



Department
for Education

Children in care

Research priorities and questions

March 2014

Contents

General approach to research needs and priorities	3
Children in Care: the policy context	4
The high level research need	7
Research Summary and gaps	8
Improving placement stability and returns home from care to birth families	8
Improving foster care recruitment and the quality of foster care	9
Improving children’s residential care	11
Supporting looked after children in their education	13
Improving support for care leavers	14
Strengthening corporate parenting and the “voice of the child”	15
Future Priorities	16
Cross cutting priorities	16
Improving placement stability and returns to birth families	16
Improving foster care recruitment and the quality of foster care	17
Improving children’s residential care	17
Supporting looked after children in their education	17
Improving support for care leavers	18
Strengthening corporate parenting and the “voice of the child”	18

General approach to research needs and priorities

This paper is one of a series of 15 which aims to:

- promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of ‘what works’ in education and children’s services;
- identify evidence gaps and promote discussion of them with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders;
- initiate collaboration with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders to research these issues; and,
- support work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence based practice, including how to make evidence accessible to practitioners.

The principles behind the department’s research strategy are inspired by Ben Goldacre’s vision¹ in the Department for Education Analytical Review². In future, the development and use of evidence should be increasingly driven and owned by the research community, sector bodies and practitioners.

The published suite of priority and question papers between them cover the department’s key areas of work and provides a coherent strategic context for the research community, sector bodies and practitioners as well as the department, to plan and prioritise research. The department will continue to commission research, informed by the published priority questions

Views about the research questions and priority papers, recent findings, on-going research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. We will also be arranging a series of discussions throughout 2014 with practitioners, the research community and other stakeholders to discuss views and help shape departmental plans for filling evidence gaps. If you want to be involved please email us at:

Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk, follow us on Twitter (@educationgovuk) or like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk).

¹ Goldacre, B.(2013), [Building Evidence into Education](#)

² The Department for Education (2013), [Analytical Review: The department](#)

Children in Care: the policy context

Children are brought into care for a variety of reasons and at different rates across the country (partly due to differences in population demographics)³⁴. They often suffer abuse and neglect prior to coming into the care system. We aspire to a care system that enables every child to achieve their full potential. For the majority of children, the time they spend in care has a positive impact on their lives. Despite improvements in recent years, there remain very marked differences between looked after children and their peers:

More likely to experience poorer educational outcomes and life chances

Only 15.3% of looked after children achieve five or more A*-C GCSEs compared to 58% of non-looked after children, an increase from 11% in 2009. A high proportion have special educational needs (67.8%) and are twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school and nearly three times more likely to have a fixed term exclusion than all children. Looked after children are far more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) although this figure improved on 2012/13.⁵

More likely to come into contact with the criminal system and have physical and mental health problems.

Young people who have been in care are more likely to end up in prison, misuse drugs and alcohol and be homeless than their peers.⁶ During the year ending 31 March 2013, 6.2% of looked after children aged 10-17 had been convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand (compared to 1.5% of all children) and 3.5% of all looked after children had a substance misuse problem (compared with approximately 0.5% of 11-17 year olds).⁷ Around half of all looked after children aged 5-16 were considered to be 'borderline' or 'cause for concern' in relation to their emotional and behavioural health.⁸ Differences are also seen in the way that young people in care go on to parent their own children. One American study has suggested that as many as 70% of those who were abused as children suffer serious parenting problems later in life⁹. At the extremes of such behaviour, individuals with a history of abuse themselves are almost six times more likely

³ DfE (2013) [Children looked after in England, including adoption](#).

⁴ Cafcass: [Care applications in January 2014](#)

⁵ DfE (2013) [NEET statistics quarterly brief: July to September 2013](#) and DfE (2013) [Children looked after in England, including adoption](#)

⁶ Burghart 2012 [A Better Start in Life: Long-term approaches for the most vulnerable children](#).

⁷ NTA, 2012-13, [Substance misuse among young people in England](#)

⁸ Statistical first release – [Outcomes for Looked After Children by Local Authorities in England](#), as at March 2013

⁹ B. Egeland, M. Bosquet, & A.L. Chung (2011) '[Continuities and discontinuities in the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment: implications for breaking the cycle of abuse](#)'.

to abuse their own children (US and UK data)¹⁰ and adults who were taken into care when they were children are 66 times more likely than their peers to have their own children taken in to care¹¹.

