Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of Looked After Children at post-primary school

by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PWC)

No 55, 2011

Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency

pwc

Department of Education

Research study into how the education system can improve the attendance of Looked After Children at post-primary school

pwc

Contents

Executive summary

Introduction

In January 2011, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers (LLP) PwC to undertake a research project to understand how the education system can improve the attendance at post-primary school of Looked After Children. The findings from this study will be used by DE to understand if, and how, they might further support post-primary schools to improve the attendance of Looked After Children.

Looked After Children are defined by The Children (NI) Order 1995 as children 'who are in the care of a Trust or who are provided with accommodation by a Trust'. Such children may be the subject of a legal order (whereby parental responsibility is shared between birth parents and Trusts), their names may be on Trust Child Protection Registers and they can live in a residential home, foster care or may be placed with a member of their family. Looked After Children are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society. They are at greater risk of becoming socially excluded than children from other backgrounds, have a statement of Special Educational Needs and to have experienced periods of suspension or exclusion from school.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- Establish the underlying causes of and influences on non-attendance by Looked After Children at post-primary level.

- Identify and review research into any association between non-attendance at school and underachievement. Comparison should be made between the make-up of the Looked After Children group as ascribed by age, gender, religion or disability and the make-up of the general school population.

- Collate and disseminate information on effective approaches and actions to improve attendance among this group, to include the review of good practice in north of Ireland, as well as in other areas including the south of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

The methodology included a review of c. 60 relevant documents covering Looked After Children policy, research and good practice from Northern Ireland and elsewhere and stakeholder consultations which included a total of 25 interviews with schools, EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) providers, voluntary organisations and Education and Library Boards (ELBs). A workshop was held with a number of stakeholders in early March to test the emerging findings and provide an opportunity to feedback on emerging conclusions and implications from this study. This is the final report and it contains all of the findings from the research.

It was not possible, within the project timescales, for DE to secure the necessary ethical approval required for PwC to conduct interviews with social workers (employed by the Trusts) or other important stakeholders (e.g. parents/carers and Looked After Children themselves) for this project. Therefore, this report exclusively presents findings from an education perspective (as reflected in the title of this report). Further research would be required (with the necessary ethical approval) to capture the views of Looked After Children and those who work with them from a social services/care perspective.

The remainder of the executive summary is structured under the following headings:

- Profile of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland.

- Underlying causes of and influences on non-attendance.

- Association between non-attendance at school and under achievement.

- Effective approaches and actions to improve attendance.

- Implications from the research.

Profile of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland

The following are the key statistics for Looked After Children in Northern Ireland[1].

- There were 1,653 Looked After Children in Northern Ireland under the age of 18 in 2008/09[2], based on those who were continuously looked after for 12 months or more. Looked After Children only represent 0.38 per cent of the population of those below the age of 18 in NI. Key statistics for this group include:

  - The majority of these children (71 per cent) are in foster care. A small proportion of Looked After Children are placed with their family (14%) or are placed in residential care (10%). The remaining 5% are placed in a setting classified as 'Other'.

  - Over one-half (52%) of Looked After Children are male, whilst 48% are female. This differs very little to the school age population (aged between 0-17) where 51% are male and 49% are female.

  - Looked After Children with a Catholic background (49%) are slightly overrepresented in the statistics, compared to those with a Protestant background (47%). This is in comparison to 40% of all school-age children who are from the Catholic background and 46% who are from a Protestant background.

  - 97% of all Looked After Children are from a White background (compared to 99% of all school-aged children).

  - A higher proportion, over one-tenth (13%) of Looked After Children, had a disability compared to only 6% of all school-aged children.

  - The Belfast and Northern Trust areas together have almost one-half (49 per cent) of all Looked After Children despite having just over two-fifths (42 per cent) of the population below the age of 18.

- There were 1,282 Looked After Children of compulsory school age in Northern Ireland in 2008/09. Key statistics for this group include:

  - Almost one-quarter (24%) had a statement of Special Educational Needs, compared to 4% for all school-aged children.

  - Both exclusion and suspension rates were higher for Looked After Children at 1% and 8% respectively, in comparison to 0.01% and 2% for all school-aged children.

---

[1] Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2010) *Children in care in Northern Ireland 2008/09*. Belfast: DHSSPS.

[2] This covers the period from 1st October 2008 to 30th September 2009.

- There were 602 Looked After Children in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland in 2008/09[3]. Key statistics for this group include:

  - The overall rate of absenteeism is higher for post-primary Looked After Children at 12.2% compared to 7.6% for all school-aged children in post-primary schools. Both authorised and unauthorised absence rates were higher for Looked After Children (at 6% and 6.2% respectively) than for all school-aged children (5.1% and 2.5% respectively).

  - 149 were eligible to undertake Key Stage 3 exams. Just over one-quarter (27%) of these children achieved a Level 5 in either English or maths, compared to 83% and 81% of all pupils who were eligible to take these exams.

  - 179 were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 61% achieved at least one A*-G grade (in comparison to 99% of all eligible pupils); 37% achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-G (in comparison to 92% of all eligible pupils), and; 16% achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-C (in comparison to 71% of all eligible pupils).

The statistics show, therefore, that Looked After Children are more likely to have a statement of Special Educational Needs, more likely to have a disability, are more likely to underachieve and a small group of these pupils are more likely not to attend school. In addition, a more detailed analysis of the above statistics by gender shows that, statements of Special Educational Needs, and rates of suspension and underachievement were more prevalent amongst boys than girls. For further statistics in these areas refer to section 2 of this report.

Of the 602 Looked After Children in post-primary schools[4], the majority (70 per cent) are clustered in 48 schools throughout NI (out of a total of all 217 post-primary schools). Of these 48 post-primary schools there are 29 schools with attendance rates above the NI Looked After Children average and 19 schools with below average attendance rates. The statistics also show that higher than average concentrations of absenteeism amongst Looked After Children are found in a relatively small number of these schools. For example, there are three schools where the attendance rate for Looked After Children is 11 percentage points or more below the NI Looked After Children average. Interviews with staff in some of these 48 schools suggest that, in general, they do not have issues with attendance of all Looked After Children, and where attendance was a particular issue, it was generally only for a small number of them.

Underlying causes of and influences on non-attendance

Our research indicates that no single factor impacts on non-attendance of all Looked After Children; rather a host of underlying causes and influences exist. The literature and stakeholder interviews suggest that the following are the main underlying causes or influences on non-attendance of Looked After Children:

- **Peer pressure**: the literature has shown that peer pressure (possibly leading to bullying) can be one of the underlying reasons for non-attendance amongst young people in care. If not addressed early this can lead to periods of expulsion, disengagement in education and ultimately underachievement. Findings from the interviews with school staff suggests that this may be more of an issue for those placed in residential care settings than those placed in foster care.

- **Behavioural issues**: the literature and interviews revealed that one of the main reasons for exclusion is persistent disruptive behaviour and that early intervention to prevent poor behaviours escalating to a crisis point is essential to tackle this issue.

- **Underlying social and personal issues**: the interviews indicated that Looked After Children dealing with the loss of a parent or underlying drug or alcohol problems tend to have poor attendance rates.

---

[3] Department of Education Northern Ireland (2009) *School census data*. Bangor: Department of Education.

[4] Department of Education Northern Ireland (2009) *Op. Cit.*

- **Personal factors**: the literature and interviews have shown that a lack of self esteem, social skills, and challenging peer relations can result in higher absenteeism rates. Personal factors can also include experiencing learning difficulties and Special Educational Needs (including ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and related syndromes).

- **Contact with birth parents**: interviewees stated that a stable foster care environment can lead to higher attendance rates amongst Looked After Children. However, where a child makes contact with their birth family, this has the potential to have a negative impact on school attendance.

- **Socio-economic circumstances:** using FSM as a proxy for local deprivation, shows that schools with less than 10 per cent of pupils in receipt of FSM have absenteeism rates of approximately 3 per cent whereas in schools where more than 50 per cent of pupils are in receipt of FSM the rate rises to 8.5 per cent. The literature also shows that children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds have less positive attitudes to school and learning than their peers in more affluent areas.

- **Age when a child enters the care system:** research shows that children who enter care before the age of 12 outperform those who enter care at age 12 or above. A reason for this may be that those who became looked after when they were younger have tended to live in foster homes and therefore have more settled lives. As Looked After Children become older, there are potential issues in relation to placement stability.

- **Placement type and stability:** the literature and stakeholder interviews suggest that Looked After Children in foster care have better attendance rates than those children in residential care settings. For the latter group, attendance at school may be influenced by pressure from their peers who are also not attending school. Also, those children in long term or more stable placements tend to have better attendance rates than other groups of Looked After Children.

- **Attitudes to education in the home/care environment:** some Looked After Children may not attend school due to habits picked up prior to entering the care system. The Looked After Child's parents' own experience of school is likely to influence the example of school behaviour and academic learning that they model to their child(ren). Consequently, interviewees suggested that children who are poor attendees may have grown up with inconsistent parental attitudes to education and often perceive their parents as not having achieved at school and therefore cannot help them to do so either.

Association between non-attendance at school and under achievement

The evidence shows that both attendance and attainment rates are lower for Looked After Children on average than for the general school population. Our research suggests that the factors that contribute to either the attendance or attainment of Looked After Children can be grouped into three broad areas, namely: background characteristics of the child; support arrangements, and; home/care setting. An important point to note, however, is that only a relatively small number of the research studies reviewed could establish a link between these groups of factors, or even indeed, specific factors (such as placement stability) to either attendance or attainment rates of Looked After Children. None of the studies reviewed showed a direct link between attendance at school and attainment.

Effective approaches and actions to improve attendance

Representatives from schools and EOTAS providers indicated that they make use of a wide range of approaches to reduce non-attendance. In this report, we detail those interventions which stakeholders reported to have been effective in managing or reducing non-attendance rates. In many cases, the approaches below are used for improving attendance of all children and not just Looked After Children.

- Approaches to incentivise attendance include:

  - **Positive rewards:** some schools are using monetary (e.g. vouchers, day trips) and non-monetary rewards (e.g. use of stars for punctuality and improved attendance).

- **Reduced hours/phased return initiatives:** in some schools there was evidence of 'reduced hours' initiatives being in place, i.e. children attending school for fewer hours each week to encourage attendance. This is mainly used where a particular Looked After Child had experienced a traumatic event (such as alleged bullying), resulting in them being absent for a considerable period of time. However, in most cases, there was an expectation that the child would transition to full attendance over the longer term.

- Interventions to increase the amount of support include:

  - **Additional adult support:** some schools have invested heavily in classroom assistants to support Looked After Children, and in some cases, to attend Looked After Children review meetings. The classroom assistant maintains a constant presence with the child, in comparison to their teachers – the Looked After Child at post-primary level may see numerous teachers each day for relatively short periods of time.

  - **Mentoring:** in some schools there was evidence of teachers and sixth form pupils acting as mentors or buddies for Looked After Children. As mentoring tends to be ongoing throughout the child's schooling, this approach is seen to be an early intervention strategy for improving attendance and also a useful way to settle a particular child back in when they have returned to school after a period of absence. EOTAS representatives, in particular, noted the importance of establishing strong relationships between adult mentors and Looked After Children as this approach can help to build trust between both parties and help to underpin expectations of high attendance.

  - **Counselling:** the majority of the schools felt that counselling was an important form of support to help manage any issues particular children might have that may be holding them back from fully engaging with their learning or from attending school. Although schools greatly valued counselling as a form of support, they noted the importance of prioritising this form of support for those Looked After Children who had greatest need.

- Approaches to build capacity to meet needs include:

  - **Joined-up working between Looked After Children stakeholders:** there were numerous examples of where stakeholders (including school staff, ELBs, voluntary organisations) had come together in a coherent and joined-up way to meet the needs of Looked After Children in specific schools. Where this was happening, it was believed to have a positive impact on attendance; however this practice could be more widespread.

  - **Looked After Children champion in the school:** a number of schools have assigned one person with responsibility for Looked After Children. However, this does not appear to be a common practice across all schools and a suggestion was made that this practice should be more widespread. The designated member of staff would then have full responsibility for all Looked After Children and would champion their needs.

  - **Staff training on Looked After Children:** a minority of school representatives interviewed indicated that they had received relevant Looked After Children specific training and had found this useful in meeting the needs of Looked After Children. However, a number of schools identified the need for increased awareness amongst teachers about personal, emotional and educational issues faced by Looked After Children. This could take the form of a training session which would also cover the responsibilities of the school, parent/carer and social worker in relation to the Looked After Child.

It is important to note that whichever approach is used, stakeholders believed that early intervention is critical. This means that alongside the use of the above approaches (which should be adapted according to the particular context of the school), Looked After Children should be assessed by education professionals (in consultation with social care professionals) as soon as they become looked after to ensure that they are getting the appropriate support aligned to their needs.

It is also important for schools/EOTAS providers to share good practice amongst themselves. Our research suggests that schools, in particular, were not aware of any examples of good practice happening in other schools. However, all of them expressed an interest in wanting to understand what good practice looked like and what other schools were doing differently or perhaps more effectively than their school.

Implications from the research

The aim of this research is to provide DE with information that will inform policy and practice in improving the attendance and attainment of Looked After Children in line with the Minister's education priority *"closing the Performance Gap, Increasing Access and Equity"*. Based on our research and our discussions with stakeholders and the Steering Group, we have outlined below some implications that DE may wish to give consideration to.

Collection and use of data

- **More detailed data needs to be collected to understand more clearly the incidence of non-attendance amongst specific groups of Looked After Children:** in 2009, there were 602 Looked After Children in post-primary school in NI. The research findings suggest that non-attendance for this group of pupils appears to be an issue in a small number of schools and for a small number of pupils only. Analysis of the interview data further suggests that non-attendance was a particular issue for Looked After Children who are placed in residential care (in comparison to those who are placed in foster care). Our findings suggest that there are additional factors and causes of non-attendance operating within this sector which exacerbate the issue. Therefore, we suggest that DE explore the feasibility, alongside the potential value, of including data fields on the School Census to capture placement type of each child. This may help to quantify the incidence of non-attendance of Looked After Children by placement type. In addition, DE, working alongside DHSSPS, may wish to consider jointly commissioning research (including possibly a longitudinal study) to understand better the issues impacting upon non-attendance of Looked After Children in residential care settings.

- **Managing transition between schools:** Transition from primary to post-primary is challenging for all pupils, but particularly for Looked After Children, who may have become accustomed to having one classroom with one teacher throughout the school day to going to a post-primary school setting where they can have 10 or more teachers per week. To facilitate the transition from primary to post-primary school, it is important that the child's history accompanies them in the transition to the post-primary school, subject to the appropriate information sharing protocols being put in place (e.g. that information is shared on the basis of consent and that it will be appropriately stored.)

School planning/development

- **Considering the needs of Looked After Children in school development planning:** although evidence from this research showed that many schools provide high levels of support and pastoral care to their Looked After Children, in many other cases provision is not tailored to the specific needs of this group of children. Indeed many of the approaches and techniques to reduce non-attendance (for example, positive rewards and mentoring) are generic and not specific to Looked After Children. For many Looked After Children non-tailored, generic support may be effective in meeting their needs but there will be some Looked After Children who have more complex needs and for whom more tailored support is required. Pupil welfare is an essential part of the school development planning process and schools should ensure that, as part of reviewing their plans, that they are proactive (rather than reactive) in meeting the specific needs of individual Looked After Children, including those who may require more tailored support.

- **Identification of a Looked After Children champion or at least a mentoring/buddy system:** where schools assigned a member of staff to work with, and support, a particular Looked After Child, this was believed to have been effective in supporting them and improving their attendance. However, findings from the stakeholder interviews suggest that this does not happen in every school. Where this is not happening, we suggest that a "Looked After Children champion" is assigned to work with Looked After Children. This would provide such children with a particular individual to approach as the first point of contact for them and someone who is aware of their background and specific needs. If this is not possible, then schools should give consideration to implementing a mentoring or buddy system similar to those described in this report.

