



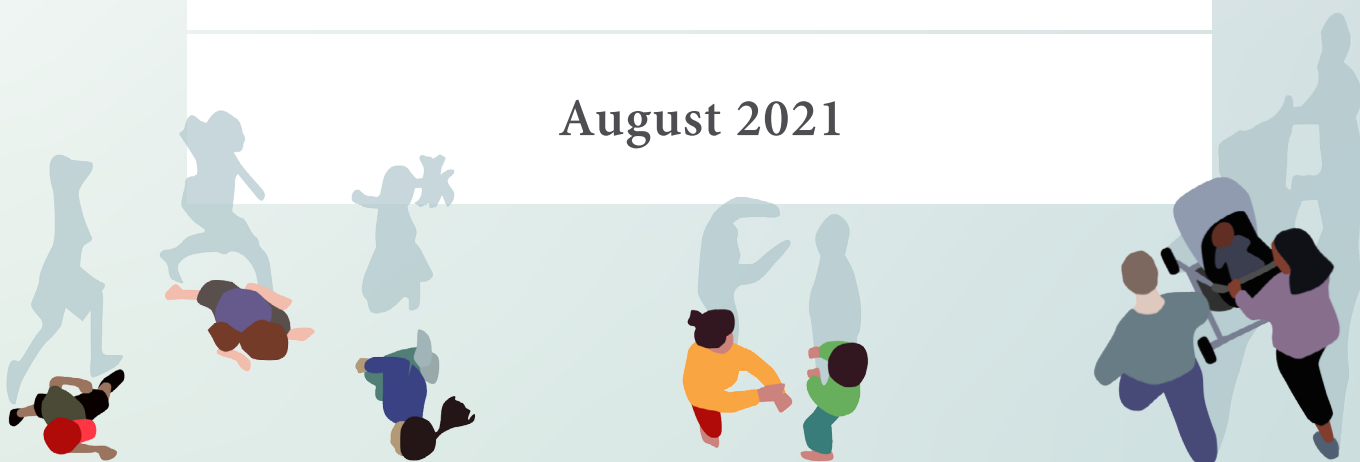
What Works *for*  
**Children's  
Social Care**



Centre for  
Evidence and  
Implementation

# **MATCHING IN FOSTER CARE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

August 2021



## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the support and assistance of the Advisory Group for this review including Matthew Brazier, Jenny Briggs, Eva Elks, Dr Kelly Dickson, Dr Catriona Hugman, Adenife Ijanusi, Jacqui Lawrence, Yusuf Paul McCormack, Ishara Tewary, Kevin Williams and Dr Kirti Zeijlmans. An additional thank you to foster carer Dr Meghan Bailey for her comments on the draft report.

This report would like to pay tribute to Advisory Group member Yusuf Paul McCormack who passed in January 2021. Yusuf was a foster carer, father, care-experienced advocate, artist, and wearer of many hats. He encouraged everyone, including those in this review team, to #BeTheDifference.

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## Funding and competing interests

Funding for this review was provided by What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC). In their capacity as funders WWCSC reviewed and provided comment on the draft protocol. They also facilitated an independent peer review process with anonymous reviewers. The views expressed in this report are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of What Works for Children's Social Care.

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest as generally defined. Eleanor Ott is a registered foster carer and has previously undertaken research around matching in foster care. She worked to ensure reflexivity by a) minimizing her role in screening, extraction and coding so that decisions and analysis emerged from this study, b) using the Advisory Group as a resource for decisions, c) working as a team, and d) consistent use of reflection. We believe that personal experience strengthened this review.

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The Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) is a global, not-for-profit evidence intermediary dedicated to using the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of children, families and communities facing adversity. Established in Australia in late 2015, CEI is a multi-disciplinary team across four offices in London, Singapore, Melbourne and Sydney. We work with our clients, including policymakers, governments, practitioners, programme providers, organization leaders, philanthropists and funders in three key areas of work:

- Understand the evidence base
- Develop methods and processes to put the evidence into practice
- Trial, test and evaluate policies and programmes to drive more effective decisions and deliver better outcomes

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# PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

Many children and young people are looked after by foster carers in the UK. This review is looking at how children and young people are 'matched' with foster carers. In this review, 'matching' includes:

- How the decision is made
- The child and foster family being given information about each other
- Introductions between the child and family, and the move into the household

A good match between a child or young person and a foster carer is important because it can have a big impact on children feeling loved, safe and happy in their home.

## What did the review study?

This review answers two questions about matching.

1. **What is important for matching?** What do social workers, foster carers, and children and young people say are important for matching in the UK?
2. **What is the impact of matching?** What is the effect of matching decisions on outcomes such as foster home stability, the wellbeing of children, and the wellbeing of foster carers in high-income countries?

## What studies are included?

For Question 1, we included 18 studies looking at the views and experiences of matching in foster care. These studies used methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys to collect data. Sixteen of these studies were located in England, one in Scotland, and one was in the UK but did not say where.

For Question 2, we included five studies looking at the effect of matching decisions. These studies used methods such as administrative data and questionnaires to collect data. Four studies were based in the USA, and one was in Canada.

## What did the review find?

Question 1 found lots of evidence that matches were often made in a rush or crisis, which meant that there was not a lot of time to make decisions about who the child or young person should live with. This meant that they were often matched with whichever foster carer was available, rather than the carer who might be the best fit for them. When matches were made in a rush, carers and children usually didn't receive much information about each other beforehand, and there was little time to prepare for the child's arrival into the foster home. Both foster carers and children and young people thought it was important to have information shared before they arrived. This helped foster carers to



prepare for a young person's arrival and helped children and young people to feel less anxious about the move.

Children and young people wanted to be involved in the match decision-making process, and foster carers and social workers agreed that this aligned with child-centred practice. The location of the foster home and living with siblings were also considered important factors.

Race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and language were also thought to be important, however social workers sometimes prioritised matching by ethnicity and culture without considering what was important to the child or the multiple and intersecting identities of the child. Children and young people valued shared qualities and experiences with their foster carers but living in a household that respected and supported their identity was also important.

The moment of arrival into a foster home was important for children and young people, especially for asylum-seekers who had often had long journeys and needed food and sleep. Foster carers' reassurance and warmth helped children to feel welcomed.

For question 2, there were not enough studies to be able to make any strong conclusions.

### **What do the findings in this review mean?**

The findings for question 1 show the importance of time and resources in making a carefully considered match between children and young people and foster carers, and that children and young people should be consulted in the matching process. The review highlighted the importance of reflexive practice and considering multiple, intersecting and shifting identities of children and young people, and the ways in which those create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Sharing information and being able to meet foster carers and visit the foster home before the move helps children and young people to feel less anxious and helps foster carers to prepare for their arrival. Matching went beyond the decision-making process and moving process to welcoming a child into a home and 'co-creating' a family with them.

For question 2, more research needs to be done so that we can find out about the effect of matching decisions on children and young people and foster families.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Introduction

There is increasing attention on family foster care globally, and the majority of children in care in the UK live in a fostering family. The decision to connect children with a particular foster family is a pivotal moment in the care journey. What Works for Children's Social Care has commissioned the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) to conduct a systematic review on matching in foster care. This systematic review looks at lived experiences of matching and the aspects that children and young people, foster carers and children's social care practitioners say are important. It also examines the evidence of the effectiveness of matching practices.

For this review, matching involves the connecting of children in care with foster families for emergency, short-term and long-term stays in foster care, including:

- The decision-making process
- The process of providing information to the child and family
- The process of introductions and moving the child or children into the household

## Objectives

This review answers the following two research questions:

1. **Experiences and perceptions.** From the research literature, what factors do social workers, foster carers, and children and young people say are important for matching based on their lived experience of matching in foster care in the UK?
2. **Impact and attribution.** What is the evidence from high-income countries about how matching decisions in non-connected foster care (e.g., based on foster carer skill level) can be attributed to outcomes (e.g., foster home stability, child wellbeing, foster carer wellbeing)?

## Methods

This review was a full systematic review that aimed to comprehensively locate relevant studies per the research questions and pre-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria. The review protocol is registered on the Open Science Framework and on the What Works for Children's Social Care website.

Research Question 1 included studies examining the views and experiences of children and young people aged 0-18 (in or previously in foster care), foster carers, and children's social care practitioners in the UK about aspects expressed as important in 'matching'. Research Question 2 included studies with experimental or quasi-experimental designs broadly defined from high income countries. It used these studies to look at the impact of matching processes for children and young people in family-based non-connected foster care on any child-level, foster carer-level or 'case-level' outcomes.





We searched 11 academic databases. The database search strategy found a total of 13,581 records that were uploaded to Covidence, a systematic review database management system. After de-duplication there were 7,006 titles and abstracts. All titles and abstracts were double screened with a good 92.5% inter-rater reliability. If reviewers disagreed about eligibility, records went onto full-text screening. We also screened 1,140 records on websites and the grey literature. We retrieved and assessed 237 full-text studies for eligibility.

Following full-text screening, there were 23 studies from 24 publications included in this review; 18 studies from 19 publications were included in analysis on Question 1 around views and experiences of matching in foster care in the UK and five studies were included for Question 2 on impact and attribution. Data was extracted per pre-specified criteria, and we undertook thematic analysis using the data analysis software Dedoose and an iterative process of refining the coding structure and developing findings which have been presented as a narrative synthesis.

The literature on views and experiences of matching in foster care represented rich data largely from England. We identified papers representing the perspectives of children and young people in or previously in foster care, foster carers, social work professionals, birth parents, foster carers' birth children, and kinship carers. Data were collected from interviews, focus groups, surveys, case studies, and qualitative analysis of clinical record audits. Quality was assessed using CASP checklists. Confidence in the findings, as assessed using CERQual, ranged from low to high.

## Results

We found strong evidence that matches were often made in a rush or crisis environment, which had an impact upon assessment of a child's or young person's needs, match decision-making, and availability of carers. Within this rushed environment, carers and children usually received limited information about each other, and there was little time to prepare for arrival.

The involvement of children and young people in the match decision-making process was thought to be important by children and young people, foster carers, and social workers. There was also evidence that it was important to involve other household members (foster carers, other children living in the household) and birth parents in these decisions where feasible. Location and living with siblings were also key considerations.

Race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language were significant factors in the match decision-making process. Social workers often prioritised match by ethnicity and culture, but included studies emphasised the multi-faceted identities of individuals and the importance of matching based on what was important to the young person. Although children and young people in care valued shared qualities and experiences, living in a household that respected and supported their identity development was also vital.

Information-sharing was highlighted as being important to both foster carers and children and young people prior to arrival in the home. Sharing accurate information allowed foster carers to properly prepare for a young person's arrival and helped to relieve children and young people's anxieties about the transition. Young people also felt more prepared for their move if they were able to meet their carers beforehand.



The initial arrival of children and young people into a foster home was a critical moment. The priority for asylum-seeking young people was for their immediate needs (food, sleep) to be met. Foster carers' characteristics such as warmth and reassurance were appreciated, as well as personalised touches to welcome the child into the home. Co-construction of family was seen as a key feature of a successful transition, whereby families embraced the child's culture, religion and likes to help them feel integrated within the home.

The literature on impact and attribution for various matching practices in foster care was sparse with methodological limitations, and no strong conclusions can be drawn from this literature.

## Conclusion

The review raised fundamental questions on what makes a good match versus what makes a good foster carer, the role of power in decision-making for a child in care, the resources invested in matching in foster care, and intersectionality of a child or young person in care's social categorisations (for example, race, religion, language, sexual orientation) and the ways in which those reflect identities and create systems of disadvantage.

The primary recommendation was that matching in foster care should be greater resourced to encourage and allow for a move away from the 'crisis' atmosphere where possible and the enactment of the standards for child-centred practice with greater choices in foster families.

Based on the evidence around views and experiences for matching in the UK, it was recommended that social care professionals consult with children and young people in matching, including which aspects of matching are most important to them. It was also recommended that they involve foster carers, other children within the fostering household, and birth parents in decision-making where appropriate.

Matching was seen to go beyond the decision-making process to preparation, arrival, and transition, and it was recommended that a planned process for transition take place. Foster carers and children and young people valued the sharing of accurate information, and children valued visits and discussions when they had taken place. The research also recommended that foster carers consider how they can 'co-construct' a family with a child or young person.

From the studies, a good 'match' was more than a box-ticking exercise, it accounted for the complexity of needs, identity, and preferences of children and young people and the structural systems of discrimination or disadvantage that they can face. Based on the findings, we recommend ensuring reflexive practice for social care professionals and foster carers. We recommend that this reflective practice acknowledge shifting identity, the intersectionality of child and young person's social categorisations (such as care status, race, and class), the ways in which those create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage, and how to support the child or young person.

The review highlighted that rigorous research about matching can be done, but that further research is needed in order to say what impact various matching practices have on children, young people and foster families.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Policy and practice context

Across high-income countries and globally, statistics on family foster care are lacking. When children cannot be adequately taken care of by their families, relevant children's social care professionals or their families move them into forms of formal 'alternative care'. Alternative care can be broadly divided into family foster care including non-connected carers and connected (or kinship) carers, residential care such as children's homes and orphanages, and semi-independent living. It is unreliable to estimate the total number of children in alternative care, the total number of children in family foster care, or the proportion of children in care who are in family foster care, but there are an estimated 2.7 million children globally between ages of 0 and 17 living in residential care (Petrowski et al., 2017). It is widely recognised that most children and young people thrive more in family environments than in large-unit residential care, and there are negative effects on the development and wellbeing of children from suboptimal care (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Across the UK, the majority of children in care are placed in family foster care (Department for Education, 2020; Information Analysis Directorate, 2019; National Statistics Scotland, 2020; StatsWales, 2019). There is increasing attention on reducing overall rates of residential care and increasing the use of family foster care (Goldman et al., 2020; Petrowski et al., 2017).

The decision to place children or young people with a particular foster family is a pivotal moment in the care journey. The act of matching involves the connecting of children in care with foster families for emergency, short-term and long-term stays in foster care, including:

- The decision-making process
- The process of providing information to the child and family
- Placing the child or children into the household.

In the English context, matching in foster care is engrained in policy and minimum standards codified in the English National Minimum Standard 15 for Fostering (Department for Education, 2011). According to this standard, matching requires ensuring an appropriate matching and decision-making process that is consistent with the wishes and feelings of the child and provides all appropriate information to foster carers.

Matching in foster care has been identified as a key area of improvement by the 2018 independent review of the fostering system in England (Narey & Owers, 2018) and by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), a non-ministerial department of the UK government, reporting to Parliament (Ofsted, 2020). Ofsted (2020) reported that, "Matching children to the right foster families is critically important for children's futures. Good matching decisions can help to ensure that fostered children have a secure base, feel loved and can enjoy their lives" (p. 3). The independent



review of fostering by Narey and Owers (2018) echoed this sentiment and noted issues around lack of preparation and that, “Children and young people told us that they thought it took too long to get them to the right placement where positive relationships could flourish and where stability would follow” (p. 71). As such, it is important to understand the context in which matching decisions are being made, the experiences of social workers, foster carers, and children and young people, perceptions on how these could be improved, and the evidence on effectiveness of matching practices.

The process for matching in foster care is documented to be different than that for matching in adoption and important for research in its own right. In the UK, the majority of children who are adopted are less than five years old, and the matching of these children involves a much smaller number of children, greater choice to carers, more established processes and guidelines including uses of matching panels, and greater resources proportionally. As of 31 March 2020, there were 80,080 children in care in England and only 3,440 children who had been adopted in the previous 12 months. Thus, the matching process in adoption and foster care reflect different organisational factors such as the timescale to make a matching decision, known available choices in carers, and completeness of information (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; *Topic 13: Matching – Key Messages*, 2014; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001).

Matching in foster care requires considering connected carers, also called friends and family or kinship carers, as a priority before matching to other foster carers. In matching to connected carers, there is less of a discussion around choice and more about whether the connected carers can meet the child or young person’s needs. Connected carers are generally managed by the same fostering teams as non-connected carers and matching to connected carers still involves the transition into those families. Despite the growth in the number of children and young people in care living with connected carers, they are only 16% of all living arrangements for children in care as of 31 March 2020 in England (Department for Education National Statistics, 2020). Looking across the UK statistics, over half of all children in care are placed with ‘non-connected’ foster carers (Department for Education, 2019; Information Analysis Directorate, 2019; National Statistics Scotland, 2020; StatsWales, 2019). From the literature, it is well documented that children and young people generally have better permanency outcomes with connected carers than with non-connected carers (Bell & Romano, 2017; Koh & Testa, 2008; Winokur et al., 2014).

Whether with connected carers or new foster carers, matching between foster families and children is crucial for the future of children in care as well as for the wellbeing of the carers and their families. Looking across the literature in high-income countries, effective decision-making is linked with foster home stability and carer retention. Promoting stability and minimising disruptions is a fundamental principle of foster care practice, as this promotes positive attachments and is linked with better outcomes for children (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Rubin et al., 2007). In particular, stability is linked with lower behavioural problems and improved wellbeing as well as school stability and academic attainment (O’Higgins et al., 2015; Rubin et al., 2007).