We need to understand what factors contribute most to these differences in outcomes and what changes could be made to the current care system to improve outcomes for looked after children.

Along with this paper we have also published our research priorities and questions for Child Protection, Social Work Reform and Intervention and for Adoption. You can find those papers on the gov.uk website. This paper concentrates on six priority areas in improving the quality of care for looked after children and their life chances:

- improving placement stability and returns to birth families;
- improving foster care recruitment and the quality of foster care;
- improving children's residential care;
- supporting looked after children in their education;
- improving support for care leavers; and
- strengthening corporate parenting and the "voice of the child" to protect and improve services.

In response to these priorities we are undertaking a number of programmes of work, including: supporting the use of evidence-based programmes to increase placement stability, including building the capability of foster carers; exploring innovative solutions to improve recruitment and training for foster carers; analysing our data on residential care and introducing a number of changes to children's homes regulations; supporting all stages of education for looked after children by introducing the Pupil Premium Plus, and putting Virtual School Heads on a statutory footing; and supporting young people to move to independence when they are ready through introducing staying put arrangements. We are also monitoring the local authority provision for care leavers through the new Ofsted framework.

Alongside our own priority areas for research our ambition is to develop an environment of evidence-based practice within the care community. In support of evidence-based practice, the department will:

- share its own evidence from research and from policy implementation; and
- support those who want to get involved in research, with funding where available.

¹⁰ J. Kaufman & E. Zigler, '[The intergenerational transmission of child abuse](#)', in Cicchetti & Carlson (ed.s), *Child Maltreatment: theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect* (Cambridge, 1989).

¹¹ Jackson, S. & Simon, A. (2005). The costs and benefits of educating children in care. In E. Chase, A. Simon & S. Jackson (Eds.) [In care and after: A positive perspective](#) (pp.44–62). London: Routledge

We want to move to a culture where data on the interventions that children receive is routinely collected and analysed and used to inform policy, practice and further research.

The high level research need

We want to embed high quality research in our policy development and practice. Our aim is to work with social care professionals to **promote the creation, dissemination and – most importantly of all – the effective use of high-quality evidence.**

We need to **understand whether the policy reforms that we are making are delivering real improvements in practice.** It is crucial we understand the impact of our policy on outcomes for looked after children and, although we collect data from our interventions, their consequences can be far-reaching and long-term so we need the support of the sector to monitor data long-term, interpret that data and re-inform the evidence base.

We want research to look at where even more positive outcomes might be achieved by doing things differently. **Care workers, carers, those in care themselves and care leavers will play a central role in identifying and addressing research priorities** through their own practice and experiences, all contributing to a shared pool of knowledge. We also need **local authorities to improve data collection, analysis and interpretation at every level, embedding it in their day to day decisions, for example in the commissioning of the right interventions and placements to meet their looked after children's evidenced needs.**

The most important outcome of our shared approach to research should be policies and interventions that are increasingly based on rigorous evidence of what works. The department already has some good examples of evidence-based practice through the Evidence-Based Interventions Programme (including a randomised control trial of the use of Multisystemic Therapy, due to report in spring 2014) and we are gaining a better understanding of the data and the impact of policies, for example through the data packs on placement breakdown and data on educational attainment including longer-term employment prospects.

Research summary and gaps

Improving placement stability and returns home from care to birth families

Stability is one of the most significant factors associated with the wellbeing of children in care and their outcomes.¹²

In September last year the department published a data pack on improving permanence for children to provide greater detail about placements for looked after children and those who return home.¹³ We know that a small proportion, but not insignificant number (11%, 7,540 children), experienced three or more placements in the year ending March 2013¹⁴. Placement stability shows a correlation with educational attainment. More stable placements are associated with a higher likelihood of children achieving five GCSEs at A* to C. Fewer than 15% of children who have more than three placements achieve that level.

