forms routinely collected by the AdF team at AdF events. These forms were given to attendees to complete - prospective long term foster carers, current foster carers, social workers, and event volunteers. We also analysed responses from children and young people attending the AdFs who were asked to fill out a postcard containing questions about their experience of the day. Feedback forms and postcards were available for three (Southwark 2018, 2019 and Manchester 2018) of the five activity days.

Verbal feedback from children was collated by event staff and is summarised in the findings section. Four children who attended completed and returned evaluation postcards. Nine prospective foster carers returned feedback forms. The activity days were also attended by other groups; of these six current foster carers, three social workers, and four event volunteers returned evaluation forms.

3.2.3. Interviews

We carried out qualitative interviews with 5 social workers and 1 foster carer to gain retrospective opinions about the experience in order to help us to understand if AdFs have affected matching and placement processes in long term fostering. We originally intended to carry out follow-up interviews with these participants at 6 and 12 months, but it became evident that these interviews would not further our understanding of long-term placements; the social workers who took part in interviews were involved in preparing and managing the day as opposed to follow-up support. We interviewed

one foster carer and five social workers who attended (an) activity day(s). All interviews were conducted over the phone between June and November 2019.

4. Findings

4.1. Have AdFs improved the matching process for children in care with a plan for long term fostering, particularly those who are harder to place?

4.1.1. Rollout of activity days for fostering

Coram first included AdFs in its service delivery targets in the financial year 2017-18, with the aim of securing permanence via long term fostering for 15 children. However, no activity days were delivered that year owing to delays and pressures of managing additional demand for adoption activity days.

Table 3: Performance against targets for activity days for fostering

Financial year	Target children attending	Actual children attending	Target foster carers attending	Actual foster carers attending	Target children securing permanence	Actual children securing permanence
2017-18	30	30	25	25	15	15
2018-19	36	34	45	45	10	17
2019-20	35	10	45	16	15	4
2020-21	10	0	15	0	4	0
2021-22	10	0	16	0	4	0
Total	121	74¹	146	86	48	36

AdFs took place in 2018 and 2019, with activity days delivered in financial year 2018-19 exceeding targets in terms of children securing permanence (Table 2). The COVID-19 pandemic began in the UK in March 2020 with subsequent lockdowns limiting the delivery of activity days.

¹ This data should be viewed with caution and may include double counting, as it does not match separate attendance data. This other source shows that 57 children attended, and 15 were profiled but did not attend in person (72 referrals total, relating to 69 children, as 3 children attended 2 AdFs each).

4.1.2. Characteristics of children in attendance

69 children were referred to the AdFs across Manchester, Northampton, and Southwark, including three children who were referred to two events (i.e. 72 referrals in total). Between 11 and 16 referrals were made per AdF with a mean average of 14.4 referrals per event.

Demographic information was available for 67 of the children who were referred. The majority of these children were male (43; 62%). The children ranged in age from 4 to 14 with a mean age of 10 years. Twenty four of the children referred (36%) were part of sibling groups. Twenty eight (42%) of the children who were referred to AdFs were from BAME backgrounds, and 38 of the children were White.

Of the 72 referrals, 57 children attended the AdFs across 2018 and 2019 in Manchester, Northampton, and Southwark in person. For 15 of the referrals, the profiles of the children were provided at the AdFs but they did not attend in person. For the children that were referred twice, one child attended both events in person and two children attended one AdF in person and for the other AdF they were profiled. The number of children attending per AdF ranged between 10 and 13, with a mean average of 11.4.

The majority of children attending AdFs were aged 7 and above. Seven were aged 4 to 6 years, 29 aged 7 to 11 and 21 aged 12 to 15. Some AdFs had slightly older children in attendance compared to other days. For example, children attending the activity day in Manchester on 13th May 2018 had a mean age of 8.2 years (SD=3.1) whereas children attending the day in Southwark on 18th May 2019 had a mean age of 12.5 years (SD=1.6).

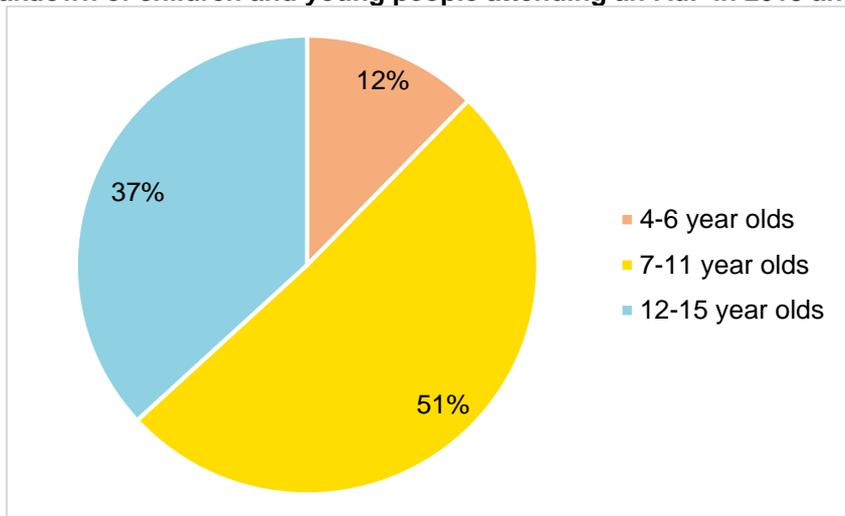
Table 4: Profile of AdFs including children and carers present, EOIs, and matches

Date	Local Authority	Children profiled/referred	Carers present	Children present	Expressions of interest	Matches
17.03.2018	Northamptonshire	16	11	11	19	6
17.11.2018	Northamptonshire	14	13	13	20	8
13.05.2018	Manchester	16	10	10	23	3
15.09.2018	Southwark	11	15	11	20	8
18.05.2019	Southwark	15	16	12	11	4
Total		72*	65	57	93	29

*Note: Including 3 children who were referred to two AdFs (69 children in total). Both of these children attended one event and were profiled for the other event.