- **Training and development opportunities for school staff:** there was a consensus amongst stakeholders that there should be greater continuing professional development opportunities available to school staff to help them meet the needs of Looked After Children. ELBs should liaise with the Head of Pastoral Care in each of its schools to source appropriate training opportunities with an emphasis on Looked After Children. The opportunities may, in the first instance, be prioritised for those schools with high numbers of Looked After Children or where there are incidences of individual Looked After Children having below/well below average attendance rates.

Good practice

- **Raising aspirations:** evidence from the research suggests that where schools provide a wide range of opportunities for Looked After Children to develop their talents and strengths; this has the potential to improve their aspirations and engagement with their own learning, and also their attendance. Indeed, for many of the schools that participated in the research, this was considered to be good practice. Schools should continue to raise aspirations of Looked After Children by providing them with appropriate curricular and extra-curricular opportunities to improve their life chances.

- **Sharing good practice:** our research found that sharing good practice approaches between schools, in terms of improving attendance and achievement of Looked After Children was limited. However, there was an appetite amongst interviewees for understanding what constituted good practice and for sharing their own practices and learning with others. In addition, the interviews found that ELBs were doing much to support schools, though it was not entirely clear whether schools were aware of the full range of support and services that ELBs and others can provide. An online good practice forum might be one potential solution to this issue. This would involve bringing together all of the available resources (including good practice) for Looked After Children into one place and raising awareness of this resource amongst post-primary schools and other providers – this would also allow schools to ask questions and gain insight from each other about effective interventions. Another method may be to initially bring together staff from the 48 post-primary schools which have 70 per cent of all Looked After Children and enable those which have the best attendance rates to share good practice with those schools that face continuing challenges in this area. This approach could then be rolled out across all schools in Northern Ireland that have Looked After Children.

1 Introduction and approach

Introduction

Looked After Children are defined by The Children (NI) Order 1995 as children 'who are in the care of a Trust or who are provided with accommodation by a Trust'. Children in care are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. They are at greater risk of becoming socially excluded than children from other backgrounds[5], have a statement of Special Educational Needs and to have experienced periods of suspension or exclusion from school[6]. It is likely that a large proportion of children in care will have had a range of negative experiences including family disruption, behavioural and emotional difficulties and may also have experienced abuse or neglect. The combined effects of one or more of these experiences may contribute to issues relating to their attendance in mainstream schools. In certain circumstances, this may also lead to a particular Looked After Child having to be educated offsite in an EOTAS provider.

The statistics show that attainment rates are lower for Looked After Children in Northern Ireland than in England. In 2008/09, whilst 99 per cent and 92 per cent of all pupils achieved at least one GCSE or GNVQ grade A*-G in Northern Ireland[7] and England[8] respectively, only 61 per cent and 68 per cent of Looked After Children respectively have achieved this attainment level. However, whilst pupils in Northern Ireland fare better than in England in terms of the proportion of pupils achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE, there is little difference between them in terms of the proportion of Looked After Children achieving this standard. The longer term consequences of low attainment include poorer job prospects and social exclusion.

It is therefore timely for DE to commission this piece of work to understand in more detail the factors contributing to non-attendance of Looked After Children and potential ways in which attendance can be improved. Managing and improving attendance rates are important as they are one of the key factors that are likely to contribute to the achievement and attainment, and subsequent life chances of Looked After Children. The remainder of this section is structured under the following headings:

- Research objectives.
- Methodology.
- Structure of report.

Research objectives

The purpose of this project is to provide DE with information that will inform policy and practice in improving the attendance and possibly thereby the subsequent attainment of Looked After Children in line with the Minister's education priority "closing the Performance Gap, Increasing Access and Equity". The objectives of the research are as follows:

- Establish the underlying causes of and influences on non-attendance by Looked After Children at post-primary level.

- Identify and review research into any association between non-attendance at school and underachievement. Comparison should be made between the make-up of the Looked After Children group as ascribed by age, gender, religion or disability and the make-up of the general school population.

---

[5] Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2007) *Care matters in Northern Ireland - a bridge to a better future*. Belfast: DHSSPS.
[6] DEL (2010) *A scoping study of those young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: DEL.
[7] http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg/32-statistics_and_research_statistics_on_education_pg/32_statistics_and_research-numbersofschoolsandpupils_pg/32_statistics_and_research-northernirelandsummarydata_pg.htm
[8] DCSF (2009) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics*. London: DCSF.

- Collate and disseminate information on effective approaches and actions to improve attendance among this group, to include a review of good practice in the north of Ireland, as well as in other areas including the south of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

Methodology

This research project was undertaken in three stages using a mix of primary and secondary research to address the research objectives identified above. Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the methodological approach. Each of these stages is detailed below.

Figure 1.1: Overview of the research methodology

Stage 1: Literature Review	Stage 2: Stakeholder consultation		Stage 3: Analysis and reporting
Review of c.60 documents including: • Review of baseline data • Review of policy / research studies • Review of good practice	**Stakeholder interviews** • 25 interviews with Education & Library Boards (4), schools (10), EOTAS providers (6) and voluntary organisations (5)	**Collaborative Stakeholder workshop** • A collaborative workshop with a total of 19 individuals who participated in the stakeholder interviews	• Content analysis of literature and interview data • Internal analysis workshops • Reporting

Stage 1: Literature review

This involved undertaking an extensive review of relevant literature on Looked After Children including a review of:

- The characteristics of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland and statistical data relating to their attendance and attainment.
- Policy/research studies on Looked After Children from Northern Ireland and elsewhere, including good practice in relation to promoting attendance of Looked After Children.

Both DE and our Expert Advisor, Dr Karen Winter[9], provided the research team with suggestions of documents to include in the literature review. This was supplemented by a comprehensive internet search to identify relevant documents for inclusion in the review. Approximately 60 documents were reviewed in total.

Stage 2: Stakeholder consultation

There were two stages to the stakeholder consultation, namely stakeholder interviews and a collaborative stakeholder workshop.

Subsequent to the literature review commencing, a phase of stakeholder consultation was undertaken with a number of cross-sectoral stakeholders who work with, or provide support to, Looked After Children. A series of depth interviews were undertaken with a total of 25 organisations/institutions. These included ELBs, post-primary schools, EOTAS providers and voluntary organisations. They included a mix of face-to-face and telephone interviews in accordance with the preference of the interviewee. Table 1.1 illustrates the breakdown of the number of interviews completed with each stakeholder group.

---

[9] Dr Karen Winter is a distinguished academic in the field of Social Work. She is a researcher and lecturer at the School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work at Queen's University of Belfast and has a specific interest in the field of Looked After Children.

It is important to note that a number of the interviews with ELBs included more than one stakeholder representative and in total 14 ELB representatives were interviewed. In addition, one of the EOTAS interviews included two EOTAS representatives.

Following on from the stakeholder interviews, a stakeholder workshop was conducted on 10th March 2011. This was attended by members of the Project Steering Group and a number of the stakeholders who were interviewed (as set out in Table 1.1). The purpose of this workshop was to:

- Share key emerging findings from the research undertaken to date.
- Invite contribution to emerging conclusions and implications.

The findings of the workshop helped shape the research implications as described in Section 6.

Table 1.1: Outline of number of the stakeholders involved in the research

Stakeholder Category	Number of interviews conducted	Number of interviewees
ELBs	4[10]	14
Schools	10	10
EOTAS providers	6	7
Voluntary Organisations	5	5
Total	**25**	**36**

Stage 3: Analysis and reporting

In relation to the literature review, the findings were analysed under a number of themes (e.g. profile of Looked After Children, factors impacting on non-attendance rates and attainment) which directly linked back to the research objectives for this study.

In terms of interview analysis, field researchers completed a detailed write-up drawing out key findings from each of the interviews. These write-ups were then combined into one document for each stakeholder group in preparation for analysis and reporting.

An interim analysis workshop was held with the core research team, to aggregate the findings from the literature review and the in-depth interviews. Interim findings were presented to the Project Steering Group on 17 February 2011.

This is the final report and it contains all of the findings from the research.

It was not possible, within the project timescales, for DE to secure the necessary ethical approval required for PwC to conduct interviews with social workers (employed by the Trusts) or other important stakeholders (e.g. parents/carers and Looked After Children themselves) for this project. Therefore, this report exclusively presents findings from an education perspective (as reflected in the title of this report). Further research would be required (with the necessary ethical approval) to capture the views of Looked After Children and those who work with them from a social services/care perspective.

---

[10] All five Education and Library Board areas were interviewed, however the BELB and SEELB were interviewed together.

Structure of report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Profile of Looked After Children.
- Literature findings on the factors influencing attendance and attainment of Looked After Children.
- Stakeholder views on the non-attendance of Looked After Children.
- Stakeholder views on effective approaches and actions to improve attendance of Looked After Children.
- Conclusions and implications from the research.

2 Profile of Looked After Children

Introduction

This section of the report provides a profile of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland. School attendance data are collected by DE via the Annual School Census. DE relies on schools to record if a child is looked after; therefore it is possible that the figures could be slightly underestimated since the school is not always aware of the child's circumstances. However these data are used for the purpose of contextualising the research and are sufficiently robust to demonstrate trends and patterns. This section is structured under the following headings:

- Characteristics of Looked After Children.
- Characteristics of school-aged Looked After Children.
- Attendance statistics.
- Attainment statistics.
- Summary.

Characteristics of Looked After Children

The data refer to 2008/09, which was the most recent year for which statistical data was available from both DE and DHSSPS at the time of writing this report. According to the statistics, there were 1,653 children and young people who were looked after continuously for 12 months or longer in 2008/09[11]. This represents a very small proportion (just 0.38 per cent[12]) of the overall Northern Ireland population who were under the age of 18 (Figure 2.1). There are proportionately more Looked After Children among the older age groups, for example 0.72 per cent of those aged 16 or 17 years old compared to just 0.18 per cent of all children aged 0-4 years.

Figure 2.1: Proportion of Looked After Children by age group
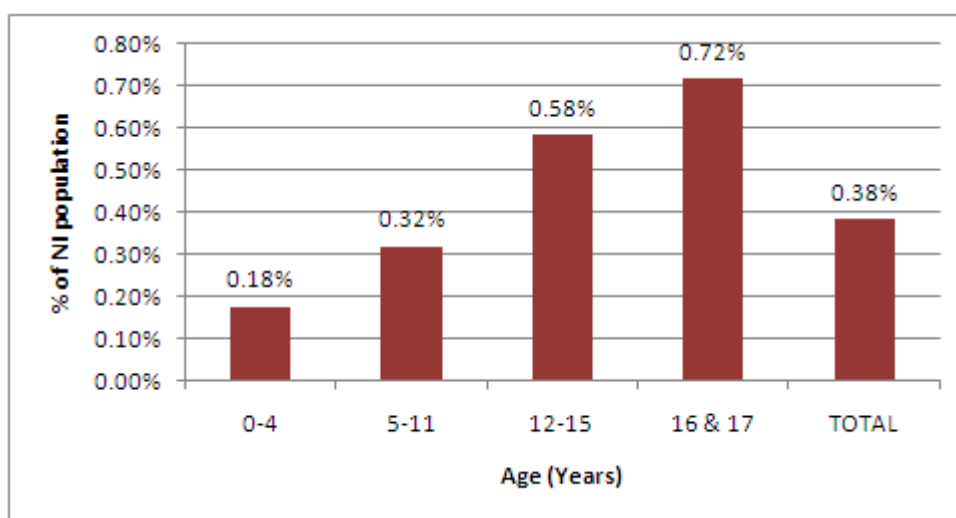
Source: PwC analysis of DHSSPS and NISRA data

Table 2.1 illustrates a number of the characteristics of those children who have been in care continuously for at least 12 months (as at September 2009). The data illustrates that the Belfast and Northern Trust areas together

---

[11] Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (2010) *Children in care in Northern Ireland 2008/09*. Belfast: DHSSPS.
[12] NISRA (2010) *Population and migration estimates Northern Ireland 2009.* Belfast: NISRA.

have almost one-half (49 per cent) of all Looked After Children despite having just over two-fifths (42 per cent) of the population below the age of 18. Other points to draw out from the data are:

- Almost three-quarters (71 per cent) are in foster care and only a small minority are placed in other settings, for example, 10 per cent were placed in residential care and a further 14 per cent were with their family. This is an important point to note given that our initial discussions with the Project Steering Group suggested that attendance rates greatly differ across placement types.

- Looked After Children with a Catholic background appeared to be slightly overrepresented in the statistics, whilst those classified as 'Other' are underrepresented[13].

- There are no significant differences in the statistics by gender or ethnicity.

In addition to the data presented in Table 2.1, just under one-quarter (23 per cent) of all Looked After Children have had one or more placement changes in that year – 16 per cent (of this 23 per cent) had one placement change, 3 per cent had two placement changes, and 3 per cent had three or more placement changes. This point is important as the number of placements can have a direct impact on attendance of Looked After Children at school and the degree to which they experience uninterrupted periods of education. The statistics suggest that the majority of Looked After Children do not experience placement instability, however a substantial minority (23 per cent) had one or more placement changes – the interview evidence suggest that this could possibly refer to those that are older at the point of admission, those in residential care and those with additional needs.

Table 2.1: Characteristics of Looked After Children

	Statistics profiled by...	% of all Looked After Children (in continuous care for previous 12 months)	% of total post-primary school population
Trust area	Belfast	24%	17%
	Northern	25%	25%
	South Eastern	19%	19%
	Southern	18%	21%
	Western	15%	18%[14]
	Total*	*100%*	*100%*
Gender	Male	52%	51%
	Female	48%	49%[15]
	Total*	*100%*	*100%*
Religion	Catholic	49%	40%
	Protestant	47%	46%
	Other	2%	14%[16]
	Total*	*100%*	*100%*
Ethnicity	White	97%	99%
	Other	3%[17]	1%[18]
	Total*	*100%*	*100%*
Disability	Yes	13%	6%
	No	87%	94%
	Total*	*100%*	*100%*
Placement	Residential accommodation	10%	n/a

---

[13] Population statistics are based on Census data (2001). Therefore caution should be taken in comparing these data with Looked After Children data.
[14] NISRA (2009) Mid-year estimates.
[15] NISRA (2009) Mid-year estimates.
[16] Census 2001.
[17] Includes Mixed ethnic background, Irish Traveller, and Other Ethnic backgrounds.
[18] Census 2001.

	Foster care	71%	n/a
	Placement with family	14%	n/a
	Other	5%	n/a
	*Total**	*100%*	*n/a*

Source: DHSSPS (2009) *Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding*

Characteristics of school-aged Looked After Children

Of the 1,653 children and young people who were looked after continuously for 12 months or longer in 2008/09, over three-quarters (78 per cent or 1,282) were of compulsory school age.

Our analysis of the data suggests that Looked After Children were more likely to have a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in comparison to the general school population. In 2009, almost one-quarter (24 per cent) of school-aged Looked After Children in Northern Ireland were covered by a statement compared to just four per cent of the general school population[19]. The same is true in other regions, for example, in England 27 per cent of Looked After Children were covered by a statement[20] compared to three per cent of the general school population[21].

Looked after boys were much more likely to have a statement than looked after girls (30 per cent and 16 per cent respectively). Statements of Special Educational Needs related to:

- Learning or severe learning disability (48 per cent).
- Behavioural problems (12 per cent).
- Other reasons, such as emotional problems or physical disability (42 per cent)[22].

Attendance statistics[23]

Attendance rates

According to DE census data, in 2009, approximately 602 Looked After Children were enrolled in post-primary schools in years 8-12. The analysis presented below refers specifically to this group.

