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Looked after children – educational policy and practice

Summary

Educational outcomes for looked after children in Northern Ireland are significantly poorer than those of other children, particularly at post-primary. For example, 27% of looked after children achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C, compared to 80% of the general school population.

Northern Ireland policy

DHSSPS has lead policy responsibility for looked after children. *Care Matters* includes a number of actions, including that all looked after children should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP). In practice, 77% of looked after children had a PEP in 2012-13. The Department of Education is developing a new policy for looked after children.

With regard to initial teacher education, there is some variation between the four providers in terms of the extent to which they cover issues around looked after children on their courses.

Overview of policy and practice in other jurisdictions

Table 1 overleaf outlines requirements around personal education plans, funding allocations and examples of interventions in other jurisdictions.

Table 1: Looked after children policy and practice in other jurisdictions

	Statutory requirement to have PEP	Additional funding	Other initiatives/ interventions
Northern Ireland	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looked after Children's team in each HSC Trust act as key education worker for assigned children
England	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local authorities must promote education of looked after children Designated teachers and virtual schools
Republic of Ireland	Education must be included in statutory care plan	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looked after children not the focus of any specific initiatives at the national level
Scotland	Yes	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local authorities must ensure looked after children have same educational opportunities as others
Wales	Yes	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently developing a national outcomes framework for looked after children

Conclusion

This paper highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration, including:

- The lack of a statutory duty to ensure that all looked after children have a PEP;
- The reasons why almost a quarter (23%) of looked after children do not have a PEP and why 24% of those eligible were not allocated a free pre-school place;
- The variation in the extent to which issues around looked after children are included in initial teacher education courses;
- Whether the new policy for looked after children will be linked to the SEN Review and other policies;
- Policies in other jurisdictions, for example, designated teachers, virtual schools and statutory duties for authorities around promoting the education of looked after children.

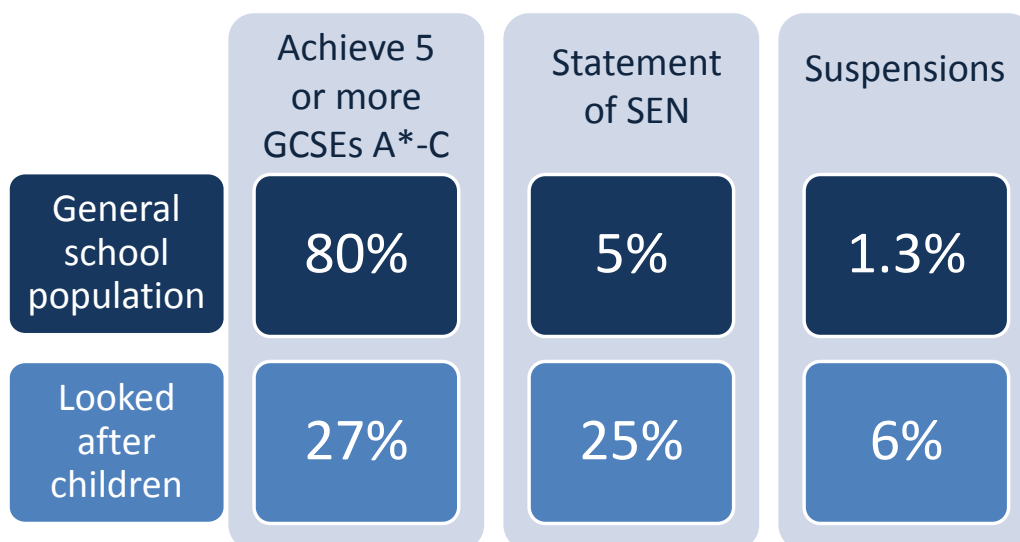
1 Introduction

'Looked after children' are defined as those in the care of a Trust or who are provided with accommodation by a Trust.¹ There were 2,858 looked after children in Northern Ireland on the 31st March 2014.²

The evidence indicates that their educational outcomes are poorer than those of other children, with the gap widening at post-primary. They perform significantly less well than looked after children in England.³ Factors that may influence outcomes include:⁴

- Care placement instability;
- A culture of low expectations;
- Higher than average rates of school exclusion;
- A lack of social capital.

