

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

A response by the Association of Directors of Social Work

BACKGROUND

Despite demographic change towards a fall in the number of children in our population, social work services are experiencing growing demand for their children and families services. This is mainly due to the effect of the almost epidemic rise in the numbers of children living with drug and alcohol misusing parents or carers. Many of these children require to be looked after (social work supervision of the child while they remain in their own homes) and others still end up being accommodated by the local authority in foster care places, residential schools or homes.

We know from the statistics available that children who are accommodated by the authority do better than those who are looked after at home and we know that of those children who are accommodated, those who are in family situations (i.e. foster care) do better than those in residential schools or homes.

But, as corporate parents to children who are looked after or accommodated, the local authority has a duty under the Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000 to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. We also must comply with the Children (Scotland) 1995 Act which states that: *"Children who are looked after should have the same educational opportunities as all other children for education, including further and higher education, and access to other opportunities for development."*

The Looked after Children statistics, which are released every year, usually give rise to some consternation, summed up in the remit of this inquiry – why do looked after children do worse academically than those who are accommodated by the authority? In our response below, the Association of Director's of Social Work will set out what we believe the main contributing factors are and further set out what we think could be done to improve the chances of these children reaching their potential.

INITIATIVES

Of course we recognise the best outcome for children and young people would for them not to be in a situation where they require to be looked after in the first place. The emphasis in the spending review on preventative spend and the announcement by the Scottish Government of a Change Fund to support early years work has the potential to make a big difference for these children and young people and ADSW welcomes these initiatives.

However, we do have significant amounts of children and young people who require social work supervision and this number, at the moment, is rising. In our current circumstances, the best route to bringing about change is to decide what we want to achieve for whom, find out what works and then design an approach and stick with it. This is the opposite to what has happened in field of educational attainment of looked after children. We have seen initiative after initiative with time-limited, ring fenced resources and very specific remits. For example, a £6million bid fund announced in 2004. Despite requests that a literature review was carried out to establish 'what works' and pilot studies commissioned, the then Executive asked for open bids from councils: a piecemeal approach which was not the best use of the money available. In 2001, funding of £10million was announced for books, equipment and homework materials for looked after children. Other grants and spending review commitments have included training for carers and funds for FE colleges to accept looked after children more readily.

Essentially, we feel there has been a fragmented though well meaning approach, which has meant that there is no long term vision for improving the educational attainment of this group. Something that is essential if we are to make an impact.

It is also clear those initiatives that have been announced are trying to tackle the wrong issues. The emphasis so far has been about getting looked after children to cope with school: providing materials, training for carers, technology etc. ADSW believes that there should be an equal emphasis between what can be done to help looked after children in their care or home setting and what schools and the education system need to do to cope with these children. Schools need to look at their culture, whole school ethos, teacher behaviours and practice if we are to get a whole system solution. Especially as the numbers of looked after children rise and children in these circumstances become common place.

We also need to realise, across all services that not all looked after children can be taught in a classroom - some will never cope with that. But, all looked after children have the right to a meaningful education which is flexible enough to cope with their circumstances. We know from national data that 9 out of 10 children in local authority residential units are going to experience exclusion; add this to their already disrupted education and some schools only offering part time time-tables and we look like we are giving the message that looked after children don't fit with education. In fact the stance we should be taking is getting all our public services to work together to fit with and meet the needs of looked after children.

A key role to ensure that we do all work together for this group of children is that of the corporate parent. Just as parents can make a big impact on the attainment of their own children so too can corporate parents make a difference to the attainment, achievement and success of looked after children. Where local authorities and other public bodies have good corporate parenting practice, it makes a difference: this group of children, more than most need someone standing up for them, looking out for them and helping them reach their potential. This is something that ADSW supports and would like to take further.

ATTAINMENT, ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS

Another key issue that ADSW would like to highlight to the committee is how and when we are judging the success of this group. ADSW accepts that educational attainment is a potential route out of social exclusion and we absolutely appreciate the importance of that route. However, we talk about attainment (in terms of grades) and not achievement, which would broaden chances of success; and we judge these children and young adults at 16 years of age.

For some children and young people who are looked after and survive in chaotic households, their lives have been severely disrupted either by a significant one off event, or by ongoing circumstances. Whatever the case, to think that they can be judged with other children who don't have their lives disrupted in this way is unrealistic. If we measured the educational attainment of looked after children at age 17 or 18, the figures would improve significantly. This would allow for the additional time that some looked after children may take to gain their qualifications and also capture those that gain qualifications at college and not school. Some councils have already started to capture this data, but it would be worth considering doing this on a national basis.

