

Brothers and Sisters in West Dunbartonshire



“Scotland will stop the practice of separating brothers and sisters, unless for reasons of safety. Relationships between brothers and sisters will be cherished and protected across decision making and through the culture and values of the people who care for them.” The Promise

In March 2023 we were keeping 38% of our children and young people with all of their brothers and sisters in care. 27% of our children and young people were with 1, but not all of their brothers and sisters. 35% were separated from all of their brothers and sisters. We are significantly better at keeping brothers and sisters together within kinship care, however this is also where we see the highest number of children separated.

68% of respondents to our Brothers and Sisters survey about time together reported that there was no formal plan in place to support their time together with brothers and sisters out-with contact with their wider family.

Actions to consider within this report span data, local policy and protocols, supporting and promoting creative practice and quality assurance. Ensuring we have a mechanism for routine data collection around the separation of brothers and sisters is essential for monitoring our progress.

This work has been carried out as part of the Keeping the Promise Working Group on Brothers and Sisters, which aims to understand how well we are doing at keeping brothers and sisters together currently, the factors impacting upon separation, and how well we are doing at keeping connections between siblings when they are separated. This will support future proofing of our services, building capacity and culture change within systems to ensure relationships between brothers and sisters are valued and protected. The data gathering began in March 2023 and this report has been written in July 2023.

Introduction

“Where living with their family is not possible, children must stay with their brothers and sisters where safe to do so and belong to a loving home, staying there for as long as needed.” The Promise

The Independent Care Review heard many stories from care experienced people that contact with the ‘care system’ led to them being separated from their brothers and sisters. The pain of that separation has often been profound and had lifelong consequences.

Relationships between brothers and sisters can be complicated and it should not be assumed that they are always easy. However when separated from parents, relationships between brothers and sisters can be an important protective factor for children.

An expansive understanding of siblings that includes half, step and adoptive siblings and reflects children’s experience of their family lives is required.

Part 13 of the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 and the Looked After Children (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 means local authorities have a duty to ensure siblings are supported to stay together, where appropriate. Where it is not appropriate for brothers and sisters to live together, steps should be taken to help them stay in regular touch with each other and to nurture their relationships. The Scottish Government has published guidance to support how this is implemented: [Staying together and connected: getting it right for siblings: national practice guidance - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot/publications/staying-together-and-connected-getting-it-right-for-siblings-national-practice-guidance-2021/pages/1-1-introduction.aspx)

The new rules also mean changes in Children’s Hearings procedures. Brothers and sisters have rights to appropriately participate – with support including advocacy services – in Children’s Hearings where contact with their siblings is being considered.

Gathering the baseline data

To establish the baseline data around how many infants, children and young people are together or apart from brothers and sisters we reviewed this population as of 24/03/23, including those looked after away from home in kinship care, foster care and residential placements.

There were 447 children looked after away from home.

Of the 447 children:

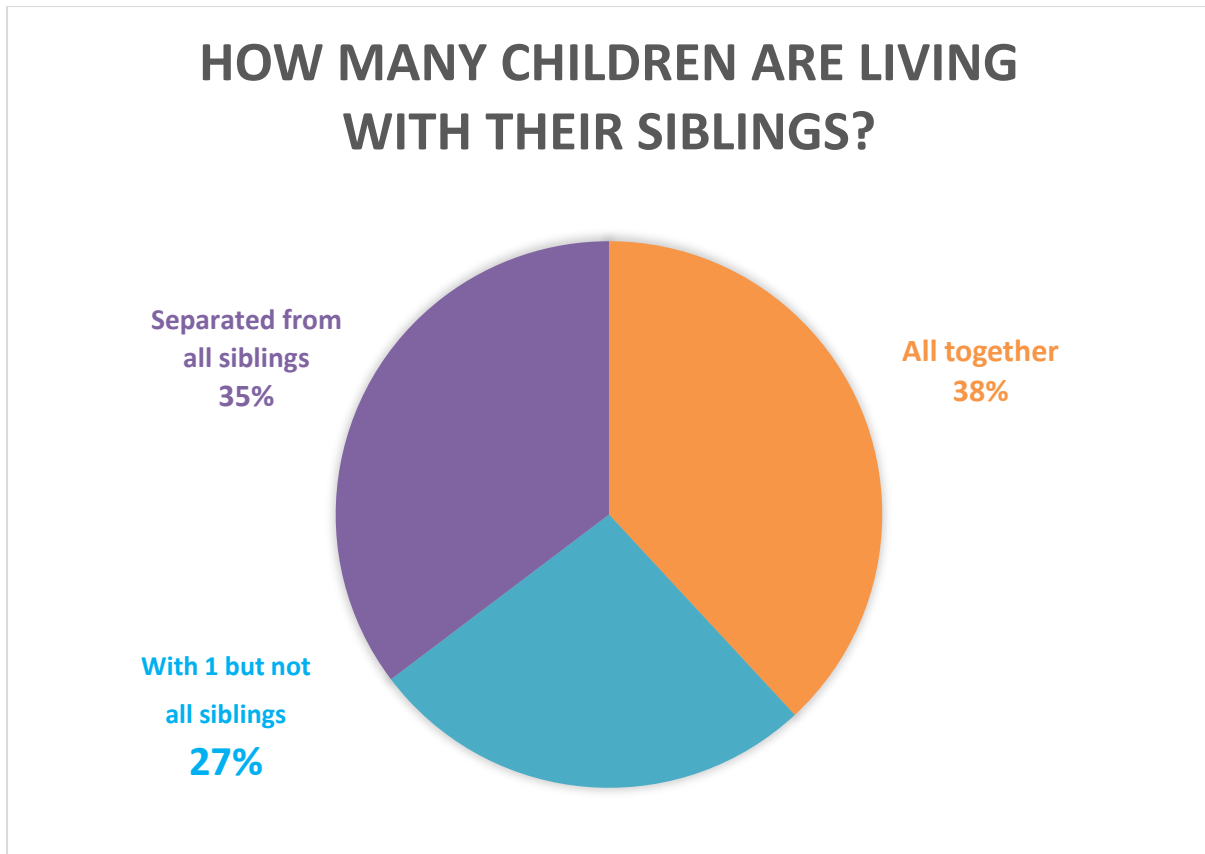
- 270 were in kinship care (60% of looked after away from home population)
- 13% were in purchased foster placements
- 11% were in foster placements provided by West Dunbartonshire Council
- 10% were in residential settings
- 252 infants, children and young people had at least 1 sibling under 18.
- 195 infants, children and young people had no siblings, or have siblings over 18.