The reasons behind multiple placements are complex and include carers' ability and resilience in dealing with challenging children and/or poor assessment of the child's needs, leading to poor matching of placements.¹⁵ We are working to develop a better understanding of the reasons behind placement moves/breakdowns and their degree of causality, building on the research carried out in 2007 by Ian Sinclair et al.¹⁶ We are also working to understand stability in a broader context, considering how placement and educational stability may impact on each other and what other factors may impact on stability such as changes in social worker or separation from siblings¹⁷. We already support some evidence-based interventions that aim to address the needs of children and build resilience and capability in carers such as KEEP (Keeping Foster and Kinship Carers Supported) and MST (Multisystemic Therapy).¹⁸ We are awaiting the results of the first UK based MST randomised control trial and we would like to see such trials conducted for other interventions so that social care workers and commissioners can make evidence-informed decisions about the interventions they offer.

¹² Hannon, C., Bazalgette, L., Wood, C., (2010). [In Loco Parentis](#). DEMOS

¹³ [Looked-after children: improving permanence](#) - data pack

¹⁴ Based on internal DfE analysis to update [Looked-after children: improving permanence](#) - data pack figures

¹⁵ Sinclair, I. (2005) [Fostering now: Messages from research](#), London: Jessica Kingsley

¹⁶ Sinclair et al 2007 "[The Pursuit of Permanence: A Study of the English Care System](#)"

¹⁷ [The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data](#) – due to report April 2015

¹⁸ You can find out more on [the Evidence-based Intervention programme website](#)

Of those children who return home from care almost a third re-enter care within five years.¹⁹ Nationally, 32% (3,180 of the 9,970) of the children who returned home in 2009-10 had re-entered care by 31 March 2013.²⁰ Studies suggest that appropriate assessment, preparation and service provision are linked to returns succeeding with lack of appropriate intervention having far-reaching consequences for children's future well-being and stability.²¹

There are wide variations by local authority: for some local authorities 10% re-enter care compared with other local authorities where 60% re-enter care.²² Research by NSPCC in 2012 found that variation in local authority practice was a bigger factor in determining whether a child returned home than the needs of the child.²³

At the moment we have no clear data to understand why children re-enter care or understanding of the cost of an unsuccessful return home. The department is due to start research this year (reporting in 2015) exploring effective practice in returning children home, exploring what facilitates success in practice and what the barriers are. As part of that research we are also looking at the wider questions of how research on effective practice is used by professionals to inform their decision making and also how models of peer support between professionals could strengthen best practice.

Improving foster care recruitment and the quality of foster care

Three quarters of the children in care in England are living in foster care. Having enough good foster carers is therefore critical for improving outcomes for looked after children. Although the vast majority of fostering services are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted (78% in 2010-13), that still leaves almost a fifth rated as inadequate or requiring improvement.²⁴

We now have quite a body of research on the demographics of current foster carers, their motivations, values and attrition rates.²⁵ We also understand some of the barriers to

¹⁹ [Looked-after children: improving permanence](#) - data pack

²⁰ Based on internal DfE analysis to update [Looked-after children: improving permanence](#) - data pack figures

²¹ E. Farmer et al 2011 "[Achieving successful returns from care: what makes reunification work?](#)"

²² [Looked-after children: improving permanence](#) - data pack

²³ NSPCC (2012) [Returning home from care: what's best for children](#)

²⁴ Ofsted - [Social Care Annual Report 2012/13](#)

²⁵ McDermid et al (2012) [The demographic characteristics of foster carers in the UK: Motivations, barriers and messages for recruitment and retention.](#)

The Fostering Network (2013) [Why foster carers care: How understanding values can transform relationships and improve services.](#)

The Fostering Network (2013) [Local authority fostering service: Benchmark report 2012/13](#)

Sebba (2013) [Why do people become foster carers: An international literature review on the motivation to foster.](#)

fostering for people who do not currently foster (confusion about what fostering involves and what fostering services are looking for, and anxieties about fostering) and have evidence about the propensity to foster amongst different sections of the community²⁶.

