

Barnardo's Scotland response to the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee inquiry into educational attainment of looked after children

Introduction and key recommendations

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children. As the number of looked after young people continues to rise it is crucial that we ensure that this intervention make as positive an impact as possible on the lives of vulnerable young people.

We believe that looked after young people should be supported to maximise their educational potential. During the transition to adulthood they should be supported to enable them to make the most of all the opportunities available to them and their peers. Education which is tailored to the needs of each child is crucial if this transition is to be successful.

Before discussing the educational attainment of looked after children as a group it is important to recognise that there are differences in educational attainment among looked after young people in different care settings. As of July 2010 just under 40% of looked after children live at home with their parents. Generally all of these children and young people will have appeared at a children's hearing, and the hearing will have made a legal supervision requirement resulting in the young person becoming looked after. These children will also have a care plan in place which is reviewed at regular intervals. The majority of looked after children in Scotland, however, do not live at home with their parents. When a decision is taken that a child should become looked after, and remaining in their home is not considered appropriate, the local authority or the children's hearing, or in some cases the court, will look at alternative placement options. These range from foster care, to kinship care, to some form of residential care.

The latest Scottish Government research shows that young people who are looked after at home, or who experience multiple moves in foster care perform much worse than those in stable foster placements or residential settings. It is crucial, therefore, that any approach to tackling education under-attainment has to recognise the different issues in different care settings.

It is also important to recognise that a high proportion of children and young people see their entry into care as beneficial to their education. Therefore, rather than the 'looked after' status in itself being a driver of poor educational outcomes, it would be fairer to say that in general the factors which make it more likely that a child will become looked after (such as chaotic family background, loss, trauma and separation, abuse, neglect, parental substance misuse and family breakup) are also indicators of poor educational attainment.

Nonetheless, Barnardo's would still argue much more could be done to improve educational attainment once children become looked after. The fact that 90 percent of looked after children leave school aged 16 years or under, compared to 37 percent of all children, is indicative of a general failure of educational process to engage looked after children and young people, as well as the wider issues around transitions out of care at 16.

Barnardo's Scotland key recommendations, as detailed in the rest of the response are:

- 1) we need to increase aspiration among and expectations of looked after children;
- 2) we need greater understanding within the education system and the teacher training curriculum of the needs of looked after children;
- 3) we need better co-ordination between the education system and other services supporting looked after children;
- 4) we need more comparative research, especially into the requirements of looked after children in different care settings.
- 5) the long-term preventative benefits of effective work to improve outcomes for looked after children need to be recognised.

Research Context

The number of looked after children in Scotland is now at its highest level since 1982. As of 31 July 2010, there were 15,892 children being looked after by local authorities in Scotland. This represents 14.3 per 1,000 children of the 0-18 year old population. The number of, and rate per 1,000 population aged 0-18 years, has been increasing every year since 2001. Of these children 6,193 were looked after at home, 1,480 in residential accommodation, with the remainder with foster carers, potential adopters or other community placements (such as kinship care).

The recent publication of the Scottish government's first annual report on the educational outcomes for Scotland's looked after children (covering 2009/10) ¹highlights the continuing underachievement of looked after children compared to the average outcomes for children and young people in Scotland. However the report does identify major differences in outcomes for looked after children in different care settings.

In terms of exam results the performance of looked after children was considerably worse than the average of all school leavers. However, the fact that that around 90 percent of looked after children left school aged 16 years or under, compared to only 37 percent of all school leavers, must be taken into account when making comparisons. Nonetheless, even if we only compare those who left school at 16, looked after children averaged only 51 'tariff points' (a composite measure of educational achievement used by UCAS), compared to 141 points for the school leaving population as a whole.

¹ Scottish government (20110) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/23123831/0>

However there are very significant differences between the different cohorts of looked after children. Children looked after at home with parents had an average tariff score of only 32, compared to over 160 when in foster care.