Figure 1: Key statistics on looked after children⁵



This paper outlines the educational policy around looked after children in Northern Ireland, England, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

¹ Department of Education (2012) *Looked after children* [online] Available at: http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/support-and-development-2/additional-educational-support/looked_after_children.htm Accessed 8/12/14

² Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2014) *Children's Social Care Statistics Northern Ireland 2013/14* Belfast: DHSSPS

³ Darmody, M., McMahon, L., Banks, J., Gilligan, R. (2013) *Education of Children in Care in Ireland: An exploratory study* Dublin: Ombudsman for Children

⁴ Idox Information Service (2014) *Educational outcomes of looked after children* Idox

⁵ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2014) *Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2012-13, Statistical Bulletin* Belfast: DHSSPS

2 Improving outcomes

The literature identifies a range of factors that may positively influence the educational outcomes of looked after children. These include encouragement and support from carers, the presence of peers involved in education and initiatives such as tuition and personal education allowances.⁶

Current guidance from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence outlines a series of recommendations for improving the education of looked after children, including:⁷

- Teacher training should include a component on looked after children;
- Monitor the quality of education of looked after children;
- Support access to further and higher education.

3 Policy in Northern Ireland

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has overall lead policy responsibility for looked after children.

A number of policy documents refer to looked after children. These include the Department of Education's 2008 *Every School a Good School* and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister's 2006 *Our Children and Young people: Our Pledge*.

The most distinct policy emphasis on the educational outcomes of looked after children can be seen within the DHSSPS document *Care Matters in Northern Ireland*. Its proposals are underpinned by four key strands:⁸

- Empowerment of education services to support looked after children;
- Foster carers/key workers supported to engage with schools as other parents do;
- Information sharing about a child's care status informed by the best interests principle and respect for privacy;
- Equal access to the full range of learning opportunities available.

Table 2 overleaf provides examples of the actions outlined within *Care Matters*.

⁶ Idox Information Service (2014) *Educational outcomes of looked after children* Idox

⁷ National Institute of Clinical Excellence (2010) *Promoting the quality of life of looked after children* (NICE public health guidance 28) London: NICE

⁸ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2009) *Care Matters in Northern Ireland- A Bridge to a Better Future*

Table 2: Key Care Matters actions regarding looked after children's education⁹

Action	Explanation
All looked after children to have a Personal Education Plan (PEP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A continuous record of a child's school history including targets • Should be completed at the three and six month reviews, and subsequently at six-monthly intervals
Looked after Children teams to be based in each Health and Social Care Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibilities include monitoring the progress of looked after children within education and preparing the PEP • Team to act as the 'key education worker' for an assigned child
Expand the Fostering Achievement scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand coverage to include all looked after children aged two or older • The scheme supports foster carer access to educational resources and out-of-school tutoring support

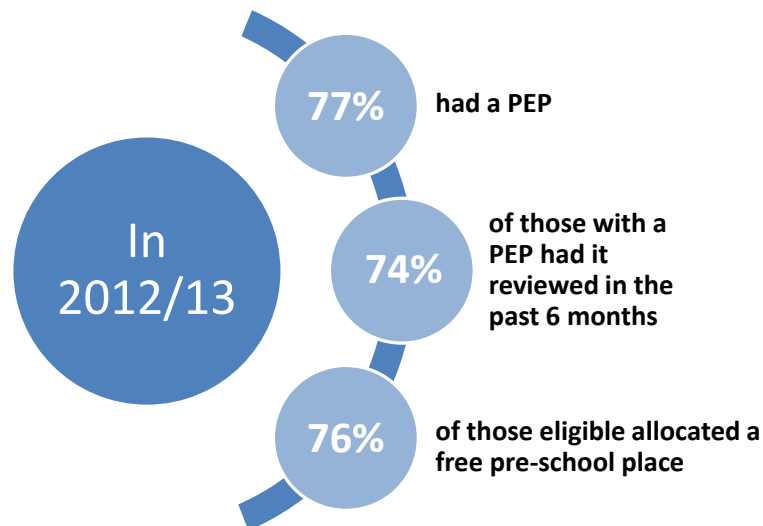
Respondents to the *Care Matters* consultation highlighted a number of areas that could be given further consideration:

- Placing a **statutory duty on Trusts** to promote the educational achievement of looked after children;
- The **specific needs** of children adopted from care into a family, children in residential care, and those requiring high levels of support or non-mainstream provision;
- Measures to **promote school attendance**;
- **Information** on the reasons why looked after children do not have pre-school places or sit exams;
- How proposals can be **linked to the SEN Review** and wider strategies;
- Introducing a statutory requirement for schools to appoint a **designated teacher** with responsibility for looked after children;
- A need for **training for teachers** on looked after children.