According to the [DfE \(2021\)](#), those aged 10 to 15 years made up the majority of under 16s in care in England (39%), which has remained stable since 2018. In Manchester, Northampton and Southwark, 10 to 15 year olds also form the majority of children in care. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that these ages are well represented in AdF attendance data, but it is positive to see that they have been given the opportunity to take advantage of the AdFs.

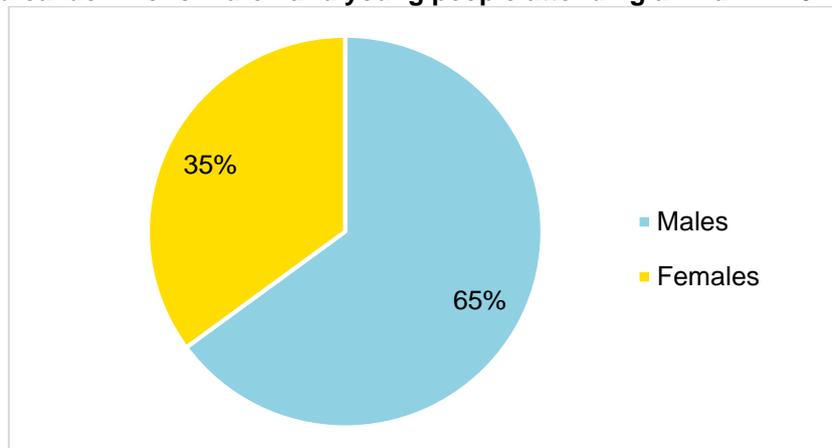
Figure 1: Age breakdown of children and young people attending an AdF in 2018 and 2019



In terms of the gender of the children and young people attending, males (65%) make up a slightly larger proportion than females (35%), with 37 males attending and 20 females attending. This pattern was apparent for three of the five activity days. For one activity day in Manchester on 13th May 2018 there were more female (60%) than male (40%) children, and in Northampton on 17th November 2018 the gender split was more equal (46% female, 54% male).

The gender breakdown of children under 16 in care in England shows that males make up 56% of the total and females 44%, which has remained stable since 2018 (DfE (2021)). This is also similar across Manchester, Northampton and Southwark. Therefore, it is positive to see higher male attendance at AdF given they make up a higher proportion of children in care.

Figure 2: Gender breakdown of children and young people attending an AdF in 2018 and 2019



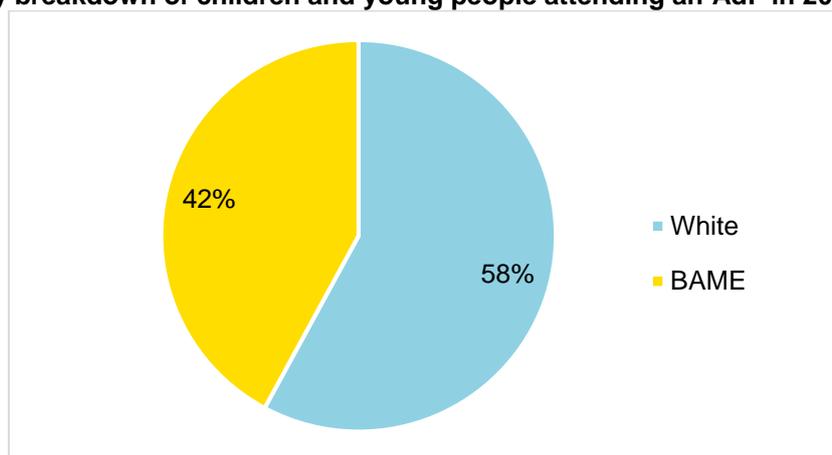
Around 30% of children under 16 in care in England are from BAME ethnicities (DfE, 2021). Considering that they make up around 20% of the under 17 population (ONS, 2011), it is clear that these ethnicities are disproportionately represented in the ‘looked after’ system. Looking at similar figures in the local authorities where an Activity Day was held, the picture is similar for Northampton, where 77% of children looked after in 2021 were White. In Manchester that figure is lower at 56% and in Southwark it is even lower at 30% - for Southwark, Black ethnicities are overrepresented in the care system at 43% (DfE (2021)).

In an interview with CoramBAAF (2022), this concern about BAME children in care was addressed, specifically low rates of adoption, the ‘delay’ in finding suitable families, particularly for black boys, the rejection of White families for BAME children and ethnic matching.

While data on fostering is limited, adoption data shows that, 84% of children and young people adopted in 2021 were White, compared to 14% for BAME children and young people (DfE (2021)). This may be for a number of different reasons, one of which being that the majority of registered foster carers are White (82%) (DfE, 2021b). While interracial adoption can be hugely successful, there are obvious benefits to placing a child, who may already be dealing with identity issues, with a family that looks like them and is well-placed to support their cultural identity.

That said, the AdFs can provide a way to support transracial fostering, enabling foster carers and those in the care system from different backgrounds to meet and interact first-hand. Attendance data does in fact show that AdF have been well attended by children and young people from BAME backgrounds. Of the 57 children and young people who attended, 33 were White and 24 were from BAME backgrounds. This breaks down into 17 from Black ethnicities and 7 from mixed ethnicities.