There is a similar picture in terms of school attendance. Looked after children have a lower school attendance percentage (87.8 percent) than that of all pupils (93.2 percent). However children in residential schools, voluntary sector homes and with foster carers have better attendance figures than those for the population as a whole, while children looked after at home (78.7 percent) and in local authority homes (84.9 percent) have significantly worse figures.

There is also a significant correlation between the number of foster placements and poor attendance and academic attainment. Average tariffs for looked after children fall from 68 for those who have had one placement during the year to 41 for those who had four or more, and attendance figures fall from 87.7 percent for those with one placement to 78.8 for those with six or more.

Another important piece of research examining improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people was carried out by the University of Bedfordshire on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) in 2009². Among other findings, the research identified that a high proportion of children and young people see their entry into care as beneficial in relation to their education. However it was recognised that this does not mean all care placements are helpful and, as the Scottish evidence above indicates, there is considerable unevenness between different care settings.

Policy context

Barnardo's Scotland has been supportive of efforts made by the Scottish Government to improve the educational attainment of looked after children. This has included efforts to improve data collection, raising the profile of the issue and piloting a range of projects to explore new models of learning. However, for Barnardo's the most significant part of the efforts made by the Scottish government has been the focus on aspirations and expectations.

As the research carried for the 2009 Scottish Government publication *'Improving the Education of Looked After Children: A Guide for Local Authorities and Service Providers'*³ indicated

Looked after children and young people can improve in both school attendance and attainment in a relatively short period of time when provided with additional support and engaged in flexible and individually tailored activities. Children and young people who had high levels of engagement in the pilot activities made appreciably more progress in one year on reading and writing than others. This is very encouraging because it suggests that being involved in educational, cultural and sporting activity can make an impact on achievement and attainment.

² Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Service (2009) - http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/vulnerablechildren/educationaloutcomes/files/improving_educational_outcomes_research_summary_1.pdf

³ Scottish Government (2009) - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/03/25142835/0>

Tailoring support to suit an individual child or young person, being flexible, involving the young person in choosing the focus of learning, and providing a breadth of learning opportunities, appear to be effective strategies for improving the achievements of looked after children and young people.

Giving children high but realistic expectations was seen as being very important, though this had to be done in a way that was not perceived as 'nagging'. Also very important was for professionals not to give up on children, even if they were initially reluctant to be engaged or who experienced problems during the project.

Barnardo's Scotland would agree with this approach, and the evidence found in this research matches our own experience in delivering services to looked after children. Appropriately tailored engagement has the potential to transform outcomes. We recognise, however, that many Local Authorities in practise find it difficult to allocate sufficient funding to deliver this level of support. However, given the renewed interest in preventative spending approaches in the Scottish parliament, we would encourage Local Authorities to recognise the long term savings that can be generated by this kind of intervention.

Key Issues

Low expectations

As described above the in our experience the most significant barrier to improving educational outcomes is the continuing low expectations of children and young people affected by complex family issues, such as domestic violence, parental substance misuse, physical or sexual abuse, loss/trauma/separation or family breakup which are closely linked to becoming looked after. At the moment too many of those pupils who need help the most actually see a withdrawal of support. This is particularly true of those who are unable to concentrate on lessons or whose families do not encourage learning.

One of the biggest problems faced by looked after children is that their often chaotic family backgrounds is that it encourages professionals to think they can't succeed, and many of the adults that work with these children can be quick to damp down expectations. This runs counter to the need to raise confidence, and recognise achievement, not just attainment for these young people.

Barnardo's Scotland currently involved in delivering mentoring services and out of school activities aimed at supporting and inspiring looked after children and young people. An example of this is our STRIVE* programme in Aberdeen, currently in its pilot phase, and a case study of the service is attached as an appendix.

In this context it is also important to recognise that, although there is quite rightly a focus on the role of teachers and the education system, these issues go much wider. For example, there is a particular issue around the provision of mental health services for looked after children. Research indicates that around

50% of looked after children in Scotland have a mental health problem⁴, yet our services report chronic problems of misdiagnosis and lengthy waiting lists to access child and adolescent mental health services.