Importantly, research shows that when foster home living arrangements are disrupted or there is an unproven allegation against foster carers, social workers and foster carers often say that it was a poor original match or that foster carers were not provided with essential information (Phillips, 2004;



Plumridge & Sebba, 2016; Rock et al., 2013; Street & Davies, 1999). The correlation between poor matching and foster home disruption or other negative outcomes is concerning, as foster home disruption can be traumatic for both children in care and foster families. A history of foster home disruption positively correlates with future foster home disruption, and qualitative literature suggests foster home disruptions lead to children 'giving up' or 'withdrawing' from people (Rock et al., 2013). It may contribute to children feeling unloved and decreased wellbeing. Foster carers may experience high levels of stress, feel that they are not fit to foster any child, and may take a break from or leave fostering altogether.

## 1.2 Rationale for this review

The importance of understanding the characteristics and impact of quality matching processes is not met by a substantial evidence base. Little is synthesised about impact from matching decisions or about the experience of children and young people and foster carers in the matching process.

The existing literature reviews on matching in foster care come from teams in the Netherlands (Zeijlmans et al., 2017) and Australia (Haysom et al., 2020). These reviews focus purely on the decision-making process (Zeijlmans et al., 2017) and on the child and household factors that are thought of as fit in both adoption and fostering (Haysom et al., 2020). Per the context section, it is important to look closer at matching processes, views and experiences including within the UK, and at their impact. None of the existing reviews aims to be a systematic review (Haysom et al., 2020; Ott, 2017; Zeijlmans et al., 2017). As such, they do not comprehensively search both the published literature as well as websites and grey literature, and they may be missing useful studies as well as reflections from systematically assessing the risk of bias within studies and the confidence in findings.

This review sets out to fill two gaps in the literature. Firstly, there is a gap in understanding the views and perspectives of those involved in the matching process in the UK and aspects that are viewed as important. This aligns with the increasing attention on the importance of lived experience and on the role that views and experiences can have in shaping recommendations for change within the social care system (Care Experienced Conference, 2019).

Secondly, it is important to go beyond the existing qualitative literature and the listing of factors considered important and look at the quantitative literature to understand the evidence on the impact of those factors and decision-making processes on children and young people in care and foster carers. Due to the limited number of robust studies of this nature conducted in the UK, this will be examined across high-income countries so that the results are more applicable to the UK setting. The review questions outlined in the next section fill these gaps.



## 2 OBJECTIVES

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This review answers the following two research questions:

1. **Experiences and perceptions.**<sup>1</sup> From the research literature, what factors do social workers, foster carers, and children and young people say are important for matching based on their lived experience of matching in foster care in the UK?
2. **Impact and attribution.** What is the evidence from high-income countries about how matching decisions in non-connected foster care (e.g., based on foster carer skill level) can be attributed to outcomes (e.g., foster home stability, child wellbeing, foster carer wellbeing)?

The review aims to answer these review questions discretely, but to synthesise findings as relevant to create an overall better understanding of the evidence on matching in foster care.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms perception and view interchangeably in this review and acknowledge that perceptions and views are influenced by experiences. We have not attempted to disentangle these ideas as we acknowledge that there is not one view of reality.



## 3 METHODS

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### 3.1 Advisory group

The review had an advisory group of individuals who represented experience as care-experienced adults and foster carers as well as across research topical expertise, research methodological expertise, social work, fostering service management, a leading fostering charity, the inspection service for fostering agencies (Ofsted), and government (the Department for Education). They joined the Advisory Group as individuals; their viewpoints did not necessarily express those of their employers, and no comment has been attributed to any individual. A terms of reference document was sent to all members at the beginning and agreed upon in the first meeting. The group's role was to advise rather than to make decisions on the review.

The Advisory Group met twice for two-hour meetings: once in October 2020 to discuss the protocol bounds and once in March 2021 to discuss preliminary findings. Additionally, some authors had individualised contact with team members outside of these meetings. We have noted times when their advice particularly shaped decisions. We are grateful for sharing their expertise.

### 3.2 Protocol registration

The protocol for this systematic review is registered on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/95xmv/>. It was also published on the website for What Works for Children's Social Care: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-project/systematic-review-on-matching-in-foster-care/>.

### 3.3 Study eligibility criteria

The study eligibility criteria were established through careful consideration of the topic of matching and in consultation with the Advisory Group and was quality assured by What Works for Children's Social Care.

The Advisory Group recommended that Question 1 include evidence from all UK geographies: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that Question 1 include connected and non-connected foster carers. With the preliminary findings, we also presented to the Advisory Group the possibility of expanding the methodology in Question 2 to include correlational studies. The Advisory Group was hesitant to include studies that may have findings which not only frame outcomes and care experienced populations in a deficit way in terms of outcomes, but also have a high risk of bias and may have misleading findings due to their lack of controlling for confounding factors.

The eligibility criteria are specified by the inclusion and exclusion criteria and 'PICO' tables outlined in 3.2. The 'PICO' tables specify the Population/Perspectives, phenomenon of Interest/Intervention, Context/Comparison, and Outcomes. The inclusion and exclusion criteria specify if certain inclusion or exclusion criteria apply to only one of the review questions whereas the 'PICO' tables present concise



study eligibility criteria for Question 1 and Question 2 separately. The criteria are the same as specified in the published protocol.

## Inclusion criteria

### Study and publication type

The review includes only empirical studies in any published or manuscript form (e.g., journals, books, unpublished article, or online). Study designs were eligible if they addressed the research questions.

For Question 1, any study designs looking at views and experiences were eligible (e.g., qualitative designs, case studies) and data collection methods could vary (e.g., surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, creative methods).

For Question 2, study designs needed to be experimental or quasi-experimental.

### Years

All years of publications were included. This recognises the common history and tradition of the care system and foster care and the perspectives that many structural issues and promising practices from decades ago remain relevant today (Care Experienced Conference, 2019; Cooper et al., 2017; Narey & Owers, 2018).

### Language

Studies were considered if written in Danish, English, French, German, Norwegian or Swedish, due to the language competencies of the research team or available translators.

### Geography

For Research Question 1, studies covering all UK geographies were eligible.

For Research Question 2, studies were eligible if conducted in high-income countries, as determined by the World Bank (*World Bank Country and Lending Groups – World Bank Data Help Desk*, n.d.). The number of robust studies conducted in the UK was limited, so high-income countries were included to extrapolate from findings from other countries that may be applicable to the UK context.

### Population for matching

For Research Question 1, studies conducted were included if they were conducted among:

connected and non-connected foster carers, social workers or other practitioners directly involved in matching, and

children and young people placed in foster care or discussing their foster home in family foster care





If studies incorporated other populations (e.g., children and young people in residential care or adopted children and young people), these were included if findings could be disaggregated and results about matching in family foster care be separated out for data extraction.

For Research Question 2, only studies conducted among non-connected foster carers were included given the existing correlational quantitative analysis and synthesis on outcomes for children and young people placed with connected carers versus non-connected carers (Bell & Romano, 2017; Koh & Testa, 2008; Winokur et al., 2014).

## **Topic (matching)**

We included any study which examined perspectives, processes and impact of matching to family foster care, including the process of decision-making, planning and information sharing, and initial arrival and transition.

## **Outcomes**

For Research Question 1, we included any study that referenced any experience or perception voiced by social workers, foster carers, and children and young people about what is viewed as important in matching processes. We anticipated a broad range of aspects being captured as part of these studies, including the importance of information, pets, or of a certain process for matching. The views about what was important for children and young people need not be measured or measurable, and may include feeling accepted, feeling loved and feeling settled.

For Research Question 2, studies measuring any child-level, 'case'-level, or foster-carer level outcomes were considered for inclusion, such as child wellbeing, child academic achievement, foster home disruption or foster carer wellbeing.

## **Exclusion criteria**

### **Study and publication type**

Any non-empirical publication was excluded, including purely theoretical literature, opinion pieces, literature reviews and evidence syntheses. Although literature reviews and evidence syntheses were excluded from this review, we checked relevant reviews for their included studies for eligibility for this review

### **Language**

We only searched for materials in English. We viewed abstracts in other languages through Google Translate as well as internal team language skills. No studies in other languages were found for inclusion, but we did have internal team skills to review in Danish, English, German, French, Norwegian and Swedish as specified in the protocol.



## Geography

For Research Question 1, we excluded studies that covered non-UK geographies given the contextual nature of views and experiences, different histories, different legislations and matching processes, and different demographics of care populations and likelihood of entering care. For example, in the Netherlands, there is virtually no adoption and there is greater involvement of birth parents in matching decisions (Zeijlmans et al., 2019)

For Research Question 2, studies conducted in low- and middle-income countries (as determined by the World Bank) were excluded (*World Bank Country and Lending Groups – World Bank Data Help Desk*, n.d.), as their findings were anticipated to not be transportable to the UK context. Foster care systems in these countries are substantially different from the services in high-income countries in terms of their pool of approved foster carers, systems and oversight, and resources.

## Population for matching

We excluded any studies focused on matching for young people aged 18 or older, as this is outside of the core UK context of matching in foster care, where matching decisions only involve children aged 17 or younger.

## Topic (matching)

For both research questions, studies about matching in adoption were excluded. The processes are different in the UK in terms of motivations to become a foster carer versus an adopter, resources in the matching system (e.g., caseloads), processes of matching panels, existence of a national, searchable database for matches (present for adoption but not for foster care), and number of approved carers versus number of children eligible for that type of care (with there being more choice in adoption). Studies focused on matching to kinship carers (also called family and friends carers), residential homes, children's homes, semi-independent living, or other types of accommodation settings were not considered. If studies included information about matching to both foster care and other types of care, and data could be disaggregated to findings about matching in foster care, then these were included and information on foster care matching extracted.

Additionally, for Question 2, we excluded studies about matching to connected carers (also known as friends and family carers or kinship carers).

## Tables defining study eligibility

### Question 1: Experiences and perceptions

Eligibility criteria for Research Question 1 are summarised in Table 3.2.1 using the qualitative PICO framework. This framework differs between a review's Population, Problem, or Perspectives, Phenomenon of Interest, Context, and Outcomes.

#### Table 3.2.1 Question 1 PICO framework



PICo domain	Criteria
<b>Population</b>	Children and young people (0-18 years old) in family-based foster care
<b>Perspectives/Views</b>	Children and young people, foster carers, and children's social care practitioners
<b>Interest</b>	Aspects expressed as important in 'matching' – the process of decision-making, information-sharing, introductions, and moving children and young people into a family-based foster care setting
<b>Context</b>	Matching in family-based foster care (to connected and non-connected carers) in the UK
<b>Outcome</b>	Any outcomes identified
<b>Study design</b>	Any study design in which these aspects were considered

## Question 2: Impact and attribution

Eligibility criteria for Research Question 2 are summarised in Table 3.2.2 using the quantitative PICO framework. This framework is commonly used for clarifying the scope of systematic reviews based on its key Population, Intervention, Comparison conditions, and Outcomes of interest for studies on impact (Eriksen & Frandsen, 2018).

**Table 3.2.2 Question 2 PICO framework**

PICO domain	Inclusion criteria
<b>Population</b>	Children and young people (0-18) in family-based non-connected foster care in high-income countries
<b>Intervention</b>	Any changes in processes, interventions, or policy or guidance related to matching in foster care, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The decision-making process</li> <li>• The process of providing information to the child and family</li> <li>• Moving the child or children into the household</li> </ul>
<b>Comparison</b>	A matched group of children and young people in non-connected foster care where that change in process, intervention, policy, or guidance has not been applied or adhered to.
<b>Outcome</b>	Any child-level, foster carer-level or 'case-level' outcomes, such as child wellbeing, foster carer wellbeing, foster carer retention, and foster home stability. Outcomes must be measured and quantifiable.
<b>Study designs</b>	Experimental study designs (RCTs, cluster RCTs) and quasi-experimental methods with a valid counterfactual including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Natural experiment</li> </ul>



PICO domain	Inclusion criteria
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Difference-in-difference</li><li>• Propensity score-matching</li><li>• Doubly robust methods</li><li>• Regression adjustment</li><li>• Regression discontinuity</li><li>• Instrumental variable</li></ul>

In operationalising this eligibility criteria for question 2, we took a broad definition of quasi-experimental designs given the ambiguity on the definition of quasi-experimental design (de Vocht et al., 2021; Shadish, et al., 2021). We adhered to the inclusion criteria that studies must include a justification of a valid counterfactual.

### 3.4 Search strategy

The search applied for the two research questions, but they were screened into Research Question 1 and/or 2 for data extraction. The search terms were developed by our team (EO and RD), and reviewed by the advisory group and in the quality assurance of the protocol.

One author (RD) searched databases on 2 December 2020 with consultation with the lead author (EO) as queries arose. The following databases were searched:

- British Education Index via EBSCO
- Campbell Library
- Cinahl via EBSCO
- Conference Proceedings Citation Index (CPCI) via Web of Science
- ERIC via Proquest
- PsycINFO via Ovid
- MEDLINE via Ovid
- SCOPUS
- Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) via Web of Science
- Social Services Abstracts via ProQuest
- Sociological Abstracts via ProQuest

The following key search terms were used as shown for ProQuest: ('foster care\*' OR 'foster parent\*' OR 'foster famil\*' OR 'foster placement\*' OR 'foster home\*' OR 'foster household' OR 'foster child\*' OR 'substitute famil\*' OR 'looked after' OR 'looked-after' OR 'child in care' OR 'alternative care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'out of home care' OR 'kinship care\*' OR 'connected care\*' OR 'friends and family care\*') NEAR/15 (('match\*' OR 'care plan\*' OR 'fit' OR 'placement\*' or 'move')). Appendix 1 shows an example search string for Web of Science and the full search record is available upon request.

No date or study design restrictions were imposed in the search. We searched for English publications only.



In addition to searching databases, one author (RD) searched for grey literature on 6 April 2021 using the following websites that were selected based on experience and specified in the protocol.

- British Association of Social Workers (BASW)
- Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Service (C4EO)
- Chapin Hall
- CoramBAAF (British Association of Adoption and Fostering)
- The Fostering Network
- Google Scholar (first 100)
- Joanna Briggs Institute
- National Children's Bureau (NCB)
- National Society for the Protection of Children against Cruelty (NSPCC)
- The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE)
- Administration for Children and Families (USA)
- Ofsted

In addition, we asked the members of this review's advisory group for key literature, screened the citations of relevant literature reviews, and contacted key authors and researchers as applicable.

### 3.5 Study selection

All retrieved citations were uploaded to Covidence (version 2568), a systematic review management system. Duplicates removed prior to screening. All titles and abstracts were double screened with a screening guide to aid in decision-making, blind to the other screener's findings. Four members of the review team contributed to screening abstracts (SC, RD, MM, GM, EO). There was ongoing discussion to clarify any generic questions that arose about the inclusion criteria. There was a good inter-rater reliability in screening with proportionate agreement of 92.5% across the review for all titles and abstracts. At least two members of the review team discussed all conflicts to understand if there were any obvious reasons for inclusion into or exclusion from the study. The abstract conflict meetings took place during regular meetings, usually at least twice a week. When in disagreement about whether a study should be included in the full-text or reasons for exclusion or inclusion were unclear, the papers were moved to full text screening.

Full texts were then screened by two members of the review team (RD, MM, GM, SC) against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Relevant primary investigators were contacted, when necessary, to establish eligibility. When disagreement existed about inclusion in the review, studies were discussed with a third reviewer who acted as an experienced moderator (EO bringing in BA as needed).

### 3.6 Data extraction

Data extraction was undertaken using a GoogleSheet with a tab including basic reference information for all included studies: one tab for Question 1 studies including demographic, methodology, and finding summary information; and one tab for Question 2 studies including demographic information,



methodology information, and findings. The domains of the relevant tabs are listed below. These domains were based on the protocol, piloted, discussed as a team, and refined.

Studies were categorised as Question 1 or Question 2 based on their design and research questions. For Question 1, the study design was categorised based on information about methods of data collection (e.g., focus groups, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires). In Question 2, we expanded upon the plans in the protocol through creation of notes about the comparison group and statistical controls used and in creating the domains of the three primary outcomes.

### **Inter-Coder Reliability for Questions 1 and 2**

To ensure consistency and replicability, inter-coder reliability was established at the data extraction stage (Belur et al., 2018). Two authors independently coded a random sample of 10% of the articles (Lombard et al., 2017). As recommended in the literature, percentage agreements above 80% were considered sufficient (McHugh, 2012). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. After data extraction was complete, one reviewer (MM) double-coded two Question 1 studies completed by the primary coders (BD, GM) to determine the consistency with which codes were used. It was determined that reviewers are generally using codes in the same way. Further, one Question 2 study was double-coded (SG and MM) at the data extraction stage to ensure consistency. It was determined that coders had 94.5 percentage agreement.

### **Extraction of publication information for all studies**

- Authors
- Year of publication
- Publication title
- Publication type (e.g., journal, dissertation, report)
- Geography of study (e.g., country)

### **Question 1 data extraction: Experiences and perceptions**

- Matching element
- Demographic information
- Population
- UK nation (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland)
- Setting
- Number of participants
- Methodology
- Analysis methods
- Summary of findings
- Voice represented



## Question 2 data extraction: Impact and attribution

For Question 2, we had initially hoped to use the framework of EMMIE for each aspect of matching as specified in the protocol, but the publications did not have sufficient information in their details to discuss anything but effect. The EMMIE framework looks at an intervention's Effect (or impact, including effect size), Mechanism (how it works), Moderators (where it works), Implementation (how to do it), and Economic Cost and is used by some What Works Centres (Puttick, 2018).