The data suggests that Looked After Children had higher rates of both authorised and unauthorised absence (i.e. 6.0 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively compared to 5.1 per cent and 2.5 per cent for those who are not looked after). This would suggest that unauthorised absences, in particular, led to the higher overall absence rates for Looked After Children (i.e. 12.2 per cent compared to 7.6 per cent for those who were not in care)[24].

- The main reason for authorised absence was illness accounting for 3.7 per cent of total half days missed by Looked After Children (compared to 4.2 per cent for those not looked after).

- The second highest reason for authorised absence was other exceptional circumstances (1.0 per cent) followed by suspension (0.8 per cent). These were markedly lower for children who were not looked after, at 0.3 per cent and 0.1 per cent of the total half days missed respectively.

- The main reason for unauthorised absence among Looked After Children was 'other' reasons (4.1 per cent of total half days compared to 1.2 per cent of those who were not looked after) followed by 2.0 per cent with no reason given. 'Other' absence includes reasons which are not covered by the other codes and are not acceptable to the school, for example, birthdays, shopping or false allegation of illness.

---

[19] DHSSPS, 2010 *Op. Cit.*, p9.
[20] DHSSPS, 2010, *Op. Cit.*,p10.
[17]DCSF (2009) *Special educational needs in England.* London: DCSF.
[22] DHSSPS, 2010, *Op. Cit.,* p10.
[23] These attendance statistics do not include Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) providers.
[24] Department of Education (2010) *Attendance at Grant-aided Primary, Post-Primary and Special Schools 2008/09: Detailed Statistics.* 31 March 2010. p20.

Analysis by ELB reveals that there were some minor variations in the data – BELB had the greatest difference in attendance rates between those looked after and those not looked after (7pp difference), whilst WELB had a somewhat lower variation (2pp difference). Figure 2.2 illustrates these points.

Figure 2.2: Attendance rates by Education and Library Board (2008/2009)
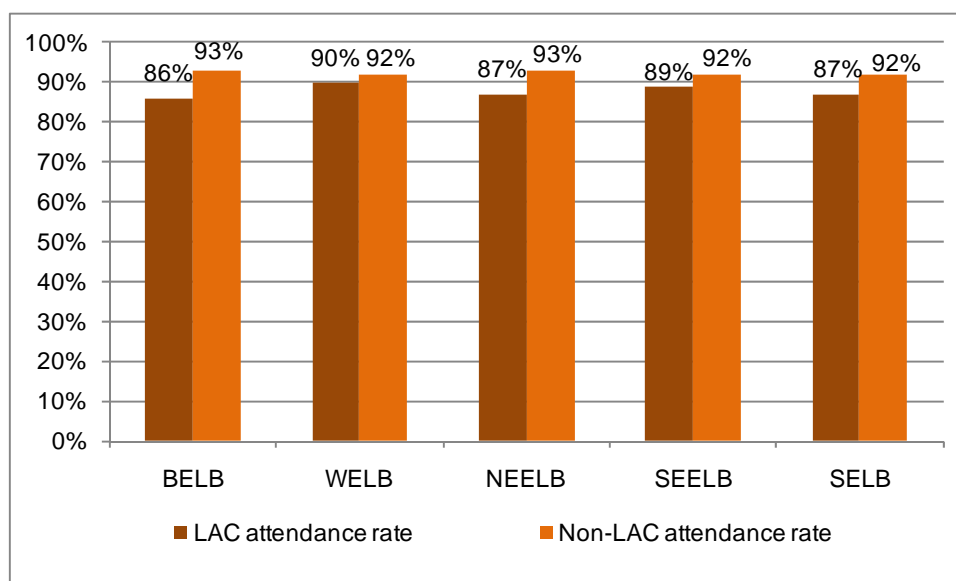
Source: DE, School Census Data, 2009

Within Northern Ireland, 48 schools had five or more Looked After Children enrolled at their school. Therefore, the majority of Looked After Children (70 per cent or 419) were enrolled in 22 per cent (48) of all post-primary schools[25].

Focusing specifically on these 48 schools, Table 2.2 below shows the number of schools in each Board area where Looked After Children attendance is higher/lower than the average attendance rate (87.8 per cent) for all Looked After Children in the post-primary schools in Northern Ireland[26]. It illustrates that attendance is above the NI Looked After Children average for 29 of the 48 schools, and that there are a smaller number of schools (19 in total) where attendance is below the NI Looked After Children average. In particular, there are a small number of schools where there is a significant variation in attendance (e.g. differences of 11pp or more from the NI Looked After Children average). The key point to note in the analysis presented above is that attendance rates amongst Looked After Children appears to be an issue in a small number of schools and affecting a small number of Looked After Children only.

Table 2.2: Number of schools in each board area where attendance of Looked After Children is higher/lower than the average NI attendance rate (for schools with five or more Looked After Children (LAC))

Board area and number of schools with LAC in each area	Number of schools where LAC attendance is higher than NI LAC average attendance	Number of schools in Board area where LAC attendance is lower than NI LAC average attendance			
		By 0-5 pp	By 6-10 pp	By 11-15 pp	By 16+ pp
BELB (6 schools)	1	4	-	-	1
NEELB (10 schools)	5	3	2	-	-
SEELB (12 schools)	9	1	-	2	-
SELB (9 schools)	5	2	2	-	-
WELB (11 schools)	9	1	1	-	-

---

[25] Department of Education Northern Ireland (2009) *School census data*. Bangor: Department of Education.
[26] Ibid.

Total	**29**	**11**	**5**	**2**	**1**

Source: DE School Census data analysed by PwC

Exclusions

Looked After Children were more likely to be excluded from school than other children who were not looked after. In Northern Ireland, 1 per cent of Looked After Children of school age had been excluded from school in 2008/09 (i.e. 13 children) compared to 0.01 per cent of the general school population[27]. There is a similar picture elsewhere, for example, in England 0.4 per cent of Looked After Children were excluded[28] compared to 0.1 per cent of the general school population.

Suspensions

Looked After Children were four times more likely to be suspended from school - 8 per cent were suspended in 2008/09 compared with 2 per cent of the general school population. Suspension was more prevalent for looked after boys (12 per cent) compared to girls (5 per cent). Age was also a factor: Looked After Children aged 12-15 years were most likely (15 per cent) to be suspended from school; followed by those aged 16 and over (9 per cent)[29]. Just over one-half of the Looked After Children who had been suspended, had been suspended for less than five days (51 per cent), whilst 6 per cent had been suspended for 20 days or more[30].

Attainment statistics

A total of 149 Looked After Children were eligible to sit Key Stage 3 tests in 2008/09 (i.e. 25 per cent of the 602 Looked After Children in post-primary schools). Just over one-quarter (26 per cent) of these children had a statement of Special Educational Needs[31].

Figure 2.3 shows the proportion of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland, the general school population in Northern Ireland, and Looked After Children in England attaining Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3. This figure shows that the attainment levels of Looked After Children in Northern Ireland were slightly lower in comparison to their counterparts in England for all of these subjects - English, mathematics and science[32].

Looked after girls tend to perform better than boys in English with 30 per cent of girls achieving a Level 5 or above compared to 24 per cent of looked after boys. Boys tended to perform better in science and maths with 24 per cent achieving this level in science and 31 per cent in maths compared to 15 per cent and 22 per cent respectively for girls[33].

---

[27] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p10.
[28] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p10.
[29] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p10.
[30] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p11.
[31] To allow comparison with the general school population in Northern Ireland children with a statement of Special Educational Needs because of severe learning disability were excluded from the analysis.
[32] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p14.
[33] DHSSPS *Op. Cit.,* p14.

Figure 2.3: Children achieving Level 5 or above in Key Stage 3, English, Maths and Science Tests (2008/09)
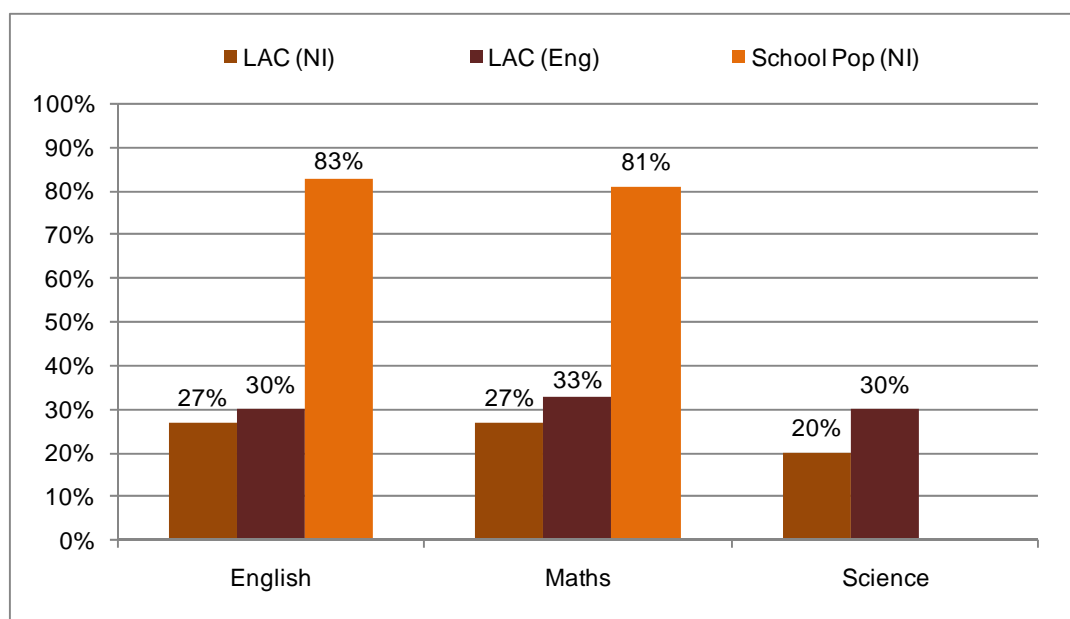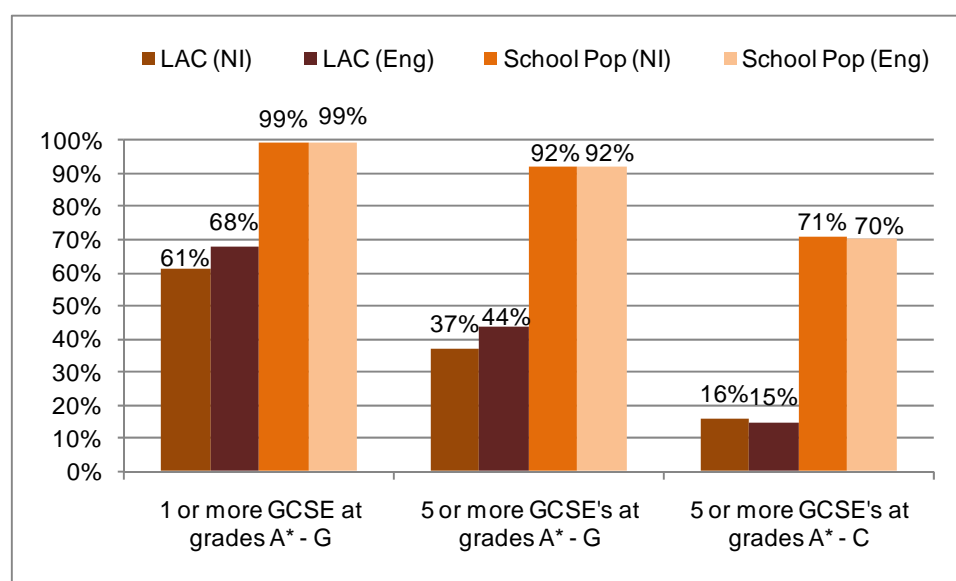

Source: PwC analysis of DHSSPS and NISRA data
Note: From 2006/07 onwards science was not compulsory at Key Stage 3 and information for Northern Ireland is no longer published.

In 2008/2009, 179 Looked After Children were eligible to sit GCSE's or GNVQs (i.e. 30 per cent of the 602 Looked After Children in post-primary schools). Just over 22 per cent (39) of those eligible to sit the exams were covered by a statement of Special Educational Needs[34]. Figure 2.4 shows the percentage of Looked After Children and the general school population in Northern Ireland, and Looked After Children in England that attained GCSE/GNVQs or equivalent qualifications in 2008/09.

Figure 2.4: Looked After Children achieving GCSE or equivalent passes (2008/09)

Source: PwC analysis of DHSSPS / NISRA / DFE (England) data

---

[34] To allow comparison with the general school population in Northern Ireland children with a statement of Special Educational Needs because of severe learning disability were excluded from the analysis.

As with the Key Stage 3 data, Looked After Children in Northern Ireland did not perform as well at GCSE level as those in England. It is important to note that the general school population in Northern Ireland performed on a par or slightly above their peers in England. Overall looked after girls performed better in Northern Ireland with 41 per cent of girls achieving five or more GCSE's at grades A*-G compared to 13 per cent of boys. They were also more likely to achieve five or more GCSE's at grades A*-C (i.e. 22 per cent of looked after girls achieved five or more GCSE's at grades A*-C compared to 11 per cent of looked after boys[35]).

Summary

- The statistics show that Looked After Children are more likely to have a statement of Special Educational Needs, more likely to be absent from school and are more likely to underachieve.

- In addition, a more detailed analysis of the above statistics by gender, shows that, statements of Educational Needs, rates of suspension and underachievement were more prevalent amongst looked after boys than girls.

- Of the 602 Looked After Children in post-primary school:

  – the majority (70 per cent) are clustered in 48 schools throughout NI. Within this cluster, there are 29 schools with attendance rates above the NI Looked After Children average and 19 schools with below average attendance rates[36]. In addition, there are three schools where the absenteeism rate for Looked After Children is 11 percentage points or more below the NI Looked After Children average. The statistics show that higher than average concentrations of absenteeism amongst Looked After Children are found in a relatively small number of these schools and therefore a small number of Looked After Children.

  – 149 were eligible to undertake Key Stage 3 exams. Just over one-quarter (27%) of these children achieved a Level 5 in either English or maths, compared to 83% and 81% of all pupils who were eligible to take these exams.

  – 179 were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 61% achieved at least one A*-G grade (in comparison to 99% of all eligible pupils); 37% achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-G (in comparison to 92% of all eligible pupils), and; 16% achieved five or more GCSEs at grade A*-C (in comparison to 71% of all eligible pupils).

---

[35] DHSSPS, 2010, *Op. Cit.*, p15.
[36] FSM entitlement in 2010 in these schools was 28% for the 48 schools in question. For the 19 schools where attendance was poorer than the NI average, FSM entitlement was similarly 28%.

3 Literature findings on the factors influencing attendance and attainment of Looked After Children

Introduction

The statistics suggest that Looked After Children have higher rates of non-attendance, suspensions and exclusions than their peers. In addition, the statistics suggest that Looked After Children are more likely to underachieve and underperform compared to their peers. Therefore, it is important to identify and understand the factors which may influence these lower attendance and attainment rates. In this section we identify the factors which the literature suggests have an impact on either or both of these, as well as providing an analysis of the literature on the factors which influence non-attendance and underachievement of Looked After Children. It is structured under the following headings:

- Factors impacting on attendance and attainment of Looked After Children.
- Summary.