The education system

In our experience the level of leadership and commitment to supporting, including and maintaining the attendance of looked after children is highly variable between schools. Effective school leadership at a school level and efforts to bring together all the services working with the children as envisaged in GIRFEC are the key to success in this area.

Teacher training also needs to be examined, both with regard to looked after children, and the wider cohort of children with social, emotional or behavioural needs (SEBN). In our experience there is currently a heavy emphasis on classroom control, and, at times, a lack of focus with the B.Ed and PGDE curriculum on techniques for including and involving children with social, emotional or behavioural needs. There is a need for more sharing of ideas, techniques and experiences, required to engage children in often chaotic circumstances in learning. However, we recognise that Government initiatives such as the *We Can and Must Do Better* training materials have been helpful in this regard.

There are also useful international models. Countries like Germany and Denmark, have a tradition of social pedagogy, which appears to provide for a more holistic approach to the care and education of looked after young people. This better integration of care and education remains desirable in Scotland. In our experience 'social workers and education staff often lack knowledge of each others structures and specialist language. Teachers receive little training around the care system and may harbour misconceptions about the reasons why children and young people are looked after. The initial training of social workers includes little if any information about schools, their organisation or curriculum. Research also shows that many social workers 'do not consider education as part of their core business.'⁵

There is also an important role for non-academic schools staff. For example janitorial staff, who may be the only male staff members in the school, can be one of the most important relationships an otherwise marginalised pupil has. There is a need for more recognition of the wider benefits and role of school support staff, whether janitors, food servers or classroom assistants.

Therefore the scope of training and education of all those who work with young people needs to be widened in order to promote a more holistic view of the needs of looked after children if their educational outcomes are to be improved. This means training and education which traverses the boundaries of individual disciplines. Social workers and carers need to view learning and education as more central to their role.

Co-ordinating and monitoring

⁴ ONS (2004) Meltzer, H. Lader, D. Corbin, T. Goodman, R. Ford, T., The Mental Health of young people looked after by local authorities in Scotland

⁵ Jackson, S and Sachdev, D. (2001) *Better Education, Better Futures: Research, Practice and the Views of Young People in Public Care*.

As described above, there is a wide variation in the performance of different schools regarding the support they give to looked after children. We would support greater efforts to audit school's performance in this area. Schools which are currently not effectively supporting their looked after pupils, and where links with other services as in GIRFEC models are not properly in place, need to be identified and action taken.

A key measure could be to identify how many school days are lost in total by looked after pupils through both exclusion and periods where the looked after child is only receiving schooling on a part time basis. Schools should be required to put in place a programme to address learning loss where school time is missed.

In this regard we welcome the clear position on the considerations that need to be taken around excluding looked after children set out in paragraphs 210-212 of the recent Scottish Government publication 'Included, engaged and involved part 2: a positive approach to managing school exclusions', and in particular the statement in paragraph 211 that "There are particular responsibilities and considerations for the corporate parent regarding the exclusion of a Looked After Child, including the implications for the placement; the emotional impact on a child or young person who may already have attachment issues and may have experienced considerable lack of stability".⁶

Research

Although there is a substantial body of research in existence around the education attainment of looked after children, in order to aid the committee's consideration we would suggest that additional information could be collected on a Scotland-wide basis assessing:

- 1) how many looked after children have additional support for learning and co-ordinated support plans and are receiving provision under the additional support for learning Act;
- 2) audit how many looked after children receive support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and have adequate behaviour support available in school;
- 3) assess how effectively GIRFEC care plans address educational needs.

Poor Outcomes

For many of Scotland's looked after and accommodated children their outcomes post education are bleak. Many have multiple health problems, come into regular and sustained contact with the criminal justice system and a high proportion do not go into any employment, training or education on leaving care.