Figure 3: Ethnicity breakdown of children and young people attending an AdF in 2018 and 2019



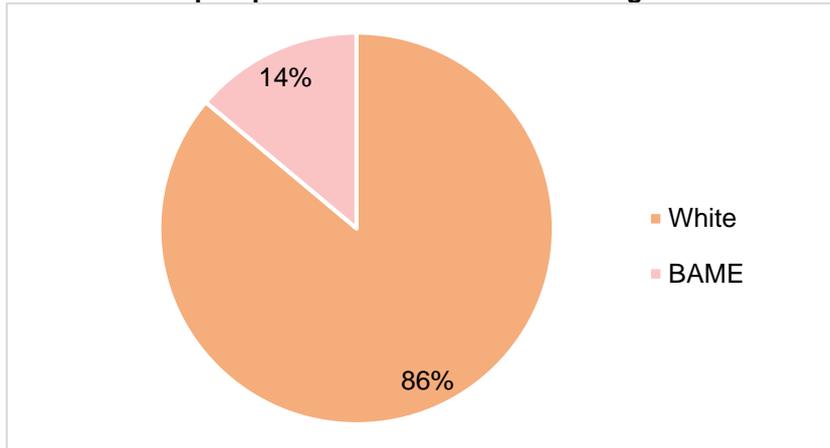
The AdFs were also attended by 9 children and young people who had a disability, representing 16% of the total number of children and young people attending.

Those with siblings who also attended an AdF made up 26% of the total (n=15). This is particularly crucial as siblings make up the largest number of “harder to place” children still waiting for families, according to the latest figures from local authorities in England (Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board, 2021). The figures show that 890 siblings were among the 2,030 children waiting for settled homes at the end September 2020.

4.1.3. Registered foster carers in attendance

Very little demographic information was available for prospective foster carers. As discussed above, a large proportion of registered foster carers are White and AdF data also reflects this with 56 prospective foster carers (out of a total of 65) attending from White ethnicities.

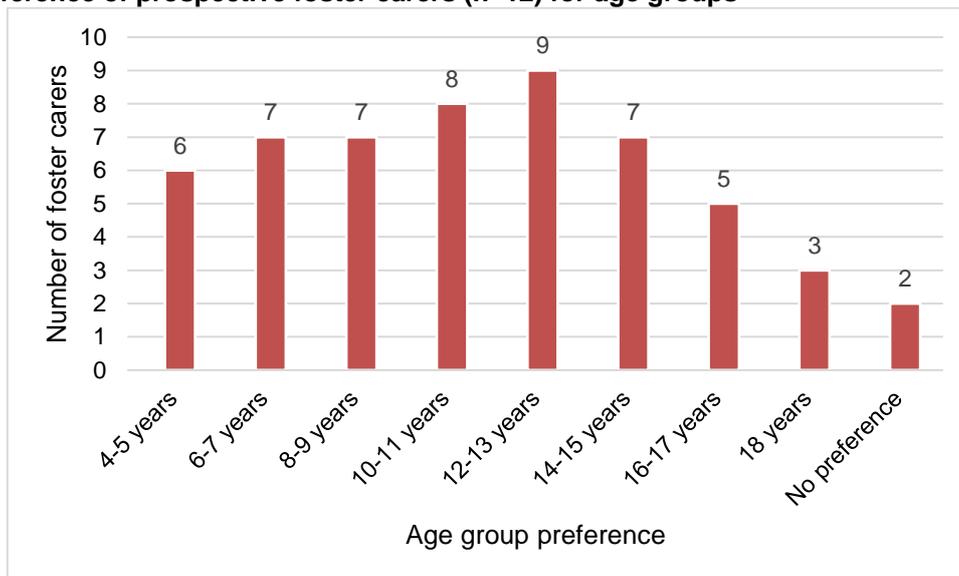
Figure 4: Ethnicity breakdown of prospective foster carers attending an AdF in 2018 and 2019



We have information on the preferences of prospective foster carers available from one activity day in Southwark in 2019. The majority of foster carers had no preference with regards to gender (n=10/12 or 83% no preference) or ethnicity (92% either no preference (n=8) or not stated (n=3)). However, half of foster carers expressed a preference about fostering sibling groups, with 2 foster carers preferring to foster siblings and 4 foster carers preferring single children.

With regards to age, 2 of the 12 foster carers did not express a preference. As shown in Figure 5, most foster carers showed a preference for children aged 12-13 years (n=9, 75%), with fewer foster carers having a preference for older children aged 16-17 (n=5, 42%) and 18 years (n=3, 25%).

Figure 5: Preference of prospective foster carers (n=12) for age groups



4.1.4. Expressions of interest

There were 93 expressions of interest (EOIs) following AdFs in 2018 and 2019. Given that there were 65 carers in attendance, this is a healthy rate. EOIs were made at a ratio of 1.3 per child referred. This varied across activity days with one activity day having less than 1 expression of interest per child (0.7 for every 1 child). The highest ratio (1 child to 1.8 expressions of interest) was an activity day in Southwark on 15th September 2018 where there were 11 children referred and 20 expressions of interest.

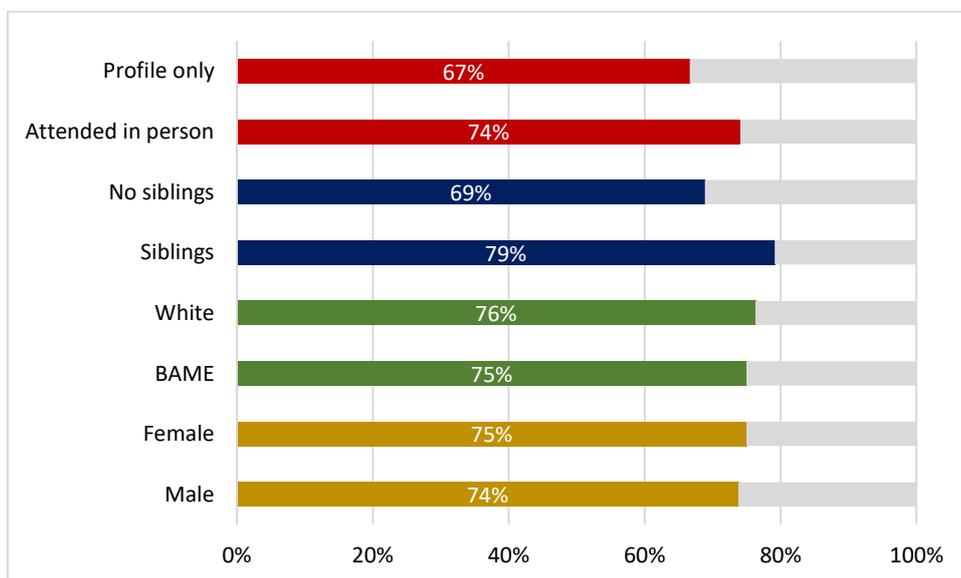
The 93 EOIs were made about 50 of the 69 children who were referred to AdFs (72 referrals as 3 children were referred to 2 activity days). This means that the majority of children referred to AdFs received an EOI (72%). Of the 50 children that did receive an EOI, half of these received one EOI (50%), a quarter (N=12, 24%) received two EOIs, 9 children (18%) received 3 EOIs, 3 children (6%) received 4 EOIs and one child received 5.