⁹ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2007) *Care Matters in Northern Ireland- A Bridge to a Better Future*

Figure 2 highlights a number of key statistics on looked after children in regard to PEPs and pre-school access.

Figure 2: PEPs and pre-school places for looked after children¹⁰



There was some variation in the provision of PEPs across HSC Trusts, ranging from 59% in the Northern HSC Trust, to 86% in the Western HSC Trust.¹¹ *Care Matters* highlighted calls for PEPs to become statutory.¹²

Transition to further and higher education

The Regional Pathways to FE and HE for Looked After Children Group comprises a number of stakeholders including representatives from the Department of Education, HSC Trusts, voluntary organisations and higher education. The group aims to provide a forum for discussion and to promote access to further and higher education for looked after children.¹³

Initial teacher education

Initial teacher education in Northern Ireland includes the four year BEd programmes and the one-year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) available at Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College, and the PGCE courses at Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster. The inclusion of issues affecting looked after children on these courses is briefly summarised as follows:¹⁴

- **Stranmillis University College:** BEd programme and three post-graduate modules include teaching on a range of issues relating to looked after children;

¹⁰ Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2014) *Children in Care in Northern Ireland 2012-13, Statistical Bulletin* Belfast: DHSSPS

¹¹ As above

¹² Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2009) *Care Matters in Northern Ireland- A Bridge to a Better Future*

¹³ As above

¹⁴ Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2014

- **St Mary's University College:** BEd students may opt to take a module on 'Educational Responses to Trauma' which includes looked after children; PGCE students study issues within the child protection course;
- **Queen's University Belfast:** Issues associated with looked after children are touched on under the themes of inclusion, pastoral care and child protection;
- **University of Ulster:** Issues around looked after children are not specifically mentioned in teaching.

School funding

The 2013 Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme proposed that schools should be provided additional funding for each looked after pupil on their roll, describing it as a "glaring anomaly" that they had not been previously allocated increased funding.¹⁵ This was accepted and implemented by the Department of Education.¹⁶

Development of a new policy

In April 2014 the Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, stated that the Department of Education would develop a new policy for the education of looked after children. The aim of the policy is to ensure that looked after children have greater opportunity to achieve their full potential.¹⁷

Policy development is currently underway and the Department is liaising with DHSSPS and other stakeholders, including young people, in developing the policy. It is expected to be in place during the 2015/16 school year.¹⁸

4 England: designated teachers and virtual schools

It is a statutory requirement for looked after children in England to have a PEP. However, Ofsted has reported that "too many" PEPs are not sufficiently challenging, particularly for children who are meeting expectations but have the potential to do better.¹⁹

In 2010 statutory guidance was introduced for local authorities requiring them to promote the educational achievement of looked after children as part of their duty to safeguard and promote their welfare.²⁰

¹⁵ Salisbury, R. (2013) *An Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme* Bangor: DE

¹⁶ Department of Education (2013) *Consultation on putting pupils first: Reforming the common funding scheme* Bangor: DE

¹⁷ Information provided by the Department of Education, December 2014

¹⁸ As above

¹⁹ Ofsted (2012) *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children* Manchester: Ofsted