Currently over two thirds of the nearly 4,000 of looked after children who are entitled to aftercare on leaving care are not recorded as entering into employment, training or education. Forty five percent of current young offenders were also looked after children. Looked after children share many of the health risks and problems of their peers, but often to a greater degree. As highlight above, it is estimated that around 50% of looked after children have a mental health problem,

⁶ Scottish Government (2011) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/345984/0115162.pdf>

of which many go undetected or untreated. Untreated health problems in children and young people are much more likely to turn into chronic problems in adulthood.

All of these problems can be of great long –term cost to local and national government. Barnardo's believes that there is a need for specific early intervention and preventative work to support this vulnerable group of young people in order to achieve positive outcomes for them. There is a clear link between educational attainment and positive outcomes in health and employment, there is also a far less chance of that person coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

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Case study

STRIVE*- a targeted programme to improve educational outcomes for looked after young people in Aberdeen

Following a year of research and development Barnardo's Scotland recently received confirmation from the Aberdeen City Education Culture and Sport Service of an agreement to work in partnership to test the Strive* programme.

Strive* is a 'booster programme' for children and young people aged between 11 years and 16 years who are 'looked after' at home or away from home and are struggling with mainstream school provision in terms of attainment, attendance and/or being at risk of exclusion.

Programme aims

1. Engage young people in learning and improve educational attainment.
2. Stem the flow of looked after school leavers entering negative destinations.
3. Champion a more holistic approach to the needs of looked after children amongst present and future frontline staff.

Young people

The programme has been designed to unlock the potential of young people, rather than simply respond to pre-identified limitations. STRIVE* will achieve this by offering:

- Out-of-school hours coaching which seeks to engage young people in individual, group and family activities which are inspirational, fun and structured in order to promote learning and achievement.
- A £500 learning fund for each young person which adds a freedom and focus to the coaching relationship and gives the relationship resources to make change happen.
- One-to-one sessions with specific school focus. Connecting success and motivation from out-of-school hours learning to school performance. A shoulder to shoulder approach to supporting young people to navigate challenges and barriers to educational attainment.

The family

STRIVE* uses a specific tool to draw in the wider family network in the successful learning of each child. The *'Family Learning Signature'* provides a baseline for understanding learning strengths and challenges and encompassing the prevailing cultural, behavioural, environmental and resource conditions within a young person's system

Integrating care and education

STRIVE* aims to make a contribution to the better integration of the care and education of looked after children which is necessary if we are to bridge the attainment and opportunity gap. STRIVE* will achieve this by:

- Recruiting social work and teaching students as coaches to support young people on a one-to-one basis and to facilitate activities. By offering this experiential learning opportunity to students we can encourage a more holistic approach to the care and education of looked after young people.
- Encouraging social work and teaching students to develop an appreciation of the importance of school for this often marginalised group of young people. STRIVE* will expect coaches to gain a sophisticated awareness and understanding of what it means to be 'looked after' in terms of the environmental and situational barriers to learning which may be faced by looked after children.
- Paying coaches a Professional Development Bursary to help ensure commitment and longevity of the coaching relationship.

Supporting evidence for Strive*

Our evidence review generated five clear themes that were ultimately incorporated into the design of Strive*.

The five themes listed below were drawn from seven studies of the views of looked after young people on the subject of their educational experience. All seven studies included were published within the last 10 years. They were chosen on the basis that they were recurrent across the samples who participated in the studies.

1. Children and young people often have to deal with low expectations and negative stereotyping from teachers, social workers and carers as a direct result of their looked after status. The attitudes of adults working with looked after children towards their education are crucial to supporting learning and achievement.
2. Good communication and collaboration between social work and teaching staff is necessary for adequate educational support for looked after children. Experiences of stigma and intrusion suggest a need for a sensitive and individualised approach to information sharing.
3. Young people value the encouragement they receive from consistently supportive individuals who take an interest in their learning and achievements.
4. Like most young people the influence of parents and families on the attitudes and motivation of looked after children to achieve are highly influential, even in cases where parents have been absent from their lives for some time.
5. Young people want the same opportunities for leisure time activities such as cultural pursuits and sports as their more advantaged peers. It is important to them that their achievements are recognised and acknowledged by the adults in their lives.