Factors impacting on attendance and attainment of Looked After Children

Figure 3.1 suggests that the factors that contribute to either the attendance or attainment of Looked After Children can be grouped into three broad areas, background characteristics of the Looked After Child; home/care setting and support arrangements— each of these are discussed in turn below and are depicted in Figure 3.1. An important point to note, however, is that only a relatively small number of the research studies reviewed could establish some links between specific factors and their contribution to either attendance and/or attainment rates of Looked After Children. However, none of the studies reviewed could establish links between attendance rates of Looked After Children and their attainment.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual model showing the link between Looked After Children context, and attendance and achievement
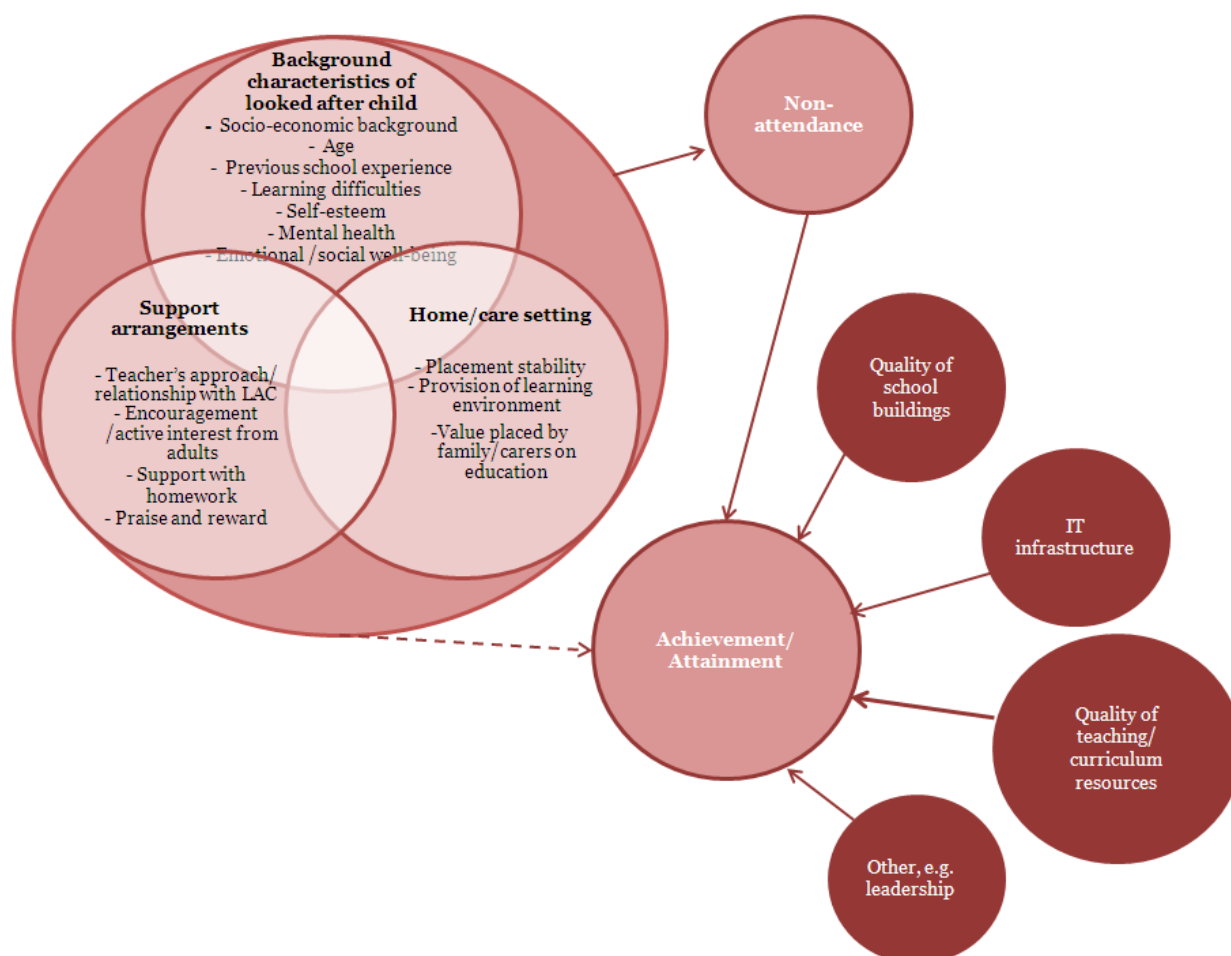
Background characteristics of the Looked After Child

There are a wide range of background factors of Looked After Children that can contribute to a poor level of attendance and attainment. They can include the following:

- Socio-economic background.
- Age at which child enters the care system.
- Negative school experiences.
- School exclusion.
- Personal factors.

Each of these factors is discussed in turn below, alongside examples of practices which were reported to be effective in helping to reduce the negative impact(s) of these factors.

Socio-economic background

Socio-economic background has an impact on attendance rates in general. In 2008/09, DE found that in post-primary schools where less than 10 per cent of pupils enrolled were eligible for FSM; the average overall absence level was 4.9 per cent of the total half days. This compares with 12.2 per cent of the total half days for schools with more than 50 per cent of pupils enrolled eligible for FSM. Since the level of FSM eligibility is indicative of levels of deprivation, the data suggests that absence tends to be higher in more disadvantaged areas[37].

Socio-economic background can have an impact on attainment of Looked After Children. Local authorities in England often attribute the low achievement of Looked After Children to their disadvantaged backgrounds, amongst other things. Socio-economic background is a contributing factor to low educational attainment, with those who are exposed to early disadvantage often requiring targeted educational support to succeed[38].

The research also shows that pupils from poorer socio-economic backgrounds often have less positive attitudes to school and learning than their peers from more affluent backgrounds. One reason given for the difference in attainment is parental involvement in children's education, which can influence how pupils perceive education and schoolwork, and their motivation to achieve[39].

Age at which child enters the care system

McClung and Gayle (2010)[40] suggest that the age at which a child becomes looked after is important to their educational achievement. Those entering care before the age of 12 generally perform better than those who come into care after the age of 12. The reason for this may be that those who became looked after when they were younger tended to live in foster homes and therefore have more settled lives.

As Looked After Children become older, there are potential issues in relation to placement stability (discussed below) with the possibility that they become looked after in a residential care setting, which, for various reasons, can have a negative impact on attendance and achievement rates.

Negative school experiences

A study by Bryderup and Trental (2010) indicated bullying as one of the reasons for young people in care having periods of non-attendance. Another study, undertaken by DEL (2010), focusing on those who fall into the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category, (which includes those who are in care, who have left care, or are on the edge of care) found that a multitude of negative school experiences of NEET had a significant effect on attendance rates at school. For example, it indicated that young people reported schools to be uninterested and unsupportive leaving them feeling isolated. The combined effects of these experiences were reported to have contributed to NEET dropping out of formal education.

In addition, the study indicated that bullying can lead to truancy and higher absence rates, affecting achievement and raising the potential for disengagement. If a victim has an aggressive response to the bullying this can result in exclusion which will further affect the child's achievement and play a part in their disengagement with education.

School exclusion

Research indicates that Looked After Children are more likely to be excluded from school and that this is a key factor contributing to rates of non-attendance. For example, a study undertaken by Barnardo's in 2006

---

[37] Department of Education, 2010, *Op. Cit.*
[38] McClung, M. & Gayle, V. (2010) Exploring the care effects of multiple factors on the educational achievement of children looked after at home and away from home. An investigation of two Scottish local authorities. *Child & Family Social Work,* 15, p. 410.
[39] Sheppard, A. (2009) School attendance and attainment: poor attenders' perceptions of schoolwork and parental involvement in their education. British Journal of Special Education, 36 (2) pp.104
[40] McClung & Gayle, *Op. Cit.*

indicated that of the 66 young people included in their research, and who had been in care during their school years:

- 41 of these young people had been excluded from schools for periods lasting between one day and two years.
- 22 have been excluded for more than 60 days.
- 2 had no secondary education at all[41].

By contrast, among those children who were not in care, the majority of parents (93 per cent) said their child had never been excluded from school, and of those who had, 83 per cent said it was for less than a week[42].

McClung and Gayle (2010)[43] found that where Looked After Children experience a change of school, this was largely due to either exclusion from their previous school or placement changes. They found that of those who participated in their study[44] four-fifths (80 per cent) of looked-after children had changed school at least once and 10 per cent had changed school more than five times. In addition, they found that almost four-fifths (80 per cent) of those who participated in their study had been excluded from school at some point and a significant number had been excluded more than once. Almost all children agreed that an improvement in their behaviour may have prevented them from being excluded from school.

Whilst exclusions have historically been higher for Looked After Children in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK compared to the general school population, Barnardo's indicates that they have been encouraged by the reducing number of permanent exclusions in England but believe more could be done to address this issue by intervening earlier to tackle issues relating to disruptive behaviour, which often precipitates exclusion.

> *"The single biggest reason for all exclusions is 'persistent disruptive behaviour'. However, Barnardo's research argues that early intervention or effective alternative provision can help stop behaviour escalating to this crisis point and therefore limit the need to exclude."* (Barnardos, 2010)

Personal factors

The general literature on attendance indicates that personal factors have an impact on absence rates. Some of these factors included: lack of social skills and confidence, poor peer relations, lack of academic ability, lack of concentration and lack of self-management skills. Personal factors can also include experiencing learning difficulties and Special Educational Needs (including ADHD and related syndromes[45].)

One or more of the above can contribute to poor self-esteem and self-concept. There are some interesting examples of interventions that aim to, for example, (re)build the self-esteem of Looked After Children. For example, VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care) run a mentoring service for Looked After Children which places a significant amount of emphasis on building self-esteem and self-confidence for those who are aged between 12 and 18[46]. Other schemes such as those provided by Fostering Achievement aims to improve the academic ability of Looked After Children by providing GCSE revision classes and extra tuition where required.

Mentoring Service (provided by VOYPIC[47])

VOYPIC provide a mentoring service to Looked After Children and young people between the ages of 12 and 18 paying particular attention to the young person's educational needs; looking at their future career; aspirations and key motivators. The young person and volunteer meet for 2-3 hours once a week for a year to undertake activities which they plan together. The aim is to increase the young person's self-esteem and self-confidence and focuses on the personal development of the young person looking at issues such as social exclusion, interpersonal skills, and independence skills and coping skills.

---

[41] Barnardo's (2006) *Failed by the System – The views of young care leavers on their educational experience.* Available at: http://www.barnardos.org.uk/failed_by_the_system_report.pdf

[42] The Equality Company (2010) *Indicators of equality of opportunity and good relations in education.* Belfast: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

[43] McClung & Gayle, *Op. Cit.*

[44] Their analysis included c. 1,400 LAC from two local authorities in Scotland.

[45] Reid, K. (2006) *The causes, views and traits of school absenteeism and truancy: an analytical review.* Manchester: Manchester University Press. See also Reid, K. (2008) The causes of non-attendance: an empirical study. *Educational Review,* 60(4).

[46] McLaughlin, R. (2002) *Branded a problem.* Belfast: Save the Children, First Key and VOYPIC.

[47] VOYPIC (2010) *Volunteer mentors get recognition for their achievements.* Belfast: VOYPIC.

GCSE revision classes and tuition (provided by Fostering Achievement)

Fostering Achievement make GCSE revision classes available to all Looked After Children doing their GCSE's. The classes are mainly in Maths and English and aim to help children with their revision. There are monthly classes which run from October, with longer sessions over the Easter Holidays. In 2009, 57 Looked After Children availed of the GCSE revision classes which were held across 7 schools in Northern Ireland. Those who availed of these revision classes performed significantly better than the NI LAC average. Fostering Achievement also provide a lot of tuition to any young person with a need for it.

Home/care setting

The literature suggests that a number of factors relating to the home/care setting can impact on both the attendance and attainment of Looked After Children. These include:

- Placement type.
- Placement stability.
- Home/care environment.

Each of these is discussed in turn below.

Placement type

Research would suggest that the placement type is an important factor in examining the attendance and attainment of Looked After Children. Research studies suggest that children in a foster care setting generally have better rates of attendance and attainment than those placed in residential care[48]. For the latter of these settings, their attendance may be affected due to peer pressure from others in the care home.

McClung and Gayle (2010) found that a higher proportion of children in foster care attained English and Maths at SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework) level 4 or above[49] whereas children in residential care performed as poorly as those looked after at home. They found that 60 per cent of children in residential care actually started off being looked after in foster care but had been unable to settle.

This is significant as children in residential settings tend have more placements than those in foster care. Research findings suggest that generally, residential care is unable to provide Looked After Children with the same stability that foster care placements provide. It also indicates that large numbers of young people in residential care settings is a barrier to creating a culture which is conducive to education, homework and attendance[50].

---

[48] Davey, D. & Pithouse, A. (2008) *Schooling and Looked After Children: Exploring contexts and outcomes in Standard Attainment Tests (SATS)*. Adoption and Fostering, 32(3).
[49] McClung & Gayle, *Op. Cit.*
[50] McLaughlin, *Op. Cit.*

Placement stability

A study undertaken by Barnardo's (2006) indicates that those who have a long term or stable placement and/or whose main placement is with foster carers and within their local area are more likely to have better educational achievement[51].

Children tend to move in order to meet their immediate care needs in the aftermath of a breakdown in placement. This is reported to often lead to disruption at school which can contribute to periods of non-attendance at school. If this happens at critical points in the school year, for example, in the lead up to statutory examinations (e.g. GCSE), this can have a detrimental impact on their future[52] (see below). Research conducted by McLaughlin (2002) also points to the disruption impact of placement instability. Her study found that moving homes had an impact on the child's education as the child has to settle into a new environment and then catch up with the rest of the class. The uncertainty and worry for young people surrounding a move affects their concentration. The following quote is from a Looked After Child aged 14 who was interviewed as part of the study undertaken by McLaughlin in 2002[53].

"Yes, because I was more thinking about where will I be whenever I go back home. I was more thinking about that than my school work and that put me off my school work and when I couldn't concentrate, I got angry." (Quoted in McLaughlin, R. (2002))

Other research undertaken by Bryderup and Trental (2010) add weight to the above findings. They suggest that frequent placement changes can have a negative impact on the child's sense of identity and self-esteem, and can also adversely affect their experience of, and access to, education[54]. Those who experience placement instability, often change schools, with one study showing that 80 per cent of Looked After Children in the study had changed school at least once and 10 per cent had changed school more than five times[55].

"When changing school you have to start from scratch with friends and everything. That is annoying because you just get adjusted to the peers and teachers and get used to the books that are used and then you change school and it is all different. New friends, new teachers and new books... [It's all] totally different." (Quoted in Bryderup, I. & Trentel, M. (2010))

Placement instability, alongside a change of school, also has an impact on educational attainment. For example, the former Department for Children, Schools and Families in England indicated that, on average, Looked After Children who move schools during Key Stage 4 obtain 75 points lower at GCSE, even after factors such as prior attainment and deprivation are taken into account[56].

An example of a specific intervention that research has shown has improved placement stability is Treatment Foster Care. The following case study illustrates what Treatment Foster Care is, how it differs to traditional foster care, and what impact it is believed to have on placement stability.

---

[51] 'A better education for children in care' Social Exclusion Unit 2003 cited by Barnardo's (2006) *Failed by the system – The views of young care leavers on their educational experience.* Barnardos. p7.

[52] Brodie, I. & Morris, M. (2009) *Improving educational outcomes for Looked After Children and young people.* London: C4EO.

[53] McLaughlin, *Op. Cit.*

[54] NICE (2010) *Promoting the quality of life of Looked After Children and young people.* London: NICE and SCIE. See also, Bryderup, I. & Trentel, M. (2010) *Danish Report WP6 – Young people from a public care background pathways to education in Denmark.* Copenhagen: YIPPEE.p122.

[55] McClung & Gayle, *Op. Cit.* These statistics are in contrast to those in Northern Ireland, where 89 per cent of children who had been care continuously for the previous 12 months (as at 30 September 2009) had no school changes, whilst one-tenth (10 per cent) had experienced one school change, and a further 1 per cent had experienced two or more school changes.

[56] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Improving the Educational Attainment of Children in care (Looked After Children).* London: DCSF.

Treatment Foster Care – an example of how this has contributed to placement stability[57]

Introduction: Treatment Foster Care (TFC) is a specific form of intensive or specialist fostering, which emphasises a clinical approach to interventions for young people with very challenging behaviour who are self-harming and/or at the risk of custody. Children are referred to foster care programmes to address their serious levels of emotional, behavioural and medical problems.

Differences between Treatment Foster Care and traditional foster care: the features which make this type of care different to traditional foster care are as follows:

- There is an above average level of support, training and remuneration of carers.
- It is predominantly used with foster carers who have children with challenging behaviour.
- It is a co-ordinated method of working to address behaviours in the home, school and community.
- It includes an intensive amount of support for foster carers such as clinical staff including psychiatrists, who are available to support the placement.
- It includes a specified length of stay.

The impact of Treatment Foster Care on placement stability: evaluations have indicated increased placement and educational stability for young people coming onto the programme for whom more conventional approaches would not offer an effective solution.

Home/care environment

Some Looked After Children may not attend school due to bad habits picked up prior to becoming looked after, for example, where the child's family did not encourage them to attend school and therefore the child places less value on their own education. It is thought that a lot of "damage" has been done before young people come into care and the "baggage" that young people carry with them can affect their self-esteem and confidence. Most of the young people in care may have already established poor attendance levels at school, poor concentration and poor listening skills before entering a care setting[58]. Contributory factors might include birth parents' own experiences of schooling[59], inconsistent parental attitudes towards schooling and lack of emotional and practical support by parents to secure their child's consistent school attendance[60].

When a child comes into care, therefore, it is important that they experience an appropriate learning environment in their care setting, which will reinforce the value of education beyond the school setting. Research suggests that a high quality of care in their placement can encourage a Looked After Child's commitment to education[61]. The home should have a positive learning environment and carers and children should both have high aspirations towards educational achievement, which should be backed up by additional resources and appropriate teaching support[62].

However, such high levels of support are not always evident in all care settings. For example, in one Scottish study, Looked After Children in residential care settings report[63] that they have no-one to help them with their homework, for example residential workers either would not or could not help them with their homework. In addition, just over a quarter of Looked After Children interviewed as part of a study by McClung and Gayle[64] indicated that they did not have a quiet place to study in their care setting. Primarily these were children living in residential units, who, in addition to the above, do not always have access to computers. Large numbers of Looked After Children in residential units is also seen, in itself, as a being a barrier to create a culture which is conducive to education, homework and attendance.

---

[57] SSIA (2007) What works in promoting good outcomes for Looked After Children and young people. Cardiff: Institute of Public Care. p13.

[58] McLaughlin, *Op. Cit., p50*

[59] Sheppard, *Op. Cit., p109*

[60] Sheppard, *Op. Cit.,* p110.

[61] Brodie & Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p29.

[62] Brodie & Morris, *Op. Cit.*, p10.

[63] Gayle and McClung, *Op. Cit.*, p418

[64] Gayle and McClung, *Op. Cit.*, p418

The following example of good practice is of a project that Aberdeen City Council implemented to improve the attendance and attainment of Looked After Children. It did this by providing additional support for children looked after at home as well as developing personalised packages of support for those accommodated in two residential units.

Aberdeen city pilot project – an example of enhanced support for Looked After Children in their care setting[65]

Introduction: Aberdeen City Council's pilot project aimed to raise attainment of Looked After Children within the authority by providing additional support for children looked after at home, their families and schools.

How the project operated and who it involved: as part of the project, additional support was provided, which focused on family liaison work and linked in with designated teachers to examine reasons for non-attendance and devise strategies to support attendance within the local authority. The following people were involved in the project:

- Full time project manager.
- One project strategist.
- One project assistant.
- One dedicated family liaison officer.
- Four designated teachers for Looked After Children (one within each target school).
- Educational researcher.
- Educational psychologist.

Outcome of the project: the project was successful due to having motivated staff members who fed back information to project leaders about the barriers they faced in working within the education system in relation to Looked After Children. The Family Liaison Officer was able to successfully engage with the families involved, and the project leaders believed this was because she was based neither in social work nor education and was regarded as a 'neutral' point of contact who acted without a specific agenda. There was also good sharing of information and good relationships developed between young people and staff, as well as raised attendance.

Support arrangements

Putting in place support for Looked After Children is critical to encouraging their attendance and in giving them the best possible opportunities to succeed. The following were identified as being important:

- Monitoring and tracking attendance rates of Looked After Children.
- Support provided by staff who work with Looked After Children.
- Encouragement through praise and reward.

Each of these is discussed below.

Monitoring and tracking attendance rates of Looked After Children

One of the key elements in securing positive attendance which is championed by the Department for Education in England is a systematic approach to gathering and analysing attendance data. This includes a breakdown of absence by vulnerable groups including, amongst others, Looked After Children. It is important that this data is used to identify and track individuals and groups whose absence is a cause for concern[66]. There are examples of projects that have focused on improving the information systems and procedures to contribute to improved attendance rates of Looked After Children. For example, in Scotland, the Fife Pilot Project enabled data for all Looked After Children across the local authority (including independent residential homes) to be fed into a central database. This enabled earlier and more effective intervention to take place than may have otherwise been the case.

---

[65] University of Strathclyde (2008) *The educational attainment of Looked After Children – local authority pilot projects.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government Education Directorate. p83
[66] Department for Education (2010) *Improving attendance and reducing persistent absence.* London: Department for Education. pp 13-14.

Fife Pilot Project – an example of how more effective data systems have improved the management of Looked After Children's attendance

Background: the pilot project aimed to develop more effective data systems for Looked After Children than those already used in the authority. In order to do this a data management project officer and a project planning officer were appointed. The functionality of the new information system means that staff from Fife Council, as well as staff from independent residential homes, are able to upload information centrally.

Impact of the project: as a result of the project, data systems for Looked After Children and young people were considerably improved. The authority now has a much more robust system for processing Regulation 7[67] letters and a more effective monthly monitoring system, which records attainment, attendance, and exclusions, as well as general progress, areas of concern and unresolved issues. The integrated nature of the information system helps to identify cases where a problem cannot be resolved within the homes and where the intervention of a service manager may help. Every month school liaison groups discuss all looked after pupils in the school and updated information is sent to the Joint Access Team.

Support provided by staff who work with Looked After Children

McClung and Gayle (2010) found that where students had been excluded, the main reason for exclusion was their behaviour. The children in that study indicated that their behaviour was directly related to the lack of understanding by teachers and pupils over what it was like to be looked after.

Jackson et al (cited by Brodie, I. and Morris, M., 2009) highlighted that emotional support features highly when young people rate barriers to learning, or key factors of effective support. The key point is that young people value support in relation to their education and they don't mind who provides this support but it is more likely to be carers, teachers, support workers or other professionals. And in terms of the way in which that support could be provided, a survey carried out by Barnardo's with 66 young people (aged between 16 and 21 years) indicated that staff who treat Looked After Children in the following ways had helped them to engage more effectively with their own learning:

- Not being 'singled out' as different.
- Someone offering unobtrusive help.
- Being listened to.
- Not using threats – "I'll tell your social worker".
- Respecting confidentiality (within child protection boundaries).
- Understanding that school work might fluctuate when things changed in care[68].

"I had no people to help me with reading, writing and things like that. They just think it's one class with all the same abilities. They don't think about individual kids...if they'd given me individual help I'd have found education easier and wouldn't have wagged it all the time." (Quoted in Brodie, I. & Morris, M. (2009))

It is important, therefore, that staff working with young people are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to help them get the most out of their time in education. Table 3.1 below highlights some examples of existing practice that build capacity of school staff (and other professionals) to better meet the needs of Looked After Children.

---

[67] Regulation 7 letters provides details of the child/young person's legal status.
[68] Barnardo's, *Op. Cit.,* p8.

Table 3.1: Examples of existing practice to build capacity of staff (e.g. teachers, residential workers, attendance officers and educational psychologists) who work with Looked After Children

Support provided	Description
Northern Ireland - Training Programmes run jointly by SELB and WELB[69]	The Southern and Western Education and Library Board's provide training courses for teachers which cover the following area: 'Improving educational outcomes for Children in Need, including Looked After Children". The programme aims to enhance participants' awareness of the complex additional needs of Looked After Children; identify how schools can help develop resilience, positive identity and holistic achievement; examine best practice when working with parents/carers and other services supporting these pupils. The programmes also look at the impact of these children's experience on their behaviour and learning as well as considering best practice protocols to promote, support and sustain the achievement of Looked After Children within education settings.
Northern Ireland – Looked After Children In Education Support Service	The Looked after Children in Education Support Service was set up in response to the recommendations from Care Matters. It was recommended that each Board should have a dedicated Education Welfare Service (EWS) Team for Looked After Children with two EWOs, a Youth Worker and dedicated time from Education Psychology. The SEELB and BELB set the above up as an Initiative between the two Boards. They work closely with the Belfast Trust; South Eastern Trust; LACE; Voypic; Fostering Achievement, and; Barnardo's. The above groups of Partners meet on a bi-monthly basis in order to ensure they are providing the best service to Looked after Children in the above mentioned Trust/Board areas.
England – Holding the Space (The Kite, Sunderland)[70]	This is an intensive therapeutic intervention aimed at young people living in residential care. Existing therapeutic services were finding it hard to meet the emotional needs of this group and therefore it was felt that a change in the culture of residential care was required. Holding the Space was developed in response to the identified need above. It is a two-year training course in advanced therapeutic skills for residential workers. There are four components to the programme: • Therapeutic group work method called 'the use of council'. • Carl Rogers' Core Conditions. • The Creative Arts as Therapy. • Transpersonal Therapy. External evaluations indicate that helping the children emotionally has had a positive impact on the young people's education. Attendance levels are high and residential staff are good at encouraging and rewarding young people. The training has improved behavior and relationships in the home.
England - Looked After Children, Health and Education Support Team (LACHES), Barking and Dagenham[71]	LACHES is a multi-agency team which offers support both to professionals and to individual children in care. The team includes a wide range of professionals (e.g. attendance officers, specialist mental health worker and educational psychologists). The team mediate between schools and social workers to make sure that Looked After Children get the support they need. They also run a mentoring programme where volunteers are recruited from the local community and provide short and long-term support to Looked After Children and young people. After one year of LACHES, young people's outcomes in the Borough increased 200 per cent. Over the course of three years they have tripled the number of young people entering higher education and were on track to meet Local Area Agreement targets on achievement. LACHES is still ongoing and between 2005 and 2008, 90 children and young people have had one to one support through the mentoring project. This has led to better engagement in mainstream education and support with flexi or vocational learning.

---

[69] Information gathered through face-to-face consulation with representatives from the Western Education and Library Board and Southern Education and Library Board.

[70] Brodie & Morris, *Op. Cit. [There are examples of Therapeutic interventions in all 5 Health and Social Care Trusts]*

[71] Looked After Children, Health and Education Support Team (LACHES), Barking and Dagenham. Available at: http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8182541 [Accessed on 24/01/2011]

Encouragement through praise and reward

The Barnardo's survey (2006) found that young people would be more encouraged in their learning if they received praise and acknowledgement for their achievements from social workers and teachers, as well as carers. Children and young people value reward for achievement and it encourages them in their education[72]. Looked After Children would like people to have expectations of them which are in line with what are expected of other children but also commensurate with their abilities. The literature suggests that taking these factors into consideration would encourage them to do better[73].

"I was really pleased with myself 'cos I got loads of certificates and all...when I got home one day after me getting the medal and the school must have phoned them up, and they said there is a wee surprise for you in your bedroom, and there was toys and all. Then I ran downstairs and said thanks and all." (Quoted in McLaughlin, R. (2002))

Summary

The following is a summary of the key findings from this section of the report:

- A review of the literature suggests that the factors contributing to the non-attendance and attainment of Looked After Children can be grouped into three broad areas. These include:

    - Background characteristics of the Looked After Child: these factors relate to the background of the Looked After Children and the impact of their experience on them.
    - Support arrangements: these factors relate to the support and encouragement that Looked After Children receive from adults in their lives e.g. carers, social workers and teachers/teaching assistants, that, depending on the quality of this support, will either inhibit or support attendance rates of Looked After Children.
    - Home/Care Setting: this covers the placement setting and whether or not particular Looked After Children experience periods of placement instability. It also includes important factors such as whether the setting provides an environment conducive to learning.

- The important point to note is that relatively only a small number of the research studies we reviewed were able to draw out the contribution of specific factors to non-attendance rates and attainment of Looked After Children. Nonetheless, these studies were useful in understanding the key factors which could impact negatively or positively on both attendance and attainment.

---

[72] Brodie & Morris, *Op. Cit.*
[73] Barnardo's, *Op. Cit.*

4 Stakeholder views on the non-attendance of Looked After Children

Introduction

The statistics presented in Section 2 indicated that overall Looked After Children in post-primary schools had higher rates of non-attendance than those who are not looked after (12.2 per cent compared to 7.6 per cent)[74]. In addition, it also suggested that non-attendance was not an issue for all post-primary schools. For example, we found that 48 schools (i.e. 22 per cent of all post-primary schools) had 70 per cent of all Looked After Children enrolments. Of the 48 schools, our analysis suggested that non-attendance of Looked After Children was an issue only for a relatively small number of these schools and therefore for a small number of Looked After Children

This section examines in detail the views of stakeholders with regard to non-attendance rates of Looked After Children, the reasons for their non-attendance and concludes with an examination of what both schools and ELBs are doing to manage this issue. It is structured under the following headings:

- Non-attendance rates of Looked After Children amongst post-primary schools interviewed.
- Barriers contributing to non-attendance.
- Management of non-attendance.
- Summary.

Non-attendance rates of Looked After Children amongst post-primary schools interviewed

The schools which were selected to take part in the stakeholder interviews had relatively high numbers of Looked After Children enrolled - an average of 9 per school. This is higher than the typical number of Looked After Children in most schools as this was one of the criteria for selecting the sample of schools. However, interviews with the pastoral leaders in each of these schools suggest that from their perspective, they did not have an issue with the attendance rates of most Looked After Children. The majority of schools indicated that it was predominantly a small number of Looked After Children within each school, for whom attendance was an issue.

In addition, when attendance did become an issue for Looked After Children who previously had a good attendance record; this was usually related to significant events in the home/care setting or other related family issues, for example regaining contact with birth parents or other family members.

School representatives were asked who they believed were the most persistent non-attenders within the school and, as noted above, they indicated that Looked After Children were often not among those who gave the most concern. At a general level, schools indicated that attendance was seen to be more of an issue relating to age as opposed to care status with attendance rates amongst year 11 and 12 pupils (including both Looked After Children and those who are not looked after) giving cause for concern. This is supported by DE attendance statistics which show that, in post-primary schools, overall absence levels peak in Year 11 and unauthorised absence levels peak in Year 12. Factors identified for non-attendance by age included: under-performance;

---

[74] Department of Education, 2010, *Op. Cit.*

inability to cope with exam pressure; the self belief that they are failing to achieve; and difficulty identifying strategies/supports to address these issues. The cumulative impact of these factors is growing disaffection manifested in decreasing attendance rates.

School representatives also indicated that in general (not specific to Looked After Children), children's attendance can be affected by: a lack of support at home, difficulties at home (e.g. single-parent families/ parental separation), or other issues in their lives (e.g. drugs, alcohol, family problems and/or mental health issues). A small number of school representatives suggested that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), for example, those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, can also have low rates of attendance. One representative stated their belief that parents of pupils with Special Educational Needs are often more lenient allowing their child(ren) to stay at home when their child(ren) showed a reluctance to attend school on a given day.

Table 4.1: Schools' views on the non-attendance rates of Looked After Children

Key point	Supporting evidence
Attendance is not an issue for most Looked After Children	*"As an overall trend, there are no problems with LAC students. Certainly there are one or two [for whom attendance is an issue] but it wouldn't be indicative of LAC in general."* (School representative)
	"Our Looked After Children attendance rates are quite good. The average rate for the school is 92 per cent *and 9 out of 10 Looked After Children are above that. Only one has an attendance rate below the school average."* (School representative)
Events in the home or other family issues can impact negatively on attendance rates of Looked After Children	*"Excluding crisis situations, attendance of LAC is very good."* (School representative)
	"Where attendance is not good, it is when the original parents are involved. Foster care attendance rates are very good" (School representative)
Underperforming Year 11 and 12 pupils, in general, tend to have higher rates of non-attendance than other year groups	*"The most persistent non-attenders are those who are underperforming and when they get to year 11 or 12 and with the pressure of exams they completely disengage with the system."* (School representative)
Children from single-parent families or where there are issues at home can sometimes have higher rates of non-attendance	*"Children from not so good home circumstances would also tend to have lower attendance rates."* (School representative)
Children with Special Educational Needs tend to have higher rates of non-attendance	*"A minority of pupils who do not attend well are SEN pupils."* (School representative)
	"Children with specific special needs, for example autism, have a lower than average attendance due to their special needs and health problems." (School representative)

Barriers contributing to non-attendance

The key point from above is that non-attendance does not appear to be an issue impacting negatively on all Looked After Children in the schools which took part in our research. However, a key objective of our research is to establish the underlying causes and influences on non-attendance by Looked After Children at post-primary level. Therefore, we invited interviewees (ELBs, schools, voluntary organisations, EOTAS) to share their views on the barriers they believe contribute to the non-attendance of Looked After Children. We have structured our findings under the three broad groups of barriers which contribute to non-attendance of Looked After Children as identified in the literature review, namely:

- Background characteristics of the Looked After Child.
- Home/care setting.
- Support arrangements.

Background characteristics of the Looked After Child

Stage of schooling

The age of the child and their stage of schooling are important factors which contribute to non-attendance of Looked After Children. Our research suggests that older children are more likely to take a stand and say they are not going to school compared to younger children. Also, those in exam classes are more likely to not attend school due to the pressure associated with exams. Interviewees suggested that around the time of exams, Looked After Children begin to question the usefulness of them and what they might do afterwards.

> *"The pressure of exams can also get to the young people as they get older and then they can disappear and not want to come to school."* (School representative)

Emotional/social well-being

Previous experiences in a child's life can affect their emotional stability. In the majority of cases where attendance has become an issue, there are often so many other things going on in their life that education is often not one of their priorities. School representatives, who participated in our research, suggested that where emotional/social issues are contributory factors, there is a need to resolve these issues before the child can fully engage with their own education. The child's attitude/emotional well-being can impact on their attendance also, for example, if a child is determined not to be there or if they have drug or alcohol issues.

Table 4.2: Impact of emotional/social well-being on attendance of Looked After Children

Key point	Supporting evidence
Emotional issues need to be resolved before a child can engage with their own education	*"It's social and emotional behaviour difficulties in the main that have an impact on their readiness and their ability to concentrate, to stay focused and behave appropriately." (*ELB representative) *"They have too much going on in their head; they can be really anxious about school and can't learn because their minds are too busy to think about anything else."* (Voluntary organisation representative)
A Looked After Child's attitude can impact on attendance	*"If a teenager is determined not to be somewhere and is in a state through alcohol/drug issues then there will be difficulties in getting them there."* (EOTAS representative)

Case study 1 below illustrates the issues that one school in our study has experienced in relation to a Looked After Child who has poor attendance due to the child's emotional instability which had resulted from a traumatic event in their life.

> **Case study 1: The negative impact of emotional issues on one Looked After Child's attendance rates***
>
> **Looked after child's background**
> This child is in Year 10 and had been living with [the child's] mother (a single parent) who had recently passed away. The child had attended school 'quite well' up until year 9 [when the child's mother passed away]. The child was then taken into foster care. However, because of poor behaviour, the child was then moved to a residential care home. The child is currently a 'school refuser'. The interview data clearly suggests that the child has continuing emotional issues surrounding the loss of the child's mother, which has resulted in behavioural issues within both the foster and residential home.
>
> **Support provided to manage attendance**
> The school put in place a range of support for this child. For example, a reduced timetable to try to get the child back into school was offered. Initially the child agreed to this but it did not work out. The school also assigned a sixth-form pupil as a mentor. This was someone that the child could try to relate to and go to, as well as someone to keep an eye out and just be there for them. Unfortunately, the support arrangements put in place by the school did not appear to work.

* Some of the details presented in this case study may have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the Looked After Child

Low self-esteem

Low self-esteem/confidence and a child's lack of success can be perceived as both a cause and a consequence of non-attendance. This can affect a child's motivation and contribute to their feelings of not wanting to attend school.

> *"If a child is confident in school and doesn't have anxiety about coming to school then they will attend. Those who have anxiety and don't feel confident in school will usually be the worst attenders in all cases, not just Looked After Children."* (School representative)

> *"Those who have low self-esteem and have a lack of success in school can also affect a child's motivation and make a child feel like they don't want to be in school."* (School representative)

Perception of school

Schools report that a small proportion of Looked After Children have a strong level of disinterest for many school subjects and for many of them this would apply particularly to those subjects which have a more academic focus. As such, this may lead to decreased attendance, which in turn leads to poor academic performance. If Looked After Children are treated differently by teachers and pupils because of their looked after status, it can also have a negative impact on their school experience and on their attendance.

> *"Children who have a bad experience of school is a high risk factor, for example teachers treating them differently because they are looked after and having different expectations because they are looked after."* (Voluntary organisation representative)

There is a need to work with Looked After Children and their particular views of education, for example, if they haven't had a good experience of education themselves or if their parents have had a particularly negative experience which may then impact on the child.

> *"...their perception of school, they undervalue it and don't see it as a means of improving their life chances."* (School representative)

> *"A lot of children haven't had a great experience of education in the past and are therefore not committed to education."* (EOTAS representative)

Home/care setting

Placement instability

Placements can, for various reasons, become unstable and for some Looked After Children frequent placement changes are the norm rather than the exception. As reported in Section 3, DHSSPS statistics for 2009 suggest that just under one-quarter (23 per cent) has experienced one or more placement changes[75]. For those who are frequently moved from one setting to another, they can find this period to be very unsettling. Placement instability was, therefore, mentioned by a large proportion of respondents as a factor which contributes to poor attendance of Looked After Children.

A number of stakeholders, who mentioned placement instability as an issue, indicated that often children are moved quite a distance from their school. They felt that more emphasis should be placed on ensuring new placements are close to the child's school to maintain some stability and consistency for that child.

Notwithstanding the above, our research suggests that for a number of Looked After Children, a new placement is often accompanied by the child moving to a new school. This can result in breaks in schooling where the child falls behind in their learning and finds it hard to engage in their own education once their new school has been found. If a child begins to fall behind and does not receive adequate support to recover academically, this can affect their confidence and self-esteem which then makes it harder for them to go back to school.

A number of stakeholders made the important point that until the child is in a stable placement they cannot be expected to engage fully with their education – they need security and stability before they can focus on learning.

Table 4.3: Negative impacts of placement instability on Looked After Children attendance

Key point	Supporting evidence
Placement changes can be unsettling	*"Moving around a lot makes it difficult for the child... when they move placements they miss school until they get settled again."* (School representative)
Distance from new placement to school is an issue for some	*"Social Services often do not prioritise the child's education and when a child is placed, often the distance from the new [placement] to the school is not taken into consideration."* (EOTAS representative)
Placement instability can impact on Looked After Child's engagement with their own education	*"Children who have had frequent moves from placement to placement tend to disengage in education because there hasn't been that consistency in engaging in promoting education in their lives".* (ELB Representative)
	"...it's very difficult for a child who's had major gaps in their education to want to re-engage and be supported...often there is a sense of failure in terms of other aspects of their lives and education can be a sign as yet another one of them [failure], so they don't want to go into a school environment and be a failure because they are so far behind". (ELB representative)

Residential home setting

An important finding from our research which came through strongly amongst the majority of stakeholders interviewed was that Looked After Children who are placed within residential care home settings tended to have lower attendance rates than those in foster care placements. One of the reasons given by interviewees for this related to the reported negative impact of peer pressure in the residential care home environment where if one or a number of children refuse to go to school, others are at risk of following this example.

A number of stakeholders felt that there was no clear guidance regarding school refusal within residential homes and there was general view expressed that perhaps residential care home staff could do more to

---

[75] DHSSPS, 2010, *Op. Cit.*

encourage and persuade them to attend school. In addition, a number of stakeholders felt that staff in residential care settings are possibly restricted in terms of what they can do to 'make' children attend school.

Table 4.4: Negative impact of residential care home setting on attendance rates of Looked After Children

Key point	Supporting evidence
Group dynamic/ peer pressure in residential care reported to contribute to non-attendance of Looked After Children	*"When Looked After Children are in residential homes, they have the poorest attendance. This is to do with peer pressure....we have a lot of experience of there being exceptional poor rates [of Looked After Children who are placed in residential] care homes."* (School representative) *"The group dynamic in the house plays a large part. If [a number of] children in the house refuse to attend school then a new child may also refuse to attend."* (EOTAS representative)
More encouragement from residential care home staff could help to reduce non-attendance	*"Young people need more encouragement from the staff in the home to make them go to school."* (EOTAS representative)
More clarity over legal powers of residential care homes to make Looked After Children attend school might help	*"The residential staff have no powers to make a child go to school...they can't physically take them out of bed and put them in the car to take them to school."* (ELB Representative)

Contact with birth family

Many schools noted that a child's behaviour and attendance can be greatly influenced by contact with their birth family. A number of interviewees indicated that a stable foster placement will lead to higher attendance levels; however, in instances where the child makes contact with their birth family, schools report a negative impact on attendance rates. This could possibly be due to a low value placed on education by the child's parents and a lack of engagement with education on the part of their parents when they themselves were of school-age, or due to the emotional issues that often surround a child having contact with their birth family again.

"When children get older they get in contact with their family again or move back home, this can cause issues and the child can fall back into old habits of non-attendance, particularly if there is no support from the home for the child to attend school." (School representative)

"Attendance is erratic when the child is back at home for periods of time with the family. There is a significant reduction in attendance. School would not be a priority for the family. The parents came through the school and there were attendance issues for them as well. There is no pattern of school engagement there." (School representative)

Support arrangements

Pastoral support

For many interviewees who participated in our research, difficulties were reported in terms of staff not being able to attend Looked After Children specific meetings as they often took place during the school day. Most schools reported challenges of being able to get sufficient levels of cover in place to enable them to attend these important meetings, though many had reported making substantial efforts to attend as many as possible.

"We had 10 requests in January for staff to attend LAC meetings and we feel dreadful not being able to attend them. It must look like the school doesn't care but everybody is on a full timetable and we are facing redundancies next year which means everyone's timetable is going to be even tighter." (School representative)

Poor pastoral care within the school setting can lead to Looked After Children feeling lost within the school system. From an analysis of the interview data, schools appear to have put in place a substantial amount of support to help manage non-attendance of Looked After Children, where this was perceived to be an issue. Notwithstanding this, there were instances where the support that schools had put in place did not appear to match the needs of particular Looked After Children. Case study 2 below illustrates one example where the support provided by the school did not appear to match the issues the child was experiencing, which contributed to the child's high levels of non-attendance.

Case study 2: An illustration of a potential mismatch between the needs of a Looked After Child and the support provided by the school*

Looked after child's background
This case study relates to a Year 9 child who has been in foster care throughout most of primary school. In Years 8 and 9, the child made contact with [the child's] birth parents. Both birth parents wanted the child home. Subsequently, the child did everything possible to precipitate a breakdown of the foster placement, so that [the child] could move home. The child eventually moved back in with [the child's] parents but this did not work out and the child is now in residential care. In Year 8, there was no issue with the child's attendance, but in Year 9, attendance dropped to 45 per cent. The child is currently a school refuser.

Support provided to manage attendance
In terms of support, the child was offered a reduced timetable and given the option of attending the classes that they identified as being of interest to [the child]. The child did not engage with this option at all. Staff tried to be positive with [the child] and tried to encourage [the child] to attend and engage in learning. The school initially overlooked some of the bad behaviour, but eventually ended up suspending the child. In this particular example, there is a question about whether the support provided to this individual child met the child's needs at particular stages in the journey.

* Some of the details presented in this case study may have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the Looked After Child

Transition from primary to post-primary school

Some children find the transition process from primary to post-primary school a particularly challenging period for them. Interviewees noted that when Looked After Children are in primary school, they become accustomed to having consistency for example by being based in one classroom and being taught by a particular teacher. However, when they move to post-primary school they are expected to take more responsibility for their own learning which they often find to be a challenge and can impact negatively on them.

"Older children have anxiety and get anxious about having to move between things e.g. from P.E. to Maths everything is different e.g. the place you are going, people they are with, they person in charge, the thing you are doing. Everything is different and this can be very alarming for the youngsters". (Voluntary organisation representative)

Management of non-attendance

Within schools, the process for managing non-attendance of Looked After Children is no different to that used for other pupils in the school. In addition to applying the normal processes for managing non-attendance of Looked After Children, the Looked After Child's social worker is also involved and other staff (e.g. the form teacher) are informed of the child's looked after status.

"Our system isn't any different for Looked After Children than for other children except with the added support and the child protection element, and informing the form teacher that the child is looked after." (School representative)

A lot of the schools reported that they pride themselves in having a good pastoral support system in place which feeds into how they manage the attendance of Looked After Children. The process for managing non-attendance is similar for most schools. It generally involves attendance being monitored by the Form teacher/Year Head. Where a particular Looked After Child (or any other child) is absent from school, it is the responsibility of the parent/carer to contact the school with an explanation for absence in line with the school's attendance policy. If no explanation is received this is followed up by those with responsibility for a particular Looked After Child/children. A large number of the schools in our research reported sending reminders home about attendance once a child's attendance rate falls below 90 per cent and by contacting parents/carers of pupils who have been off for a period of time. If attendance falls below an 85 per cent threshold, then the child may be referred to the Educational Welfare Officer (EWO), if appropriate.

"We have an attendance officer that regularly monitors the attendance in school and if a student is off for a period of the time the Form teacher will then contact the carers to see what the difficulty is and to make sure they are not truanting from school." (School representative)

Some schools have multi-disciplinary care team meetings to discuss Looked After Children's attendance. The EWO normally attends these meetings, alongside the social worker, the educational psychologist, and range of other multi-disciplinary people to discuss the best plan of action for each child. One school has employed a Home-School Link Officer who has a similar role to the EWO but aims to offer early intervention to get the child back into school before the attendance falls below the 85 per cent threshold. Where attendance could become an issue, this person would go out to the Looked After Child's home and try to help the parents/carers to get the child back into school.

In addition to the above, there are a number of other activities/initiatives that ELBs are involved in to help manage/improve the attendance of Looked After Children. These are detailed below.

- **Working with Health and Social Care Boards:** a number of the ELBs reported having a good working relationship with their respective Health and Social Care Trusts and there is a lot of work taking place trying to manage and improve attendance.

  "[Our] Trust has set up the 'Children who are Looked After Support Service' (CLASS) which includes a therapeutic support service, outreach, 16+, education project worker and a LAC support teacher. There is a clear vision from the Trusts and the Boards in terms of managing the attendance of Looked After Children." (ELB Representative)

- **Inter-agency working:** there is a clear focus within ELBs on multi-agency working. Many of the ELBs report meeting on a regular basis with voluntary organisations, Trusts, and the EWS. This joined-up working allows the group to share information and good practice in improving attendance.

- **Training for schools:** a number of the ELBs have targeted schools that have a high concentration of Looked After Children and provided them with specific training to help them improve their provision for Looked After Children and better manage their attendance*.*

Summary

- Generally schools reported that they did not have an issue with the attendance rates of most Looked After Children and it was predominantly a small number of looked after pupils within each school, for whom attendance presented as an issue.

- The most commonly cited cause of high or very high non-attendance was linked to instability of placement; making contact (and/or living again) with birth parents; and living in a residential care setting where interviewees believed that children were more likely to be subjected to more negative influences (e.g. peer pressure), leading to higher levels of non-attendance.