The 93 EOIs were made by 40 prospective carers, who each made between one and five expressions of interest. There were 65 carers in attendance, meaning the majority of carers (62%) made at least one EOI. Of the 40 carers that made EOIs, 12 carers (30%) made one EOI, 13 carers (33%) made two, 9 carers (23%) made 3, two carers (5%) made 4, and four carers (10%) made 5 EOIs.

The majority (n=76, 82%) of EOIs were made about children who attended the AdFs. Seventeen (18%) of the EOIs were made about children who did not attend but whose profiles were available at the events. In line with the preponderance of boys among children attending AdFs, the majority of EOIs were made about male children (n=57 EOIs, 61%) compared to female children (n=36, 39%). Children about which EOIs were made spanned the full age range of children in attendance at AdFs from 4 to 15 years. The most common age of children about which EOIs were made was 10 years (23%), compared to 12 years for other children. Just over half of the EOIs (n=55; 59%) were in relation to children who were White. For 88 of the EOIs we have information about whether the children they were made for had additional needs (5% unknown). The majority of EOIs (n=69, 74%) were made about children who were described as having no additional needs.

Whether children attended an AdF in person² was not associated with receiving an EOI. Children who received EOIs were similar to children who did not receive EOIs in terms of their ethnicity (BAME compared to White)³, gender⁴, and whether they had siblings⁵ (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Stacked bar chart showing proportion of children receiving EOIs according to demographic characteristics



Note: Coloured columns = Received EOI, Grey = No EOI

² $\chi^2 (1, 69) = 0.32, p = 0.57$

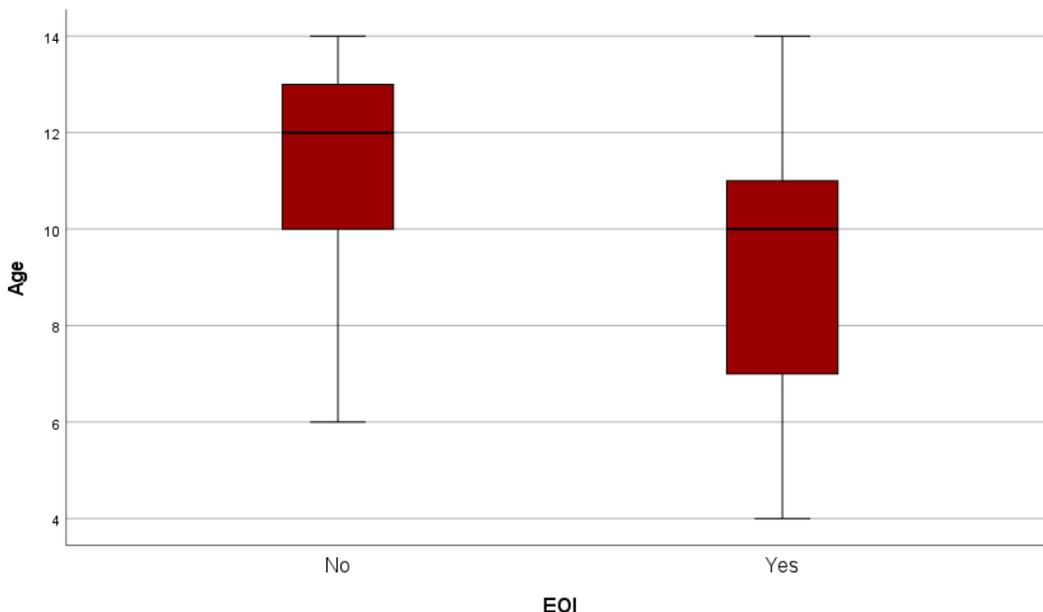
³ $\chi^2 (1, 66) = 0.02, p = 0.90$

⁴ $\chi^2 (1, 67) = 0.003, p = 0.96$

⁵ $\chi^2 (1, 69) = 0.83, p = 0.36$

However, children who received EOIs were significantly younger⁶ than children who did not receive an EOI (see Figure 7)⁷.