For some looked after children, just getting to school is an achievement. Think about the looked after child, judged a success by the current criteria, because he or she attained 9 standard grades at level 1; they then go onto university; but can't get a job, because they can't cope in a work setting. Or, think about the looked after child, grown up and a single parent to 3 children, none of whom have been near social services – is she not a success?

We can still be aspirational for our looked after children we should just appreciate that it may take them longer to get to the same place as their peers and that success for them, might look different.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

One of the key issues when talking about the educational attainment of looked after children is that it is deemed an issue for social work. Actually it is an issue for social work, education and health. In a

recent study by Glasgow City Council it was found that 18 out of 21 children in one primary 1 class in the city had some sort of support from social work in place. It is clear that as more and more children are brought up in these circumstances, all services will have to change the way they view and treat these children, as in some areas they are becoming the rule and are no longer the exception.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRENDS

The key question of the inquiry is why looked after children do not attain qualifications in similar quantities and at similar level to other groups of children. In a nutshell, of the children in Scotland who are looked after, those looked after in a homely setting do best, because they have security and a family environment; children in residential schools or homes do not do very well as many of them have had multiple failed placements and major disruption in their lives, but they have routine and discipline and they therefore do better than those looked after at home; this group of children have contact with social work services and are under their supervision, but this can mean a couple of visits a month and in the meantime they have to cope with a chaotic home life.

However, this is not straightforward as just because children are fostered does not mean to say they are in an ideal situation. The demographic of foster carers leans towards adults who are often themselves not top achievers or who have not had the best school experience. However, if we approach this issue holistically we can make a huge difference¹. In all of this however, we also must not forget that some children thrive with minimal intervention in their lives while they continue to live in their family home.

WIDER ISSUES

There are many things that local and central government and other agencies can do to improve the outcomes for looked after children which involve other agencies.

Jobs and training

- We need to invest in training and routes to employment for this group, including how the public sector (local authorities, health service, police, civil service, etc) can identify training places and employment opportunities. A job and the security that comes with it is probably the ultimate attainment for looked after children, particularly as they leave care.
- Entrepreneurial foundations of private sector companies are already working to set up 'academies' and mentoring schemes. As corporate parents the public authorities can change lives by offering jobs and Scottish Government could lead the way by identifying a quota of jobs and training places specifically set aside for this group.
- On a similar theme, the further education sector could provide a dedicated number of college places.

Working with families

The other dimension we need to consider is the importance of working with families. Introducing evidenced based programmes for the most disadvantaged families through the use of the recently announced early years change fund would be a positive use of the monies available and would have a positive impact on the outcomes that this group of children and young people could attain.

Multi-agency approaches

Following in the spirit of the previous government ('We can and must do better' publication), we have ensured that we have identified lead teachers for looked after children in every school. But we need to work the other way too to ensure that every school knows who its looked after children are. It would also be useful to extend awareness by ensuring that every authority has a dedicated looked after children teaching and health resource; and that all residential units have a link education officer or teacher.

¹ A recent study by BAAF in association with Dundee University looked at a very successful 'paired reading' scheme with foster carers which lifted the attainment of the children they cared for.

We also need to ensure that all community planning partnerships are aware of and are prioritising looked after children and have single outcome agreement targets for them; and that children's services plans are clear about specific services available and the outcomes we are aiming for.

ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

Essentially, decisions over where a child should be brought up are a balancing act between trying to keep families together and knowing when to accept that working towards that goal is no longer in the best interests of the children. This is a complex area, but we feel attention to the following goes some way towards improving outcomes for this group of children and young people:

- Any future initiatives, policy or legislation brought forward in this area should fit with the GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) agenda; an agenda that ADSW is fully committed to.
- Collection and analysis of appropriate and useful data: reflecting the outcomes we genuinely want for children who are looked after. We have to question whether or not that is the number of standard grades they attain at 16.
- A consistency of policy direction and approach nationally.
- An approach to helping this group of children towards successful lives that is based on a clear understanding of the evidence of what works.
- A commitment and realisation from all services that looked after children are rising in number and should no longer be viewed as an issue for social work alone. Universal services such as education and health need to accept their role in the lives of these children. The emphasis should be on the child or young person and what they need, not on the service responsible.
- An emphasis on supporting children and young people when they are ready, which might not be at the same time as other children and young people.
- Adopting evidence based approaches to utilising the monies made available for early years preventative work.