

**MSP Briefing: Scottish Parliament Debate on Inquiry into the  
educational attainment of looked after children**

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the debate on the educational attainment of looked after children and the Education and Culture Committee's inquiry.

Barnardo's Scotland notes that this is not a new problem and that looked after children have had low educational attainment levels for over a decade. We believe that Scotland, as a corporate parent, is currently failing looked after children especially those cared for at home or in kinship care settings.

The Scottish Government must consider the following measures in order to improve the educational attainment for looked after children and young people:

1. Government must consider a holistic approach to improving the educational outcomes of looked after children. Looked after children face multiple barriers to learning and without all the issues being addressed it will be almost impossible to raise the attainment level of education among this group of children.
2. Increase aspirations and expectations of looked after children.
3. More looked after children and young people must be provided with supported one-to-one opportunities to help them achieve, build confidence and motivation, to complement mainstream education.
4. Significantly more looked after children should receive a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP).
5. The Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act should be reviewed to see if it is delivering on its objectives.
6. There needs to be better and more comprehensive data collection by the Scottish Government relating to additional support being received by individual looked after children.
7. There needs to be greater support to help looked after children make the transition into adulthood to ensure that they are able to take advantage of post-education opportunities.
8. Securing permanent, stable homes for looked after children, as quickly as possible is a key factor in improving educational attainment.

## **Educational Attainment**

Scottish Government's statistics<sup>1</sup> show that the attainment level of looked after children based on a points system, on average, is five and half times lower when compared to all school children. Those children looked after at home perform the worst of all categories of looked after children.

Ninety percent of looked after children leave school aged 16 or under, compared to 37% of all other school leavers. Six months after leaving school only 44% of looked after children were in employment, education or training compared to 85% of all school leavers. Only 1% of looked after children go onto higher education compared to 36% of all school leavers<sup>2</sup>.

Scottish Government statistics show that looked after children, in stable foster homes, out perform all other looked after children and their attendance at school was better than all school pupils. This compares to those looked after children who had multiple placements throughout the school year, who scored considerably lower than all school pupils, and on average the more placements they had the lower their attainment became.

## **The importance of permanency**

Supportive, caring environments are a key factor in the educational attainment of children.

Far too many looked after children are waiting too long for a permanent home, enduring multiple short term placements, which can exacerbate their complex needs. The Scottish Government and local authorities must focus on improving the speed of moving looked after children into permanent care arrangements.

## **Multiple barriers to learning**

Looked after children have multiple needs all of which can contribute to their poor attainment in education.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Publication Notice, Educational Outcomes for Scotland's looked After Children, 2009/10

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

Many looked after children live chaotic lifestyles with complex family issues, such as domestic violence, parental alcohol and substance misuse, physical or sexual abuse, loss/trauma/separation or family break up, which all can have an impact on a child's ability to learn. This is an addition to other issues that can have an effect, such as poor mental health, which can be a cause or consequence of them becoming looked after. It is estimated that 50% of looked after children have a mental health problem, up to five times more than other children<sup>3</sup>. Children generally are waiting significantly long periods to access CAMH services and that looked after children are also less likely to access any of these services.

Although this debate is focused on educational attainment, it would be remiss of the Scottish Government to consider this in isolation. The Scottish Government's National Performance Framework explicitly recognises that to improve overall levels of educational attainment, the outcomes for pupils from challenging backgrounds needs to improve. A holistic approach to improving the general outcomes of looked after children must be actively pursued, which will in turn have a positive impact on their educational outcomes.

### **Additional support**

Research carried out for the 2009 Scottish Government publication *Improving the Education of Looked After Children: A Guide for Local Authorities and Service Providers* found that looked after children provided with additional support and engaged in flexible and individually tailored activities improved school attendance and attainment in a relatively short period of time.

We would agree with this research, which matches our own experiences of working with looked after children. We also understand that many looked after children are affected by low expectations, both held by them and placed on them by others.

Barnardo's Scotland is currently involved in delivering mentoring services and out of school activities aimed at supporting and inspiring looked after children and young people. Our programme, STRIVE\*, based in Aberdeen,

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<sup>3</sup> The health of looked after and accommodated children and young people in Scotland messages from research, Jane Scott and Malcolm Hill, Social Work Inspection Agency (2006)

is currently in its pilot phase (a case study is attached). It works with looked after children aged between 11 and 16 who are looked after at home or away from home and are struggling with mainstream school provision in terms of attainment, attendance and at risk of being excluded.