For the purpose of gathering this data we were looking at the 252 infants, children and young people who had at least 1 sibling under 18.

Gathering this data was a manual job that involved cross referencing the looked after and accommodated children’s spreadsheet against Carefirst to establish sibling relationships. This does not include sibling like relationships, as defined within the new legislation, due to this information

not currently being captured on Carefirst. The available data is reliant on sibling relationships being completed and updated on Carefirst.

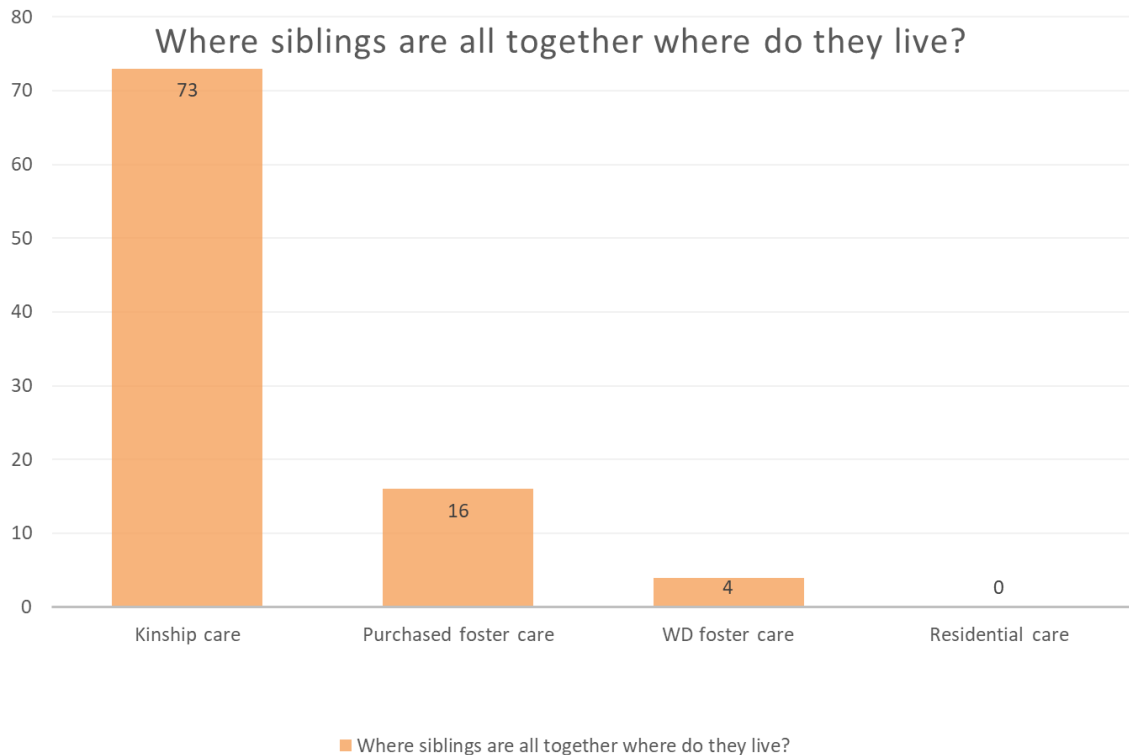
During the data collection, type of placement and age was also recorded to establish where we are able to keep more siblings together and attempt to identify any patterns in relation to age and separation.