As such, the data extracted for Question 2 included:

- Aims/summary
- Matching element (e.g., decision-making factors such as race, siblings, or process such as a matching tool)
- Demographic information
  - Inclusion criteria for study
  - Population
  - Country
  - Other setting notes (e.g., urban/rural, geography, type of foster agency)
  - Ethnicity
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Other demographic characteristics
  - Number of participants
- Methodology
- Intervention
- Randomisation methods
- Comparison group
- Statistical controls used
- Outcome assessments/measures and validity
- Analysis methods
- Primary outcome 1: foster home disruption (unplanned endings)
  - Outcome
  - Outcome assessment/measures and validity
  - Analysis methods
  - Results (Effect size, any relevant sections from the EMMIE framework including mechanisms, moderators, implementation conditions and economic assessment)
- Primary outcome 2: child wellbeing
  - Outcome
  - Outcome assessment/measures and validity
  - Analysis methods
  - Results (Effect size, notes from EMMIE framework including mechanisms, moderators, implementation conditions and economic assessment)
- Primary outcome 3: foster carer wellbeing
  - Outcome



- Outcome assessment/measures and validity
- Analysis methods
- Results (Effect size, notes from EMMIE framework including mechanisms, moderators, implementation conditions and economic assessment)
- Secondary outcome (unspecified)
  - Outcome
  - Outcome assessment/measures and validity
  - Analysis methods
  - Results (Effect size, notes from EMMIE framework including mechanisms, moderators, implementation conditions and economic assessment)

### 3.7 Data analysis and coding

We uploaded and coded all studies from Question 1 using the data analysis software Dedoose as a tool in which to apply thematic data analysis to describe the patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flemming et al., 2019; Thomas & Harden, 2008). In the first instance, multiple reviewers coded studies looking line-by-line inductively at 'descriptive codes' emerging from the data around the research questions. These 'inductive' codes were inevitably influenced by the way in which we defined matching in foster care in the protocol to include the decision-making process, information sharing, and the process of moving into a family. Descriptive 'deductive' coding was also applied about whose voice was being represented in relation to matching, paying particular attention to children and young persons, foster carers and social care practitioners as outlined in the protocol. Final codes for 'whose voice' included specifying whether this was the authors' interpretation, birth children's views, children and young persons' views, foster carers' views, foster agencies' views, connected carers' views, placement commissioners' views, or social workers' views.

The coding structure in Dedoose for Question 1 was developed through an iterative discussion, merging, creating hierarchy, and coding process with return to earlier studies for re-coding. Initially, three reviewers (RD, GM, MM) coded line-by-line a small number of studies, established broad intercoder agreement on the codes and code level, and discussed these with each other and the review lead (EO) to finalise this coding structure. During this meeting, quality assurance took place by looking at each other's codes, discussion how one would code the same or differently, agreement on the code and renaming, merging, and creating hierarchy (sub-codes) as appropriate. The creation of hierarchy included creating 'second order' codes bringing together several descriptive codes and 'third order' themes. Initially, themes grouped into decision-making factors, factors that led to the strength of a match, initial arrival and transition, perspectives represented, and preparation and information-sharing. Similar meetings took place weekly during the three weeks of coding, and the process of coding was iterative including returning to earlier studies for re-coding. During the second week, the meeting focussed on reviewing and confirming 'second order' and 'third order' codes and confirming intercoder reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997; Lombard et al., 2017). During this process, decision-making factors and factors that led to the strength of the match were merged as it was not clear whether an item had been used for decision-making or whether it was thought that it should have been used for the matching. After the completion of coding, one reviewer (MM) blind coded one study each of the





two primary coders (RD, GM), compared her use of codes, and confirmed that the codes were used consistently, thereby further establishing intercoder reliability (Lombard et al., 2017).

As such, we coded in Dedoose:

- Views on and experiences with the decision-making process for matching, including any factors that were used in matching and factors perceived as strengthening/improving/being of importance to matching
- Views on and experiences with the process of planning and information-sharing as part of matching
- Views and experiences with initial arrival and transition in foster care
- Views and experiences with any cross-cutting issue around matching, such as structural constraints
- Whose voice is represented in findings (e.g., child and young person, foster carer, other children in fostering household, social worker, author)

The codes around the decision-making factors and factors, planning and information sharing, and initial arrival and transition are listed in Appendix 2.

### **3.8 Risk of bias assessment**

Study quality (including relevance and risk of bias) was assessed using the 2018 CASP qualitative study checklist for Question 1 and the 2018 CASP case control study checklist for Question 2 (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018b, 2018a). The CASP checklists are 10–11 questions designed to help individuals make sense of research. They ask the questions about whether the results of the study are valid (including methodology), what are the results, and will they help locally. They were designed as reflexive and pedagogic tools by a group of experts for each tool, piloted, and revised over the years. They are not recommended to be used with a scoring system. The CASP checklists are widely used for considering evidence-based practice and in systematic reviews (Krystalli & Emerson, 2015; Nadelson & Nadelson, 2014).

The 2020 CASP randomised controlled trial checklist was planned to be used with randomised controlled trials (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2020). This was not necessary since no randomised controlled trials could be identified for this review. There is no CASP checklist for quasi-experimental designs, but due to our methodological requirement of having a 'counterfactual', we planned for and used the case control checklist. Using the CASP checklists across the two review questions allowed for comparability.

The authors used the risk of bias assessment to make educated judgement calls around methodological limitations which contributed to our assessing the certainty of evidence. No studies from Question 1 or Question 2 were determined to have fundamental research design issues inappropriate to address the aims of the research (part A of the checklists). If studies were assessed to have fundamental methodological design issues and the methodology was determined not to be appropriate to meet the aims, these studies were excluded but listed in an appendix.



For Question 2, meta-analysis was not possible due to limited studies, varied contexts (heterogeneity), and design limitations. Our evidence assessment from the CASP checklist revealed concerns about risk of bias, potential confounding factors, and limitations in the relevance of the findings to the question and context at hand. As such, the risk of bias assessment contributed to our decision not to draw strong conclusions for these studies or make strong recommendations based on this data. Additionally, we considered expanding our requirement of a quasi-experimental design and comparison group to include a broader range of studies. However, we used some initial quality appraisal, discussion, and consultation with the advisory group to determine that an expansion of the inclusion criteria to correlational studies that did not compare conditions would raise too many issues around research designs appropriate to meet the aims.

### 3.9 Assessing the certainty of evidence

For Question 1, we assessed the confidence in the cumulative evidence using the GRADE- Confidence in Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative research (CERQual) approach (Lewin, Bohren, et al., 2018; Lewin, Booth, et al., 2018). This approach helps to examine studies' methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy of data, and relevance and allows for an overall assessment of confidence in their findings.

The 4 dimensions of the CERQual approach are defined as following (Lewin et al., 2018, p. 5):

- Methodological limitation: The extent to which there are concerns about the design or conduct of the primary studies that contributed evidence to an individual review finding
- Coherence: An assessment of how clear and cogent the fit is between the data from the primary studies and a review finding that synthesises that data. By 'cogent', we mean well supported or compelling
- Adequacy of data: An overall determination of the degree of richness and quantity of data supporting a review finding
- Relevance: The extent to which the body of evidence from the primary studies supporting a review finding is applicable to the context (perspective or population, phenomenon of interest, setting) specified in the review question

For Question 2, evidence was assessed in narrative form, as the body of evidence was insufficient for using GRADE or another method for assessing the confidence in the evidence.

### 3.10 Data synthesis

We synthesized the findings in narrative form, paying particular attention to different voices being represented in synthesis, differences across contexts and populations, and relevance for policy and practice.

For Question 1, data was synthesised using thematic analysis and the creation of hierarchy of codes and themes as discussed in coding. The coding process included numerous checks to ensure intercoder agreement and the reflection of themes based on the data. Additionally, we paid particular attention in the synthesis to heterogeneity. We noted when data was about connected (kinship) carers



or 'non-connected' foster carers. We planned to assess the heterogeneity by UK country and either separate analysis by UK country or provide subgroup analyses based on country. However, only one study was conducted outside of England, so we did not have enough data to do this.

Based on the themes, thematic codes, and our iterative process of discussion, we created finding statements that were then assessed for their certainty of evidence using GRADE CERQual and a succinct Summary of Findings table. The key themes identified have been presented as a narrative synthesis in the results section.

For Question 2, we planned to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis if heterogeneity was not too great. We had planned to use the qualitative data from Question 1 to examine the parallels and differences with the quantitative data from Question 2, and to explain any findings in narrative form. However, a meta-analysis was not conducted due to the small number of eligible studies identified for this question and the level of heterogeneity. Instead, the findings and study characteristics were noted in narrative format and in a table.

We had planned to synthesise together the two review questions, particularly using the qualitative data from Question 1 to create theories to understand findings of Question 2 and explore the similarities and differences between the qualitative experiences and views and the outcomes found in quantitative data. However, we were unable to do this due to the limited amount of data identified for Question 2.

We presented preliminary findings to our Advisory Group, which helped ensure that the synthesis resonated with experience, policy, practice, and relevant literature.



# 4 RESULTS

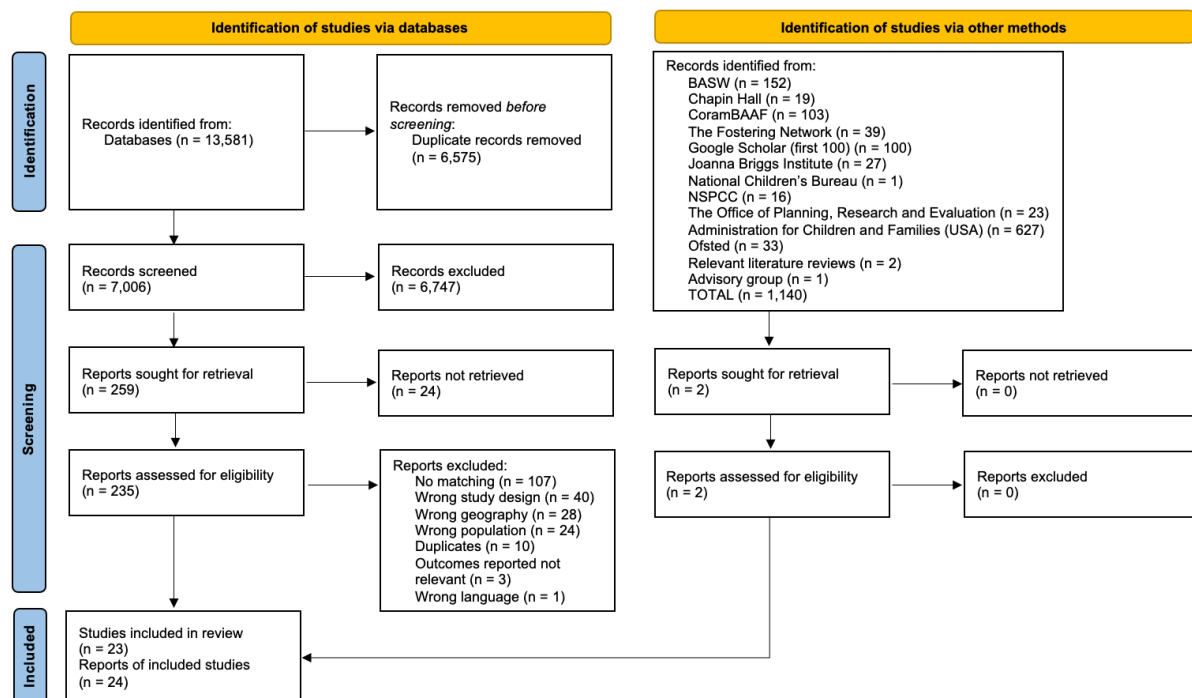
## 4.1 Search Results

This subsection describes the search results and studies included in this review.

### 4.1.1 Results of the search

The database search strategy found a total of 13,581 records. After de-duplication, 7,006 titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria, and 1,140 records on websites (8,146 records in total). 237 full-texts were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Following full-text screening, 23 studies from 24 publications were eligible for inclusion: 18 studies (19 publications) for Question 1 and five studies for Question 2. No studies were found that met the eligibility criteria for both studies. This process is depicted in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram in Figure 1 (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram



A total of 23 studies (24 references) met our inclusion criteria and were included in this review.



### 4.1.2 Included studies

Eighteen studies (corresponding to 19 references) were identified for Question 1. The remaining five met the criteria for Question 2.

Of the included references, 21 were from journals, one was from a report (Ofsted, 2020), one was from a book (Wade et al., 2012b), and one was from a dissertation (Garcia, 1990).

The characteristics of included studies, the methods of data collection, and the child demographics are discussed in the following section.



## 4.2 Characteristics of included studies

Characteristics of included studies for Research Questions 1 and 2 are summarised in the following tables and texts.

### 4.2.1 Characteristics of included studies for Question 1 on views and experiences

Table 4.2.1 presents the characteristics of included studies for Question 1 on views and experiences. We have noted specific elements of matching considered in the study, considering the review's definition of matching as the process of decision-making, planning and transitioning into a fostering family.

**Table 4.2.1: Characteristics of included studies for Question 1 on views and experiences**

Reference (first author and year)	Data collection methods	Matching element(s)	Setting	UK nation	Sample (n)	Voice represented
<b>Adams 2011</b>	Qualitative semi-structured interviews with foster carers and brief questionnaires completed by local authority fostering services	Planning, move into the foster family	'Mother and baby' foster care	England	8 foster carers; 3 local authorities	'Mother and baby' foster carers
<b>Aldgate 2009</b>	Qualitative interviews (plus standardised tests and ecomaps for additional information)	Transition into the connected carer family	Connected foster care (kinship care)	Scotland	30	Children and young people in kinship care
<b>Barter 2016</b>	Qualitative focus groups	Information sharing and foster home planning	Foster care	England	32	Foster carers
<b>Broad 2001</b>	Qualitative interviews	Foster home planning	Connected foster care (kinship care)	England	22	Kinship carers



Reference (first author and year)	Data collection methods	Matching element(s)	Setting	UK nation	Sample (n)	Voice represented
<b>Goodyer 2016</b>	Qualitative semi-structured interviews using a narrative approach	Transition into the foster family	Foster care	England	22	Children and young people in foster care
<b>Hollows 2006</b>	Qualitative interviews about five cases involving large sibling groups	Decision-making for large sibling groups	Foster care	England	n unclear. Social workers for five cases	Social workers
<b>Ingley 2008</b>	Clinical file audit of records of clinical therapy sessions, letters, disruption meeting minutes and social services case conference minutes	Foster home planning	Foster care	England	Records of 49 children	Clinical notes of social work professionals
<b>Ní Raghallaigh 2015</b>	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Cultural matching	Foster care for asylum-seeking young people	England (study A) and Republic of Ireland (study B). Only results from England used.	21 young people in interviews 19 young people in focus groups	Asylum-seeking young people who previously lived in foster care



Reference (first author and year)	Data collection methods	Matching element(s)	Setting	UK nation	Sample (n)	Voice represented
<b>Ofsted 2020</b>	Case studies, focus groups, qualitative interviews, surveys	Decision-making and strengths of foster homes	Foster care	England	Unclear	Children and young people in foster care, foster carers, social work professionals, birth parents
<b>Parvez 2000</b>	Qualitative interviews	Cultural matching	Foster care	England	6	Foster carers
<b>Pitcher &amp; Jaffar, 2018</b>	Case studies and qualitative interviews	Cultural matching for young Muslims	Foster care	England	12	Young people in foster care
<b>Pugh 1996</b>	Qualitative interviews	Preparing foster carers' birth children for foster care	Foster care	England	9 birth children of foster carers 4 foster carers	Foster carers' birth children and foster carers
<b>Schofield 2019</b>	Qualitative interviews	Matching considerations for LGBTQ young people	Foster care for LGBTQ young people	England	26	Foster carers
<b>Sinclair 2003</b>	Questionnaires	Child and foster carer characteristics and interactions	Foster care	Unclear	495 foster carers 150 children 416 social workers 492 family placement social workers	Foster carers, children's social workers, and foster carers' placement social workers





Reference (first author and year)	Data collection methods	Matching element(s)	Setting	UK nation	Sample (n)	Voice represented
<b>Sirriyeh 2013</b>	Case study interviews with foster carers and young people in their care, and three focus groups with young people	Transitions for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people	Foster care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people	England	23 foster carers, 21 young people (case studies) 19 young people in focus groups	Foster carers, asylum-seeking young people in foster care
<b>Stoneman 2019</b>	Qualitative semi-structured interviews	Preparing foster carers' birth children for foster care	Foster care	England	8	Foster carers' birth children
<b>Wade 2012</b> <b>Wade 2019</b>	Survey, case study semi-structured interviews, focus groups with young people, policy/practice focus groups with social workers, and document analysis	Decision-making, preparation and transitions for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people	Foster care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people	England	133 foster carers (survey) 23 foster carers, 21 young people (semi-structured interviews) 3 focus group including 19 young people transitioning from care 4 policy and practice focus groups including 31 social workers from children's asylum & fostering teams 4 managers in children's asylum teams (interviews)	Foster carers, asylum-seeking young people who had just left foster care, social workers and managers
<b>Waterhouse 2001</b>	Qualitative interviews	Matching decision-making process	Temporary and short-term foster care	England	37 carer households who provided 50 foster homes for 71 children	Foster carers, childcare workers, family placement workers



## **Publication date and data source**

The 18 included studies were published between 1996 and 2020.

Seven of the studies included in Research Question 1 used more than one method of data collection. Data collection methods included qualitative interviews (13 studies), focus groups (5), surveys (4), case studies (4), and clinical file audit (1).

Most studies explored matching within a non-connected foster care setting, however two studies examined connected (kinship) care. Three studies focused on foster care for asylum-seeking young people, one looked at 'mother and baby' foster care, and one studied foster care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) young people.

## **Child Demographics**

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Seven of the 18 studies reported the race/ethnicity of the children included in the study. Of these, two studies included all white children (Aldgate, 2009; Stoneman & Dallos, 2019), and one study included only children and young people from Afghanistan (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015). Another study included 73.7% young people from Afghanistan but did not note the ethnicity of the other participants (Sirriyeh, 2013). One study comprised of children from Pakistan (46.2%), Afghanistan (38.5%), and Bangladesh (15.4%) (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018). Another study recruited 18 white, three Black, and one mixed race child (Goodyer, 2016). A further study included 58% white children and 42% from ethnic minorities not further specified (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001).

### ***Sex and Gender***

Six studies reported on the sex of the children included in the sample. Two studies included only male participants (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Sirriyeh, 2013). The percentage of female children in the remaining studies ranged from 35.7–68.2% (Aldgate, 2009; Goodyer, 2016; Ingley & Earley, 2008; Stoneman & Dallos, 2019). One study reported on children and young people identifying as LGBTQ.



### *Age*

Of the eighteen studies included in Research Question 1, eight reported on the age of the children included in the sample. One study reported the mean age as nine years seven months old (Ingleby & Earley, 2008). Another study looked at participants aged between 0–15, with 40% of the sample aged ten and over. The rest of the studies reported the following age ranges: 8–16 (Aldgate, 2009); 9–17 (Goodyer, 2016); 13–18 (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Sirriyeh, 2013); 6–16 when placed with the foster carer (Schofield et al., 2019); and 8–18 (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019).



## 4.2.2 Characteristics of included studies for Question 2 on impact and attribution

For Research Question 2, five studies were included with characteristics presented in Table 4.2.2.

**Table 4.2.2: Characteristics of included studies for Question 2 on impact and attribution**

Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings
Garcia 1990	Match decision-making by ethnicity	Administrative data used to identify outcomes for Hispanic children placed with Hispanic vs non-Hispanic foster families	Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA); chi-square was employed to test for differences in the reasons for termination of foster homes and to determine foster home outcome and the association with ethnicity as the dependent variable	USA	1,908 children, 365 foster families	Length of foster home stay	Ethnic matching was not associated with the time spent by the child in foster care. Hispanic children cared for by Hispanic families for longer periods of time than non-Hispanic families. Ethnic matching was associated with positive home outcomes for both groups
Linares 2007	Siblings living together or apart	Prospective study, examined living together vs apart using questionnaires	Primary analysis was a linear mixed effects (LME) model; tested interaction terms and accounted for correlation among sibling pairs	USA	12 foster care agencies, 156 children	Sibling relationship quality, child wellbeing, length of foster home stays	Sibling positivity predicted lower child problems at 14 months, whereas sibling negativity predicted higher child problems. Living together or apart did not affect child behaviour problems at follow up.
Moore 2016	Foster home decision-making using an assessment tool	Tested validity of a web-based foster home decision tool	Descriptive and bivariate statistics as well as chi-square tests	USA	2,328 foster home decisions	Foster home stability	The appropriate placement level indicator (APLI) was predictive of foster home instability, and when children were placed in accordance with the level of care protocol



Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings
		(ECAP) using administrative data					determined by the APLI score foster home stability was better.
Novak 2020	Relationship between siblings living together or apart and subsequent 'delinquency'	Data from NSCAW II prospective longitudinal study	Negative binomial estimates of the association between sibling separation and offending behaviour, controlling for a number of factors	USA	380 survey responses	Offending ('delinquent') behaviour	Participants who were separated from some but not all siblings at the first wave reported significantly more offending behaviour than youth who were not separated from siblings, while youth who were separated from all siblings did not differ in offending behaviour from youth who were placed with all siblings
Thorpe 1992	Siblings living together or apart	Retrospective chart review	Logistic regression and odds ratios of mental health outcomes and siblings living together or apart	Canada	48 families with 115 children	School performance, number of foster homes, teacher and peer relationships	No significant differences were seen between children living with and without siblings, except those who had been separated had significantly fewer mental health symptoms whilst in foster care.

## Study characteristics

The five included studies were published between 1990 and 2020. Study data was collected from administrative and survey data from large-scale surveys and foster care agencies. In particular, the studies used state-wide administrative data (Garcia, 1990), foster care agency data over a two to three year period (Linares et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2016), national survey data (Novak & Benedini, 2020), and child chart data (Thorpe & Swart, 1992). Thus, the majority of the study data was collected via foster care agencies.



## **Child Demographics**

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Four of the five studies reported on the race/ethnicity of the children included in the study. Of these studies, two studies reported including children with Hispanic ethnicity wherein these children comprised 28.0% and 43.3% of the sample (Garcia, 1990; Novak & Benedini, 2020). Three studies reported children with Caucasian ethnicity wherein these children comprised 27.0%, 78.0% and 41.1% of the sample (Garcia, 1990; Linares et al., 2007; Novak & Benedini, 2020). Three studies reported children with Black ethnicity wherein these children comprised 36.0%, 43.0% and unreported percentage of the sample (Garcia, 1990; Linares et al., 2007; Novak & Benedini, 2020). Two studies reported on further categories, including Indigenous and Asian ethnicity comprising between 9.0% and 15.6% of the sample (Garcia, 1990; Novak & Benedini, 2020)

### ***Sex and Gender***

Four of the five studies reported on the sex of the children included in the sample. Of these, the percentage of female children ranged from 34.8% to 50.0% and the percentage of male children ranged from 50.0% to 57.0% (Linares et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2016; Novak & Benedini, 2020; Thorpe & Swart, 1992). None of the studies reported on children identifying as non-binary or LGBTQ.

### ***Age***

Of the five studies, four reported on the age of children included in the sample. Three studies reported on the average age of children in the sample, with averages between 5.9 years and 9.4 years (Linares et al., 2007; Novak & Benedini, 2020; Thorpe & Swart, 1992). Two studies reported the range of child ages as between 0–15 and 0–17 (Moore et al., 2016; Thorpe & Swart, 1992).

### ***Sample Size***

All five studies reported on the sample size of the children included in the study. The total sample of children included in the studies is 4,983, with an average sample size of 997.



### 4.2.3 Location of studies

All studies included for Research Question 1 were conducted in the United Kingdom. Sixteen of these were based in England, one in Scotland, and one did not specify where in the UK it was conducted.

All studies for Research Question 2 were conducted in North America. Four of these studies were conducted in the USA, and one study was conducted in in Canada.

### 4.2.4 Excluded studies

A total of 237 studies were excluded during full-text screening. The reasons for exclusion are presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram on p. x. Among reasons for exclusion were the lack of matching elements, wrong study design, wrong geography, that a study was not retrievable, included the wrong population, was a duplicate not caught in de-duplication, reported irrelevant outcomes, or was written in the wrong language.

## 4.3 Risk of bias within studies

The results for study quality assessment are reported in Appendix 3. Summary of CASP checklist quality assessment.

Each of the 19 studies for Question 1 were assessed using CASP's Qualitative Checklist (Table 2. Summary of CASP Checklist findings for Question 1). Generally, the studies had clear statements on the aims of the research, appropriate qualitative methodology, and valuable research findings. There were more concerns and fewer details on recruitment strategies, sufficiently rigorous data, the relationship between the researcher and participant, and ethical issues.

Each of the five studies for Question 2 were assessed using CASP's Cohort Study Checklist (see Table 3: Summary of CASP checklist assessment for Question 2). All of the studies clearly explained the aims of their research and how their cohort was recruited. Recruitment methods appeared appropriate in all studies. In all but one study (Thorpe & Swart, 1992), the measurement of participant exposure and outcomes was adequately described and sufficiently rigorous. Studies were inconsistent in their identification of appropriate controls and their inclusion of these controls in their analyses. Only two of the five studies included controls (Linares et al., 2007; Novak & Benedini, 2020). One study reported outcomes at follow-up (Linares et al., 2007), however long-term follow-up was largely unnecessary for the designs employed. The precision of study results was uncertain or inadequate due to high standard errors and a lack of reporting of other precision estimates, such as confidence intervals. As a result, the results of these studies can only be trusted to an extent. Further, the generalisability of these studies is limited due to a variety of factors, including the lack of precision estimates and because no studies used experimental methods. Overall, the quality and risk of bias of the included studies is high and the results should be interpreted with a degree of caution.



## 4.4 Certainty of evidence assessment

The table below summarises the certainty of evidence assessment for the review findings for Question 1 using the GRADE-CERQual approach. The next section further details these findings drawing on quotes and information from different studies to illustrate these.

**Table 4.4: Certainty of evidence assessment for Question 1**

Review finding	Contributing studies	Confidence in the evidence	Explanation of confidence in the evidence assessment
<p><b>Overarching.</b> Matches in foster care were often made under <b>time pressure</b> or in a 'crisis' atmosphere which leads to limited time for decision-making and to consider the match carefully and match on multiple dimensions, a lack of information sharing, and little opportunity for planning. This was reported to contribute to distress for children and impact negatively on the experience of initial arrival.</p>	<p>Adams &amp; Bevan, 2011; Barter &amp; Lutman, 2016; Goodyer, 2016; Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher &amp; Jaffar, 2018; Sirriyeh, 2013; Wade, 2019; Wade et al., 2012; Waterhouse &amp; Brocklesby, 2001</p>	<p>High confidence in the finding of time pressures. Medium confidence in the consequences of the time pressure.</p>	<p>8 studies. Thick data across contexts. High coherence. The negative impact of the crisis atmosphere had less thick data but maintained high coherence.</p>
<p><b>Decision-making process and factors that led to the strength of the match</b></p>			
<p><b>Involvement of children and young people in decision-making processes.</b> Matches may be strengthened through consultation with children and young people in care in identifying key matching factors that are important to them.</p>	<p>Ofsted, 2020; Sinclair 2003; Wade et al., 2012</p>	<p>High confidence.</p>	<p>3 studies. Very thick data and high coherence. Although there were fewer studies discussing this directly, they were studies with some of the greatest sample sizes and this finding had high coherence with other findings from this review.</p>
<p><b>Involvement of household members in decision-making processes.</b> It was viewed as important to involve foster carers, 'established' children in the</p>	<p>Barter &amp; Lutman, 2016; Goodyer, 2016; Ingley &amp; Earley, 2008; Pitcher &amp; Jaffar, 2018; Pugh, 1996; Ofsted 2020; Stoneman</p>	<p>Moderate confidence. There was less evidence about the involvement of foster children already in the household and</p>	<p>There was relatively strong data across contexts. The data had a number of caveats as discussed in the findings.</p>





household, and birth parents in priorities for matches, foster family's approval bounds, and decision making for matching. The involvement of these household members was viewed to allow for better matches and make it easier for children to settle into their new foster families.

& Dallos, 2009; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001

discussion of foster carers' adopted or special guardianship children.

**Importance of considering siblings.** Children valued being placed with their siblings and disliked being separated.

Goodyer 2016; Hollows 2006; Ingley 2008; Ofsted 2020

High confidence

Strong data was provided with large overall sample sizes contributing to this finding.

**Importance of location.** Being placed close to their family home was thought to be important to promote stability, allowing children to continue to attend the same school and see friends and relatives.

Aldgate 2009; Broad 2001; Goodyer 2016; Hollows 2006; Ofsted 2020; Wade 2012; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018

High confidence in the finding that being placed close to home was important.

Thick data and high coherence across many studies that being placed close to home was important.

However, Muslim families preferred children to not be placed in the local community.

Low confidence in Muslim family's preference for foster homes outside the local community.

Only one contributing study with small sample size to support the second finding.

**Importance of considering ethnicity, culture, race, religion and language in matching.** It was considered important to consider race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language of the foster family (including other foster children) in the matching process.

Broad, 2001; Goodyer, 2016; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Rashid, 2000; Wade et al., 2012; Wade, 2019; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001

High confidence in the finding that 'consideration' of race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language is important in matching. There was slightly less evidence on the importance of language and religion relative to broader consideration of ethnicity and culture.

9 studies. There was relatively strong data across a number of studies in support of this finding. It is important to note, however, that consideration of these factors did not mean necessarily an exact match, but rather a 'close' or 'culturally appropriate' match as is outlined in subsequent statements of findings. There were also caveats, as further described by subsequent findings, specifically around the risks of mismatch and risk of over-simplification of identity.



Participants reported **potential strengths** of a close match by ethnicity/culture and, conversely, several studies highlighted **potential risks** to children of internalised racism and unmet needs if children and carers were not matched considering race, ethnicity or culture.

Broad, 2001; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Rashid, 2000; Wade et al., 2012; Wade, 2019; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001

Moderate confidence regarding the strengths of a match by 'shared' ethnicity or culture and low confidence regarding the potential risks.

8 studies. There was less evidence about the risks of internalised racism as this was addressed in only one study which, while providing several accounts relating to the risks of no match by ethnicity, represented a sub-set of foster carers from a wider study sample.

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**There was reported a risk of 'oversimplification' of the multiple facets of identity when matching.** It was

considered important to appreciate that children and carers often inhabited several different identities (examples included religion, language, ethnicity, country of origin, family heritage/ancestry) and that steps should be taken to avoid prioritising one identity (e.g., ethnicity or religion) at the expense of others, or without reference to the child.

Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Wade et al., 2012; Wade, 2019; Waterhouse 2001

Low confidence.

3 studies. There were some detailed accounts given of instances in which an oversimplification of a child's identity or lack of thorough understanding of identity had led to a poor match, however, there was relatively little data as it was addressed in only three studies.

**A 'close' match rather than an exact match.** It was suggested that an 'exact' cultural match or shared ethnicity may neither be possible nor necessary, but rather that a close match or a culturally appropriate match in a broader sense was positive and could meet the child's needs. A 'close' match was described in various accounts as a match whereby certain aspects of a child's identity might be shared with their carer, such as religion,

Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Rashid, 2000; Wade et al., 2012

Moderate confidence.

4 studies. High coherence. There was more evidence about the appropriateness of a 'close' match in relation to religion than other aspects of ethnicity and culture.



but where other aspects, such as ethnicity, heritage/ancestry or country of origin were not shared.

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### Preparation and information-sharing

**Information sharing for foster carers.** It was considered important to sharing accurate information with foster carers about children and young people prior to arrival in the foster home.

Barter & Lutman, 2016; Ofsted, 2020; Wade et al., 2012

High confidence for the general population.  
Medium confidence for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Thick and highly coherent data with large sample sizes contributed to this finding.

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**Information sharing with children and young people.** It was considered important to share **information with children and young people** about their foster home prior to arrival.

Goodyer 2016; Ofsted 2020

High confidence

Rich data was coherent across studies with large sample sizes to support this finding.

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**Visiting and planning.** Where possible, it was viewed as important to have a process of introductions to relieve anxieties and facilitate trusting relationships.

Goodyer, 2016; Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher, 2018; Wade et al, 2012

Low confidence

Good coherence with a contrast to the finding on matches made in a rush, but some limits in coherence; Ofsted (2020) found that some children matched in emergencies without visits settled well. Data has limits in its adequacy. High relevance of the finding.

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### Arrival and transition



**Initial arrival.** The initial moment of arrival for children and young people was seen as important, with an emphasis of being calm and reassuring.

Goodyer 2016; Ofsted 2020; Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Sinclair and Wilson 2003; Wade et al., 2012; Wade 2019

Moderate confidence, high confidence for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Rich data for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, but medium adequacy of data for the general care population. Medium coherence as some studies discussed the possibility of building a bond.

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**Co-construction of a family and embracing preferences and culture of the family.** Creating the co-construction of a family life by adapting existing family structures was attributing to making a young person feel more at home.

Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade et al., 2012; Wade 2019

Low confidence, high confidence for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

3 studies all about unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Low adequacy of the data, but high coherence.

For Question 2 on impact and attribution, the studies were sparse and varied and the process of assessment of risk of bias raised methodological concerns. As such, there are no strong conclusions that can be drawn and no assessment of certainty of evidence. Findings are presented in narrative form in the following section.



## 4.5 Synthesis of results

### 4.5.1 Results from Question 1: Experiences and perceptions

What factors do social workers, foster carers, and children and young people say are important for matching based on their lived experience of matching in foster care in the UK?

In the following, we use the identified literature to answer this question based on the following perspectives (listed in order of frequency): children and young people in or previously in care, foster carers, social work professionals, foster carers' birth children, and kinship carers. These different perspectives have been noted in the results below as appropriate.

Three key themes were identified across studies:

1. Decision-making factors and factors that led to the strength of the match
2. Planning and information sharing
3. Initial arrival

These themes mirror the staged process of matching, with decision-making generally being followed by information sharing, planning and initial arrival. However, in practice, matching was a more iterative process with information being shared at various points in time, including after a child's arrival in a foster family home. Cutting across these three themes was the time pressure and crisis environment of match decision-making. The 'crisis' environment affected the decision-making factors, the amount and kind of planning and information sharing that took place, and the initial arrival of the child or young person. In the following, we elaborate on first this cross-cutting theme, and then on each of the three key themes.

#### **Cross-cutting - match made in a rush or crisis**

This code applied across all three themes and had an impact on all stages of the matching process. Matching children and young people with foster carers often occurred in a rush, with little time to make thorough decisions (Goodyer, 2016; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Sirriyeh, 2013; Wade, 2019; Wade et al., 2012; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001). This time pressure meant that decision-making was sometimes based on limited information about the child and their needs.

*If, for example, a client had gone to a screening unit at 12 o'clock, by 4.30–5 o'clock that person could be in a foster placement. That isn't time to get a lot of information. (Social worker, Area 4, Wade et al., 2012)*

In a crisis situation, there tended to be fewer foster home options and decisions were made based on the availability of the carer, regardless of the carer's skills or the assessment of a child's needs.

*Fatima waited at school for what seemed hours while the social worker looked for a foster placement. As it was Friday evening, options were limited. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*



*The space was there at that time ... and it was only for a fortnight ...* (Foster carer, Adams & Bevan, 2011)

There were several accounts of foster carers being given a few hours' notice; impacting the amount of preparation they could put in place for a child's arrival. Whilst best practice suggests that children should have an introduction to the foster carer prior to their arrival in the foster home, this was usually not possible within these timeframes.

*Very short notice was given to carers and the children, and in only a very few moves had there been any planned introduction.* (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001)

Many children recounted their experiences of being moved without any warning or time to prepare for the transition to their new home. These sudden moves could be distressing for children.

*I didn't even know I was coming here. I've been here a week ... I come home one night and seen my bags sitting in the hall and she just said 'you're moving' like ... and so they just sent me off, and I went ... things weren't going too well.* (13-year-old child, Goodyer, 2016)

*He actually got moved very suddenly then. He didn't even know he was moving. They just told him and said that they'd packed all his stuff in and they were moving him on, and so with that, he got a bit frightened, I think, and ran away.* (Foster carer, Wade et al., 2012)

Whilst rushed decision-making is inevitable in some cases, both foster carers and children viewed this rush decision-making as leading to negative consequences. Even within this environment, they felt that social work professionals should attempt to share as much information as possible in advance of the move to help foster carers and children prepare for the transition and make it easier for them to settle into new foster homes.

## **Theme 1: Decision-making factors and factors that led to the strength of the match**

### **Involvement of household members in decision-making (children and young people, foster carers, foster carers' children, birth parents)**

A central subtheme identified was involving 'household' members in decision-making about the match; by household members, we mean the children and young people in care, foster family members who would be involved in day-to-day caring relationships, and birth family and those who had been involved in day-to-day caring relationships. Children and young people, foster carers, children of foster carers, and birth parents all have different expectations for a household and consulting them was considered important to ensure that a foster home was appropriate for their needs.

Professionals noted that working with children and young people to understand what was important to them in a household could lead to better referrals. Whilst social work professionals may think they know what would make the best match for a child based on their training and professional judgement, each child is individual with different views about what would be best for them in a foster home.



*If the social worker could talk more to the children about what is important to them, they might be surprised that it is something that we may consider quite low down on the wish list. What we think is important to the child probably is not the most important thing in their life. (Fostering agency representative, Ofsted, 2020)*

Children and young people were often able to identify difficulties with their foster homes, which could have been avoided if they had been involved in the decision-making process.

*I didn't know they had a large dog, which I was scared of, and had no choice but to stay there. [I] didn't know that it was a seven-person household and I struggle with lots of people. [I] wish I could have made requests as to what would suit me. (18- to 21-year-old care leaver, care leavers' survey, Ofsted, 2020)*

This experience of not being consulted was not unusual; over two thirds of children in foster care in the Ofsted survey reported that they had not been consulted before moving into their foster home, and of those who had been consulted, very few thought that their views had made a difference. The involvement of children and young people in the matching decision process may improve the quality of matches, limit foster home disruption, and make it easier for young people to settle into their foster homes.

Another key stakeholder not always involved in foster home decision-making was foster carers. (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001) found evidence that carers were often unclear about their approval criteria, the reason for the match, and the appropriateness of overriding their approval criteria, which had been set anticipating the bounds of an appropriate match. In Waterhouse and Brocklesby (2001), a third (17) of the instances of matching decisions did not adhere to carers' approval criteria, especially in cases where other factors such as ethnicity were thought to be more important. Foster carer involvement was often dependent on the procedures of the local areas, and not consistently practiced across the UK. In some cases, foster carers' birth children were also involved in the decision-making process. Although most of the studies focused on foster carers' birth children, fostering has a large impact upon the lives of all of the children in a fostering household, and some carers felt that it was only right that they be considered.

*... my own children don't want young children. They want eight [years old] and above, so I have to respect what they want as well, otherwise it wouldn't work. (Foster carers' focus group, Ofsted, 2020)*

Multiple studies found that foster carers' birth children were not always involved in the decision to accept a new foster child (Barter & Lutman, 2016). Ingley and Earley (2008) also recommended involvement of children who are 'established' within the household, such as foster children, in decisions about preferences for matches and in preparation for new arrivals. Sometimes children were too young to fully understand the concept of fostering when professionals tried to engage them in the process.

*Our homefinder did ask the children what they'd like ... they wouldn't understand what it's all about until you have actually got a child here ... all Keith knew was he was going to have*



*someone his age to play on the computer with him. (Foster mother talking about birth children, Pugh, 1996)*

Assessment of foster carers' birth children's and adopted children's capacity to engage in decision-making could enable improved matches and lessen conflict between children within the home. There was not a consistent message around age spacing or other clear guidance in the decision-making considering the needs of other children in the household. Some carers were clear in requiring age gaps (Ofsted, 2020), while two social workers noted the positives of specific cases where children in the foster family were of the same sex and close in age to the foster child (Pugh, 1996).

Taking birth parents' views into consideration in the decision-making process was also identified as important by all parties, although it was acknowledged that this often was not possible due to limited numbers of carers, tensions in relationships between them and social work professionals, or birth parents not being included in local authority procedures (Ofsted, 2020). As a child's parent, they can often provide additional information about their child which can improve the suitability of the foster home.

*Parents who we spoke to did not feel as fully engaged with decision-making as they would have liked and felt that some of the important information they had about their children should have contributed to the matching process more. (Ofsted, 2020)*

Parent involvement in match decision-making could support the development of positive relationships between themselves, foster carers and social work professionals. The approval of parents could also make it easier for children to settle into their new environment.

*One Muslim foster carer was told by a parent on hearing that his child was being placed with a fellow Muslim, 'My heart is at peace now'. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

*The birth family and foster carers are working together and it's okay. That's made a real big difference and those children have managed to settle a lot better than before. They were worrying about what's mum and dad going to think, what can I and can't I say. It helps them feel very relaxed (Foster carer, case study, Ofsted, 2020)*

The needs of parents must also be acknowledged, especially in relation to the 'family time' contact arrangements with their children. In this example, a child was placed in a home too far away and the foster home ended up being disrupted because of these difficulties.

*The last one was too far for my mum, they had to move me back here. (11-year-old child, Goodyer, 2016)*

Involving parents in the match decision-making would give social work professionals the ability to identify these problems and find a more appropriate match in the first place, reducing potential for future transitions.

### **Living with siblings**





Several studies explored experiences of siblings living together or apart, and the factors that contributed to decision-making around these (Goodyer, 2016; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Ingley & Earley, 2008; Ofsted, 2020). Children valued living with their siblings, and sometimes had negative reactions to being separated.

*I was home with my mum and my social worker Tracey said I had to go to a 4th place, and so we ran off. [...] Me and my brother. Yes. They found me at my aunt's, I thought I was going with my brother, I was ok with that bit, then my social worker told me it wasn't. (Child, Goodyer, 2016)*

*Several children in our survey mentioned that the thing they most liked about their foster home was that they were able to live with their brothers and sisters. Conversely, other children identified that being separated from their siblings was the thing they disliked most about their foster home. (Ofsted, 2020)*

Local authorities often had policies to keep sibling groups together where possible. However, based on the needs of individual children and other logistical considerations such as the size of the sibling group, siblings were sometimes separated.

*'We never considered a group placement because we knew we wouldn't get one so we just looked at the logical way to split them'. (Social worker, Hollows, 2006)*

## **Location**

The location of the foster home was a very important factor in matching, identified by children, foster carers and social work professionals (Aldgate, 2009; Broad, 2001; Goodyer, 2016; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Ofsted, 2020; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Wade et al., 2012b). Staying close to their previous home was considered important to ensure that children could continue to go to the same school and stay connected with their friends and relatives.

*Unfortunately, we didn't get much choice in terms of location, but we ensured that ... he still went to the same school and could still see his sister. And these carers have done that, although they are a bit out of the way. (Social worker's manager, case study interview, Ofsted, 2020)*

*It's so boring here. I miss my friends. Being in the middle of nowhere and not knowing anyone is hard. (Child, Aldgate, 2009)*

There were some differences in cultural preferences for location. Pitcher (2018) examined foster homes for Muslim children and found that many parents preferred their children to live further away to avoid the embarrassment of their community knowing their child had entered foster care.

*There had been a suggestion that a foster family be sought in their immediate community, but their mother had resisted this saying it could 'cause awkwardness' and 'everyone will know our family business'. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

## **Importance of considering ethnicity and culture**



A subtheme that emerged across several papers identified in this systematic review was the importance of considering ethnicity and culture when matching. Although many studies did not clearly outline definitions of a match by ethnicity or culture, discussions tended to present ethnicity and culture as closely related, and to highlight the importance of understanding the complexity of ethnicity and culture when matching. Specific aspects of ethnicity raised included shared physical attributes (particularly skin colour and hair type), common heritage or ancestry, and country or region of origin for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In several studies, shared religion, values and beliefs, social norms and language were described as elements of a cultural match.

Study participants, including social workers, foster carers, and children and young people, identified ethnicity and cultural identity as important and even as a priority factor.

*One in five social workers and family placement workers raised concerns about the appropriateness of the placement in respect of the child's ethnic origin and cultural origin. (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001)*

*'Race' was identified as by far the most important criterion for matching by both groups of workers. (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001)*

*Carers from all backgrounds identified race, ethnicity and culture as the matching priority. This was particularly seen as the priority by minority ethnic carers. (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001)*

A number of studies referred to the 'need' for foster carers from minority ethnic groups and related to this, to the 'shortage' of foster carers from these groups, highlighting the importance that was attributed to matching by ethnicity or culture. There was a particular emphasis on skin colour, for example, a need for 'Black foster carers'.

*Mrs F described how one of her daughters read an article about the need for black foster carers in a black newspaper and drew it to her attention ... Mrs E was working as a social worker with children and families and her awareness of black children's needs led her to become a foster carer. (Rashid, 2000)*

It was suggested in one report that carers from refugee and minority ethnic communities were more challenging to recruit, yet most carers were felt to have the 'requisite skills' to care for 'refugee young children' (Wade et al., 2012). However, while many felt that shared ethnicity or a close cultural match was a priority, not all foster carers did to the same extent.

*Of the two carers who said that shared ethnicity was not (so) important, one (African-Caribbean) stated that she would look after any child that needed helping, and that shared ethnicity was a secondary consideration, although you 'have to teach them their culture as they grow up'. (Broad, 2001)*

### **Strengths of a match by ethnicity, culture and religion (and the risks of no match)**

Several studies explored the strengths of matching a child and foster carer by ethnicity or culture. On the one hand this was described in terms of the ability of carers from the same or similar cultural



background or ethnicity to readily meet certain needs that a young person may have, particularly around positive identity development, feeling at home, access to familiar food or religious practices. It was also explored in relation to the risks that a child may face when ethnicity or a cultural background was not shared with their carer. These ranged from carers being unable to meet certain needs, such as helping young people with Afro hair or supporting a child in their religious practices, to the risk of there being racist views in the household.

Shared heritage often helped with the practical things as well as identity and was contrasted to cross-racial or cross-cultural matches where those aspects were absent:

*One foster parent articulated powerfully the benefits of a strong match of culture and ethnicity: 'I have heard carers ... saying that it shouldn't matter what race the children or carers are, as long as they are being nurtured and looked after. But when you hear black kids say, 'I don't want to be black anymore', or 'Do you like being black?' there are obviously some issues around that. I think it is important ... He knows he is Jamaican, so he has taken an interest in Jamaican things. We've not had to make any special efforts to give him Jamaican food or culture as it's part of the family.'* (Foster carer, case study interview, Ofsted, 2020)

*... my carer tried to do my Afro hair with European products and accessories, and it hurt. It was annoying and it was the wrong products. I hated it and complained, and I was moved ...* (Care leaver, 30- to 39-year-old, care leavers' survey, Ofsted, 2020)

Rashid (2000) also highlighted the skill and commitment that Black foster carers of African-Caribbean heritage demonstrated towards supporting Black children in their care with developing positive identities. This was particularly the case for children who had previously been exposed to, and had internalised, racist views or had been in all-white environments with little to no contact with Black people:

*Mrs C described how on arrival both Verna and Sandra were self-deprecating about their racial origins and their identity. Both girls had long histories of living in residential care, and both were of mixed racial parentage, with African-Caribbean fathers. Verna's mother was of mixed racial parentage while Sandra's mother was white. Although Verna's children's home had undertaken a lot of work on issues of race and identity, and had worked hard on building up children's self-esteem, Mrs C found that Verna used derogatory terms about herself, like 'half-caste'. Mrs C tackled this by getting Verna to look up the word 'caste' in the dictionary, discuss its meaning and thus recognise the absurdity of the term 'half-caste'. After this episode, Verna stopped using this derogatory language and began to refer to herself as being 'of mixed race'.* (Rashid, 2000)

*Perhaps the most overt and extreme example of denying black identity came from Joseph who was placed with Mrs A with his sister Joanne, when they were 15 and 12 years old. Both their parents were African-Caribbean. The children had been placed in a residential unit in a shire county far from their home ... Joseph insisted that he was not black, but a 'light-skinned darkie'. Mrs A was shocked to find him referring to black people as 'Bournville selection' and making jokes like 'If I didn't see a black man grin and so didn't see his teeth, I wouldn't be able to see him'.* (Rashid, 2000)



Across the studies, the benefits of a cultural match raised by foster children ranged from shared language to norms and values, to religion and food.

*Some Eritrean, Ghanaian and Nigerian young people were also placed with foster carers from the same countries of origin. While some young people reported tensions in these placements, many settled well into relationships with foster carers of the same nationality or faith, and often mentioned cultural factors that facilitated this, citing the benefits of shared language, food tastes or values. Ayotunde said: 'I think it was all right because she [my foster carer], she's Nigerian and I'm Nigerian as well ... we kind of have the same values and norms so ...' (Wade et al., 2012)*

There were varied experiences in 'cross-cultural' matches, regarding the extent to which carers were reported by the young person to be able to or motivated to meet their cultural needs. While Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh (2015) reported that 'most' young people felt that their foster carers had made attempts to support their cultural needs, not all young people had this experience:

*... it was evident that cross-cultural carers responded to the cultural needs of the young people to different degrees. Some paid little or no attention to culture whereas others placed particular emphasis on it. In cases where little or no attention was paid, carers sometimes believed that the young person was disinterested, and culture was not of particular importance. The carers believed young people had adjusted to their new society and, hence, cultural practices linked to their country of origin were not of much significance. (Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh, 2015)*

Some foster carers reported that accommodating young people's needs during Ramadan could be particularly challenging, in terms of 'family food routines' (Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh, 2015). While some young people felt that positive encouragement to engage in cultural or religious practices was absent in cross-cultural homes:

*Several of the young people commented that 'not being stopped' from doing things was not the same as positive encouragement. This is clear in both Fatima and Sumaira's accounts. Children need behaviour to be modelled by a trusted adult (Bandura and McDonald, 1963) and even more so when he or she may have sensed disapproval and prejudice within wider society. If a carer is not a Muslim, much can be achieved (although in a less satisfactory way) through Muslim befrienders, advocates and buddies who can come into the home, offer advice and take the child out. No care plan or review is complete without properly addressing this. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

In some instances, there were also problems arising from different social norms and values:

*While carers, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who show warmth and kindness provide what is most important and most valued by children, the young people we interviewed gave many examples of feeling unnecessarily uncomfortable, for example by alcohol consumption, careless undress and casual comments inspired by the media. Such insensitivity has the potential to undermine otherwise good caring. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

All children entering care experience change and loss where continuity can be comforting. The continuity and familiarity provided by a close cultural match was particularly raised in the context of care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.



*... it was evident that young people attached great importance to their culture. When speaking about foster placements, they referred to culture as a significant aspect. They observed that culture could provide a sense of continuity in a context where, as Summerfield (1998: 16) has stated, they were experiencing a 'rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives'. Young people spoke of how moving from their countries of origin meant considerable change including loss of family, friends, food, familiar smells, clothing and climate. Thus, it was deemed beneficial to have some similarities available. (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015)*

Where language was shared between the foster child and foster family, this was felt to be very helpful for continuity and communication:

*When young people were placed with carers of the same nationality who spoke the same language, they highlighted benefits in terms of language continuity. (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015)*

By contrast, where language was not shared between the child and foster family, there were both reports of miscommunication and, unsurprisingly, children reported a desire for opportunities to speak their mother tongue:

*Ann gave an example in her description of her foster child's reaction to her attempts to estimate his size so she could provide him with a change of clothes when he arrived. Unable to understand English and communicate with her, when she approached to measure him, he had raised his arms as if her intention was to search him. (Wade et al., 2012)*

For some young people though, the desire to learn and practise English – particularly to help with integration, connection to others in the UK and to help in future employment – outweighed the desire to be placed in a home with shared language, or other shared aspects of culture:

*While some young people considered their native language to be of great importance, this was not always the case. Many young people highlighted the benefit of being in an English-speaking household where English could be learnt more quickly. I don't like to speak it, Tigrinya. It's not helpful for jobs ... That's why I like to speak English. (Young person, Study A, Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015)*

In addition to matching with foster carers, it was also suggested that the presence of other foster children in a household with a shared or similar cultural background, ethnicity, language or religion, may be positive and help young people communicate, feel more at home, provide support in settling into the home, and share cultural experiences and religious practices.