The following is a summary of evidence which informed the design of STRIVE*:

- High achieving looked after children are differentiated from those who do less well by greater self-efficacy. (Jackson & Martin, 2002)⁷
- Self-efficacy, as a characteristic, is a strong predictor of success in later life including educational attainment. (Lexmond & Reeves, 2009)⁸
- Self-efficacy is key to motivation which is strongly related to success and the belief that success is possible. (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001)⁹
- Dozens of studies in the United States have emphasised the 'powerful impact' of providing out-of-school hours learning opportunities for young people within well structured programmes aimed at supporting positive learning outcomes including academic achievement. Successful programmes offer opportunities to 'practice new skills through hands-on, experiential learning ... which compliment, but do not replicate, in school learning'.¹⁰

*...balancing academic support with a variety of engaging, fun, and structured extra-curricular activities that promote youth development in a variety of real-world contexts appears to support and improve academic performance.*¹¹

- Giving young people the support to make choices about how to manage and spend a personal allowance for OSHL activities could act as an incentive to participate as well as consolidating ownership of learning and promoting self efficacy.¹²
- Gilligan argues that specifically mentoring the talents and interests of young people could make an important contribution in terms of the progress and resilience of those young people.¹³
- The quality of the mentoring relationship as perceived by young people is crucial. The relationship needs to be one based on helping and supporting as opposed to policing. Young people can disengage if a conflict of roles occurs with the mentor perceived as acting for authority and not on behalf of the young person.
- Longevity of the relationship is crucial. Mentoring relationships of short duration could do 'more harm than good' and 'the longer the mentoring relationship, the better the outcome for young people.'¹⁴ Successful

⁷ Martin, P. and Jackson, S. (2002) 'Educational Success for Children in Public Care: Advice from a Group of High Achievers' in *Child and Family Social Work*, vol. 7 pp. 121-130

⁸ Lexmond, J. and Reeves, R. (2009) *Building Character: 'Parents are the Principle Architects of a Fairer Society...'* Demos: London

⁹ Jackson, S and Sachdev, D. (2001) *Better Education, Better Futures: Research, Practice and the Views of Young People in Public Care*. Barnardo's, Ilford

¹⁰ Little, Pricilla M. (2009) Supporting Student Outcomes Through Expanded Learning Opportunities <http://hfrp.org/out-of-school-time/publications-resources/supporting-student-outcomes-through-expanded-learning-opportunities>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Maxwell, D., Sodha, S., Stanley, K. (2006) *An Asset Account for Looked After Children: A Proposal to Improve Educational Outcomes for Children in Care*, IPPR: London

¹³ Gilligan, R. (1999) 'Enhancing the Resilience of Children and Young People in Public Care by Mentoring their Talents and Interests' in *Child and Family Social Work* 4, pp. 187-196

¹⁴ Hall, J. (2003) *Mentoring and Young People: A Literature Review*, SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow

programmes in the USA usually employ paid mentors. Remuneration may incentivise mentors to 'perform better than volunteer mentors' and may encourage longer term commitment.¹⁵

- Frequent and regular contact with the young person which should encompass communication with parents and carers to encourage their support.¹⁶

Moving forward

In designing new programmes, such as STRIVE*, Barnardo's Scotland employs a five step development process that includes a pre-pilot test. This test enables us to prototype programme delivery and make any adjustments prior to conducting a fully evaluated pilot. In March 2011 we secured funding to run a one year test of Strive* in Aberdeen. We are currently looking at sources of funding for the pilot phase of the programme.

¹⁵ Kilm, T., Miller, M and Nunlist, C. (2009) *What Works? Targeted Truancy and Dropout Programs in Middle and High School*. Olympia: Washington State Institute of Public Policy

¹⁶ Hall, J. (2003) *Mentoring and Young People: A Literature Review*, SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow