

# Improving the Educational Attainment of Children in care (Looked after Children)



# 1. Improving the Educational Attainment of Children in Care (Looked after Children)

- 1.1 We believe that every child in care is capable of success in learning and in life. Yet too many are let down educationally by the system that is supposed to look after them. In 2008, just 14% of children in care achieved 5 A\* – C grade GCSEs – the level which is increasingly seen as the basic threshold for employability. There are several factors which cause this situation:
  - in the first place, of course, a number of children in care have been through a lot before being taken into care, and this can create barriers to learning;
  - secondly, experience of the care system, including for example, movement between placements, can disrupt their life and their schooling;
  - thirdly, the school system itself doesn't do enough to help looked after children catch up and keep up – either because schools don't know that children are in care or because they do not know what can be done to accelerate their learning.
- 1.2 We believe the current levels of educational attainment can be transformed if the system is changed so that the joint efforts of all those who care about the learning of these children can have their maximum effect.
- 1.3 In this document we propose that the fundamental elements of that system should be:
  - In every local authority, a senior official, or “virtual school head” (VSH) should rigorously track the schooling of every child in care, making sure in the first place that schools know when they have a child or children in care on their roll, and that the school is putting in place appropriate additional targeted provision for this child or children.
  - In every local authority, the VSH should be looking to ensure continuity of schooling for every child in care, even where stability of placement cannot be achieved, using appropriate admissions powers and school transport where necessary.
  - In school, there should be additional, personalised, one-to-one support for every child in care, through one-to-one tuition and use of the Personal Education Allowance where appropriate.
- 1.4 In this document we set this approach out in more detail. We recognise that other things will contribute to the success of individual children and young people as well – and that tackling wider barriers to learning will be important. However, getting this basic approach in place will make that possible – and will on its own transform learning and achievement for many children and young people.

## 2. The Case for Change

- 2.1 There are around 60,000 Children in Care (CiC) at any time, although this is a rapidly changing group as children move into and out of care. Children enter care for many reasons, but many have experienced serious problems not of their own making. 63% enter care because they have suffered abuse or neglect, and many suffer mental health problems resulting from this. Others may enter care because their parents are suffering from a severe disability or their family is suffering acute stress. Some may not have received adequate support in a range of areas, such as receiving basic health care.
- 2.2 Following these difficulties experienced by the child or young person, the State takes them into care for their own protection and wellbeing. But the truth is that many children and young people in care do not then receive a good quality learning experience.
- 2.3 CiC tend to move schools more regularly than their peers, which has a strong negative effect on attainment. They are also more likely to have Special Educational Needs: 28% of CiC have a statement of SEN compared to 3% of all children.
- 2.4 Although some of this group of children do well, their average attainment is far worse than that of their peers. At Key Stage 2, they are significantly less likely to reach level 4 or above in English or maths. In 2008 only 46% of CiC achieved level 4 in English and 44% achieved level 4 in maths. By contrast, 81% of all children obtained this level in English and 79% obtained this level in maths.
- 2.5 The gap between this group and their peers increases by the end of Key Stage 4. In 2008 just 14% of CiC achieved at least 5 A\* – C grade GCSEs, compared with 65% of all children. Unlike the figure for all children, the figure for CiC does not include qualifications equivalent to GCSEs and we are actively working to address this inconsistency. However, the gap is still too big.
- 2.6 Beyond school age, this group of young people are still less likely to experience positive outcomes. For example, they are less than half as likely to end up in education, employment or training as their peers and there is a disproportionate probability that they will be teenage parents.
- 2.7 But with the right support in place, we believe that every child in care is capable of progressing, achieving and succeeding. We take these children into care to improve their life chances, but their outcomes remain unacceptably low.
- 2.8 Our existing strategy to help CiC to succeed is described in the Care Matters White Paper, published in June 2007, which set out a range of proposals to improve attainment for this group. These children and young people now have priority in admissions arrangements to ensure they have access to the school that is right for them, and they can access

personalised learning, over and above what they should be receiving in school, through a Personal Education Allowance of £500. They should also benefit from a presumption that they should not move schools unnecessarily. Most of them now have access to a designated teacher to support their learning, and there will be a statutory requirement for schools to have a designated teacher for CiC from September 2009.

- 2.9 Schools and local authorities have already made progress in raising attainment for this group of children. From 2005 to 2008 the percentage of CiC achieving 5 good GCSEs or equivalent has risen from 11% to 14%. But this improvement is slower than the national average for all children. In the same time period the percentage of all children obtaining these qualifications has risen from 56% to 65%. Reversing the widening of this gap and transforming opportunities for young people is now an urgent necessity.

## 3. Our strategy

- 3.1 There is no reason why CiC cannot achieve as much as any other child or young person. Indeed, they should receive close, personalised support from a number of qualified professionals to make better educational progress. Our ambition is for CiC to have the opportunity to do as well as their peers, and we believe this ambition is achievable.
- 3.2 If we are to succeed then we need:
  - **Local Authorities to have a Virtual School Head** to track closely the progress of every CiC and ensure that they receive the support they need.
  - **Every school to have a Designated Teacher** to work with each child to plan to raise their attainment and respond to their needs, including providing one-to-one tuition wherever appropriate.
  - **Local authorities to provide stable placements and schooling.**
- 3.3 Many local authorities have been operating a role of **Virtual School Head**. Building on the early signs of success from the DCSF pilot of the role, this document emphasizes the importance of a single senior manager at each local authority taking lead responsibility for improving the attainment of CiC. Crucially, the Virtual School Head (VSH) should make sure that there is systematic, disciplined tracking of the education of every individual child in care. This document outlines the steps that local authorities and schools should take to make sure that every child in care is identified and supported in a personalised way. The VSH should also make sure that the education of children in care is seen as a priority by everyone who works with them.
- 3.4 The document also highlights the role of the **designated teacher** within the school. We know that this group of children and young people particularly value having a teacher responsible for addressing their needs. The designated teacher is responsible for agreeing Personal Education Plans (PEPs) with each CiC in their school, in conjunction with their social worker and others involved in the child's life. In order to supplement PEPs, this document points to particular programmes of support that designated teachers should consider carefully for each CiC in their school. In particular, **one-to-one tuition** appears to have a particularly significant impact on looked after children, and so this should be employed wherever appropriate.

# 4. Local Authorities have a crucial role in raising attainment

## **The Director of Children's Services and Lead Member should provide leadership to improve the attainment of CiC**

- 4.1 The Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services are responsible for ensuring that the local authority's duty to promote the educational attainment of CiC is properly discharged.
- 4.2 It is vital that their leadership should focus relentlessly on narrowing the gap in educational achievement between CiC and their peers; ensuring they are fully supported to achieve their full potential; and ensuring that every tier in the local authority is fully aware of their duty to promote the educational attainment of this group.

## **The Virtual School Head should be accountable for improving the attainment of CiC**

- 4.3 So far around half of LAs have a VSH. The full evaluation of the DCSF pilot is still underway, but evidence from early adopters of the model suggests that it can lead to a positive impact on attainment. For example the first year after a virtual school was introduced in Liverpool the number of CiC gaining one or more GCSEs rose from 33% to 54%.
- 4.4 Regardless of whether the title 'Virtual School Head' is used, we believe it is imperative for local authorities to have somebody at senior level who is accountable for the attainment of CiC overall.
- 4.5 Our intention is that every local authority in the country has a senior manager who takes this lead responsibility. To support this, we have included money in the Care Matters grant, as part of the local authority's Area Based Grant to support the implementation of this model across the country.

## **The Virtual School Head should:**

### **Monitor the attainment of pupils**

- 4.6. The VSH will work through a range of others including the Looked After Children Education Services (LACES) to monitor the attainment of this group of children. LAs may wish to consider how best to ensure the VSH and LACES team work effectively together for maximum impact. This may mean reviewing structures so that the LACES team reports directly to the VSH within a local authority. In this model the VSH can be accountable for

monitoring the educational progress of CiC in their authority. Working through the LACES team, and in conjunction with other relevant professionals, the VSH should:

- rigorously track and monitor data on where children in care are at school and their progress, and act where necessary
- ensure that schools know which children are in care
- make sure that there is a PEP for all CiC and one-to-one support where appropriate.