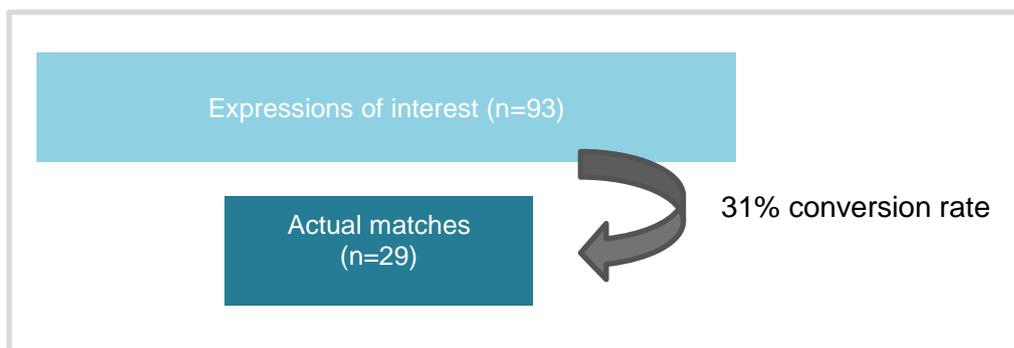
Figure 7: Boxplot of age of child in years by whether or not an EOI was received



4.1.5. Matches

Of those 93 expressions of interest, 29 translated into actual matches – a conversion rate of 31%. If this conversion rate were to be applied to the 6,850 children in care in Manchester, Northampton and Inner London as of 2020 (DfE (2020)), that would account for 2,124 matches.

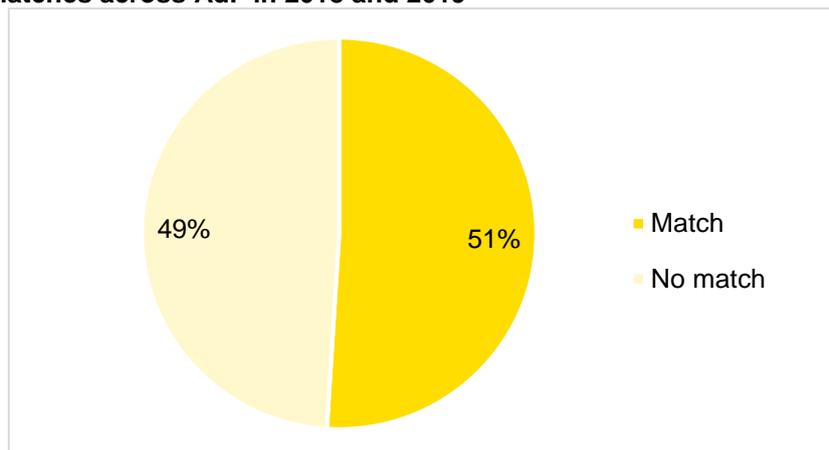
Figure 8: Conversion of expressions of interest into actual matches across AdF in 2018 and 2019



In total, 51% of the 57 children that attended an AdF in person in 2018 and 2019. In comparison, 71% and 68% of under 16s were starting to be looked after in foster care in 2018 and 2019 respectively. While this is considerably higher than the AdF match rate, it is important to note that AdF are specifically designed to place those who are harder to place.

⁶ $t(65)=-2.66, p = .01$

⁷ This analysis includes three children that attended two activity days. Between the first and second AdFs, the children aged up by one year. For this analysis the age at which these children first attended an AdF was used i.e. the youngest age. The effect remained significant when these three children were excluded from the analysis ($t(62)=-3.03, p = 0.004$).

Figure 9: Actual matches across AdF in 2018 and 2019

4.2. Have the placements for children who were matched through AdFs sustained?

We sought follow-up data regarding whether placements were sustained from local authorities. However, this data was either not returned or had high rates of missing data.

Partial data was available for the two activity days in Southwark when we contacted them in September 2021. Of the 8 matches made following the 2018 activity day, we know that one resulted in the child moving in with their new foster carers. Another child moved but the match subsequently broke down. For two children, the matches were progressing, and for 4 children, their matches did not progress.

Following the AdF in 2019, two matches were progressing, one for a child who attended and one for a child that was profiled but did not attend. It was indicated that four of the young people who attended the activity day may also be progressing to permanence with their current carers.

4.3. How stable are the placements that have been sustained?

Follow-up data regarding the stability of placements were sought from local authorities. However, these data were not returned.

4.4. What are the experiences of those attending AdFs?

4.4.1. Experiences of children

Verbal feedback was gathered informally on the day of the activity days and is available for children who attended three of the AdFs (Southwark (2018, 2019) and Manchester (2018)). This feedback is reported by Coram in unpublished evaluation reports for each of the three AdFs. Children were described as having enjoyed the activities and engaging with other children and their siblings. One child was noted to have engaged particularly well with the DJ workshop. One child reportedly experienced relief after forming a link with a foster family on the activity day. Another child had a lot of fear about fostering after negative experiences and reportedly felt that the activity day helped them to feel more positive about moving from residential to foster care.

However, some children were described as feeling anxious both before and after the activity day. One child was reportedly disappointed after forming a strong connection with a child in a foster family at the activity day but the match not consequently being progressed.

In addition to verbal feedback, four children filled in feedback forms. Children were asked to rate on a scale from 1-10 how much they enjoyed the day from 1 ('I didn't like it') to 10 ('it was excellent'). Two of the four respondents answered 10, one child answered 6, and one answered 4. When asked what activities they enjoyed, many children expressed liking all of the activities, in particular the

football, jenga, foosball table, and magpie show. Children also suggested what activities could be added to the day, including archery, baking, ping pong, and a bouncy castle. One child commented that they found the activity scary. Positive comments were also made about meeting children and grown-ups and the food. One child suggested including more activities that would be suitable for older children.

4.4.2. Experiences of prospective foster carers

Feedback forms were returned for 9 prospective foster carers across 3 of the activity days (Southwark 2018, 2019 and Manchester 2018). Foster carers were asked to rate their overall enjoyment of the day on a 5-point scale from 'unsatisfactory' to 'excellent'. All respondents (n=8) to this question (n=7) rated their overall experience as 'good' (n=2) or 'excellent' (n=6).

Six foster carers described having worries about coming to the activity day, with one fosterer reporting that they were not sure about coming. One foster carer was nervous to meet the children, whereas another was worried about feeling isolated and not knowing what to expect. One fosterer was worried for the feelings of children whose links with potential carers did not progress and the impact this may have on them.