*While adjustment to family life was not always easy, some comments suggested that a close cultural or ethnic match with foster carers or other fostered children could help young people to feel more at home: Our other foster child is also Vietnamese. They both enjoy the ease of communication and socialize together and with us whenever possible. (Foster carer)*

*He s like my brother ... most of the time we speak Pashto. (Young person, Wade, 2019)*



In Wade et al. (2012), most children did not speak the same language as their foster carers, but other children could help reassure new children and could help them to communicate and be understood.

*It's maybe two, three days. After this, you know one Afghan guy, he's living here. It's my language. He's told me about everything. And after that, I'm okay. I'm not scared after that.* (Mahmud, Wade et al., 2012)

Being placed in a home with other children with a shared religion, or where other foster children with shared religion were placed nearby, also was found to be a positive experience for some young people:

*In Study A some Afghan young people were placed together in foster care placements or nearby other Afghan young people. Some prepared and ate food together during Ramadan, enabling them to maintain communal aspects of their religious practices: We can all cook ... For all month ... And our mum love it, she's love it, yeah ... And then, when I go to friend house, he - we're talking, we're cooking food, Afghan food always, like curry, rice and yeah, we just - I'm always going and every night I going to - not every night, but every Sunday, I'm going to my friend house and I stay there and we have, like six, seven friend talking to each other, then yeah, we're cooking and eating.* (Young person, Study A, Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015)

### **Multi-faceted identities: danger of over-simplifying matching criteria**

People are complex and have multi-faceted identities which can include identities related to ethnicity, skin colour, religion, language and culture. Several studies highlighted the dangers of an oversimplification and of a lack of understanding of the multi-faceted nature of identity. This oversimplification, in several studies, led to 'mismatches' or overly crude criteria (particularly skin colour, religion or country of origin) being applied to the match with negative results. Implicit in multiple quotes was a prioritisation of one identity (e.g., race or non-white) over other identities and needs.

*Culture is ignored while the colour of the skin is a primary factor. For example, I had a Chinese child, and I was ill equipped to meet his cultural needs.* (Jamaican carer, Waterhouse, 2001)

*There appeared to be an assumption that, because a carer was black or white, they were able to meet a child's wider cultural needs. However, there was marked unease on the part of carers about what they perceived as 'colour matching' at the expense of addressing children's other needs.* (Waterhouse, 2001)

*I've had three black children on the basis of my husband's race but never a Muslim child. In fact, eight of the ten children I've had placed have been Catholic.* (White foster carer married to a White/Egyptian husband, both Muslim, Waterhouse, 2001)

There were several accounts of a lack of nuanced understanding of the child's religion or ethnicity leading to a mismatch, resulting in unhappiness, confusion or to the ending of a fostering arrangement.

*Some of the unhappiest placements were ones in which a match had been attempted but was poorly informed, as for Hassan and Tariq where Sunni [Muslim] children were placed with an Ahmadiyya [Muslim] family or where negative conversation in a cognate language could be*



*picked out. There were, in fact, three examples of unintentional mismatching in our study. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

In one study, two foster children matched with a family by shared religion requested a move after finding that their broader cultural identities did not align with those of the foster family. The boys did not share language with the family and felt that they would be better placed in a home where there were opportunities to learn English.

*Arian and his foster sibling, who was also Albanian, requested a move to a white British family because they thought they would have more opportunity to practice their English, after being placed initially with a foster family who did not speak English in the home. The boys were Muslim and had been matched with this Muslim foster family who were from another ethnic origin. They had found that, although they were all Muslim, their religious and cultural identities and lifestyles were not compatible. The boys felt isolated as they did not share a first language with their carers and that, with limited opportunities to learn and practice English, they struggled to communicate. (Wade et al., 2012)*

Importantly, different young people prioritised different aspects of a cultural match, highlighting that matching should not necessarily prioritise one aspect of identity at the expense of others, and further, that it must take account of those aspects most important to the child.

### **A 'close' cultural match**

Across several of the studies there was a suggestion that an 'exact' cultural match or shared ethnicity may neither be possible nor necessary, but rather that a close match or a culturally appropriate match in a broader sense was positive and could meet the child's needs. A 'close' match, for example, might describe a match whereby certain aspects of a child's identity might be shared with their carer, such as religion, but where other aspects, such as ethnicity, heritage/ancestry or country of origin were not shared.

*Social workers often told us about the ways in which they met these needs when the foster carers themselves were of a different background to the children. In one of our case studies, for example, a match for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child with a family of a different ethnic group had worked, in part because: '... there was a strong religious similarity ... so, they were Muslim, they live in an area that's quite multi-cultural, there's a mosque literally two minutes' walk from the house ...' (Social worker, case study interview, Ofsted, 2020)*

*Following the first review, Hassan's social worker understood the need for them to be with a 'Muslim' or at least an 'Asian' family. (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

Similarly, where there was a relationship between languages spoken by the child and foster carers, even if not an exact match, this was found to be helpful.

*While most young people were in cross-cultural placements, some were able to find points of familiarity in the languages spoken in the home. This helped them settle as well as providing foster carers with a means of communicating and welcoming them. Many of the young people*



*from Afghanistan told us how foster carers who spoke Farsi or Urdu were able to communicate to some extent with them because some Afghans understood a little of these languages. (Wade et al., 2012b)*

### **Support and sensitivity for ethnicity, cultural identity, religion, or related needs**

Where carers did not share but were sensitive to needs that might arise from a child's ethnicity, culture or religion, and committed to meeting those needs, this was also seen as positive and a potential means of meeting these specific needs.

*Where foster carers and young people did not share the same nationality, ethnic origin or religion, foster carers often made an effort to develop their knowledge of the young person's country of origin and religion and tried to provide familiar points of reference by accessing information and pictures on the internet or in library books, often as part of a shared activity with young people. Social workers generally informed foster carers about young people's religious needs so they could provide basic considerations such as food that met dietary requirements, prayer mats and religious books and could show young people where places of worship were located. Some foster carers who had begun placements more recently had been given booklets about the young person's country of origin. (Wade et al., 2012b)*

*What I like from my last foster mother, she always asked me what kind of food I eat, what kind of music I like, so, and she sometimes takes me to a place where, where there is a cultural programme [from my country], she would take me there, so because ... I always miss something about my own culture ... so she used to do that, and I really liked that about them. (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015)*

*Where there was not a close ethnic match, this could be outweighed by having a good overall experience: 'I had a positive experience in care. Matching was not positive in regard to ethnicity. However, the carers were lovely and very supportive ... I had a safe home to live in.' (30- to 39-year-old care leaver, care leavers' survey, Ofsted, 2020)*

The matching by sensitivity to cultural needs thus linked to information sharing about cultural background and to embracing a child's background and preferences and co-construction of a family (discussed in initial arrival).

### **Sensitivity to other specific needs: asylum-seeking young people and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) young people**

Beyond sensitivity to specific needs that might arise from a child's ethnicity, culture, religion or related constructs, across many of the studies there were references to other specific needs that carers may need to be sensitive to. Two specific areas of need raised in the literature were sensitivity to the specific needs with which an asylum-seeking child or young person might present (including the history of migration, potential history of trauma, and interaction with the asylum system) and sensitivity to specific needs related to LGBTQ sexual orientation or identities. Though very different, across both of these areas of need, there was reference to the foster carer needing to build a trusting relationship with the child in relation to these specific needs, and to explore these areas at the child's pace.





In some cases, shared experiences were found to enable a carer to be particularly sensitive to certain needs a young person had. For example, carers who themselves have experience of resettlement or migration felt better prepared to care for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child.

*In general terms, therefore, personal experience of migration and the challenges of resettlement had helped carers to feel better prepared and, perhaps, drew them towards fostering young people with similar experiences. It may also have led children's services to identify and recruit them for this specialist task. (Wade, 2019)*

For LGBTQ carers or carers with LGBTQ family members, there was a sense that shared experience of LGB sexuality or gender-diverse identities demonstrated to LGBTQ foster children that LGBTQ identities were accepted and could be talked about openly in the household. This was felt to be particularly helpful for LGBTQ children who had previously been exposed to, or internalised, negative views of LGBTQ identities or families.

*LGBTQ carers or carers with LGBTQ family members felt confident in demonstrating that they could be trusted, as the young person had evidence that LGB identities were accepted and could be talked about. But here, too, there was an emphasis on going at the young person's pace. My son is openly gay ... so there is quite often gay chatter going on at home. I would not specifically sit down and say to (the young person) 'Right I want you to talk with me about your sexuality' because I do not think that is appropriate. I think it is the sort of thing that a young person will come to you with when they are ready ... (Schofield et al., 2019)*

However, many non-LGBTQ carers were also effective in demonstrating sensitivity to the needs of LGBTQ young people in their care through efforts to signal acceptance of LGBTQ identities to the child and to work with the child, at their pace, to identify how best to support them.

*Important here is the foster carer's flexibility and willingness to tune into how this particular LGBTQ young person thinks and feels and to identify how best to support them. I'm learning how to anticipate things and understand things better and I'm getting more of a grasp on who she is ... so there's a way of being and I'm learning it. (Schofield et al., 2019)*

There was a risk, however, for LGBTQ young people in being in households where a lack of understanding of sexuality and gender identity undermined carers' efforts to be supportive or sensitive to the young person's needs. This included both a lack of acknowledgement on the part of foster carers of the potential risk of stigma an LGBTQ young person might face, as well as problematic or pathologizing beliefs about sexuality and gender identity, for example a belief that non-heterosexual sexualities were linked to childhood sexual trauma or that LGBTQ young people would inevitably lead very difficult lives. In one study, there was an example of a child being placed in a household where there were openly homophobic views which was felt to be very concerning.

*One statement often made by foster carers to suggest what they meant by acceptance was that the young person's sexual orientation or gender identity "does not make any difference," but this was understood in varied ways. This statement could be positive, conveying that sexual orientation or gender identity did not affect the carer's feelings for the young person or threaten their relationship. However, in a few cases, particularly in relation to sexual orientation, the*



*assertion that it made no difference appeared to underestimate the challenges that would in fact be experienced by the young person, in terms of the risk of bullying, stigma and homophobia. There could even be a sense of 'blaming' the young person for any negative consequences of their identity. It does not make a difference – I think it's how the child makes an issue of it. If you want it to be a problem, you can make it a problem. There must be concerns about foster families where carers seem dismissive about the risks of stigma or, as was the case in one family, where family members were homophobic or engaged in 'banter' about a young person's sexual orientation. (Schofield et al., 2019)*

Negative consequences of matching often suggested the importance of planning and information sharing in ensuring that foster carers understood the child or young person's identities and needs and had appropriate understanding or training.

## **Theme 2: Planning and Information Sharing**

### **Information-sharing**

A common theme across studies was that of information-sharing (or lack of), and its role in preparing foster families and the children and young people they looked after for their arrival into the home. Practice guidelines suggest that information about young people's likes, dislikes, routines, school, health, families and family time arrangements, should be shared with foster carers prior to them joining a new household. Despite this, foster carers often reported receiving little information from social workers about the child in advance (Barter & Lutman, 2016; Ofsted, 2020; Wade et al., 2012). Some foster carers, especially those who were more experienced, refused to take a child without this information.

*One carer said: 'Any child that comes to us always has an "All about me" book. We will not take a child without one.' (Foster carer, five to nine years' experience, foster carers' survey, Ofsted, 2020)*

When foster carers did receive information about a child, some found that the information they received was out-of-date or inaccurate. Some foster carers suggested that information may be left out to make a child seem more appealing to take on, and to deceive carers into accepting the match.

*We had some concerns initially as it said on his record that he scratches and bites ... we questioned that, and it happened when he first came into care, and he doesn't do that anymore, but it was still on his record. (Foster carer, case study, Ofsted, 2020)*

*One participant discussed a recent case where pre-placement assessments contained no indication of negative interactions. However, once in placement, contact with the child's school and previous nursery revealed long-standing issues of sexualised behaviour towards other children. It was later found that the child had sexually harmed another child in the foster home, the placement ended. When the child was moved to another placement, the participant contacted the new foster carers, who they knew had young grandchildren who visited regularly, to discover that they had received no information concerning the potential risk that the child may pose. (Barter & Lutman, 2016)*



*Sometimes they don't know all the information themselves but sometimes they don't tell you everything. They only tell you what they want you to know. (Focus group participant, Barter & Lutman, 2016)*

This lack of accurate information made it difficult for carers both to make informed decisions about whether their home was a good fit for a child and make preparations to enable them to meet the child's needs. Unplanned moves were frequently attributed to inaccurate information.

A lack of information was especially common among asylum-seeking young people. Due to the often-urgent nature of finding a home for these young people, there was usually not enough time to collect detailed information about them to pass onto their carers.

*Most foster carers in our study had been informed of the young person's nationality, gender, age (sometimes approximate), religion, health conditions (although not in all cases) and the young person's asylum status. Beyond these basic details, however, information was limited. (Wade et al., 2012)*

In particular, there were often queries over asylum-seeking young people's ages, in part due to lack of documentation. Age assessments were initiated by the local authorities and the questioning of age caused great anxiety for children and young people as it affected not only their trust with adults but also questioned their rights and futures. It could also cause difficulties and a lack of trust between foster carers and young people whilst age-assessments were being carried out and create an atmosphere that was not family-like (Sirriyeh, 2013; Wade et al., 2012b).

*A foster carer described a short-term emergency placement where she had been unable to suspend the question of age. Faced with a young person she believed to be an adult, this carer was anxious at being alone in the house with a stranger she regarded as an adult male. While she accepted the young person into her house, that night she barricaded her bedroom door with a piece of furniture. (Sirriyeh, 2013)*

Professionals, foster carers, and children and young people all said that it was important that children should receive information about their foster family before arriving. This could be a useful tool in helping to prepare children for the transition and reduce uncertainty and anxiety around the move.

*We heard and saw many examples of good written information about the carers and their home. This information helped children to settle, especially when it included pictures. This could reassure children, empower them to ask questions, and help them to begin seeing themselves as part of the foster family. (Ofsted, 2020)*

*One child had received an introduction booklet produced by the family dog. (Ofsted, 2020)*

In many cases, however, children did not receive any information about the foster family before moving, which caused them to experience stress about their new foster home.

*One concern many participants reported was the scant information about an impending move. Nine children knew nothing about the impending move, and some had filled the vacuum with assumptions. (Goodyer, 2016)*



*Several of the fostering teams we spoke to acknowledged that there was more they could do, such as ensuring that profiles of foster carers were routinely updated and easily available at short notice to share with children. (Ofsted, 2020)*

This tended to occur mostly when children and young people were moved to a new family in a rush, and professionals acknowledged that they should make this information more easily available so that it could be shared with children at short notice.

### **Communication and planning**

Linked with the sharing of information was the involvement of all household members – children and young people entering the household, foster carers, children in the fostering household, and birth family, as relevant – in communication and planning for moves (Goodyer, 2014; Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Wade et al., 2012b). Some children did not believe the information they received, and others did not receive information at all (Goodyer, 2016). The consequence of this lack of child-centred planning was noted strongly in studies (Goodyer, 2016).

*Fatima was confused about whether she would be staying with Denise and Alan. She found it very hard to get hold of the social worker, who always seemed busy or on leave. When she did ask her, it seemed there was a different answer every time. She did not really know how to talk to her friends about what was happening, as it felt embarrassing. Gradually, Fatima's mood became lower: 'I was a depressed, dark person.' (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018)*

### **Introductions and visits**

In addition to well-planned moves being characterised by accurate information sharing, communication, and planning, they were also characterised by having the opportunity to speak with, meet, visit or stay with the carers ahead of time. The process of introductions was thought to help relieve anxieties and facilitate trusting relationships (Goodyer, 2016). One example included in the literature was that of a young person visiting a household and refusing to move as it was too far from his social connections. More common were narratives about young people feeling more comfortable after a visit to their future foster family.

*She [social worker] said: 'Would you like to visit them?' I visited and she was very good and the same day I visited her, and I felt comfortable, and she said: 'Would you like to live with me?' and I said, 'yes', and after one week I moved in. (Young men's focus group, Wade et al., 2012)*

This first meeting was thought to be critical as part of the transition process.

## **Theme 3: Initial arrival and transition**

### **Day of arrival and immediacy of needs**

Linked with visits to foster families was the importance of the first meeting between a foster child and a foster family, whether it be during a visit or the initial point of arrival. An aspect of 'chemistry' on



whether the child and family got along and felt at home was sometimes attributed to this meeting and to the overall strength of a match (Goodyer, 2016; Ofsted, 2020; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003).

*I just remember coming for one day to see if I liked them, but no more, that's all. I felt right at home, right away ... We (James and his social worker) came down on the train and we had lunch here. (Young person, Goodyer, 2016)*

The importance of the initial day of arrival was a particularly strong finding for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with discussions about the importance that resting and preparing food as well as meeting the extended family, including foster carers' own children, had in welcoming children and young people (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade, 2019; Wade et al., 2012b).

