

We can do better for looked after children

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Children who are looked after by local authorities tend to have low attainment and generally poor outcomes beyond school. This is the depressing message of research over many years. Yet I am optimistic that we will improve this shameful situation.

I base my optimism in part on the findings of a study which researchers at the University of Strathclyde have recently completed for the Scottish Government¹. As part of a study of 18 local authority pilot projects, we examined attendance, exclusion and attainment data for more than 600 looked after children and young people. We found that attendance at school improved in all age groups, significantly so among 9-10 year olds and those over 15 - almost half of the study population - and exclusions reduced significantly among the over 15s. Attainment in reading, writing and mathematics improved by one 5-14 level in one year for 40% of those in this age range, a rate of improvement much better than the average for looked after children in Scotland and similar to children who are not looked after.

We also found a relationship between high involvement in pilot activities and progress in reading and writing, though not in maths (perhaps because literacy featured highly in many projects), and, unsurprisingly, that the attitudes and values of

¹ The report, and many other resources, are available via the Looked After Children Website at: www.ltscotland.org.uk/lookedafterchildren

professionals working with young people and their families were crucial components of success.

Collecting the data required persistence, and we confirmed the findings of previous research highlighting the inadequacies of systems for recording and tracking the achievements of looked after children. We found instances of unexplained missing data, individuals for whom we had data one year but no data a year later, discrepancies between social work and education databases, and lack of clarity about how to record data for some looked after children.

The latter problem is most critical for older young people who attend off-site education or are in part-time education. Their attendance and achievements may be recorded incorrectly or not recorded at all by the mainstream school in which they are enrolled. It was particularly frustrating for our contacts who knew about young people's achievements in vocational qualifications but found that these were not being recorded in central management information systems.

Maureen McKenna, Glasgow City Council's head of service for education, has called for headteachers to improve tracking of pupils who stop attending school, for whatever reason (TESS, 5 September). I agree: we need to stop the practice of assuming that someone else is taking over responsibility. The case histories of individual looked after children typically show a point when normal progress was affected, often due to a move caused by a traumatic event in the family. Sadly, while effective social and emotional supports are usually provided without delay, the effects on education are more likely to be overlooked. There is a very simple message: one person, or committee, in a local authority needs to have responsibility for reviewing the educational progress of all looked after children, including those looked after at home and children in foster and residential placements outside the authority. This

task needs to happen regularly. The review group needs to have a degree of clout, to ensure that when concerns are raised, the necessary supports can be provided without delay.

Detailed guidance for local authorities is provided in a new Scottish Government publication, *These are our Bairns: A Guide for Community Planning Partnerships on Being a Corporate Parent*. I particularly like the sections headed: 'How will I know I've made a difference?'

There is undoubtedly greater awareness of the need to improve education for looked after children, and our research highlighted innovative approaches by professionals. There are many challenges. For example, I was told about a young person placed by one local authority with a foster carer in another local authority who months later is not in school because the authorities have not reached agreement about the costs of educational support. *These are our Bairns* says that education services will know they have made a difference when they can give a positive answer to the question: 'Would this be good enough for my child?' Is there a Chief Executive in Scotland who would say it is acceptable for a looked after child to lose a single day's schooling while a funding dispute is settled?

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