Prospective carers described being motivated to come for the chance to meet a child to join their family. One fosterer wanted to see whether their current foster child connected with the children at the activity day. One prospective foster carer wanted to attend the activity day in order to meet the children on a personal level and build a mutual connection with them.

In terms of their experience of the day, many foster carers described enjoying meeting the children. One carer also enjoyed meeting other foster carers who share similar goals to them. Two fosterers felt that the event gave them insight into the young people's lives. Some foster carers reflected on the advantages of meeting children in person as opposed to through 'a paper report', noting that it helped to provide a natural way for children and carers to meet one another and to see who would be compatible in a family. One foster carer noted that they were able to see the personalities of the children.

Some prospective foster carers noted some areas for improvement. One foster carer suggested more activity days should be run to help children find foster families. Another foster carer noted a preference for being able to read about the children would be attending the activity day beforehand, as well as having time to learn about the different colour badges (showing who the different event attendees are) ahead of the day. One fosterer felt that the older children may have missed opportunities to meet potential carers as they were playing outside; this foster carer felt it made them more difficult to engage with.

4.4.3. Experiences of current foster carers

Feedback forms were returned for 6 current foster carers across 3 of the activity days (Southwark 2018, 2019 and Manchester). Carers were asked to rate their overall enjoyment of the day on a 5-point scale from 'unsatisfactory' to 'excellent'. There was a broad range of responses: one foster carer felt their experience was excellent; 2 felt it was good; 2 indicated neutral; and one carer answered 'poor'.

One foster carer did not have any worries about attending the AdF but two carers did. One foster carer was concerned about the distance and potential for disruption of the child's behaviours. Another carer was worried about the number of adults that would be involved and the effect the day would have on the children attending. One foster carer was unsure how their child felt about attending. All foster carers who responded (n=5) felt that they were well-prepared for the event. However, the foster carer who was unsure about how their child felt about attending felt that the information provided ahead of the activity day should focus more on the young person and how they may react.

Some of the foster carers noted challenges in preparing their children for the activity day. Two foster carers reported that this was due to their child's feelings of anxiety. One foster carer felt that their child only had a limited understanding of what the activity day was and another noted that their child was more interested in the party bag.

Three of the foster carers expressed that their children enjoyed the activity day, but one noted that the long day meant their child became very tired. Two foster carers felt that the activity days have a negative impact on the children they care for; one felt that the events lead to children feeling confused and rejected, and another reflected on the amount of anxiety that can be stirred up following an event in terms of why they did or did not get chosen and whether they feel they would get on with prospective fosterers. One foster carer felt that there were too many adults present.

Similar to the feedback from a child that attended an AdF, one carer felt that the activities were too geared towards younger children, with less activities tailored for older children and teenagers.

4.4.4. Experiences of social workers

Three social workers returned feedback forms from two activity days in Southwark (2018, 2019). They provided overall ratings of their experience of the day on the same 5-point scale described above; their responses were 'excellent', 'good', and 'neutral'.

None of the social workers described any worries ahead of the activity day, but one was curious to see how their child would find it. While the social workers felt prepared for the day, they did make some suggestions to help them feel better prepared. One social worker would have preferred to have more time to absorb the information provided ahead of the day and another would have liked to receive the information via email as they were unable to attend the briefing. One social worker found the children's coloured badges difficult to remember and would like this information to be reiterated more on the day. One carer reflected on preparing the foster carers they work with for the event and felt they had a good understanding of it. Two carers noted they had prepared the children for the activity day by explaining who would be there and what it was for; to have fun and meet fosterers.

Two social workers reported that the children they work with enjoyed the day, but one of these noted that the day was not that useful for their children in terms of meeting prospective foster carers. This social worker noted that there were not many foster carers present and those that were there did not interact with the children that much. One social worker felt that the activity day was useful for all three of the families they were working with that attended, noting that two of the three families made an expression of interest. This social worker reflected on the advantages of the activity days meeting other staff members and discussing permanency more broadly. They wrote:

'All too often I am reading referrals of children who came into care early in life and have had multiple placements. I think Activity Days are a very useful part of a wider set of actions needed to change this'
- Social worker

The five social workers interviewed came from 2 local authorities, Manchester (2) and Southwark (3). Two activity days were run in Southwark, the first in September and the second in May. The second, in May, was not deemed as successful as the first in September. Manchester only had one AdF, however, subsequently ran two of their own 'Manchester-ised' events, which they named *Celebrate Me*. Substantial learning and changes to processes seems to have occurred for all social workers.

Perceptions of how the children found the experience

The social workers in both areas reported that they felt that the majority of children enjoyed the days and the experience, "[a]ll the children seemed to have a fantastic time; this was reported by the carers" (social worker, Manchester), and that they seemed to enjoy the activities and food, "the face painter was amazing", "young people really got into that" (social worker, Southwark). One social worker said "[t]he children that just came and had fun, they mentioned the activities and excitements" (Manchester social worker), another said that two young people "said it was fun, they enjoyed seeing each other; they had a really good time, they loved getting the goody bag, one of them liked having their face

painted” (social worker, Southwark). Another social worker described how the young person he attended with, who “can be contrary in person”, answered the question of if he was having a good time with a “heartfelt, honest and straight ‘yes, I really enjoyed myself’ [... which was] actually really unusual for him” (social worker, Southwark).

However, social workers described nuance to children’s experience, and a distinction was drawn between the children who knew what the day was about, and those either not aware or less concerned – most were just thinking “they had a lovely day out making new friends”, while the “children that were aware that they were there because they were looking for potential permanent carers,... were sharing their personal disappointments of not being matched with anyone from the event” (social worker, Manchester). This difference in thinking and understanding was identified as due to their ages or various disabilities, and was also a different experience for older children, “[f]or a couple of the older children, it looked a bit like, you know when you are at a birthday party where you really don’t want to be and you’re stood at the side. For some of the children I think it was a bit much, they didn’t feel part of it in the same way” (social worker, Manchester).

The social worker who reported their child’s heartfelt enjoyment of the day, described a challenging moment within it, detailing how their child seemed to want them with them when they were talking to a carer, and then hid behind him when they joined them. They speculated that “at times he felt a potential exposure of that process”, but that it could have been because he hadn’t introduced that carer to him, and/or the strong connection he had with themselves (social worker, Southwark). Another social worker in Southwark said the children didn’t find anything challenging, while another in Southwark said “[e]ven those that were in residential and those who were reluctant about stepping down to foster care were very positive”. The Manchester social workers who reported some children’s “personal disappointments of not being matched”, also said that they have positive feedback from these children, “that is was great to meet a variety of foster carers from different ethnicities and different organisations too” (social worker, Manchester).

The social workers strike a positive tone about the children’s experience of being involved in the process. One social worker, while caveating that they hadn’t had the opportunity to properly catch with their young person yet, said, “it’s possible that he appreciated the opportunity to go through that process, because he has always had placements happen to him so being part of a process was actually quite empowering for him” (social worker, Southwark). Another thought that it did feel like an inclusive experience for the young people, and described how they thought one child found it empowering:

“I think to them it feels like an inclusive experience. Usually it’s a paper exercise that gets done by the social worker and they present to the young person that ‘this is the person you’re getting matched with’. The events gave us the opportunity to see if there was any chemistry between young people and the carers. At the May one, one girl had three expressions of interests, but there were two carers she felt that she just didn’t click with. There were a couple of carers that she really hit it off with, they had instant chemistry and they were really taken by her. For her, the sense that someone else wanted her was quite powerful. It feels more of a natural event rather than just having a set of introductions.” (social worker, Southwark)

Effect on placements, including harder to place

In terms of feeding into matches and placements, social workers spoke and speculated on positive dynamics and outcomes from the day. One social worker described two young people (aged around 8 and 11 years) finding matches through the activity day and moving from residential care: “the thought of moving to random foster carers that they’d never met was quite a scary prospect, but because they had met the person and had a bit of a connection I think it made it a bit easier” (social worker, Southwark). The social workers interviewed discussed positive impacts on matching and placements and did not mention anything negative.

A theme of movement towards greater permanence following AdF involvement was observed by social workers from *existing* placements, from both the child/young person and the carers. One social

worker noted that a carer changed their mind after the day and wanted to care long-term, while another observation was “carers sometimes claim the children when they find out there’s a possibility of an alternative permanent family being identified” (social worker, Manchester). From the child or young person’s perspective, two Southwark social workers discuss a child who previously wanting to find a new placement, but “as far as I know there’s been no noise from him about wanting to move placements after the activity day”, and child’s social worker speculating that perhaps the AdF gives young people the chance to experience other carers before a formal course of action, which in this instance, resulted in the young person being more content with his existing carers (social workers, Southwark). For these social workers, this made them think of this placement more as a permanent match than thinking they needed to find alternatives. One Southwark social worker speculated, “it’s been a process and a journey that the young person has been part of. Maybe that gives them an investment in how things work, I’m not sure”.

Social workers, spoke about matches and placements that had occurred as a result of the AdF. One social worker detailed how a current placement was going, that “all the services and support has been put in place for them, there’s regular contact, I couldn’t ask for anything better to be honest” (social worker, Manchester). This social worker then detailed the role the AdF played here, it “helped because they were able to meet, on neutral grounds, with the current carer, and the children were able to have fun with her in that environment. It wasn’t too much for the children, they were just having fun. The next time they saw the carer, the remembered her from the activity day, so I think it assisted it very much” (social worker, Manchester).

The social workers spoke of matches and placements for harder to place children. This included a sibling group (3 and 5 year old) that are “extremely settled” (social worker, Manchester) and boys moving from residential placements. From the Celebrate Me (see below for me detail) event which Manchester followed their AdF with, social workers detailed finding a match for a 15 year old black boy who had been in residential care for 5 years. One social worker noted that a child may not look appealing on paper, but might when observed in person doing an activity (social worker, Southwark). Another social worker discussed how it is “almost luck who you get there on the day and if there’s that natural connection with the child/children, because they weren’t the easiest to place”, but the AdF gives that opportunity (social worker, Manchester). This social worker further detailed how they thought the AdF helped matching for both social workers and cares. For carers, they got to see a child with another (“fantastic”, [skilled]) carer which gave confidence to being able to manage themselves and come forward (social worker, Manchester). For the social workers, having the opportunity to observe children, carers and their interactions, and having more than one option to consider, helped with their thinking.

The effect AdF had on LAs, their thinking and processes (including around permanence)

The AdFs seemed to provide social workers with opportunities for professional development, with some feeling that they had learned a lot from the event. One social worker from Manchester noted, “I learnt so much from the event. Everything from learning how to profile children, I thought we were doing it well but we really have improved”. Social workers in Manchester were able to use this learning to adapt the format of the AdFs and deliver their own event ‘Celebrate Me’ about which they received positive feedback from carers. For Southwark one social worker noted in relation to AdFs that “it’s been something that’s been present in conversations with management, it’s an ongoing thing”.

In terms of the specific learnings that the AdFs have helped bring about, social workers spoke about changes to the process of finding placements and gathering information and placement options. There seemed to be more confidence in creative and innovative thinking, as well as an emphasis on engaging further with families and identifying carers through links made at AdFs. One social worker from Manchester reflected on how Coram’s information sessions helped social workers to “think of how they would encourage more carers and look for more permanence for the children”. Interviewees also noted the importance of how social workers attending the events were

spoken with and what venue is chosen. They emphasised the importance of following up on EOIs within a day or two to avoid prospective carers losing interest.