*There was this boy, his face covered in mud, his shoes, everything, with this plastic bag with all his dirty things, belongings and whatever and he said, 'Hello' [laughs] and he was so tired. (Foster carer, Wade et al., 2012)*

*She said to me: 'Do you want any food?' I said: 'Yeah' I was starving. And then she said to me: 'Do you want to go to sleep?' I said: 'Yeah, I want to go to sleep' because I was really tired. And then I went to sleep, and it was like a dream, like, I was feeling so nice. (Young person, Wade, 2019)*

Young people often noted and remembered the actions of their fostering family during the initial stage, and whether they were calm and reassuring, greeted them with warmth, adapted their communication style, or if there were any particular personalised touches such as a welcome sign.

### **Embracing the preferences and culture of the child and co-construction of family life**

A number of studies mentioned the importance of children understanding the rules and expectations of the household (Pitcher & Jaffar, 2018; Sinclair and Wilson, 2003; Sirriyeh, 2013; Wade, 2019; Wade et al., 2012b), with some studies also discussing the process of adaptation or integration of a child into a household as multi-directional. Children and young people and foster carers noted the importance of the fostering family embracing the culture, food, likes and religion of a young person to help them feel more at home. For Muslim children in non-Muslim foster homes, this included involving young people in food shopping trips to buy their preferred food and to see that meat was Halal and adapting family meal and cooking times during Ramadan (Ní Raghallaigh & Sirriyeh, 2015; Wade et al., 2012). Wade (2019) noted the positive effects of a 'co-construction of family life'.

*[Foster carers] had welcomed young people into their families, but many had gone further by allowing young people to help shape the culture and practices of family life, thereby offering young people greater security through the co-construction of a network of family-like relationships and by providing a secure base from which young people could explore the world outside of the placement. (Wade, 2019)*



## 4.5.2 Results from Question 2: Impact and attribution

This section will report on the evidence from high-income countries about how matching decisions in non-connected foster care can be attributed to outcomes. It presents the findings with the technical statistical terminology.

### Matching, methods, and outcomes

Three types of matching were examined in the five studies: ethnic matching (Garcia, 1990), sibling matching (Linares et al., 2007; Novak & Benedini, 2020; Thorpe & Swart, 1992), and matching based on an assessment tool (Moore et al., 2016). As three studies reported on sibling matching, this element of matching was the focus of the limited literature available.

### Ethnic Matching

In the study reporting on ethnic matching, the author sought to examine if there were differences in foster home stability based on whether children were matched with a 'non-Hispanic' or 'Hispanic' foster care family (Garcia, 1990). To conduct this analysis, the author used two-way ANOVA and chi-square tests. The overall finding of this study was that ethnic congruence between children and foster families was not associated with the length of time spent at the foster home ( $X^2 = 10.02$ ,  $df = 5.0$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### Sibling matching

In the three studies reporting on sibling matching, the researchers used linear mixed effects models (Linares et al., 2007), negative binomial estimation (Novak & Benedini, 2020), and logistic regression (Thorpe & Swart, 1992) to examine the relationship between sibling matching and child outcomes.

In the study by Linares, the authors looked at differences in child outcomes based on whether siblings were placed together and the quality of the sibling relationship using data from 12 foster care agencies in New York City. Linear mixed effects models were used to examine the role of match type ('continuously together', 'continuously apart', and 'disrupted placement') and sibling relationship quality (defined as either a positive or negative relationship) on each child outcome. The child outcomes examined were child behaviour and conduct problems using the Eyberg Child Behaviour Inventory (ECBI), child feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction using the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale, and child depression using the Child Depression Inventory (CDI). The model tested controlled for a number of factors including sibling gender and age. Further, the analyses adjusted for sibling pairs. The study found that sibling positivity was associated with lower ECBI scores at 14 months follow-up ( $\beta = -2.48$ ,  $SE = 1.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , one tailed) whereas sibling negativity was associated with higher ECBI scores at the same point ( $\beta = 1.78$ ,  $SE = 0.98$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , one tailed). Further, associations between match type and child outcomes (loneliness and depression) were not observed at follow-up (see Table 3 in the article).



In the paper by Novak and colleagues, the authors used data from the National Study on Child and Adolescent Well-Being II (NSCAW II) to examine associations between sibling separation and 'child delinquency' (measured using the Delinquent Behaviour Scale) using negative binomial estimation. The prospective and longitudinal nature of the NSCAW II allowed for confirmation that children entered foster care before 'child delinquency' was measured. The analyses controlled for a number of variables including internalising behaviours, foster home type, and child characteristics. The study found that children who were separated from some of their siblings had more behaviour issues than those who were placed with their siblings (coefficient = 0.08, SE = 0.03,  $p < 0.01$ ). The analyses did not find any difference in 'delinquency' among children who were placed with all of their siblings (see Table 2 in the article).

Finally, Thorpe et al examined whether there was an association between siblings living together or apart, school performance, and mental health symptoms (as measured by a checklist of 18 mental health symptoms). This analysis was done by retrospectively analysing the charts of 115 sibling pairs and conducting logistic regression. This analysis found that children who were not living with their siblings were more likely to have fewer mental health symptoms (OR for children placed together = 1.40 and OR for children placed separately = 2.00,  $p = 0.025$ ). Further, children who were separated from their siblings were more likely to perform better at school (OR (together) = 32.00 and OR (separate) = 47.00,  $p = 0.025$ ).

### **Assessment tool matching**

In the study reporting on assessment tool matching, the authors evaluated the matching decisions made using the 'Appropriate Placement Level Indicator' (APLI) within the context of the work of a foster care contractor (Moore et al., 2016). Descriptive and bivariate statistics as well as chi-square tests were used to evaluate whether APLI decisions were associated with foster home stability. The analyses found that when children were placed based on the recommendations of APLI, they had greater foster home stability (40% were stable) than those children who were not placed according to APLI (28% were stable among those placed in a higher-level care than recommended and 22% were stable among those placed in a lower level of care than recommended) ( $X^2 = 34.01$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).



# 5 DISCUSSION

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## 5.1 Summary of findings

There were 23 studies from 24 publications included in this review; 18 studies from 19 publications were included in analysis on Question 1 around views and experiences of matching in foster care in the UK and five studies were included for Question 2 on impact and attribution.

The literature on views and experiences of matching in foster care represented rich data largely from England. We identified papers representing the perspectives of children and young people in or previously in foster care, foster carers, social work professionals, birth parents, foster carers' birth children, and kinship carers. Data were collected from interviews, focus groups, surveys, case studies, and qualitative analysis of clinical record audits. Quality was assessed using CASP, and ratings are presented in appendix 3. Confidence in the findings, as assessed using CERQual, ranged from low to high.

We found strong evidence that matches were often made in a rush or crisis environment, which had an impact upon assessment of a child or young person's needs, match decision-making, and availability of carers. Within this rushed environment, carers and children usually received limited information about each other, and there was little time to prepare for arrival.

The involvement of children and young people in the match decision-making process was thought to be important by children and young people, foster carers, and social workers. There was also evidence that it was important to involve other household members (foster carers, other children living in the household), and birth parents in these decisions. Location and living with siblings were also key considerations.

Race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language were significant factors in the match decision-making process. Social workers often prioritised match by ethnicity and culture, but included studies emphasised the multi-faceted identities of individuals and the importance of matching based on what was important to the young person. Although children and young people in care valued shared qualities and experiences, living in a household that respected and supported their identity development was also vital.

Information-sharing was highlighted as being important to both foster carers and children and young people prior to arrival in the home. Sharing accurate information allowed foster carers to prepare properly for a young person's arrival and helped to relieve children's and young people's anxieties about the transition. Young people also felt more prepared for their move if they were able to meet their would-be carers beforehand.

The initial arrival of children and young people into a foster home was a critical moment. The priority for asylum-seeking young people was for their immediate needs (food, sleep) to be met. Foster carers'





characteristics such as warmth and reassurance were appreciated, as well as personalised touches to welcome the child into the home. Co-construction of family was seen as a key feature of a successful transition, whereby families embraced the child's culture, religion and likes to help them feel integrated within the home.

The literature on impact and attribution for various matching practices in foster care was sparse with potential for confounding factors, and no strong conclusions can be drawn from this literature. Further quantitative analysis on impact is needed around matching practices in foster care, and this literature should draw upon the aspects viewed as important by those involved in matching in foster care.

## 5.2 Discussion of findings

The review raised fundamental questions about the nature of matching and of care. Although we created the hierarchical themes, it was unclear about whether factors were used as part of a decision-making process, to mentally and physically prepare for a child and young person, or to respond to needs and identity after arrival. For example, LGBTQ sexual orientation or gender identity could be used as a consideration in deciding what family to place a child or young person with (and match by sensitivity, training about, or to a family with LGBTQ members), to reassure a young person prior to arrival about where they would be going, for foster carers to mentally and physically prepare a foster family for a child or young person's arrival (e.g., by placing a rainbow or trans flag or ensuring proper use of pronouns), or to respond to needs and identity after arrival (e.g., experiences of marginalisation, creation of inclusive community). Some foster carers emphasised responding to needs no matter the match and creating a nurturing, family environment. As such, there was a blurred line between what is matching, what makes a good foster carer, what makes a good relationship between a family and child, and what support should be offered to a child and foster family to sustain and build a match.

Although the importance of matching on factors and having accurate information was noted, needs and identities of children and young people were not stagnant. Outdated information did not reflect the child, their needs, and their strengths as they were entering a home. Children may have certain identities and needs emerge as more prominent than initially expected; for example, they could come out as LGBTQ after being in a home for a period of time or they could emphasise their desire to have a family who could support them in learning English or with their education. The Advisory Group also emphasised the importance of responding to shifting identities and priorities over time.

Intersectionality naturally fits in considering how individuals' social and political identities intersect to create different modes of discrimination and privilege and to contribute to a child's own identity. This may be a useful frame for reflection for social workers and foster carers in the matching process. As such, matching was seen as more than a tick-box decision-making exercise. Although the literature covered issues such as matching on race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, ability to stay with siblings, disability, parenting status, and geography, there was an absence of a discussion around class. Class has been noted to be a prominent consideration within British society and in the care system in England, and a tick-box exercise may not optimise the reflexivity suggested to create the best possible match. The process of consultation of children and young people was seen as important to identify what aspects of their identity, preferences and needs were viewed as more prominent by them. Studies discussed numerous examples where aspects of



identity – such as religion or non-white race – were prioritised, but experiences of children and young people in the family were more complex and the ‘match’ was viewed not to be a positive one.

Embedded within the concept of matching were ideas of power and of the uni-directional nature of a child moving into a foster family's home and adapting to their family. The ‘match’ was a decision made about a child or young person by the adults involved. Some children and social workers acknowledged that if children were consulted, they may have had different priorities or chosen not to live somewhere where the relationship later disrupted. In the move into the new household, the importance of a child or young person understanding the culture of the new household and house rules was often emphasised, rather than the co-construction of a household together (Wade, 2019).

Although there was high confidence in the finding recommending that children and young people, and birth parents where possible, should be consulted in the process, it was not suggested that they make the decisions themselves from the options of foster carers. Such a shift of power in decision-making conflicts with commonly held notions of English perspectives on childhood and would have implications in terms of the burden of decision-making put on children. Narey and Owers' review of foster care in England (2018) maintained the power with the adults in charge and put it clearly as ‘children do not always know what's best for them, and it is the responsibility of adults who know them, to make decisions which are likely to make their lives happier and prepare them better for a successful adulthood’ (p. 73). At the same point, the Narey and Owers' review found that children should be part of the process and ‘there could not be more of a significant, life changing responsibility’ than choosing the match within foster care. This review echoed the importance of involving children and that the current processes were often far from child-centric and failed to involve children. As part of consulting children, social workers and others should reflect on the agency of children and the dominant understanding of childhood – children in care, particularly unaccompanied asylum-seeking children – often challenge these dominant understandings by having taken on ‘adult’ responsibilities, levels of independence, and agency in taking care of their needs.

Whilst the findings did not suggest a fundamental shift in the notion of structural responsibility for decision-making, the findings recommend a shift in the structures around matching to ensure better resourcing for matching and greater choice of foster carers, as well as a shift in the mindset around matching being part of a dominant ‘crisis’ atmosphere. Although there was limited time available for matching processes in some cases, it was acknowledged that more could be done to move away from a crisis atmosphere. Many of our codes around sudden moves related to moving on from one foster carer to another, a situation in which there could have been greater planning. Even with time limitations, it was acknowledged that more could be done to prepare the child and young person, consult with other household members, share information and undertake greater reflection. The sudden shifts of household for children and young people without resourced child-centric work could have devastating effects for them.

Concomitant with shifting the mindset around matching was shifting the resourcing for matching in foster care. The Advisory Group and broader literature suggest that there is much to be learned from matching in adoption, which is better resourced and is accompanied by more options for a match, extensive information sharing, visits for the child, and more child-centred practice (Narey & Owers, 2018; Ofsted, 2020). Shifting the resources could also allow for the recruitment and retention of more



foster carers and the creation of databases to allow foster carers themselves to proactively search for children as well as for social workers to draw on regional or greater pools of foster carers. One study from the USA found that providing an increase in payment for foster carers decreased the number of times the average child moved by 20% as well as decreasing the number of children in residential care (Duncan & Argys, 2007). Changing the way in which foster care is resourced could shift the narrative from a 'crisis' and 'deficit' perspective to one of positive practice.

### **5.3 Strengths and limitations of the review methods**

This systematic review aimed to comprehensively locate studies around matching in foster care to answer our two review questions. The database search was comprehensive and rendered a large number of citations which were thoroughly double screened, and we attempted to thoroughly search the grey literature as well. Some full texts could not be located, particularly of older studies. We were unable to assess publication bias due to the small number of included studies. We acknowledge that we may have missed some relevant studies, particularly from reports and books.

The review looked at two pertinent questions around matching not covered elsewhere (Haysom et al., 2020; Ott, 2017; Zeijlmans et al., 2017), but it did not aim to systematically look at correlational studies that, whilst they may have a higher risk of bias, may also lend themselves to results that are interesting to policy and practice. We were limited in our analysis by available evidence discussed in the next section, including by the diversity of populations, matching practices, and study designs, and more primary research is needed to comprehensively understand matching in foster care as well as to understand what works, for whom, and in what conditions.

We had planned to synthesise the findings from Question 1 and Question 2 together but, we were unable to do this due to the limited amount of data identified for Question 2 in the search.

### **5.4 Strengths and limitations of available evidence**

#### **5.4.1 Methodological limitations and clarity in reporting**

There were methodological limitations for studies in both Questions 1 and 2 and gaps in the clarity of reporting, as evidenced through the CASP checklist process. In particular, there were concerns about the methodological design's ability to answer their own research questions and lack of clarity around the sampling frame; nonetheless, these studies rendered rich data useful for our analysis.

For Question 2, there were major limitations in the methodologies of the included studies. There were no randomised controlled trials included in the review question on impact, and major concerns for drawing conclusions based on individual studies and potential confounding factors within those studies.

Across both review questions, it was difficult to screen eligible studies because of the lack of clarity in reporting around research questions, the target population, the geography of the study, and methods used, and a number of authors were contacted for clarification.



### 5.4.2 Coherence and relevance of data

Overall, there were high levels of coherence or fit between the data and the findings. The findings for Question 1 seemed relevant to the current English context, although their transferability to other contexts is unknown. There were instances where a finding, such as the importance of the co-construction of family, seemed compelling but was less supported by data and its relevance extended far beyond matching to thinking about foster care overall. The relevance of the data extended beyond the review question to raise broader questions about the nature of power relations in children's social care, the importance of social care professionals considering relationships beyond a child-foster carer dyad to the whole fostering family and birth family, and the importance of the structural and resource constraints within foster care.

### 5.4.3 Adequacy of the data and gaps in available data

The richness and quantity of data depended on the individual finding as discussed in section 4.4: Certainty of evidence assessment. There was adequate data for high confidence in some findings and low in others; adequacy of data was insufficient for any meta-analyses and to say anything about effectiveness.

There were gaps in the literature around views and experiences from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and for many sub-populations such as matching for parent and child foster homes or understanding the complexity of intersectional identity and the role of class in matching. More evidence around views and experiences is needed for non-connected carers.

The data was insufficient to make strong conclusions around the impact of matching practices. Qualitative literature raised questions around actions such as age spacing for children in a fostering household and the impact on the foster home in involving birth family formally in settling and reassuring a child around matching.

## 5.5 Recommendations for practice and policy

The recommendations for practice and policy followed the inter-linked areas of practice recommendations and structural recommendations.

Based on the experiences and views of children and young people, foster carers, and practitioners in matching, there were recommendations for greater reflexivity and consultation in decision-making based on the following:

- Social workers should involve children and young people in discussion of what parts of their identity, needs and wishes are the most important and consider these in decision-making as appropriate. Matching factors include aspects such as geography, living with siblings, safeguarding considerations, race, ethnicity, culture, language, trauma and grief, sexual orientation, gender identity, and age. Built into their reflective practice should be understanding of the power they hold and the importance of child-centred listening and communication.



- Social workers and foster carers should reflect about the intersectionality of child and young person's social categorisations (such as care status, race and class) and the ways in which those create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. They should also reflect on the importance and complexity of identity and needs and how they shift over time.
- Social care professionals' decision-making for matching in foster care should involve foster carers as well as the children in their household in terms of what they are looking for in a match and in the decision-making process where appropriate.
- Social workers often do not involve birth parents in the matching decision-making process or in the transition into the new home, but where done appropriately, this may help children and young people to settle.

