Additional Submission

Education and Culture Committee

Inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children

Fife Council Education Service

This briefing note summarises initiatives undertaken in Fife to improve educational outcomes for looked after children, in particular to tackle their continuing poor performance both locally and nationally in terms of attendance, exclusion and attainment. We believe that establishing an effective system for monitoring the educational experience of looked after children is essential, and this has been central to our work.

Identification

In order to monitor looked after children’s experience and performance in education it is essential that schools are aware of children’s looked after status. Over a number of years, we have progressively developed approaches to ensure that accurate information concerning LAC status is shared between Social Work and Education. This was based initially on liaison between social work teams and schools in the areas which they cover, and systematic use of Regulation 7 letters. While this brought about some improvements in accuracy we were aware that it did not offer a comprehensive solution, particularly in respect of children attending school in a different area from their supervising social work team.

In view of this we developed a process which links the management information systems used by Social Work (SWIFT) and Education (Pearson e1). We initially considered the possibility that these systems could be set up to share information automatically, but it was clear that this would not be possible without a major resource investment. We opted therefore for a simpler solution whereby key staff in Social Work are given access to e1, and on a regular basis manually update the status of all looked after children in Fife.

Initially this required confirmation on e1 of the status of all LAC in Fife attending an educational establishment, some 697 children from a total LAC population of 842. Following completion of this major task Social Work administrative staff now routinely update this information on a regular basis when the SWIFT system is being updated, ensuring that both systems hold the same information.

It should be noted that this process applies only to children looked after by Fife Council. Responsibility for updating the status of children looked after by other authorities lies with the school which they attend rather than Fife Social Work Service as the Social Work Service does not systematically receive information from other authorities about such children, despite relevant LAC
Regulations. However schools tend to be fully aware of these children, and updating their records is straightforward.

Following the initial updating exercise we undertook an audit of LAC status which confirmed a high level of accuracy, close to 100%. A small number of anomalies were identified, mostly related to confusion about children’s actual status. The most common of these was a belief in schools that children who are looked after by a relative are automatically subject to a formal supervision requirement. Development of this system has been helpful in clarifying such issues.

Educational establishments are now able to accurately identify the looked after status of all children by generating a report using a predefined search procedure. This information is then used to monitor pupils’ progress at individual and at cohort levels, as described below.

**Monitoring the educational progress of LAC**

**Individual level**
At school level there is a clear expectation that there is awareness of children’s looked after status among all relevant staff and that this is taken into account in any consideration of their progress and need for support. This occurs as part of the tracking process which schools undertake in respect of all pupils. More specifically, identification of a child as looked after prompts consideration of whether they may have additional support for learning needs in terms of the ASL Act (2009), and if as a result a need for additional planning is indicated, ensuring appropriate linkage with any care plan in place and the establishment of a single child’s plan.

**Cohort level**
Monitoring at a population level was developed originally as a process in a joint Education/Social Work resources monitoring group, and was limited to young people resident in small group homes. Our experience was that the introduction of such monitoring in itself had a significant positive impact in ensuring that needs are identified and addressed.

Educational progress and outcomes for LAC are now considered at seven local area Getting It Right Groups. These multi-agency groups comprise area level managers of the main services for children (Education, SWS, Police, Housing, Community Services and the Voluntary Sector). The groups meet on a regular basis and receive information, using a standard format, about all looked after children from secondary schools in that area. This information is then triangulated with information from other sources and any need for further intervention or support is identified, and relevant agency management representatives on the GIR group ensure that this is delivered.

The development of an accurate identification system ensures that such monitoring is thorough and accurately focused. This monitoring process is in the process of being rolled out to all educational establishments in Fife, so
that the educational experience of looked after children attending early years establishments, primary and special schools will also be monitored.

**Measuring Impact**

The LAC identification system became fully operational in September 2011 and we anticipate that its impact will be evident by the end of the current session. This expectation has been shared with schools and will be measured in terms of improved attendance and reduced exclusion, both of which will be supported by the establishment of reviewed policies early in 2012. We also anticipate an improvement in attainment, though we have continuing reservations about the measures used to evaluate this nationally. In our evidence to the recent Scottish Government enquiry we offered the following comment.

*While we are in no doubt that educational outcomes for looked after children are unacceptably poor, we would encourage consideration of developing more appropriate and sensitive measures than those currently used. There are two aspects to this. We are not convinced that basic measures of attainment, and the related ‘tariff scores model’, offer an appropriate basis for evaluating educational progress. They fail to measure ‘value added’, which despite relatively low scores can be considerable, nor do they reflect wider achievement, which is an area in which some looked after children can excel, particularly when the more formal aspects of the curriculum have been challenging or indeed inaccessible to them. Secondly we have some reservations about the basis on which outcomes for looked after children are compared with the whole population. We believe a more valid and reliable comparative model would be based on pupil populations which more closely match the life circumstances of looked after children, who are much more likely to come from more disadvantaged socio economic groups. This we believe is important given the clear established link between social deprivation and educational progress for all children, irrespective of looked after status.*

Importantly, our improved identification system will allow us to apply our developing approach to measuring value added to the cohort of Looked after pupils. We will are also interested in pursuing the development of soft indicators of progress that are prerequisites to attainment relating to capacities of attachment, self confidence, resilience and esteem.

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*January 2012*