Social workers also noted the role of AdFs in educating carers who were interested in permanency but needed a greater understanding of it. As one interviewee said, “permanency is used constantly in discussion in Manchester”, reporting that “there’s more people coming forward for permanency, and offering permanency to children who are already in placement”.

Interviewees made clear the importance of senior management involvement and buy-in for the successful delivery of AdFs. One social worker noted that this contributed to one of the AdFs being more successful than the other and offered this advice on running AdFs in the future, “have a really strong steering group with social work representations but also managers who can make decisions as well to make sure it’s solid”. It was clear from the interviews that the AdFs would not have worked without Coram’s support. When talking about the support received from Coram one social worker noted, “it was absolutely essential; it wouldn’t have worked without that and with their expertise”.

4.4.5. Experiences of event volunteers

Feedback from volunteers (four volunteers across three activity days (Southwark 2018 and Manchester 2018) who supported at the activity days was positive, with 2 volunteers rating their experience as ‘excellent’ and 2 as ‘good’.

Two volunteers described feeling worried ahead of the activity day, with one noting that it was their first time. All five volunteers who responded noted that they felt well prepared for the day, with some reporting that the information was useful, with clear roles and responsibilities given. One volunteer reflected on the usefulness of the profile making presentation and the briefing for carers, but felt that they would have liked more information on the children so they could recognise them as they arrived.

All volunteers that responded were positive about the event staff, describing them as organised and helpful. All of the volunteers also commented on the venue, noting that it felt safe and well-decorated. However, one volunteer did note that there may not have been sufficient space had there been bad weather and the children forced to play inside. One volunteer commented on the wide range of activities, with children particularly enjoying the Inspiring Children activities. This volunteer reflected that the group limbo and dancing at the end of the day enabled all attendees to have a shared experience.

4.5. Are AdFs cost-effective compared to foster care as usual?

As recommended in the review of the pilot events by Coram-i (2017), it is important to understand whether the returns of AdFs justify the costs. For the purposes of this analysis, the number of matches are used as a proxy for the number of placements.

AdFs are estimated to cost approximately £8,000. A breakdown of these costs is provided in Table 5. Five AdFs have been delivered by Coram, totalling an estimated £40,000. A total of 57 children (of 72 referrals) attended these events and a 29 matches were made, meaning the match rate was 51%. Therefore, the ‘cost’ for every one match made was £1,379.

Table 5: Cost breakdown of an AdF

Feature	Approximate cost
Briefing session	450
Profiling workshop	450
Consultation services	1,000
Three steering group meetings	800
Profile editing and books	500
Preparation materials	300

Referral management	200
Direct event costs (venue, catering, entertainments, gifts, logistics, storage, van hire)	4,000
Feedback meeting	150
Evaluation	150
Total	£8,000

Cost-benefit analyses have been conducted for activity days for adoption (Coram, 2021), but the calculation for AdFs is less straightforward. This is because we are not aware of any published analysis quantifying the cost difference between a child in short-term foster care compared to a child moving to long-term foster care. The cost of caring for a looked after child in a local authority residential home is estimated at £4,865 per child per week for 2020/21. At an independent sector care home for children this cost is £4,153 per week. Many of the children attending the AdFs attended with their current foster carers. The cost of foster care is estimated at £661 per child per week for 2020/21, but this is likely an underestimate as the figure does not include social care support costs ([PSSRU, 2021](#)).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Coram has delivered five AdFs attended by 57 children. Many of these children could be described as being 'harder to place'; 42% were from BAME groups, 26% had siblings, and 16% had a disability. Overall, there were 93 expressions of interest, or 1.3 expressions of interest per child, with 71% of children referred for an AdF receiving at least one. In terms of conversion, 29 of these progressed to matches meaning a conversion rate of 31%.

Our qualitative findings suggest that the activity days were largely enjoyable for those who attended; the current carers, prospective carers, and the children. Prospective foster carers were glad to meet the children face-to-face, with some observing that it gave them a greater insight into the young people's lives. It seems that the activity days may be able to offer benefits to foster carers and social workers beyond speeding up the process of matching children with foster carers. The events, and build up to the events, allowed social workers and carers to build useful connections and to further their understanding of permanence through fostering more broadly. It also seems that the activity days played a role in encouraging current foster carers who attended to consider taking on longer-term foster placements for children currently in their care.

On the basis of our findings, we recommend that the Coram AdF team review the age-appropriateness of activities on offer at AdFs. It may be that additional steps need to be taken to engage older children and encourage interactions with prospective foster carers. Our findings also suggest that careful attention should be paid to ensuring that social workers, prospective foster carers, and current carers understand the ethos and rationale behind the AdFs, particularly the importance of not having access to details about the children prior to the event.

These findings are promising, but we have been unable to follow up to find out what happened next. Our evaluation was hindered by a lack of available follow-up data on the outcomes of these matches in terms of how long these matches were sustained and the stability of the placements. The data available only provides an overview of the activity days and not a rich understanding of longer-term outcomes for individual children. We did find that receiving an expression of interest was not associated with a child's gender, ethnicity, or membership or not of a sibling group, but it was with age. Children who received an EOI were statistically significantly younger than those who did not.

We recommend that future research takes steps to ensure follow-up data is collected and shared with evaluators. We recommend taking a pro-active approach to evaluation, ensuring buy-in and engagement from all stakeholders (e.g. local authorities) ahead of time. We also recommend establishing an evaluation system whereby the Coram AdF team collect this data themselves rather than relying on local authorities.

Insights from qualitative written comments were useful but limited. Crucially, the voice of the child was missing from these findings, with feedback forms available from just 7% of the children in attendance. Future research should seek feedback from children and young people through means that are acceptable to them, such as anonymised feedback forms, interviews, or focus groups. This should be a priority for future evaluation, given that some carers expressed concerns around possible feelings of anxiety and rejection that AdFs may evoke for older children in particular.

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