### **Rigorously track and monitor data**

- 4.7 Many CiC move placements and schools regularly. It is sometimes hard for LAs to have robust information about the educational achievement of the CiC they should be supporting. Without this information it is not possible for LA and school staff to compare the attainment of this group and their peers, and take action to improve their attainment.
- 4.8 It should be the responsibility of the VSH, working through the LACES team, to maintain an accurate record of the location and educational progress of CiC in their authority, including those who are looked after by their authority regardless of where they are placed. They should rigorously track and monitor progress of their pupils in a similar way to a headteacher of a physical school.
- 4.9 There are an average of 300 CiC in each local authority, although clearly this number varies widely between authorities. Even in a large authority with as many as 2,000 CiC, it should be possible for a VSH, working with the LACES team, to monitor the progress of each individual child and intervene on their behalf where necessary.

### **Ensure that every school has the information it needs**

- 4.10 We know that teachers at some schools will not necessarily know which of their pupils are in care. In these instances they will not understand the potential barriers to improving these pupils' attainment, or the factors behind issues such as bad behaviour. It should be the responsibility of the VSH to ensure that the headteacher and the designated teacher in each school know which of the children on their roll are in care, and what can be done to support this group in particular.

### **Make sure there is a PEP and one-to-one support**

- 4.11 The VSH, either personally or through the LACES team, should work with relevant professionals to ensure PEPs are of a high quality. In conjunction with School Improvement Partners they should challenge schools when appropriate to improve the quality of the PEP and promote faster progress.
- 4.12 We know that this group of children particularly benefit from personalised support. Early evidence suggests that one-to-one tuition is a particularly effective way of providing this support for CiC, and so the VSH should ensure that that CiC are able to access one-to-one tuition wherever appropriate.

**Promote a focus on educational attainment across the local authority**

4.13 VSHs should champion the needs of CiC across the LA and spread effective practice.

VSHs can have a particularly powerful impact on:

- Improving behaviour and attendance
- Promoting stability of placement and school stability through admissions policies and use of school transport.

**The VSH should work to improve behaviour and attendance**

4.14 As a result of the problems that affect the lives of this group of children and young people they sometimes exhibit challenging behaviour. But behaviour and attendance can be improved if attendance is tracked, measures are taken to promote good attendance, good lessons are provided every day, and wider barriers to learning are addressed. VSHs should work with others at LAs and schools to ensure that measures are taken across the authority to promote positive behaviour, good attendance, and reduce exclusions, which should in turn improve attainment.

**The VSH should secure placement and school stability**

4.15 Moving school is incredibly disruptive for any child's education, particularly in exam years where schools will follow different exam syllabuses. On average, pupils 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. It is vital that this group of young people do not move schools unless absolutely necessary. The VSH should ensure social workers adequately consider the educational needs of CiC when taking decisions about moving placements. Where moving placements is absolutely essential, wherever possible a new placement should be found which enables continuity of schooling.

4.16 The VSH should take responsibility for making sure that admissions powers to admit CiC to the most appropriate school are used wherever necessary, and they should ensure that school transport is provided as required to help children stay in the same school.

## 5. Schools

- 5.1 CiC are even more likely than their peers to value the consistent personal support and attention of an identified adult, who is able to understand the issues facing the child and provide advice, support and high expectations over time. Feeling valued and supported by an adult is a key to promoting attainment among this group of children. An adult in every school should be concerned for the welfare and achievement of CiC so that every child feels supported and cared for.
- 5.2 The head teacher should be engaged in the welfare and education of children in care. They should provide leadership to ensure the school focuses on this group's needs, and they should make sure that each child receives personalised support.
- 5.3 From September 2009, there will be a statutory requirement for every school to have a designated teacher responsible for CiC, even in schools where there are currently none of these children on roll.
- 5.4 The designated teacher should be:
- responsible for co-ordinating strategies to raise the attainment of the child or young person, in particular agreeing a **high quality Personal Education Plan** and **creating opportunities** for CiC to access additional resources for learning, particularly **one-to-one tuition**.
  - a central point of contact for a child in care to provide the link between the child or young person's carer, social worker, VSH and other children's services.
  - responsible for understanding the wider needs of the child or young person.