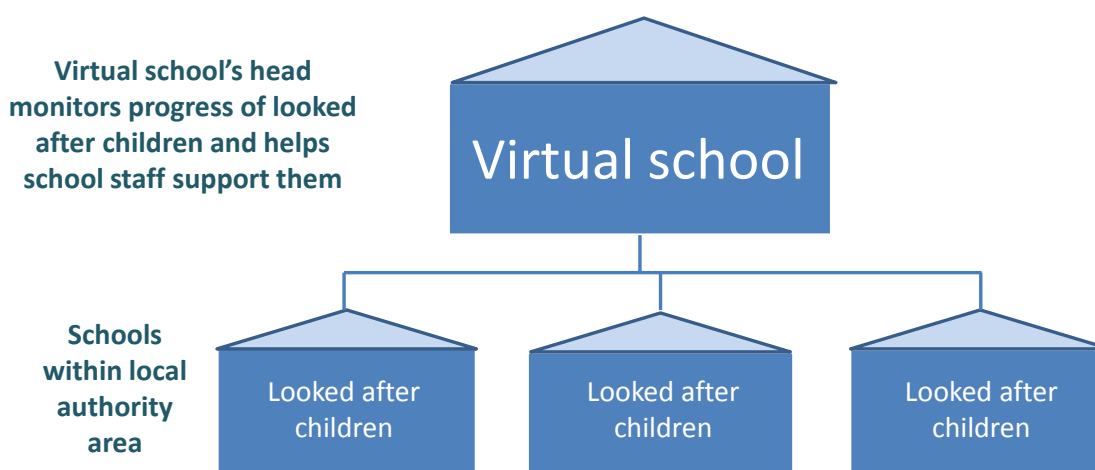
²⁰ As above

Schools have a statutory obligation to appoint a designated teacher to promote the educational achievement of looked after children, and to ensure that they receive appropriate training. Their role includes:²¹

- Promoting a culture of high expectations and aspirations;
- Advising staff about tailored teaching strategies;
- Ensuring that looked after children are prioritised in one-to-one tuition;
- Taking lead responsibility for the child's PEP.

Local authorities take a 'virtual school approach' whereby looked after children from a number of schools are worked with as if they are in a single school in order to raise attainment, and improve attendance and stability. Authorities are required to appoint a 'virtual school headteacher' to undertake the role.²²

Figure 3: England's virtual school model



Virtual school headteachers support school staff and social workers in understanding the additional needs of looked after children and the support available. This may include tuition and support in helping looked after children to settle into a new school.²³

School funding

A pupil premium of £1,900 for each looked after child is paid to schools in England. This aims to close the gap in outcomes between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.²⁴

²¹ Department for Children Schools and Families (2009) *The role and responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked after children* Nottingham: DCSF

²² Gov.uk (2013) *Improving the adoption system and services for looked-after children* [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-adoption-system-and-services-for-looked-after-children/supporting-pages/virtual-school-heads-vsh> Accessed on 17/11/14

²³ Ofsted (2012) *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children* Manchester: Ofsted

²⁴ Gov.uk (2014) *Pupil premium: funding for schools and alternative provision* [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings> Accessed 17/11/14

5 Republic of Ireland: limitations in data and policy-making

In the Republic of Ireland looked after children are referred to as ‘children in care’. There is a lack of data relating to children in care, which means that there is insufficient information on issues such as attendance rates and outcomes, and it limits the development of evidence-based policy-making.²⁵

The National Standards for Foster Care and the National Standards for Children’s Residential Centres (2001) detail the roles and responsibilities of educational and social care professionals in relation to the provision of educational supports for children in care. These include schools being involved in promoting continuity and quality of education and school personnel assessing educational needs and progress.

However, at the national policy level children in care are not the focus of any specific policy initiatives within the Department of Education and Skills, and they are not the focus of targeted interventions or initiatives.²⁶

School funding

The Department of Education and Science provides capitation grants to schools based on the number of pupils on the roll. Additional grants are not paid for children in care.²⁷

6 Scotland: equal opportunities

In Scotland local authorities are expected to ensure that looked after children have the same educational opportunities as all other children.²⁸

It is a statutory requirement that all looked after children have a plan detailing how their needs will be met, to include education outcomes. In addition, all looked after children are presumed to have further support needs, and there is a duty on local authorities to provide the relevant support. They must also be assessed as to whether they need a Co-ordinated Support Plan (for those with more complex needs).²⁹

However, a recent inquiry by the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee highlighted concerns around the extent to which education is included within looked after children’s plans.³⁰