- Schools use the same process for managing non-attendance for both Looked After Children and those who are not looked after. The exception to this is the involvement of a Looked After Child's assigned social worker. When attendance in school falls below 85 per cent the child may be referred to the EWO if appropriate. The EWO will carry out an assessment and put a support plan in place. Other ways in which the ELBs are trying to improve attendance is through close relationships with their Trust, multi-agency working and by providing Looked After Children specific training to teachers.

5 Stakeholder views on effective approaches and actions to improve attendance of Looked After Children

Introduction

In previous sections we identified a range of factors which impact, both positively and negatively, on the attendance rates of Looked After Children. In addition, examples of good practice to support the attendance of Looked After Children from both Northern Ireland and elsewhere were also detailed.

The purpose of this section is to report the views of stakeholders in relation to what they are doing to support and encourage attendance of Looked After Children. As part of our research, stakeholders were invited to identify factors that support good attendance rates of Looked After Children. They were also provided with an opportunity to describe approaches that they have used to manage and reduce non-attendance rates of Looked After Children and were invited to put forward suggestions to further tackle non-attendance. Finally, we also explored with interviewees the degree to which the sharing of good practice is occurring between schools. The remainder of the section is structured under the following headings:

- Factors that support good attendance rates.
- Effective approaches used to reduce non-attendance.
- Summary.

Factors that support good attendance rates

An analysis of the interview data suggests that a number of factors can have a positive impact on attendance rates of Looked After Children. The factors which were cited most commonly were placement stability and a good pastoral care system in school. Below, we discuss these and other factors that interviewees felt were important in contributing positively to attendance rates of Looked After Children. These have been grouped under the following headings: home/care setting and; support arrangements.

Home/care setting

Placement type

It was widely suggested by stakeholders that children who are placed in foster care are much more likely to have better attendance rates than those who are placed in residential care. As discussed below, this is partly due to the security of the placement, but more importantly, the child having the support of the foster carer to encourage them to attend and do well at school. For example, one interviewee indicated that foster carers are perhaps more motivated to get their child(ren) to attend school. In general, schools believed that foster carers were good at following up, and acting upon, non-attendance.

Table 5.1: Impact of foster care setting on attendance of Looked After Children

Key point	Supporting evidence
Foster care settings believed to support better attendance	*"From our experience with regards to attendance fostering tends to be much more successful than residential."* (School representative)
	"Most children in foster care have good attendance unless they have behavioural issues." (Voluntary organisation representative)
Foster carers are motivated to get children to attend school	*"Carers generally have more motivation to get the children into school as they know if the child doesn't go to school there will be questions asked."* (School representative)
Foster carers are generally good at following up non-attendance issues	*"Foster parents are generally very good at checking up on absence and very few LAC would in practice be referred to the EWO."* (School representative)

Placement stability

In addition to placement type, the stability of the child's placement has an important part to play in contributing to high attendance rates of Looked After Children. Interviewees suggested that those in long-term, stable placements tended to have better attendance rates than those who experience periods of placement instability. Interviewees indicated that long-term placements provide stability and contribute to a Looked After Child's feelings of safety and security.

However, interviewees also suggested that, in addition to placement stability, it is important that parents/carers show a high-level of interest in the child's education. Interviewees were keen to point out that the issue in relation to the support from the parent/carer is not unique to Looked After Children and that a stable home life with consistent levels of support is important for all pupils.

Table 5.2: Impact of placement stability on attendance of Looked After Children

Key point	Supporting evidence
Long term/stable placements support better attendance	*"Those in long term secure placements have better attendance rates."* (School representative)
	"Whenever this child was in and out of placements her attendance was giving us cause for concern. She is in a foster placement that is working for her and her attendance has improved because of the actual stable placement that she is in at the moment." (School representative)
The attitude of the child's parents/carers can impact on attendance	*"It is no different to anyone else. Children who have parents who are uninterested are less likely to have good attendance no matter if they are looked after or not."* (School representative)

Value placed by family/carers on education

In addition to placement stability, interviewees felt that it is important that the parent/carer values education and conveys the importance of education to the child. They also believed that these values needed to be backed up by providing an environment that is conducive to, and supports the learning of, the child.

"A good home life, with support from parents/carers tends to help. Children who don't attend tend not to have that strong structure at home. It is important to have the full support of the parents or the person who cares for them." (School representative)

"We have one child who has had 100 per cent attendance for the last two years. This child is in a secure foster placement where value is placed on education at home." (EOTAS representative)

Support arrangements

Pastoral support

The majority of school representatives interviewed indicated that a key reason why they only had an attendance issue with relatively small numbers of Looked After Children was due to the good pastoral support system they had in place within their school. These systems incorporated high levels of pastoral support for children (and challenge, where appropriate); regular contact with parents/carers, and; a strong follow-up system for non-attendance.

"We have good pastoral support in school where the children feel supported and challenged, if there is an issue they know who to go to." (School representative)

"We have a well-established pastoral system and within that we have systems for dealing with non-attendance. The key is that the staff in the school follow these procedures. They call the parents or carers if non-attendance is an issue." (School representative)

Case study 3 shows how a good pastoral support system in one of the schools that participated in our research had encouraged one child to stay engaged with their own education. It also illustrates the benefits of early intervention to help improve attendance.

Case study 3: The importance of strong pastoral support systems*

Looked after child's background
This is a Year 9 child who had Special Educational Needs and is on specific medication to manage their behaviour. Initially, the child had been living in foster care but due to [the child's] behaviour, this placement almost broke down. The child was described as being "academically, but not emotionally bright." [The child] had good attendance in Year 8 (98 per cent) but this dropped slightly to 93 per cent in Year 9. The school felt there was potential for attendance to become an issue in the future, as [the child] had issues in keeping up with homework and was becoming increasingly involved in anti-social behaviour.

Support provided to manage attendance
The school provided a range of support to manage the child's attendance and to help ensure [the child] did not fall behind in class. Arrangements to support the child included:

- Ongoing support from the SENCO, year head and form teacher.
- Close liaison with the child and family team which was led by the school counsellor.
- Homework support provided by the classroom assistant.
- 'Circle of friends' work with the child in a small group of friends.

In addition to the above, the school counsellor closely liaises with the child's social worker. As the school believes that attendance may become a bigger issue in the future, they are considering providing the child with counselling.

* Some of the details presented in this case study may have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the Looked After Child

Curricular and extra-curricular provision

The majority of schools who participated in our research mentioned the importance of extra-curricular activities and their contribution to improving Looked After Children's engagement with school and their attendance. They believed that it was critical to understand the child's specific interests/strengths and then provide them with appropriate opportunities to become involved in activities which match these - for example, one stakeholder reported that for one of their Looked After Children who had an interest in singing, the school made arrangements for her to attend singing lessons to encourage her in this area. Interviews with EOTAS and ELBs representatives supported these findings.

In addition, there was also recognition that the range of curricular options available to Looked After Children (and to other young people) had widened considerably in recent years and this was viewed as being important in being able to meet the specific needs of all children, including Looked After Children.

Table 5.3: The contribution of extracurricular activities to promoting Looked After Children engagement and attendance

Key point	Supporting evidence
Extra-curricular activities can help improve attendance	*"[This child] has steady attendance. It did dip a wee bit in Year 10... but she is starting to build a little confidence. This year, we are getting her singing lessons. It's about encouraging them to be involved in whatever they are good at...sport, singing, music. As a result, they have more independence and a different set of friends. This is the first year she has decided to go into a choir."* (School representative)
It is important to find something the child is interested in and encourage their involvement	*"Give them activities that will engage them and motivate them. The settings are adjusted for the type and combination of children coming into the provisions."* (EOTAS representative)
There is a perception that the curricular and extra-curricular offering now better matches interests of Looked After Children	*"Schools are better now...the curriculum that is now available to children is more attractive. There are more interesting options available – there are more carrots you can dangle in front of them and actually draw them back into the schooling process through e.g. more practical work, leisure pursuits. It is more flexible and there is more scope available to schools to actually tailor a programme to children's requirements."* (ELB representative)

Social worker support

Some schools identified the requirement for a consistent approach from social services, and stated that it was best for the child to have the same key worker over a prolonged period of time. However, it was recognised that this was not always possible in all instances, e.g. because of staff turnover. Good communication links between the social worker, school and the home setting were also considered to be important in managing non-attendance of Looked After Children.

"Support from the social worker, education welfare officer and foster carer keeping close contact with school can help to eliminate patterns of non-attendance." (School representative)

Effective approaches used to reduce non-attendance

Stakeholders (schools, EOTAS providers and ELBs) reported using a wide range of approaches, which they believed were effective in reducing non-attendance of Looked After Children. Examples of these approaches are discussed below.

Positive rewards

Rewards were mentioned by most schools as having a positive influence on promoting attendance of Looked After Children, although it is important to note that this approach tended to be used for all pupils and was not specific to Looked After Children. Rewards tended to be given in recognition of punctuality, full attendance, or most improved attendance (e.g. over a term or over a year). A number of schools used non-monetary rewards (e.g. use of stars to recognise good attendance); whilst others incentivised good attendance through the use of vouchers, treats or trips (e.g. ice skating, bowling).

"We have a monthly reward system in school and at various times over the year, the children have targets and rewards. There are annual rewards for full attendance and those who have close to full attendance. We promote attendance in that respect." (School representative)

Positive rewards were also used by some EOTAS providers, although not in all instances. Some used a similar system as described by schools, whilst others used a points system which the child could "cash-in" to play sports or watch a DVD. One of the EOTAS providers did not support the use of rewards for attendance, believing that the child would then attend just to get a reward and not because they understood the importance of attending *per se*.

Reduced hours/phased return initiatives

In some schools a "reduced hours" initiative proved successful for engaging with Looked After Children who may otherwise not attend school. This system works by allowing a particular child to start school later, or finish earlier, than their peers. However, a number of schools had reservations about how it should be used. For example, one school indicated that they would only use the approach based on an expectation of full attendance over the long term.

EOTAS also reported using reduced hours initiative in some cases. This was often linked to specific behavioural issues of the child that would otherwise impact on their attendance.

A minority of schools also mentioned that they operated phased returns for those Looked After Children who may have experienced a traumatic event (such as alleged bullying), resulting in them being absent for a considerable period of time.

"Reduced hours do not encourage or maintain high standards in achievement. If necessary, and for specific issues, we would allow a short term phased return but we then expect full attendance." (School representative)

"For those with behavioural problems, timetables are tailored for each individual based on professional judgement." (EOTAS representative)

"We had a case of alleged bullying in school and we have allowed that child to come back as a phased return to allow them to build their confidence. We would also do this in the case of a family breakdown e.g. a divorce or separation which can also cause disruption to the child." (School representative)

Additional adult support

Some schools have invested heavily in classroom assistants and support staff specifically to assist Looked After Children and, in some instances, these staff attend LAC review meetings. The classroom assistant maintains a constant presence with the child, in comparison to their teachers – the Looked After Children may see numerous teachers each day for relatively short periods of time. The ongoing presence of a classroom assistant enables good relationships to develop between them and particular Looked After Children.

EOTAS representatives also mentioned the importance of individual support from an adult in securing attendance.

"We've invested quite heavily in support staff and we now have 10 support staff and we've invested a lot in their training. They are well able and confident to attend LAC reviews and to work with Social Workers." (School representative)

Case study 4 illustrates how having a consistent person (in this case a classroom assistant) in a child's school life can make a difference to keeping them in school and encouraging them to attend.

Case study 4: The contribution of a classroom assistant to one child's engagement with their own learning*

Looked after child's background
The child was taken into care due to the extremely traumatic circumstances [the child] experienced. The school reports that this is an extremely traumatised child who has experienced a number of foster placement breakdowns, resulting in the child having to live in a children's home. The child currently lives c.40 miles from school but is being transported to and from the school. The child is successfully doing A-Levels at school.

Support provided to keep child in school
The school attributes the good attendance rates and engagement of the child in their own learning to the high levels of support provided by the classroom assistant. The classroom assistant provides a consistent level of support to the child, which the school believes is important.

"I would have to say that the sole reason this has worked out is due to the commitment and consistency of the classroom assistant. The assistant has been the one consistent figure throughout this traumatic experience of the child." (School representative)

The classroom assistant attends all of the child's review meetings, and the school believes this would not have happened if this had been the responsibility of other teachers in the school due to the resource constraints they face (e.g. being fully timetabled).

"She [the classroom assistant] has attended every meeting whether it is in with Social Services, in school, or driving to where the placement is. The teachers could not have gone to all those meetings [because] everybody is on a full timetable and we are facing redundancies next year which means everyone's timetable is going to be even tighter." [School representative]

The school believes that the key to being able to utilise the skills and expertise of support staff is providing them with appropriate training so that they are confident in representing Looked After Children at review meetings.

* Some of the details presented in this case study may have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the Looked After Child

Mentoring

Mentoring was provided in some of the schools which took part in the research. Interviewees from these schools indicated that in some cases mentoring was effective as a pastoral care mechanism, although it is not something which is specifically targeted at Looked After Children. Staff members are allocated a number of pupils to mentor, and each child will then have that teacher to turn to if they need support. As mentoring is ongoing throughout the child's schooling, this approach is seen to be an early intervention strategy for improving attendance and also a useful way to settle a particular child back in when they have returned to school after a period of absence.

In one school, sixth form pupils were assigned as mentors to their younger peers (including those who are looked after). The mentor is there to support the younger child and 'be a friend' to them.

EOTAS representatives indicated that they assigned an adult mentor to encourage children to attend school. Interviewees believed that forming strong relationships with the children was critical to effective mentoring – once that relationship is formed, the child begins to respect the mentor and will feel like they are letting them down if they do not attend.

> *"We include children in a motivational mentoring scheme... meetings with the teacher in school. We ask the teacher to set targets for the person... We try to engage early. We have an allocated portion of time for one or two teachers to have CPD to engage young people."* (School representative)

> *"Where it is appropriate or where we feel it would help, we would identify a 6th Form individual who is willing to buddy or mentor them. It's not a formal thing."* (School representative)

> *"You cannot under estimate the relationships. If the child thinks they are letting you down they will attend."* (EOTAS representative)

Counselling

The majority of the schools felt that counselling was an important form of support to help manage any issues particular children might have that may be holding them back from fully engaging with their learning or from attending school. Schools interviewees indicated that they greatly valued the counselling service provided to them through the Department. However, in addition to this, a number of schools fund their own counselling services so that children (including those who are looked after) can have more access to the counsellor. Although schools greatly valued counselling as a form of support they were also very aware that even though particular Looked After Children may have emotional issues, it is more appropriate for them to prioritise counselling support for those with the greatest need.

> *"We have counsellors in school and that is very important but except in a crisis situation, it is not appropriate to spend all day dealing with your emotional issues. You deal with the emotional issues so you can get on with learning."* (School representative)

Joined-up working between Looked After Children stakeholders

Some schools suggested that where there is regular contact or close relationships built between the form teacher and parent/carer, improved attendance of Looked After Children often follows. This relationship enables the school and parent/carers to work together to ensure that both sides are doing everything they can to make sure the child attends school.

> *"Form teachers have close relationships with the parents, key workers and their social workers so everything possible is done to ensure that they [Looked After Children] are attending school."* (School representative)

One of the schools had put in a place a multi-disciplinary care programme which consists of team meetings twice a term to discuss the attendance of Looked After Children. The principal, vice principal, co-ordinator of pastoral care, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), and the learning co-ordinator for the young people being discussed all meet with the EWO, educational psychologist, Barnardo's and the social worker to discuss, in particular, issues relating to the attendance of Looked After Children. The group meet to discuss particular Looked After Children and any concerns they have about individual children. These meetings are also felt to be a good way of sharing good practice and also for putting plans in place for particular children, where necessary. The meetings also help to form relationships among those involved in the group and the school now finds it is easier for them to pick up the phone and speak to someone about any issues they may be experiencing in relation to Looked After Children.