A shortage of some types of foster placements has been considered a problem for some time. Nationally, however, fostering services are improving their recruitment of foster carers - the number of new carers is outstripping the numbers leaving and is also exceeding the increase in foster children²⁷. The challenges are in understanding the following questions:

- how efficiently foster care places are being used, particularly in the independent sector, where 44% of places are vacant, compared to 28% in the local authority sector.²⁸ We know that it can sometimes be difficult to calculate the true vacancy rate where foster carers approved to care for more than one child only have one child placed with them due to the needs of that specific child. We need a better understanding of how the foster carer market is operating, including commissioning strategies and their impact on children's outcomes, more detailed information about the reasons for placement vacancies, and better evidence about the unit costs of foster care in the independent, relative to the local authority, sector. We also need to gain a better understanding of alternative market models for foster care provision, their risks and benefits;
- how foster carers should be able to meet the needs of hard to place groups with particular needs. Across the country, older children with challenging needs, disabled children and sibling groups are commonly said to be hard to place, and particular areas have other hard to place groups. Work with recruitment and retention consortia has suggested that local authorities tend not to have a good understanding of the needs of their looked after children, and the capacity of the local foster carer workforce (both local authority and independent) to meet these, which is an obstacle to effective recruitment, retention and commissioning strategies;
- to what extent available foster carers are able to meet the needs of children needing foster care – we need to develop a better understanding of what makes a good foster carer good, and how to attract, retain and develop people with the potential to be a good foster carer (e.g. recruitment strategies, training, status in the child's team, payment models).

Hoger et al (2013) [The impact of fostering on foster carers' children](#): An international literature review, Adoption and fostering: understanding motivations and barriers.

²⁶ Scott and Duncan (2013) [Adoption and Fostering: understanding motivations and barriers](#).

²⁷ Ofsted (2013) [Fostering quality assurance and data forms 2012-13](#) first statistical release

²⁸ Ofsted (2013) [Fostering quality assurance and data forms 2012-13](#) first statistical release

One factor that could be having negative impact on recruitment and retention of foster carers is foster families' risk of having a false allegation made against them and subsequent poor handling of investigations. We have limited robust research on the number and types of allegations of abuse and neglect made against foster carers.²⁹ We also need to have a better understanding of the circumstances in which allegations are made and how best to handle investigations into allegations to provide the best balance between creating a safe environment for well-founded claims to be raised whilst mitigating negative effects of unfounded claims.

Improving children's residential care

The department has published a data pack on residential care, setting out information on the use of residential care and the demographics of the children living in residential care.³⁰ Children's residential care is used for a small proportion, but not insignificant number, of looked after children. There were 68,110 looked after children at 31 March 2013, with 4,930 children placed in a children's home (over 7% of the total looked after children).

1,718 children's homes in England were registered with Ofsted at 31 March 2013. Of these, 371 (22%) were local authority run and 1,347 (78%) were in the private or voluntary sector. This pattern of ownership has changed quickly: the proportion of places in local authority-run provision decreased from 61% in 2001 to 28% of the total residential care provision.³¹

In 2011-12, local authorities across England spent £3.08 billion in total on looked after children, of which £1.05 billion was spent specifically on residential care (which caters in the main for children over the age of 12).³² The reasons for these high costs are complex, as are the needs of the young people in care. Residential care is often seen as a last resort by commissioners, with young people placed in residential care often presenting some of the most challenging behaviour that cannot be catered for elsewhere in the system. Once children are in residential care, local authorities sometimes think too little about whether and how they can return to their birth family or move to other forms of care when appropriate. Commissioning and planning on behalf of the local authorities needs to improve, but the skills and knowledge are often inadequate while

²⁹ Biehal and Parry (2010). [Maltreatment and Allegations of Maltreatment in Foster Care](#). A Review of the Evidence.

Ofsted (2013) [Fostering quality assurance and data forms 2012-13](#) first statistical release

³⁰ DfE (2013) [Children's homes data pack](#).

³¹ DfE (2013) [Children's homes data pack](#).

³² DfE (2013) [Children's homes data pack](#).

some local authorities lack the scale for efficient commissioning.³³ There is variability in quality, costs and outcomes which warrants further exploration and understanding.

