Education and Culture Committee
Inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children

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Educational attainment of looked after children: are we asking the right questions?
It is reasonable to expect that the experience of being looked after away from home should have a positive effect on a child and young persons’ educational attainment. It is also important to be able to demonstrate that ‘looking after’ children improves their life chances, and to seek quantifiable measures for doing this. However the insistence that there should be no discernable difference between the educational attainment of children who have been looked after and those who have not, an aspiration expressed by successive government initiatives and reports, such as “We can and must do better’ and the SWIA report ‘Extraordinary Lives” is unhelpful, and reinforces the assumption that educational outcomes for looked after children are very poor.

In fact drawing such a conclusion from attainment is very unsound because it is based on a comparison of the population of looked after children with the population of children as a whole, despite the latter being a totally unsuitable comparator group. First of all looked after children are not drawn equally from all social classes, and secondly, it is not reasonable to expect the experience of being looked after to fully compensate for the poor early experiences that looked after children will almost invariably have experienced. We know from research evidence that children can recover from trauma and make improvements when removed to a more nurturing environment but we also know that children do not totally catch up. In addition figures include children looked after for many years and those where intervention has been quite recent.

In particular it seems unreasonable to expect being ‘looked after’ at home to have a significant impact on educational outcomes. Being looked after at home is a very minimal intervention compared to being placed ‘away from home’, ie with a family or in a setting better able to provide nurture, encouragement and support, and I would suggest that we should be more concerned if being looked after away from home did not have a greater impact on educational attainment! In fact, one could argue that comparing educational outcomes for children looked after way versus being looked after at home actually provides some evidence of the positive effect of being accommodated on educational attainment.

Specific issues in relation to national educational attainment data:
There are a number of specific issues in relation to national data as well as the more general concerns considered above.

There is inconsistency about the criteria for inclusion - ie which children and young people are included in 'end point' data. Previously, nationally collected data related to the point at which a young person ceased to be looked after and therefore reported on exam performance across several different exam diets. The new reporting framework does relate to one exam diet, which is an improvement, but the criteria for inclusion
relates to being looked after continuously for the 12 months between 31st July (2009) and August 1st (2010). This means, for example, that a young person in the care system for a 13 month period falling into this would be counted – whilst a young person in the care system for several years – but who left in June 2010 would not be counted. Exam results achieved in later years – ie after ceasing to be looked after do not figure in any data set or analysis.

Also, rather than measuring attainment at SCQF at level 3+ which had some merit as a baseline comparison, the new reporting framework counts tariff points – and the key table gives a comparison of tariff points for all school leavers, even though it acknowledges that most looked after children leave at the end of S4.

Figures also include young people with complex learning needs who are looked after away from home in a residential school.

**Conclusion**
Current data tells us little about the extent to which the educational potential of looked after children is enhanced by their experience in care, or of being ’looked after’. More useful and relevant information would be obtained by identifying a more suitable comparator group against which the possible gains due to having become looked after are measurable – for example the lowest attaining 20%, and/or through tracking individual progress from the point of becoming looked after.

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**References**


Stein, Mike. 2006  *Wrong turn: The consensus that children in care are failing, and that the system is to blame, is plain wrong*. The Guardian