> *"This [the multi-disciplinary care programme] makes communication more efficient and builds personal relationships so you can then pick up the phone if you need it."* (School representative)

A number of the ELBs indicated that they had a multi-disciplinary approach to meeting the needs of Looked After Children. This involved the staff within each of the respective boards working in cooperation with the Health Trusts to share information and good practice in relation to working with Looked After Children.

Looked After Children champion

A number of the schools that participated in this research had assigned a person with responsibility for Looked After Children. However, this does not appear to be a common practice across all schools and a suggestion was made that this should be more widespread practice. This assigned member of staff would then have full responsibility for all Looked After Children and would champion their needs and be someone who they could turn to if they are experiencing any personal issues.

"There is a need for a LAC teacher in all schools, some schools are very good and do have a designated LAC teacher, but others don't. I think having someone who would co-ordinate all the needs of LAC would be helpful, someone young people could go and talk to". (Voluntary Organisation representative)

Staff training

One ELB reported that they provide Looked After Children specific training to school staff, whilst another ELB provided training to schools on a needs basis, and they reported adapting this training based on the concentration of Looked After Children in particular schools. A minority of schools representatives reported that they had Looked After Children specific training and that this had helped them to better meet the needs of this group of children.

However, not all school staff reported having opportunities available to them for training specifically related to Looked After Children. The majority of schools indicated that there needs to be greater awareness amongst teachers and other staff who work with Looked After Children about the issues that they may face in their lives, what it is like for them to be in care and what teachers or other staff might need to be mindful of when they are working with Looked After Children. It was also suggested that there needs to be a clearer understanding amongst those who are working with particular Looked After Children (e.g. parents/carers, the school and social worker) of each other's responsibilities they have towards the child. If everyone is clear about what others are doing to help/support a particular Looked After Child then they are better enabled to work together to collectively meet the child's needs. Stakeholders suggested that there needs to be more training provided for both staff who work in schools with Looked After Children and for other stakeholders (e.g. social workers).

Table 5.4: Views on staff training to promote Looked After Children engagement and attendance

Key point	Supporting evidence
Staff training would help to increase teachers' understanding of Looked After Children but needs to be delivered in a way that is sensitive to their needs	*"It would be good if they could receive some training around the issues of being in care and the types of things they could expect to come across when dealing with Looked After Children."* (School representative) *"Teachers need to be well informed and understand the pressure that Looked After Children are under but it's really counterproductive if teachers get the message that they have a really terrible life so don't be expecting much."* (School representative)
Training for social workers and teachers to understand better each other's responsibilities would be helpful	*"There needs to be better understanding and relationships between the carers and schools. There needs to be training for key people in schools - What are the residential carers trying to do for the young people, we've (the school) got to understand that and they (social workers) need to understand the education system."* (School representative)

In conclusion, schools and other stakeholders report the use of a range of approaches that are believed to be effective in reducing non-attendance of Looked After Children. It is important to note that whatever approach is used, early intervention is critical. This means that alongside the use of the above approaches (which should be adapted according to the particular context of the school) that Looked After Children are assessed by educational professionals (in consultation with social care professionals) as soon as they become looked after to ensure that they are getting the support that they need.

> *"There is a strong debate for assessing every child on arrival into the care system to make sure we are doing the right thing for them."* (ELB Representative)
>
> *"Having a good assessment of academic abilities at the beginning and seeing where their deficits are, would be a really good place to start. For example things as basic as, can they tell the time, can they form their letters, and have they any ability to read or write."* (Voluntary organisation representative)

It is also important for schools/EOTAS providers to share good practice amongst themselves. Our research suggests that schools were not aware of any examples of good practice happening in other schools. However, all of them expressed an interest in wanting to understand what good practice looked like and what other schools were doing differently or perhaps more effectively than their school. However, there was tacit acknowledgement of the work of EWOs in helping to share good practice between schools, as one school representative indicated *"the EWO does a good job of passing good practice between schools".*

Summary

- Within the home/care setting, placement stability was found to be one of the most important factors in securing Looked After Children's attendance at school; those in long-term placements were believed to have better attendance than those in a residential care setting. In addition to this, a clear commitment within the home/care setting to education was believed to be important in promoting good attendance, backed up by an environment that is conducive to, and supports the learning of, the child.

- Support from the school setting is also critical which includes, in particular, pastoral support (incorporating good communication with parents/carers and follow-up systems for non-attendance) and flexibility with regard to timetabling. Support from social services was also considered to be a factor in supporting attendance. Where there was good communication links between the social worker, school and the home setting, this was considered to be effective in managing non-attendance of Looked After Children.

- The research findings suggest that schools, EOTAS providers and other stakeholders are using a range of approaches to reduce non-attendance. These include: positive rewards; reduced hours initiative; mentoring (including adult and peer mentoring); assigning a member of staff with responsibility for Looked After Children; counselling, and; additional adult support. For the schools that used these approaches, they were all believed to have had a positive impact on reducing the incidence of non-attendance. In addition, schools and other stakeholders noted the importance of ongoing communication between the carer, school and social workers in a joined-up approach to reduce non-attendance. However, in addition to the above approaches, stakeholders believed that early intervention is critical and that the needs of Looked After Children should be identified as soon as they enter into care. In addition, it is also important that good practice is shared more widely across the system as the findings from our research indicate that almost all schools were unaware of any examples of good practice happening in other schools.

6 Conclusions and implications from the research

Introduction

This section of the report sets out the conclusions from the research and implications of these in terms of suggesting actions for improving the attendance rates of Looked After Children.

It was not possible, within the project timescales, for DE to secure the necessary ethical approval required for PwC to conduct interviews with social workers (employed by the Trusts) or other important stakeholders (e.g. parents/carers and Looked After Children themselves) for this project. Therefore, this report exclusively presents findings from an education perspective (as reflected in the title of this report). Further research would be required (with the necessary ethical approval) to capture the views of Looked After Children and those who work with them from a social services/care perspective.

This section is structured under the following headings:

- Conclusions.
- Implications from the research.

Conclusions

Attendance of Looked After Children

Of the 602[76] Looked After Children in post-primary schools, the majority (70 per cent) are clustered in 48 schools throughout NI (out of a total of all 217 post-primary schools). Of these 48 post-primary schools there are 29 schools with attendance rates above the NI Looked After Children average and 19 schools with below average attendance rates. The statistics also show that higher than average concentrations of absenteeism amongst Looked After Children are found in a relatively small number of these schools. For example, there are three schools where the attendance rate for Looked After Children is 11 percentage points or more below the NI Looked After Children average. Interviews with staff in some of these 48 schools suggest that, in general, they do not have issues with attendance of all Looked After Children, and where attendance was a particular issue, it was generally only for a small number of them.

Underlying causes of and influences on non-attendance

Our research indicates that no single factor impacts on non-attendance of Looked After Children, rather a host of underlying causes and influences exist. The literature and stakeholder interviews suggest that the following are underlying causes, or influences on, non-attendance of Looked After Children:

- **Peer pressure**: the literature has shown that peer pressure (possibly leading to bullying) can be one of the underlying reasons for non-attendance amongst young people in care. If not addressed early this can lead to periods of expulsion, disengagement in education and ultimately underachievement. Findings from the

---

[76] Department of Education Northern Ireland (2009) *Op. Cit.*

interviews with school staff suggests that this may be more of an issue for those placed in residential care settings than those placed in foster care.

- **Behavioural issues**: the literature and interviews revealed that one of the main reasons for exclusion is persistent disruptive behaviour and that early intervention to prevent poor behaviours escalating to a crisis point is essential to tackle this issue.

- **Underlying social and personal issues**: the interviews indicated that Looked After Children dealing with the loss of a parent or underlying drug or alcohol problems tend to have poor attendance rates.

- **Personal factors**: the literature and interviews have shown that a lack of self esteem, social skills, and challenging peer relations can result in higher absenteeism rates. Personal factors can also include experiencing learning difficulties and Special Educational Needs (including ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and related syndromes).

- **Contact with birth parents**: interviewees stated that a stable foster care environment can lead to higher attendance rates amongst Looked After Children. However, where a child makes contact with their birth family, this has the potential to have a negative impact on school attendance.

- **Socio-economic circumstances:** using FSM as a proxy for local deprivation, shows that schools with less than 10 per cent of pupils in receipt of FSM have absenteeism rates of approximately 3 per cent whereas in schools where more than 50 per cent of pupils are in receipt of FSM the rate rises to 8.5 per cent. The literature also shows that children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds have less positive attitudes to school and learning than their peers in more affluent areas.

- **Age when a child enters the care system:** research shows that children who enter care before the age of 12 outperform those who enter care at age 12 or above. The reason for this may be that those who became looked after when they were younger have tended to live in foster homes and therefore have more settled lives. As Looked After Children become older, there are potential issues in relation to placement stability.

- **Placement type and stability:** the literature and stakeholder interviews suggest that Looked After Children in foster care have better attendance rates than those children in residential care settings. For the latter group, attendance at school may be influenced by pressure from their peers who are also not attending school. Also, those children in long term or more stable placements tend to have better attendance rates than other groups of Looked After Children.

  Attitudes to education in the home/care environment: some Looked After Children may not attend school due to habits picked up prior to entering the care system. The Looked After Child's parents' own experience of school is likely to influence the example of school behaviour and academic learning that they model to their child(ren). Consequently, interviewees suggested that children who are poor attendees may have grown up with inconsistent parental attitudes to education and often perceive their parents as not having achieved at school and therefore cannot help them to do so either.

Association between non-attendance at school and under achievement

The evidence shows that both attendance and attainment rates are lower for Looked After Children than all other school children in NI. An important point to note, however, is that only a relatively small number of the research studies reviewed could establish a link between specific factors, such as placement stability, to either attendance or attainment rates of Looked After Children. None of the studies reviewed showed a direct link between attendance at school and attainment.

Effective approaches and actions to improve attendance

The research shows that there are a number of approaches which schools and other stakeholders use which they believe are effective in reducing non-attendance rates amongst Looked After Children. In some cases, the approaches below are used for improving attendance across all children and not just Looked After Children. These approaches include the following:

- Positive rewards.
- Reduced hours/phased return initiatives.
- Additional adult support.
- Mentoring.
- Counselling.
- Joined-up working between Looked After Children stakeholders.
- Looked After Children champion in the school.
- Staff training on Looked After Children.

It is important to note that whichever approach is used, stakeholders believed that early intervention is critical. This means that alongside the use of the above approaches (which should be adapted according to the particular context of the school), Looked After Children should be assessed by education professionals (in consultation with social care professionals) as soon as they become looked after to ensure that they are getting the appropriate support aligned to their needs.

It is also important for schools/EOTAS providers to share good practice amongst themselves. Our research suggests that schools, in particular, were not aware of any examples of good practice happening in other schools. However, all of them expressed an interest to understand what good practice looked like and what other schools were doing differently or perhaps more effectively than their school.

Implications from the research

Based on the findings presented in this report, DE may wish to consider the following implications that could be used to strengthen support/provision for Looked After Children which, if implemented, could impact positively on rates of non-attendance.

- **More detailed data needs to be collected to understand more clearly the incidence of non-attendance amongst specific groups of Looked After Children:** in 2009, there were 602 Looked After Children in post-primary school in NI. The research findings suggest that non-attendance for this group of pupils appears to be an issue in a small number of schools and for a small number of pupils only. Analysis of the interview data further suggests that non-attendance was a particular issue for Looked After Children who are placed in residential care (in comparison to those who are placed in foster care). Our findings suggest that there are additional factors and causes of non-attendance operating within this sector which exacerbate the issue. Therefore, we suggest that DE explore the feasibility, alongside the potential value, of including data fields on the School Census to capture placement type of each child. This may help to quantify the incidence of non-attendance of Looked After Children by placement type. In addition, DE, working alongside DHSSPS, may wish to consider jointly commissioning research (including possibly a longitudinal study) to understand better the issues impacting upon non-attendance of Looked After Children in residential care settings.

- **Managing transition between schools:** Transition from primary to post-primary is challenging for all pupils, but particularly for Looked After Children, who may have become accustomed to having one classroom with one teacher throughout the school day to going to a post-primary school setting where they can have 10 or more teachers per week. To facilitate the transition from primary to post-primary school, it is important that the child's history accompanies them in the transition to the post-primary school, subject to the appropriate information sharing protocols being put in place (e.g. that information is shared on the basis of consent and that it will be appropriately stored.)

School planning/development

- **Considering the needs of Looked After Children in school development planning:** although evidence from this research showed that many schools provide high levels of support and pastoral care to their Looked After Children, in many other cases provision is not tailored to the specific needs of this group of children. Indeed many of the approaches and techniques to reduce non-attendance (for example, positive rewards and mentoring) are generic and not specific to Looked After Children. For many Looked After Children non-tailored, generic support may be effective in meeting their needs but there will be some Looked After Children who have more complex needs and for whom more tailored support is required. Pupil welfare is an essential part of the school development planning process and schools should ensure that, as part of reviewing their plans, that they are proactive (rather than reactive) in meeting the specific needs of individual Looked After Children, including those who may require more tailored support.

- **Identification of a Looked After Children champion or at least a mentoring/buddy system:** where schools assigned a member of staff to work with, and support, a particular Looked After Child, this was believed to have been effective in supporting them and improving their attendance. However, findings from the stakeholder interviews suggest that this does not happen in every school. Where this is not happening, we suggest that a "Looked After Children champion" is assigned to work with Looked After Children. This would provide such children with a particular individual to approach as the first point of contact for them and someone who is aware of their background and specific needs. If this is not possible, then schools should give consideration to implementing a mentoring or buddy system similar to those described in this report.

- **Training and development opportunities for school staff:** there was a consensus amongst stakeholders that there should be greater continuing professional development opportunities available to school staff to help them meet the needs of Looked After Children. ELBs should liaise with the Head of Pastoral Care in each of its schools to source appropriate training opportunities with an emphasis on Looked After Children. The opportunities may, in the first instance, be prioritised for those schools with high numbers of Looked After Children or where there are incidences of individual Looked After Children having below/well below average attendance rates.

Good practice

- **Raising aspirations:** evidence from the research suggests that where schools provide a wide range of opportunities for Looked After Children to develop their talents and strengths; this has the potential to improve their aspirations and engagement with their own learning, and also their attendance. Indeed, for many of the schools that participated in the research, this was considered to be good practice. Schools should continue to raise aspirations of Looked After Children by providing them with appropriate curricular and extra-curricular opportunities to improve their life chances.

- **Sharing good practice:** our research found that sharing good practice approaches between schools, in terms of improving attendance and achievement of Looked After Children was limited. However, there was an appetite amongst interviewees for understanding what constituted good practice and for sharing their own practices and learning with others. In addition, the interviews found that ELBs were doing much to support schools, though it was not entirely clear whether schools were aware of the full range of support and services that ELBs and others can provide. An online good practice forum might be one potential solution to this issue. This would involve bringing together all of the available resources (including good practice) for Looked After Children into one place and raising awareness of this resource amongst post-primary schools and other providers – this would also allow schools to ask questions and gain insight from each other about effective interventions. Another method may be to initially bring together staff from the 48 post-primary schools which have 70 per cent of all Looked After Children and enable those which have the best attendance rates to share good practice with those schools that face continuing challenges in this area. This approach could then be rolled out across all schools in Northern Ireland that have Looked After Children.

The Department of Education (DE) Research Report Series is designed to provide easy access to research findings for policy makers, researchers, teachers, lecturers, employers and the public. This reflects the high value which DE places on the wide circulation of research results to ensure that research has the maximum impact on policy and practice in education.

Research cannot make decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

Any views expressed in the Research Report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.