We believe that more looked after children and young people should be provided with supported one-to-one opportunities to help them experience achievement, build confidence and motivation, to complement mainstream education.

We understand the current economic environment makes spending decisions extremely difficult for local authorities, however, such support would be a preventative spend and a key early intervention preventing many of the long term problems that come with leaving school at 16 with little or no qualifications.

### **Teacher support and education**

Barnardo's Scotland is concerned that as a result of the chaotic family backgrounds and multiple barriers faced by looked after children many professionals believe that these children can not succeed and can be too quick to dampen expectations or 'write off' their chances. This is in stark contrast to what these children need in the most difficult time of their education.

We believe that there needs to be greater understanding within the education system and the teacher training curriculum must reflect this and have a focus on looked after children.

### **Appropriate implementation of policy and legislation**

The Additional Support for Learning Act (ASL), which was passed in 2004 and revised in 2009 placed a requirement\duty on education authorities to consider whether looked after children require a co-ordinated support plan (CSPs). A Co-ordinated Support Plan is a statutory planning document for children and young people whose needs require a high level of co-ordination of support from their education authority and other agencies. The revision aimed to ensure that all looked after children were specified as having additional support needs and considered for a plan.

Scottish Government statistics show that there were 9,566 looked after children studying continuously during the entire 2009/10 academic year. Last year CSPs were given to 3,527 children from all backgrounds<sup>4</sup>. There is currently no further breakdown of this data. However, it would appear there are barriers which potentially inhibit looked after children benefitting from the provisions of the ASL legislation and the vast majority of looked after children are not receiving CSPs.

Barnardo's Scotland believes that too many looked after children are not being considered for a CSP or that due consideration is not being fully given. From our work with looked after children and local authorities, we agree with evidence highlighted in the Committee's inquiry to date that there is evidence to suggest that there is some conflict between GIRFEC and the ASL Act. Often the rationale for not using ASL and CSP's for looked after children is that existing planning processes and GIRFEC afford all that is necessary in terms of planning and provision of support to those children. However, if this was the case we would have expected to see better progress and better results.

Local Authorities must ensure, that all looked after children are considered for a CSP. We believe that significantly more looked after children should be given a CSP.

There also needs to be more data collected and published to show how many looked after children have been:

- Considered for CSPs
- Awarded CSPs
- Rejected for CSPs
- Have appealed decisions and success rate of decisions/appeals.

This information should be broken down by Local Authority area and included in the Statistical Publication Notice published by the Scottish Government on Educational Outcomes for Scotland's Looked After Children.

More needs to be done to support families and carers (foster and residential) of looked after children to promote and be aware of the act and their rights under the act.

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<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government: Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland, No.2, 2011 Edition  
7th December, 2011

We also believes that there is a potential conflict of interest, as local authorities are corporate parents for looked after children and yet in order to appeal a decision regarding a turned down request for a CSP they would have to appeal to the local authority. This is also the case for many foster carers. Barnardo's Scotland has heard of cases where foster carers are unwilling to make appeals/references for the children in their care due to the fact that they are carers for the local authority they would have to appeal to.

Barnardo's Scotland currently provides a Scotland-wide service, *Take Note*, which was set-up for parents and young people (16-17), including looked after children, who have grounds to make a reference to the Additional Support Needs Tribunal for Scotland (ASNTS). The service has been widely promoted to all local authorities. At present the service has received no referrals regarding looked after children appealing a negative CSP decision, which we believe to be a reflection of this situation.

Barnardo's Scotland would like to see a full review of the Additional Support for Learning Act (2009) and assess its relationship with GIRFEC to ensure that the ASL is being implemented appropriately.

### **About Barnardo's Scotland**

Barnardo's Scotland is a national voluntary organisation and works directly with more than 10,000, children, young people and their families in over 98 specialised services in local communities across Scotland which cover fostering, parenting, substance misuse, offending, homelessness, and abuse. Most of the children and families we work with have some degree of interaction with the welfare system, and this UK legislation will have a profound impact on their lives.