Most local authorities make use of children's home provision outside the local authority's boundary and more than a third of children placed in children's homes are placed more than 20 miles from their parental home³⁴. For some children this is entirely appropriate but we know that a range of additional challenges and issues arise when children are at a considerable distance from home. Local authorities are unable to rely on their local knowledge and intelligence about the quality of homes or the suitability of their location; and the distance can affect the ability of social workers to visit the child regularly and monitor the quality of the placement. The distance between the child and their family may also limit relationships and undermine the scope for work with the whole family.³⁵ Local authorities report using such placements to secure specialist provision for children with complex disabilities or severe mental health issues. However, further work is required to establish the extent to which these are the genuine drivers of distant placement, and to understand the nature and availability of specialist provision. Local authorities acknowledge the need for a clearer picture of their requirements and to establish the link between their local requirements and effective commissioning.³⁶ This is perhaps reflected in the poor match at national level between the geographic supply and demand of residential care provision.³⁷

The impact on outcomes of the different types of residential care provision is also poorly understood. A meta-analysis of 27 studies lent weight to the suggestion that non-institutional natural interventions should be considered first, but the evidence base is far from conclusive, particularly around the impact for various groups and needs.³⁸ Initial work undertaken by the University of Kent to explore quantifiable outcomes for residential care has highlighted an absence of conclusive evidence in the existing literature.³⁹ We want to understand better the impact of different countries' residential care systems on outcomes and how comparable they are to a UK setting.⁴⁰

³³ Action research into the more effective strategic commissioning of children's residential care homes, [Final report to the Local Government Association](#), July 2013

³⁴ DfE (2013) [Children's homes data pack](#).

³⁵ Munro, et al. (2014) [Children's homes: understanding the market and the use of out of authority placements](#). Research Brief. London Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre.

³⁶ OPM (2013) [Action research into the more effective strategic commissioning of children's residential care homes](#) – Final report to the Local Government Association July 2013.

³⁷ DfE (2013) [Children's homes data pack](#).

³⁸ De Swart et al (2012). [The effectiveness of institutional youth care over the past three decades](#). Children and Youth Services Review 34, 1818-1824.

³⁹ [Ongoing outcomes of care study](#) Initial findings can be seen [here](#)

⁴⁰ Nuffield Foundation (2013) [Beyond contact: work with families of children placed away from home](#)
Gilbert, R. et al (2014) Cumulative risk of entry into out-of-home care: changes over time in Denmark and England, *Briefing paper for the Department for Education, Preliminary findings unpublished*.

Market studies of the financial health of the residential care market have recently been undertaken, but significant gaps exist in our understanding of the impact of the creation of larger providers through takeovers and mergers (sometimes backed by significant private finance) on outcomes, market competition and innovation in service.⁴¹

Similarly, the department has commissioned work to address gaps in our understanding of the size, demographic and qualifications of the children's homes workforce to inform future policy-making. The quality and content of existing foundation degrees relevant to children's home staff is not well understood.

Supporting looked after children in their education

We have already noted elsewhere in this paper the differences between looked after children and their peers in educational attainment and some of the factors which may contribute to those differences.

The role of designated teachers and virtual school heads has contributed to raising awareness of the educational needs of looked after children. When virtual school teams and virtual head teachers have strong leadership skills, the necessary 'clout' to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility, their support is highly valued by schools, other professionals and carers. There is evidence of very effective support involving the virtual school that not only makes a difference to children's educational progress, but also often enhances the stability of their placements and has a positive impact upon their emotional well-being.⁴²

We know that the educational achievement of looked after children interacts with many other elements of the care and education systems. Improving educational outcomes will be linked with overall improvements in the quality of care that is delivered.⁴³ Through the new nationally published child level data we can now look at the relationship between educational attainment and other factors such as placement stability, length of time in care and types of special educational needs.⁴⁴

The facility to match data means we know more about the educational outcomes of looked after children and their relationship with other factors but we still need to better understand this better. Measuring educational outcomes for children is complex because there are likely to be a large number of factors working together at the same time, or at different stages during a child's journey through care. We need a greater understanding of the factors that sit behind the data and are starting to look at how we might gain this by working across government to join up our data and also through research due to report

⁴¹ LaingBuisson "[Children's Social Care & Special Education Services Uk Market Report 2013](#)"

⁴² Ofsted (2012) [The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children](#)

⁴³ C4EO: [Improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people](#)

⁴⁴ DfE (2011) [Looked-after children: educational outcomes - data pack](#)

next year.⁴⁵ There are also gaps in data in relation to outcomes post-16 at Key Stage 5 and beyond.