There is a lack of national data at present in this area, however that is set to change with additional questions added to the CLAS return around siblings.

Whilst not directly comparable due to our inclusion of all placement types, Stand Up for Siblings conducted research that found that around 40% of children in adoptive or permanent fostering families in Scotland are living apart from all of their birth siblings. Around 70% of children in adoptive or permanent fostering families in Scotland are separated from at least one of their birth siblings.

[SWSPresearchbriefing.pdf \(standupforsiblings.co.uk\)](https://standupforsiblings.co.uk/SWSPresearchbriefing.pdf)

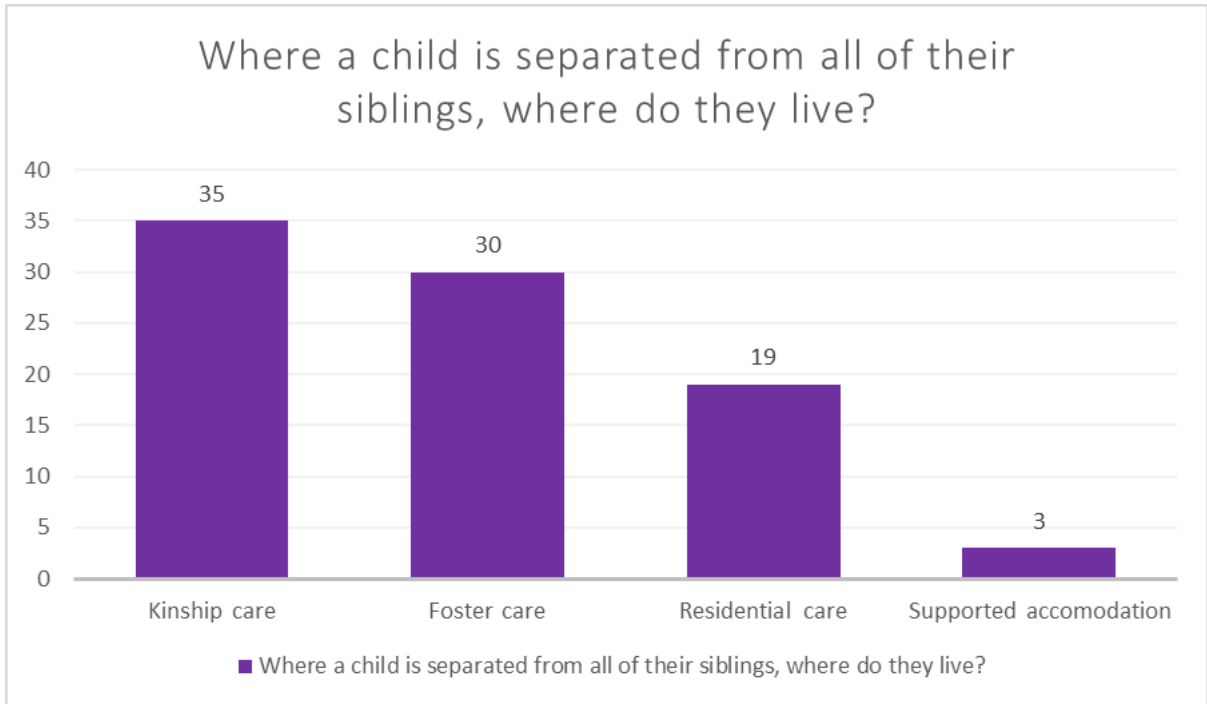


This data shows that we are best at keeping brothers and sisters all together when they are with kinship carers. Of 93 infants, children and young people who are living away from home with all their brothers and sisters, 73 of them are in kinship care. This is important to recognise, and forecast in our planning, ensuring that these kinship families get the support they need to stay together. This can include ensuring suitable, appropriate accommodation is available to keep brothers and sisters together.

In West Dunbartonshire within our Housing Allocations Policy we have an Exceptional Circumstances section, which involves cases being presented to an Allocations Panel who can decide to make an offer of accommodation out with the core policy, and can include applications to support kinship care arrangements which are supported by the HSCP.

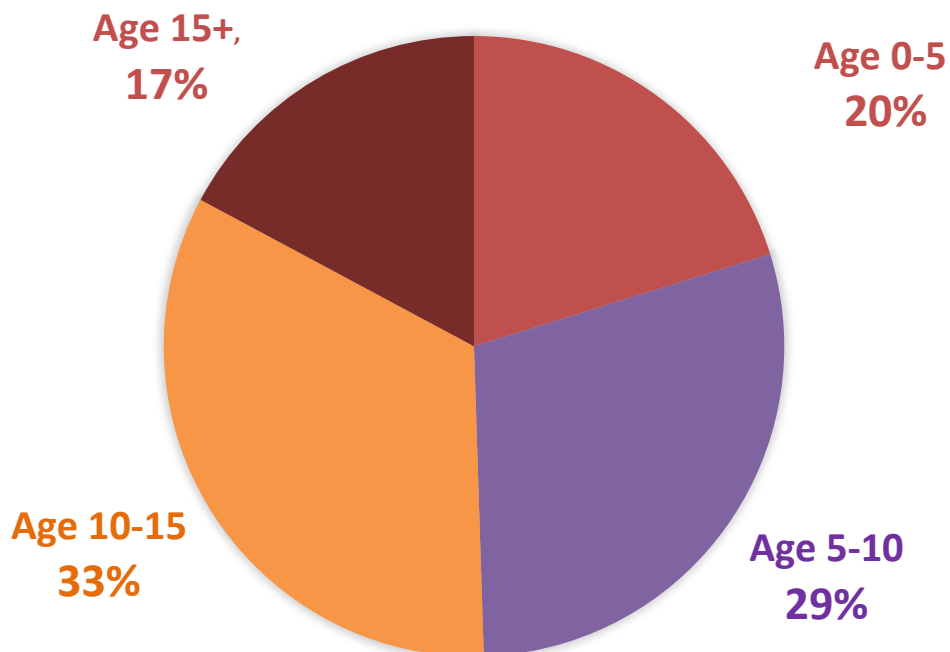
To keep siblings together within foster care this data highlights the reliance on external foster carers over our own West Dunbartonshire Council foster carers. External, “purchased” foster placements come at a higher financial cost, as well as often being geographically further away from the child’s community. There is recognition of difficulties in recruiting local foster carers, and a campaign is being planned to support wider recruitment, with an emphasis on being able to provide homes to keep brothers and sisters together.

The average cost to the local authority for one child in residential care is £129,000 per year. A purchased, private foster placement is £45,000 per child per year. This reduces to £18,500 for our West Dunbartonshire foster carers. The average cost to the local authority for a child in kinship care is £10,564.50. Whilst there is a clear moral and outcomes argument to be made in favour of kinship care, there is also a strong financial argument to support the use of kinship care when a child cannot live safely at home.



Kinship care is also the most frequent placement type where children are separated from all of their siblings. The reasons for this were wide ranging, but most commonly featured diverse families, where children had different mothers or fathers, and were living with different maternal or paternal extended family.

HOW OLD ARE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE SEPARATED FROM ALL OF THEIR SIBLINGS?

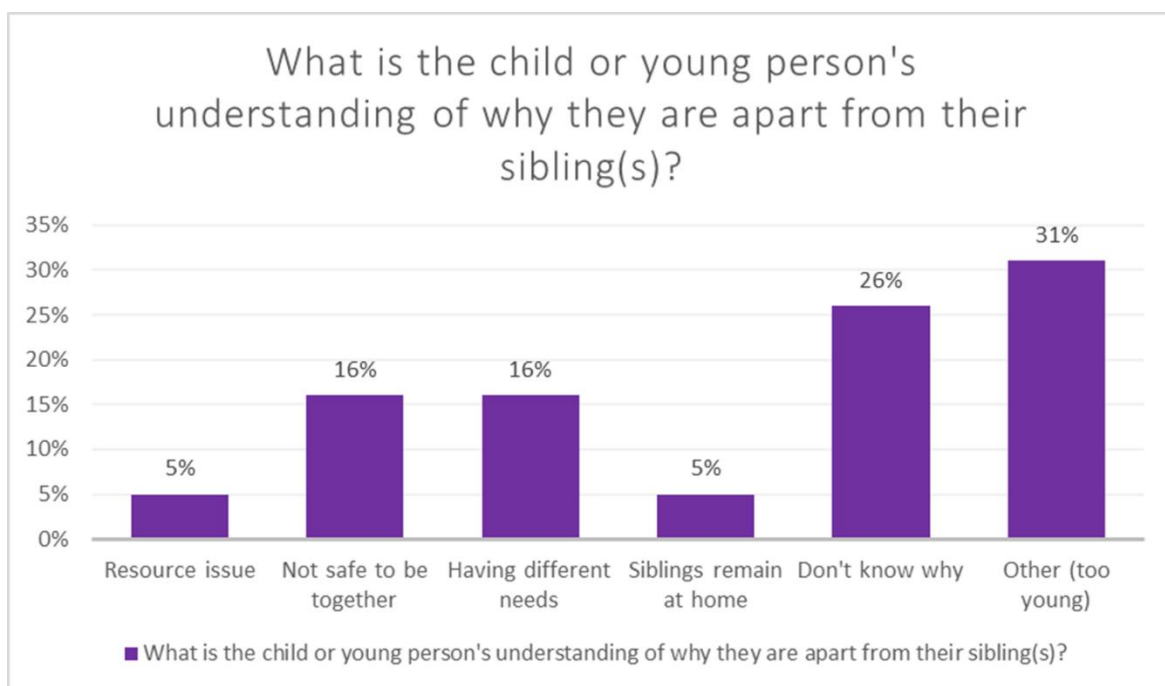


There is a common assumption that children are more likely to be separated from their brothers and sisters as infants, or as older teenagers. For our children the majority are separated from 5-15.

Time together with brothers and sisters

An anonymous, online survey was sent out to foster carers, adoptive parents and our Children's Houses to find out more about the experience of children and young people who have siblings they are separated from, including time they spend together.

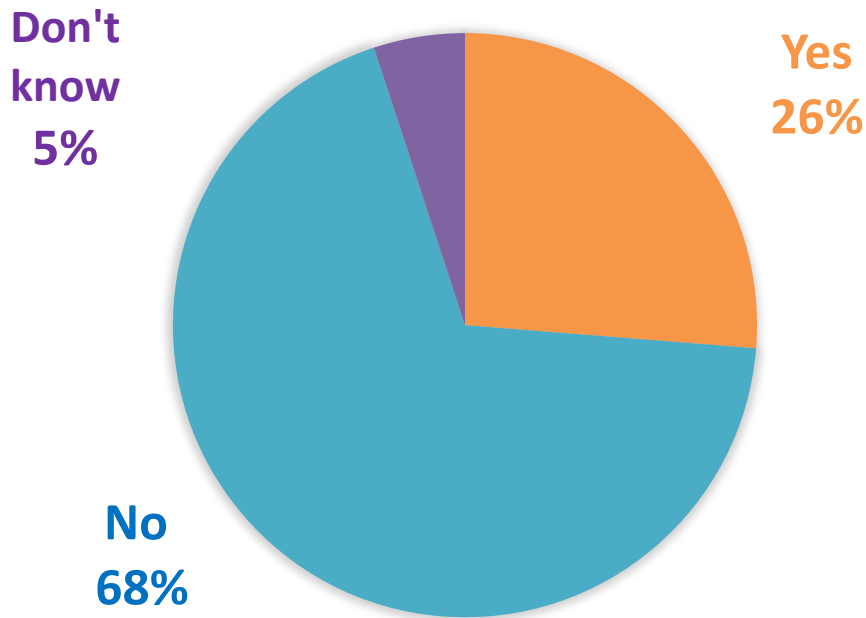
There were 19 responses, with 6 adoptive parents, 9 foster carers and 4 from Children's Houses. Information accompanying the survey asked people to share and discuss the survey with their child or young person if appropriate, or if not to complete with the knowledge they had. It is important to acknowledge that this is a small sample of a much larger population and can't be considered representative of the wider group's experience, however does give us some insights into potential issues and areas to consider.



26% of children and young people not knowing why they are separated from their brothers and sisters is of concern. This should be discussed when children and young people come into care, and age appropriate explanation given around the reasons, including any sibling separation. Sometimes this has been explained, and adults can think it has been addressed, however children and young people may need to re-visit this.

Due to the anonymous nature of the survey it is not possible to know the ages of children that have been classed as "too young" to have an understanding of this. It would be interesting to have access to this data to gain an understanding of what age carers think the child is able to have an understanding.

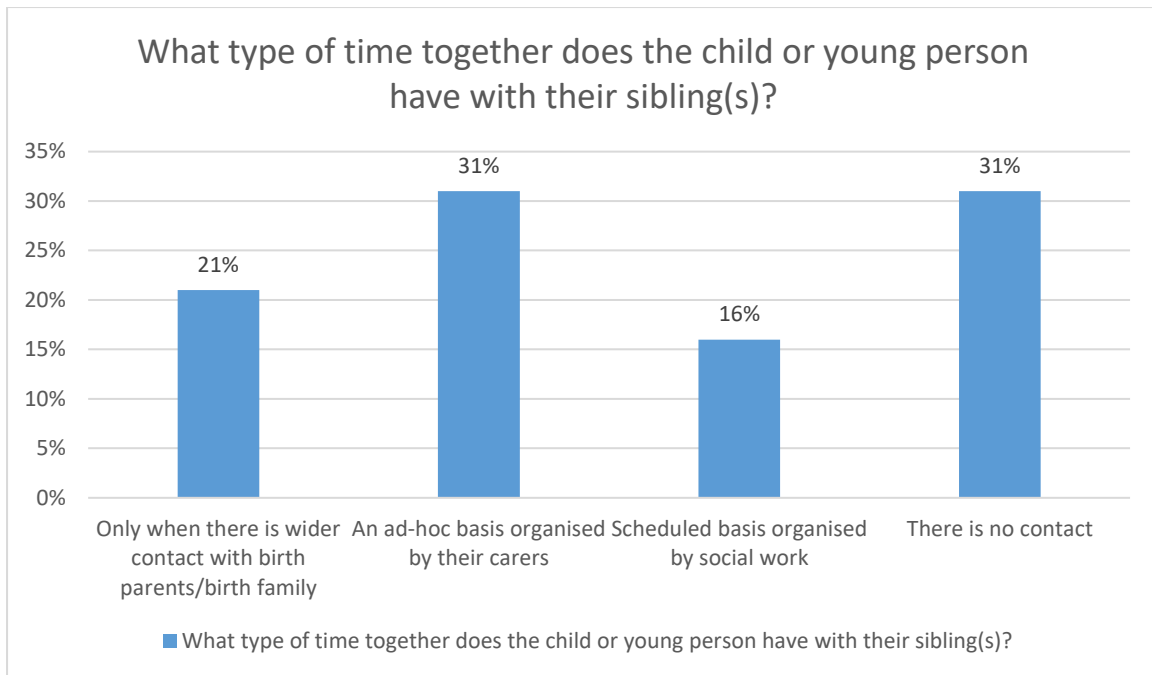
IS THERE A FORMAL PLAN IN PLACE TO SUPPORT THEIR TIME TOGETHER WITH THEIR BROTHERS AND SISTERS OUT WITH CONTACT WITH PARENTS/WIDER FAMILY?



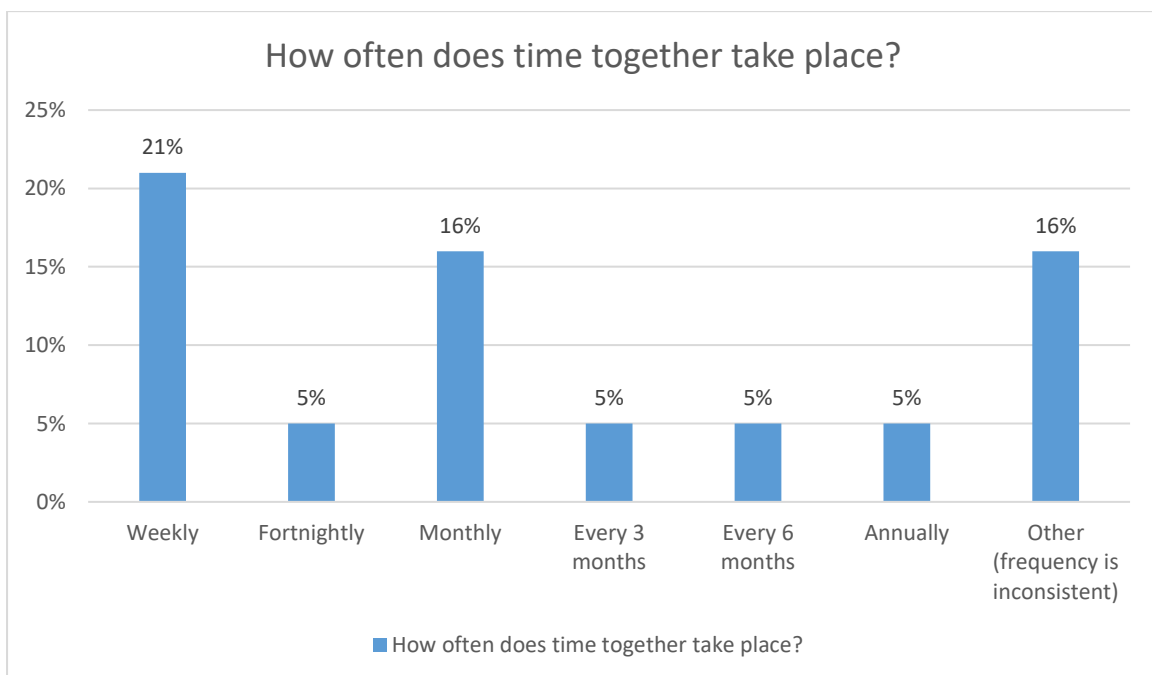
68% of children and young people do not have any type of formal plan in place in relation to their time with their brothers and sisters. The understanding of what constituted a formal plan was anything recorded within minutes, care plans, assessments or within orders. Whilst it is rare for a Children's Hearing to contain this type of direction within an order, it should be considered within care planning. This doesn't mean that a rigid, formal plan must be in place, but children and young people should have an understanding and expectation of when, where and how they will see their brothers and sisters. For children looked after away from home this could be addressed within Review meetings, with Independent Reviewing Co-Ordinators having this on the agenda for discussion.

This could be a potential indicator of culture, and the importance placed upon exploring brothers and sister's relationships, and wishes for time together within their care planning. Considering this alongside the low number of Brothers and Sisters reports sent to the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) this could highlight the need for further exploration and support to understand the importance of these relationships.

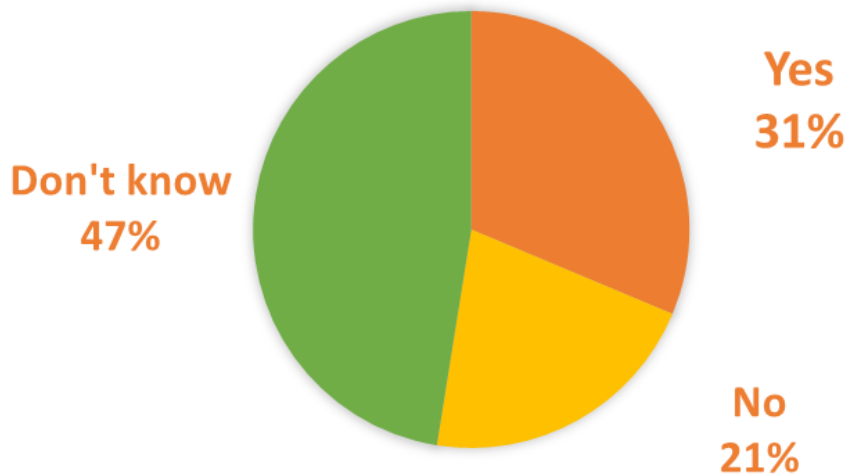
This is a statistic that could be a significant indicator for shifts in practice if this survey is repeated. In six months' time we would hope to see these figures change so that the majority of children and young people have a formal plan in place to support time together with their brothers and sisters.



From the children and young people surveyed there appears to be a dependence on time together with siblings happening either within time with their wider family (21%) or on an ad hoc basis organised by their carers (31%). Being organised on an ad hoc basis could lead children and young people to uncertainty around when they will see their brothers and sisters, and could contribute towards drift, ruptured relationships and inconsistency.



WOULD THE CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON LIKE TO HAVE MORE TIME WITH THEIR SIBLING (S)?



31% of responses highlighted the child or young person would like more time with their brothers and sisters. In some situations it may not be possible to have increased time with brothers and sisters, however this highlights the need to ask the question and revisit this. There was a high response of “don’t know” answers, which could indicate a flaw in the questionnaire. It is unclear from the survey question if it is the child or young person who doesn’t know if they would like more contact, or if being completed by their carer, it is the carer who doesn’t know if they would like more time with their brothers and sisters. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey it is not possible to go back to clarify this with responders. If it is true that carers “don’t know” if the child or young person would like more time with their siblings this is something we would want to change, so that children and young people’s views and wishes about their time with brothers and sisters is known.

For future surveys we would want to see a shift of responses to “Yes” and “No” and see a reduction in “Don’t know”.

Conclusion and recommendations

Brothers and Sisters features prominently within The Promise Plan 21-24, and has been identified as an area nationally where further progress is required, as highlighted as one of three priority areas in the recent Promise Oversight Board report (June, 2023 [promise-oversight-board-report-two.pdf](#) ([thepromise.scot](#)))



- LOCAL POLICY/PROTOCOLS

Consideration around the creation of local protocols and policy to ensure consistency and clarity on how we value sibling relationships.

- **Recommendation:** The development of a Brothers and Sisters Policy or Charter that can be developed alongside children and young people to ensure clarity and consistency around responsibilities of the local authority in relation to this, and what children and young people can expect. The Lead Officer for the Promise to facilitate this alongside those with care experience and the workforce.
- **Recommendation:** Clear senior sign-off for decisions or recommendations to separate brothers and/or sisters. Examples of good practice nationally describe authorisation by

the Head of Service who holds the responsibility for the child's care. This is an indicator of culture and the significance of keeping siblings together held by West Dunbartonshire.

- Recommendation: We continue to see a low number of Sibling Reports completed for children involved in the Children's Hearing system. There is work ongoing around how to increase this number, to ensure children and young people who have participation rights within their sibling's Hearings are afforded that right. This will sit within the Better Hearings working group, and will involve training and practice improvements.

- QUALITY ASSURANCE

There is the opportunity to quality assure the package of support available to brothers and sisters who are separated through the role of the Independent Review Co-ordinators. These individuals now chair all Review meetings for our looked after and accommodated children.

- Recommendation: It would be helpful for questions to feature on the standing agenda for Review meetings of children who are separated from siblings, such as:
 - Exploring time together arrangements (including if this is not appropriate), what the child or young person would like, and setting expectations around what the children can expect for this, as well as considering any barriers.
 - Exploring the child or young person's understanding about why they have been separated, and around reasons for time together/lack of time together and addressing this.
 - Ensuring Advocacy has been explained and explored with the child or young person.
- Recommendation: Training for the wider workforce around the importance of sibling relationships for care experienced infants, children and young people. Training has taken place on Brothers and Sisters, and we will build on this. We also aim to create a Promise Learning module, accessible to anyone (workforce or community) that will feature a section on Brothers and Sisters to support as wide a reach as possible. This will be created and led by our children, young people and adults with care experience.

- KINSHIP CARE

This data demonstrates the significant extent to which kinship care is keeping the majority of brothers and sisters together within West Dunbartonshire.

- Recommendation: Further exploration around how we can strengthen the support provided to kinship carers and potential kinship carers is required. This features as one of the 5 project workstreams within the 5 year service redesign of Children & Families social work services: "Improving Lives with Children and Families in West

Dunbartonshire- What would it take?”. We must ensure we are supporting kinship families to remain together and to thrive.

- Recommendation: Further exploration to understand how brothers and sisters experience time together whilst in kinship care could be beneficial. This will be covered in the audit around brothers and sisters decision making and practice in 2024. This will also include why brothers and sisters are separated within kinship care, and identify any actions we can take to mitigate this (considering areas like financial support, emotional support and housing).

- FOSTER CARE

There is a national, and local recruitment crisis around foster carers at present, with the numbers of foster carers declining, as well as reduced new foster carers being approved.

- Recommendation: Significant work around this is planned within West Dunbartonshire, with a foster carer recruitment campaign planned, again as part of the “What would it take” service re-design. This will include recruitment for foster carers who can take siblings.
- Recommendation: The Family Placement team to ensure there are clearly defined expectations for foster carers around their responsibilities to support brothers and sisters relationships, what they can do when direct time together is not possible, and support they can expect from social work with this.

- ADOPTION

Within the survey responses there were a number of respondents who identified the dilemma whereby adoptive parents of siblings decide not to allow any form of contact with the child in their care.

- Recommendation: Training and support to be offered by the Adoption team to prospective adoptive carers around the importance of sibling relationships, and clearly defined expectations around supporting relationships following adoption. – check if already happening.
- Recommendation: Carefirst team to consider alongside the Adoption Team and Family Placement Team how we can represent sibling relationships of children who go on to be adopted separately from their siblings. Current practice means their case is closed and is no longer accessible or visible as a “relationship”. Reasons for this remain valid, however consideration as to how we can ensure new workers are able to see accurate reflection of sibling relationships, as well as for data gathering purposes.

- SUPPORT SERVICES

Ensuring we have the infrastructure to support brothers and sisters relationships is essential.

- Recommendation: Developing and strengthening our Family Group Decision Making service to provide increased support around keeping families together, or identifying potential kinship carers would also support our work around Brothers and Sisters. Reviewing and developing this service is within the Family Support workstream of the 5 year re-design.
 - Recommendation: Increasing children and young people's access to Advocacy is also an important step in ensuring their voice is heard within care planning, both within the local authority processes and within Children's Hearings. Increase purchased Advocacy provision beyond the current 3 days per week to at least 5 days per week.
 - Recommendation: Consideration around locations where time together can take place. Respondents to the survey identified this is often happening within carers homes, with attempts to make this feel as natural as possible. When time together in carers' homes is not possible it's important that there are alternative locations that also feel natural and relaxed, without the distractions and potential overstimulation of places like soft play. Appropriate locations for family time has been raised numerous times by families and staff, and so when this wider issue is being considered it's important to acknowledge brothers and sisters time together within this.
- SUPPORTING AND PROMOTING CREATIVE PRACTICE

Examples of ways to maximise resources are provided as innovative practice within the Scottish Government's National Guidance for "Staying together and connected". This is about recognising the innovative and creative practice that is happening, but formalising it so that these are more readily available and known about as options when appropriate.

- One example is enabling foster carers who have the ability to take sibling groups to be on "stand by", so they can care for sibling groups at short notice. Whilst on "stand by" they can be supporting other carers to facilitate family time between brothers and sisters.
- Another example is the use of short-let holiday accommodation and residential child care staff to support sibling groups to remain together, even in the short term. Examples are provided of the Care Inspectorate working flexibly and responsively to support registered services be more creative in response to this challenge.
- Supporting multi-agency partners in the team around the child to identify opportunities where they can support brothers and sisters relationships, for example within School.
- West Dunbartonshire Council Housing team have flexibility within their Housing Policy for exceptional circumstances, related to their Corporate Parenting duty. This involves kinship carers and foster carers being able to have their case presented to the Housing Panel for urgent support in relation to a more suitable property. To date this process has

supported four kinship carers and one foster carer to move to a more suitable property. Promotion of this process is important to ensure people are aware of this option.

- DATA

There is a call for better data to be gathered from local authorities to provide an accurate picture of whether brothers and sisters are living together or apart, and if they are separated why this is. We now have a snapshot of data around how many children we are keeping with their siblings and how many we are separating, however do not know the reasons for these decisions.

- Recommendation: Lead Officer for The Promise to carry out an audit around reasons for separation. This would require a deeper look at our information systems to discover if reasons are clearly recorded, and potentially discussions with allocated workers involved in decision making.
- Recommendation: The Scottish Government have now asked for an additional data collection around siblings within the CLAS return. The first time this data is reported will be in November 2024. As this is a new data collection there is currently exploration ongoing by the Carefirst team and operational staff as to how best to gather this.
- Recommendation: The quantitative and qualitative data collection around separation and time together will be repeated on an annual basis. The Lead Office for The Promise will carry this out between March and April 2024. The findings will be widely shared and used to progress our Brothers and Sisters Plan.

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