### **The Designated Teacher should agree a Personal Education Plan for each CiC**

- 5.5 The key mechanism for addressing the needs of the child or young person and improving their attainment is the PEP. **The key thing about a PEP is that it should set high expectations of rapid progress and put in place the additional support the child or young person needs in order to succeed.** The designated teacher is responsible for working with social workers to develop the PEP. Each child's social worker should be aware of the child's educational needs and involved in decisions on how these are addressed, and designated teachers should make sure that the child's carer is consulted. The preferences of the child should be taken into account when producing the PEP; involving the young person in the design of their learning helps them to take ownership of their learning goals, and promotes confidence in the classroom. The designated teacher should ensure that the PEP is written, implemented, reviewed regularly and the impact assessed.

- 5.6 Guidance on how to design an effective PEP is available in the 2005 statutory guidance to promote the educational attainment of looked after children. A good quality PEP should:
- **be an achievement record** (academic and otherwise);
  - **be linked to information in other education plans**, including a statement of special educational needs and IEPs;
  - identify **developmental and educational needs** (short and long term) in relation to skills, knowledge, subject areas and experiences;
  - **set short term targets**, including progress monitoring against each of the areas identified against development and educational needs; and
  - **set long term plans and educational targets and aspirations** (e.g. in relation to public examinations, further and higher education, work experience and career plans and aspirations).
- 5.7 Each child at risk of not reaching their expected level of attainment is entitled to £500 per annum Personal Education Allowance. When designing the PEP the designated teacher should ensure that the child or young person receives maximum benefit from spending this allowance. The Personal Education Allowance can be used to pay for the sort of activities that parents provide for their children to help with their learning – including providing books and educational trips to the theatre.

### **The Designated Teacher should provide access to additional learning opportunities**

- 5.8 The designated teacher should be responsible for ensuring that CiC receives additional targeted learning support programmes from which they would benefit.

### **One-to-one tuition**

- 5.9 One-to-one tuition has been piloted in 10 local authorities through the one-to-one tuition element of the Making Good Progress Pilot. This is now being rolled out nationally in Key Stage 2, 3 (and in National Challenge schools in Key Stage 4). It is being rolled out in a phased approach, with an initial tranche of individual tuition in the Spring and Summer Terms of 2009 for 36,000 pupils falling behind in the latter part of Key Stage 2. From 2010-11, one-to-one tuition will be available to 300,000 pupils a year in English and maths. CiC who would particularly benefit from one-to-one tuition are eligible for this support.
- 5.10 Early evidence suggests that CiC make even better progress as a result of one-to-one tuition than their peers. This is unsurprising since CiC regularly highlight the value they place on personalised learning and lessons finely tuned to their needs. We will continue to monitor closely the patterns of progress made by this group in the MGP pilot to identify propitious stages, times and contexts for tuition.
- 5.11 Designated teachers should consider carefully whether CiC attending their school would benefit from this offer. We expect schools to make use of one-to-one tuition for CiC unless there are over-riding reasons not to.

- 5.12 The designated teacher should ensure that carers understand the benefit of one-to-one tuition and are equipped to engage with it at home.

#### **Academic focused study support**

- 5.13 Academic-focused study support can be directly related to the core curriculum, and is focused on raising standards of attainment. It might include activities such as homework clubs, peer education programmes, book clubs, mentoring or catch-up sessions delivered by subject specialists and focusing on key topics. It can also develop learning about learning such as thinking skills, study skills, research and library skills. Research shows that this type of support can improve attainment, attitudes to school and attendance.
- 5.14 We recommend that schools consider providing academic study support for all their pupils, but particularly targeted at CiC and other vulnerable children. We know that CiC may particularly benefit from these enriching activities outside the classroom, to which they generally don't have as much access as their peers.
- 5.15 In some schools there is additional funding for providing academic study support. As part of *Gaining Ground*, a total of £14 million is being made available to participating schools.

## 6. Conclusion

- 6.1 Of course, VSHs and schools do not work in isolation. Carers can contribute to improving attainment by creating a suitable environment for study, instilling a positive attitude to learning, and maintaining contact with the school. Social workers can help by prioritising the child's educational stability when placements have to change and ensuring that PEPs are in place.
- 6.2 But the key to success is the combination of stable schooling, a VSH tracking the progress of all CiC and intervening where necessary, and personalised support at school - including one-to-one tuition wherever appropriate. With this system in place, we believe that every child in care can be successful.

If you would like further information on any aspect of this document please contact Sarah Lewis from the Children in Care team at the DCSF. She can be contacted at [sarah.lewis@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.lewis@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk)



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