²⁵ Darmody, M., McMahon, L., Banks, J., Gilligan, R. (2013) *Education of Children in Care in Ireland: An exploratory study* Dublin: Ombudsman for Children

²⁶ As above

²⁷ Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Capitation Grants 2012/13* [online] Available at: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0005_2013.pdf Accessed 18/11/14

²⁸ Darmody, M., McMahon, L., Banks, J., Gilligan, R. (2013) *Education of Children in Care in Ireland: An exploratory study* Dublin: Ombudsman for Children

²⁹ The Scottish Parliament (2012) *6th Report, 2012 (Session 4): Report on educational attainment of looked after children* [online] Available at: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/51538.aspx#summary> Accessed 18/11/14

³⁰ The Scottish Parliament (2012) *6th Report, 2012 (Session 4): Report on educational attainment of looked after children* [online] Available at: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/51538.aspx#summary> Accessed 18/11/14

In 2011 the Centre of Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) was established with the aim of providing a holistic approach to looked after children. It is primarily funded by the Scottish Government, and is accountable to it. The organisation works with Ministers and civil servants to implement policy and advise on the development of new policy.³¹

Guidance documents for local authorities highlight a number of areas of support that can be used for looked after children, including:³²

- A **designated teacher** for looked after children in schools: the role includes participating in care planning and reviews, providing progress reports and liaising with social workers and carers;
- **Corporate parenting**: the idea is that local authorities should act as “good parents” towards children in their care, however inspection evidence suggests many school staff do not understand the responsibilities;
- **Local authorities should develop an integrated education and social work policy** on the educational needs of looked after children;
- **Training**: CELCIS has a remit to provide training for those working with looked after children and the Government funds a national training programme for corporate parents.

School funding

Scotland has not implemented a ‘pupil premium’ system providing additional funding to schools for each disadvantaged pupil. Funding for schools is provided to local authorities using a formula based on the relative need of each authority, including levels of deprivation (take up of Free School Meals and income support).

7 Wales: developing a framework

Under the Children Act 2004, local authorities have a duty to ensure that all children in their care have a Personal Education Plan within 20 school days of entering care or joining a new school.³³

A 2012 report by the Wales Audit Office identified a lack of initiatives such as virtual school headteachers and one-to-one tuition for looked after children in Wales.³⁴

Subsequently, guidance to local authorities and schools on the use of the pupil deprivation grant suggests that consideration should be given to such interventions,

³¹ CELCIS *Direction, scrutiny, accountability* [online] Available at: http://www.celcis.org/about_us/governance/ Accessed 18/11/14

³² SPICe (2011) *Educational Attainment of Looked After Children* Scottish Parliament

³³ Legislation.gov.uk *Children Act 2004* [online] Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents> Accessed 18/11/14

³⁴ Wales Audit Office (2012) *The educational attainment of looked after children and young people* Cardiff: Wales Audit Office

noting that this may provide an evidence base on best practice that could be implemented more widely.³⁵

In addition, work is underway to develop a national outcomes framework for looked after children in Wales to include educational outcomes; it is intended that this will inform the targeting of resources and interventions.³⁶

School funding

A pupil deprivation grant of £1,100 is paid to schools in Wales for each student with FSME and from 2013 for looked after children.³⁷ In addition, all pupils must have a personal education plan.

8 Conclusion

This paper has shown that looked after children perform significantly less well than their peers at school in Northern Ireland. A number of areas could be given further consideration:

- The lack of a statutory duty to ensure that all looked after children have a PEP in Northern Ireland in light of the requirements in the other jurisdictions;
- The reasons why almost a quarter (23%) of looked after children do not have a PEP and the variation across HSC Trusts;
- The reasons why 24% of eligible looked after children were not allocated a free pre-school place;
- The variation in the extent to which issues around looked after children are included in initial teacher education courses;
- Whether the new policy for looked after children will be linked to the SEN Review and other policies;
- Policies in other jurisdictions, for example, designated teachers, virtual schools and statutory duties for authorities around the education of looked after children.

³⁵ Welsh Government (2013) *School Effectiveness Grant and Pupil Deprivation Grant 2013–2015* Cardiff: Welsh Government

³⁶ As above

³⁷ Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) *State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain* UK: Williams Lea Group