Improving support for care leavers

The government has introduced a range of initiatives to help improve outcomes for care leavers including:

- changing the law so that children living with foster carers are able to remain in these homes until aged 21;
- introducing the Junior Independent Savings Account for all care leavers, with over 46,000 accounts now open with a £200 contribution from government; and
- launching the Charter for Care Leavers – a pledge between local authorities and young people leaving care – which sets out the support they can expect right up to the age of 25, with over 120 local authorities now signed up.

In October 2012 we published a Care Leavers data pack which summarised national data about children who leave care aged 16 and over and outcomes of care leavers at the age of 19.⁴⁶ This included the relationship between educational attainment and other factors such as placement stability and length of time in care. The data showed that the older a young person is when they leave care, the more likely they are to remain in education (40% compared to 26% of those who left care aged 16) and care leavers who had greater placement stability were more likely to be in education (80% of those in education had one placement, compared to 69% of those who were NEET). The data also showed that young people who entered care due to socially unacceptable behaviour were the group most likely to be NEET at the age of 19.

We have some knowledge from a small survey that care leavers experience the best outcomes when local authorities have high aspirations supported by good corporate parenting; leaving care is seen as a process not a single event; and young people themselves are involved in planning to leave care.⁴⁷

From 2014-15 we will be publishing data on care leavers aged 19, 20 and 21. We currently have a gap in our data for outcomes for care leavers over the age of 21. This is important because some of our measures may be bound by proximity such as the gap between leaving care and leaving education. We also need to understand whether the gap in outcomes for those in care compared with peers over time remains the same, narrows or widens; and the long-term impact of interventions aimed at narrowing the gap.

⁴⁵ [The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data](#) – due to report April 2015

⁴⁶ DfE (2012) [Care Leavers in England Data Pack](#)

⁴⁷ Ofsted (2009) [Support for care leavers](#).

We know that being in settled, safe accommodation is associated with increased wellbeing and engagement in education, employment or training of care leavers.⁴⁸ We do not yet have good evidence on whether the different types of accommodation care leavers move to have a differential impact on long-term outcomes.

Strengthening corporate parenting and the “voice of the child”

Ofsted inspections show that the best local authorities adopt a strong corporate parenting approach which is linked to better outcomes for children. The law is also clear that children’s voices should be at the heart of decision making in the care system and evidence shows that, where children are consulted and listened to, they are more likely to want to use the support that is offered.⁴⁹

There is wide variation in the availability of advocacy services between different geographical areas, as well as differences in the groups of children and young people targeted by advocacy services. Access to advocacy support could be related to age, disability, type of placement and asylum status.⁵⁰ The Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York is due to report in summer 2014 on research exploring how corporate parenting is operating in policy and practice.⁵¹

The department holds discussion groups for young people in care to meet with the minister and officials so we can hear their experiences of care, the things that matter to them and the changes they would like to see⁵². The Children’s Rights Director for England also carries out a wide range survey of children’s views, from which we know that around half of children who have experienced the care system say that they are asked for their opinions on things that matter. Around half also say that their opinions make a difference to decisions and this does not differ depending upon the type of placement the children were in⁵³.

We also need to have a better understanding of whether Children in Care Councils improve the collective and individual voices of children in care. Although 68% of children asked in a recent survey who knew about their local Children in Care Council thought it was making a difference for children in care, over half of children asked hadn’t heard of a Children in Care Council⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ C4EO: [Improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people](#)

⁴⁹ Stein, M. (2009) [Quality Matters in Children's Services: Messages from research](#), Jessica Kingsley, London

⁵⁰ Stein, M. (2009) [Quality Matters in Children's Services: Messages from research](#), Jessica Kingsley, London

⁵¹ Dixon (2014) [Corporate parenting: making the difference?](#)

⁵² Reports from the meetings can be found on the [Rights4Me](#) website

⁵³ Ofsted: [Children's care monitor 2011](#)

⁵⁴ Ofsted: [Children's care monitor 2011](#)

Future priorities

The research questions identified below are intended as broad prompts. They have been formulated to help identify where further analytical and evaluative work might most usefully be focused – whether that work is undertaken by government, by independent researchers, or indeed by social care itself. We also need to understand how these issues vary across the full diversity of England’s care system and its workers. **These questions are intended to be reviewed at regular intervals, as gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation arise.**

Cross cutting priorities

Cutting across all of these areas are some key questions:

- How do local authorities best understand current and future needs of their own looked after population and what skills and knowledge do they need to commission effectively for provision and interventions, utilising relevant data and research evidence? What are the most important factors in, and greatest barriers to, putting evidence-based social care into practice?
- What are the biggest lessons that central and local government could learn from how other countries work with their looked after children population?
- What are the true end to end costs of the care system?
- What factors encourage innovation in children’s social care practice? And what are the barriers?
- What factors affect whether children enter the care system, how do we measure those factors, how do we determine their relative causality, and how do we use that information to drive system changes to improve outcomes for children in and on the edge of care?
- What are the reasons behind the variation in care application rates seen across different local authorities and what might that tell us about differences in practice.
- Are there alternative models for the provision of care, which blur some of the traditional categories or the binary ‘in’ versus ‘out’ of care and what is the impact of these alternative models?

Improving placement stability and returns to birth families

- What are the factors (and their relative degree of causality) that contribute to placement moves or breakdowns and how do we tackle them?
- What are the main reasons that looked after children returning home re-enter care and how do we tackle those?
- Do the different models of parental responsibility and parental involvement in decision making (both day to day and wider) while a child is looked after (as seen in other countries) impact on placement stability, permanence and outcomes for

looked after children including returning children home from care successfully? If so, how?

Improving foster care recruitment and the quality of foster care

- What are the most important factors in determining whether a person will be a “good” foster carer, including for hard to place children such as older children with challenging needs?
- How can we maximise applications to foster from people with the potential to meet the needs of hard to place children (e.g. older children with challenging needs, disabled children and sibling groups)? What are the best ways of supporting and developing such people to meet their potential (e.g. what alternative models of support exist, what are the relative risks and benefits of each model, including the impact on children’s outcomes and cost benefits)?
- What incentivises people to become foster carers and what puts them off?
- To what degree is the foster care market operating to support the provision of a sufficient (both number and ability to meet children’s needs) and value for money foster carer workforce? What other market models exist for the provision of foster care, and what are the relative risks and benefits of these?
- How can we better understand the causes of allegations of harm to children by foster families? How can incidents of harm and false allegations be minimised and investigations be handled more effectively?

Improving children’s residential care

- To what extent does the structure of the market for children’s homes placements support increasing quality of provision? How can local authorities better manage the market so as to raise standards? What are possible future models that could develop in the market and what would attract new entrants?
- What are the outcomes from secure children’s homes and how can commissioning for secure places be structured to maximise the impact of this type of provision?
- What are the factors that underpin better assessment, placement and provision for children in residential care homes?
- How far do existing qualifications, in particular foundation degrees in therapeutic child care, for staff working in children’s homes meet the needs of staff, providers and ultimately children in care?

Supporting looked after children in their education

- What are the different factors that affect a looked after child's educational attainment (with specific interest in: pre-care experiences; level of disability; quality of their foster carer/social worker; school attended; attachment of pupil premium plus; and the point at which they enter care) and what is their relative impact?

- Are there specific interventions that have been found to be particularly effective at improving the educational attainment of looked after children?

Improving support for care leavers

- What are the long-term social, physical, and economic outcomes for care leavers, from different types of placement, at different stages of their lives, including any links to duration in care?
- Which interventions have an evidence base to suggest their effectiveness in improving outcomes for care leavers?
- What are the most important factors in predicting the long-term outcomes for care leavers?

Strengthening corporate parenting and the “voice of the child”

- Does a strong corporate parenting role link to better outcomes for children and, if so, how?
- Is there a link between the level of involvement a child has in the design of care and the outcomes for that child?
- What is the best way to provide children in care with a voice within the system?

Engaging with future priorities

We would like individuals or organisations to respond to this and you can do this in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to the questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.
- Follow us and join the discussion on Twitter (@educationgovuk)
- Like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk)



Department
for Education

© Crown copyright 2014

You may re-use this document/publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v2.0. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2 or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at www.education.gov.uk/contactus.

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.

Reference: DFE-00089-2014