The recommendations for a more inclusive and consultative process continued throughout planning and transition into a family with the following:

- Where possible, transitions into a family home should be accompanied by accurate information sharing and visits and discussions between the child or young person and the new foster family.
- Foster carers should consider how they can 'co-construct' a family with a child and young person including through mutual adaptation to family life and shared experience. This idea may be relevant for the training and supervision of foster carers.

The recommendations for practice were linked with recommendations for policy and the structural changes based on the review findings as well as the discussion. The primary recommendation was that matching in foster care should be better resourced to encourage and allow for a move away from the 'crisis' atmosphere where possible and the enactment of the engrained standards for child-centred practice. The improved resourcing should allow and prioritise social workers enacting reflective practice on the complexity of identities and needs, consultation and discussions with children and young people, contributions by birth family in the decision-making, and visits between the child and fostering family. Greater resources should also go into the creation of more efficient and better systems for matching (such as national databases and proactive processes for matching) and into the recruitment of more foster carers so that there are greater choices for a match, even within a short space of time.

## 5.6 Recommendations for research

Matching in foster care was confirmed to be a pivotal moment in the care journey for not only children and young people, but also for foster carers, children in fostering families, birth family, and in terms of decision-making by social workers for the child and young person. Given the prominence of matching, further research is needed. The following research gaps were identified:

- To understand the views and experiences of matching from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- To understand better the experience of matching for children moving to connected carers and how this may be different from non-connected carers



- To examine matching from an intersectional lens and include the role that class plays as a factor for matching
- To quantitatively examine the impact of various matching practices using high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Studies could focus on topics such as using matching-assistant devices, 'nudge' factors such as reminders to social workers to consult children and young people and birth parents and requiring age gaps between children in the household.
- To frame studies away from a 'deficit' lens of children and young people (e.g., only discussing the contribution of externalising behaviours to negative outcomes) and include in studies the strengths of children and positive outcomes.
- To identify and test the effectiveness of 'key ingredients' of matching practices to better understand those elements and activities that cause changes in outcomes. This research will only be possible with a greater number of effectiveness studies and details on the mechanisms of change.

Additionally, the language used within studies could be improved. Studies often lacked specificity, making it more difficult to identify relevant research as well to discuss common findings. Studies should specify clearly where their data comes from, including if it is from connected-carers foster care, non-connected foster carers, or adoption as well as the methods used in the study and the geography of the study. The nature and tone of the language was often clinical and from a 'deficit' lens-view of the child, particularly for the quantitative studies that focused on the contribution of negative child behaviour on negative outcomes (e.g., temperament and externalising behaviours on foster home disruption). Where possible, language in studies should maintain clarity, discuss potential synonyms, and use language that is acceptable and reflects child-centred practice (Connelly, 2018; TACT Fostering and Adoption, 2019).

## 5.7 Conclusion

Matching in foster care was confirmed as a pivotal moment in the care journey and one worthy of resource investment and a focus on reflective practice. We found strong evidence that matches were often made in a rush or crisis environment, which had an impact upon assessment of a child or young person's needs, match decision-making, and availability of carers. Within this crisis environment, carers and children usually received limited information about each other, and there was little time to prepare for arrival.

The consultation of children and young people in the match decision-making process was thought to be important. It was also viewed as important to involve other household members (foster carers, other children living in the household) and birth parents in matching decisions. Young people viewed it positively when there was a planned process, and they were able to meet their would-be carers beforehand.

Race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language were significant factors in the match decision-making process as were location and living with siblings. Social workers often prioritised match by ethnicity and culture, but included studies emphasised the multi-faceted identities of individuals and the importance of matching based on what was important to the young person. Although children and



young people in care valued shared qualities and experiences, living in a household that respected and supported their identity development was also vital.

The initial arrival of children and young people into a foster home was a critical moment. The priority for asylum-seeking young people was for their immediate needs (food, sleep) to be met. Foster carers' characteristics such as warmth and reassurance were appreciated, as well as personalised touches to welcome the child into the home. Co-construction of family was seen as a key feature of a successful transition, whereby families embraced the child's culture, religion and likes to help them feel integrated within the home.

More rigorous effectiveness research is needed in order to say what impact various matching practices have. The review highlighted that rigorous research within the area of matching in foster care can be done.



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# 7 APPENDICES

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## Appendix 1: Example search strategy

Example strategy (Web of Science):

(TI=((('foster care\*' OR 'foster parent\*' OR 'foster famil\*' OR 'foster placement\*' OR 'foster home\*' OR 'foster household' OR 'foster child\*' OR 'substitute famil\*' OR 'looked after' OR 'looked-after' OR 'child in care' OR 'alternative care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'out of home care' OR 'kinship care\*' OR 'connected care\*' OR 'friends and family care\*') NEAR/15 ('match\*' OR 'care plan\*' OR 'fit' OR 'placement\*' OR 'move'))))

OR

(AB=((('foster care\*' OR 'foster parent\*' OR 'foster famil\*' OR 'foster placement\*' OR 'foster home\*' OR 'foster household' OR 'foster child\*' OR 'substitute famil\*' OR 'looked after' OR 'looked-after' OR 'child in care' OR 'alternative care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'out of home care' OR 'kinship care\*' OR 'connected care\*' OR 'friends and family care\*') NEAR/15 ('match\*' OR 'care plan\*' OR 'fit' OR 'placement\*' OR 'move'))))

OR

(KP=((('foster care\*' OR 'foster parent\*' OR 'foster famil\*' OR 'foster placement\*' OR 'foster home\*' OR 'foster household' OR 'foster child\*' OR 'substitute famil\*' OR 'looked after' OR 'looked-after' OR 'child in care' OR 'alternative care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'out of home care' OR 'kinship care\*' OR 'connected care\*' OR 'friends and family care\*') NEAR/15 ('match\*' OR 'care plan\*' OR 'fit' OR 'placement\*' OR 'move'))))

OR

(AK=((('foster care\*' OR 'foster parent\*' OR 'foster famil\*' OR 'foster placement\*' OR 'foster home\*' OR 'foster household' OR 'foster child\*' OR 'substitute famil\*' OR 'looked after' OR 'looked-after' OR 'child in care' OR 'alternative care' OR 'out-of-home care' OR 'out of home care' OR 'kinship care\*' OR 'connected care\*' OR 'friends and family care\*') NEAR/15 ('match\*' OR 'care plan\*' OR 'fit' OR 'placement\*' OR 'move'))))

**AND LANGUAGE:** (English)

*Indexes=SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH Timespan=All years*



## Appendix 2: Themes and subthemes coded in dedoose

Table 1: Themes and subthemes of Question 1 analysis

Themes		
Decision making factors and factors that led to the strength of the match	Planning and information sharing	Initial arrival and transition
Subthemes		
Assessment of child's needs	Care planning roles and responsibilities	Adapting communication to overcome language barriers
Assessment of suitability of kinship carer	Importance of children understanding the reason for moving home	Calming and reassuring
Availability of foster carer	Information-sharing about length of stay	Co-construction of family
Beliefs and values around sexuality and gender identity	Information-sharing with child	Embracing food/culture/likes/religion to help feel at home
Birth children already in the foster home	Information-sharing with foster family	Household rules and expectations
Carer skills	Introductions between child and foster family before arrival	Inviting into the home
Carer training needs	Involving 'established' foster children in preparation for arrival	Meeting immediate needs
Chemistry and 'fitting in'	Making child aware of upcoming transition	Personalised touches to help settle in



Child characteristics (i.e., behaviours, history)	Preparing birth children for transition	The role of extended family/children in welcoming
Child wants to be in the foster home	Social worker involvement in care planning	Understanding of the asylum-seeking process
Contact with parents	Time for prepare for arrival	
Contact with siblings		
Cultural matching		
Ethnic/racial matching		
Experience of carer		
Foster carer interest in type of care		
Foster carer's capacity to accept a child into their home and family		
Foster carer's openness to fostering children from different backgrounds		
Foster family characteristics (i.e., age, other children in the household, personality, pets)		
Involving birth parents in matching decisions		
Involving child in decision-making		
Involving foster carers in decision-making		



Involving foster carers' birth children in matching decisions

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Linguistic matching (shared language vs. benefits of English-speaking household)

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Location of foster home

---

Match made in a rush/crisis

---

Living with siblings

---

Reason for match unknown

---

Relationship prior to arrival

---

Religious matching

---

Sensitivity to specific needs/complexity (culture, religion, needs of LGBTQ young people, lack of understanding of concept of fostering/mistrust of social workers among asylum-seeking young people, trauma/complex and multifaceted needs)

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Shared expectations

---

Shared identity/experiences (LGBTQ identity, experience of grief, experiences of migration/resettlement)

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## Appendix 3. Summary of CASP checklist quality assessment

Table 2. Summary of CASP Checklist findings for Question 1

Study (first author and year)	1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	8. Was the data sufficiently rigorous?	9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	10. How valuable is the research?
<b>Adams 2011</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	can't tell	no	yes	yes
<b>Aldgate 2009</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no	yes
<b>Barter 2016</b>	yes	yes	no	can't tell	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes
<b>Broad 2001</b>	no	yes	can't tell	can't tell	yes	no	can't tell	no	yes	yes
<b>Goodyer 2016</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
<b>Hollows 2006</b>	yes	yes	can't tell	can't tell	can't tell	no	can't tell	no	yes	yes
<b>Ingley 2008</b>	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes
<b>Ní Raghallaigh 2015</b>	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	yes
<b>Ofsted 2020</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
<b>Pitcher &amp; Jaffar, 2018</b>	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Pugh 1996</b>	no	yes	no	yes	can't tell	no	can't tell	no	no	yes



<b>Rashid 2000</b>	no	yes	can't tell	can't tell	yes	can't tell	can't tell	can't tell	yes	yes
<b>Schofield 2019</b>	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	can't tell	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Sinclair 2003</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	can't tell	yes
<b>Sirriyeh 2013</b>	yes	yes	can't tell	can't tell	no	no	yes	no	yes	no
<b>Stoneman 2019</b>	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Wade 2019</b>	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	can't tell	can't tell	yes	yes	yes
<b>Waterhouse 2001</b>	yes	yes	can't tell	can't tell	can't tell	can't tell	can't tell	no	yes	yes

The CASP checklist includes detailed notes available upon request. The process of undertaking the CASP checklist fed into reflection and the assessment of the strength of findings.



**Table 3: Summary of CASP checklist assessment for Question 2**

Study (First author and year)	1. Did the study address a clearly focused issue?	2. Was the cohort recruited in an acceptable way?	3. Was the exposure accurately measured to minimise bias?	4. Was the outcome accurately measured to minimise bias?	5. a. Have the authors identified all important confounding factors?	5.b. Have they taken account of the confounding factors in the design and/or analysis?	6.a. Was the follow up of subjects complete enough?	6.b. Was the follow up of subjects long enough?	7. What are the results of the study?	8. How precise are the results?	9. Do you believe the results?	10. Can the results be applied to the local population?	11. Do the results of this study fit with other available evidence?
<b>Garcia 1990</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	not applicable	not applicable	see Table 4.2.2	uncertain	to an extent	uncertain	no
<b>Linares 2007</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	see Table 4.2.2	adequate	to an extent	uncertain	somewhat
<b>Moore 2016</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	not applicable	not applicable	see Table 4.2.2	adequate	to an extent	uncertain	no
<b>Novak 2020</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	not applicable	not applicable	see Table 4.2.2	adequate	to an extent	uncertain	somewhat
<b>Thorpe 1996</b>	yes	yes	unsure	unsure	no	no	not applicable	not applicable	see Table 4.2.2	uncertain	to an extent	uncertain	no



## Appendix 4. Summary of Question 2 excluded studies study characteristics

The following table presents full text studies excluded for methodological reasons as illustrative examples of the literature excluded from the review.

**Table 4: Study characteristics of Question 2 studies excluded for methodological reasons**

Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings	Reason for exclusion
<b>Boer 1991</b>	Match decision-making for siblings	Record analyses, questionnaires, and interviews with the agencies to discuss reasons for siblings living together or apart and the decision-making process	Correlational analysis between simultaneous placement and placements with interval between premature and non-premature departures	Netherlands	15 agencies	Living together or apart, foster home disruption, length of stay	<p>There was no connection between premature termination and the original reason for joint placement, premature broken-off foster homes and the sex or ages of children placed together, premature termination and the presence of other foster children in the foster home.</p> <p>A higher number of premature departures was seen when siblings were placed simultaneously rather than in intervals.</p> <p>Reasons given for siblings living together were: to preserve the familial bond (24%), the existence of a positive sibling bond (14%), the wishes of the family (10%), and an attempt to offer the children the perspective of a future together (7%).</p> <p>The most important considerations for deciding whether siblings should live together were: the mutual bond between siblings, degree of difficulty of the children (i.e. behavioural disorders, interpersonal issues, and influence of the child's parents).</p>	This study 1) does not examine associations (instead they report % of different cases) and 2) does not have a comparator group/not quasi-experimental or experimental



Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings	Reason for exclusion
<b>Bush 1978</b>	Child choice in match and visiting foster home prior to arrival	Retrospective assessment of satisfaction with foster home (survey and qualitative interviews)	Unclear, most likely T-test comparing satisfaction of children who had visited their home prior to arrival and had been given a choice of foster homes with those for whom at least one of those conditions was not fulfilled.	USA	370 dependent and neglected children, and some of their parents, surrogate parents, and social workers	Satisfaction with foster home	Children who had visited their foster homes prior to arrival and been given a choice of foster homes were more satisfied with their placements.	Not a quasi-experimental design (Q2), and wrong location (Q1).
<b>Cautley 1975</b>	Foster parent characteristics	Interviews with foster parents and interviews with social workers for success ratings	Correlations between success ratings and foster parent characteristics	USA	145 first-time foster parents	Success ratings of foster home	No single characteristic of either parent was predictive of success. Social worker's global success rating of the foster mother could be predicted more accurately than any other rating by social workers.	Correlational analysis
<b>Gould 1987</b>	Match decision-making based on temperament	Questionnaires to measure temperament and foster parent expectations	Ex-post facto design; goodness of fit was operationalised as a relation score between child's temperament and foster carer's temperament	USA	121 foster families, 74 children	Foster home disruption	Children who were easy to anger were the likeliest to experience foster home disruption. The more difficulty a mother had with a child's temperament attribute, the likelier it was to be associated with disruption, and the poorer the mother/child fit on an attribute, the likelier it was to be associated with disruption.	No counterfactual.
<b>Green 1996</b>	Match decision-making based on temperament	Survey and criteria assessment to measure temperaments, cross-sectional	T-test comparing children match of adults and children by temperament	USA	85 families	Foster care adjustment and family functioning	Temperamentally 'easy' children were matched with similar parents. These parents reported better family functioning and better foster care adjustment.	No comparator/counterfactual here. The authors examine whether better matches between foster children and foster parents in terms of temperament predict better



Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings	Reason for exclusion
		questionnaire data						outcomes (using Match Assessment Scale and Family Adjustment Device)
<b>Hegar 1986</b>	Sibling separation	<p>Pilot study: children's placement data.</p> <p>Main study: cross-sectional agency records of children from sibling groups and survey data</p>	Cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to determine association of factors with joint sibling placement.	USA	<p>38 sibling groups (108 in pilot, 202 in main study)</p> <p>108 child-welfare workers (main study)</p>	Siblings living together or apart in foster homes	Siblings were placed together with one or more siblings 66.8% of the time. Differences in siblings' ages or sex were associated with separation.	No counterfactual
<b>Leathers 2005</b>	Sibling separation	Interviews with caseworkers and foster parents, prospective collection of administrative data files maintained by the state child welfare agency for 5 years	<p>Hierarchical ordinary least squares regression analysis to test association between sibling placement patterns and foster home integration.</p> <p>Logistic regression analyses tested predictive models of foster home disruption, reunification and combined</p>	USA	Caseworkers and foster parents of 197 adolescents in long-term foster homes	Foster home disruption, reunification, adoption	Young people living without their siblings were less likely to be adopted/subsidised guardianship than those with consistent joint sibling placements. Young people living without siblings after previously living with them in foster homes were more likely to have foster homes disrupted than those living with siblings.	No counterfactual



Reference	Matching element	Data source	Analysis design	Country	n	Outcomes	Findings	Reason for exclusion
			adoption/subsided guardianship.					
<b>Palmer 1996</b>	Foster home decision-making, Preparation for moving to foster home by birth parents	Questionnaire for social workers	Low quality description of methods used; examined variables associated with foster home change	Canada	184 children, 46 placement workers	Number of foster homes	A significant percentage of variability in foster home stability was accounted for by two conditions: the child's behaviour and the involvement of their parents in preparing them for moving to a foster home.	No counterfactual.
<b>Smith 1998</b>	Sibling separation	Case records, questionnaire about child's case history completed by caseworkers, observation, foster mother interviews, vocabulary test.	Correlation exploring association between child functioning and living with or without an older sibling in foster homes.	USA	38 children	Vocabulary scores, social competence, behavioural and emotional problems.	Children living with siblings in foster homes had a greater history of psychological problems. Children living with older siblings had fewer emotional and behavioural problems, but lower receptive vocabulary scores than children separated from their siblings.	No counterfactual

These studies made it through an initial screening of full-text studies, but, with data extraction, it became clear that they did not meet methodological inclusion criteria. These excluded studies originated from the USA, Canada and the Netherlands. Two studies focused on the foster carers match with the 'temperament of the child' (Gould, 1987; Green et al., 1996), match decision-making for siblings (Boer & Spiering, 1991), and the preparation for moving into the foster home by birth parents (Palmer, 1996).



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