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

Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children In Scotland (CELCIS)

Introduction
CELCIS welcomes the opportunity to make submission to the Education and Culture Committee in examining the reasons why more significant progress has not been made since devolution in improving the educational attainment of looked after children and what can be done. The focus of this paper will cover a number of key areas: the developments and progress in policy and practice in Scotland relating to the educational outcomes of looked after children; a review of the current outcomes for looked after children in Scotland; evidence about ‘what works’ in relation to achieving better educational outcomes and finally, the role of CELCIS and LACSIG in promoting improved outcomes for looked after children.

Policy and Practice
CELCIS acknowledges the extent to which policy and governance innovations have progressed in relation to improving the educational outcomes for looked after children in Scotland. Policy and practice in Scotland have been significantly influenced by two key reports: Learning with Care (2001) and Looked After Children: We Can and Must do Better (2007), each providing a more strategic approach to implementing change. There is evidence of considerable infrastructural development such as professional training and research and the dissemination of guidance for practice such as Core Tasks for Designated Managers in Educational and Residential Establishments in Scotland (Scottish Government 2008).

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 gives legal force to the entitlement of looked after children and young people through the assessment of additional support needs. However, there is a need for advocates who are independent of the local authority in relation to the appeals process. In addition, the review process recognised that while the Act has contributed to a greater sense of shared responsibility for identifying and addressing learning needs, the provisions continue to be inconsistently applied and concentrate on ‘planning’ rather than ‘implementation’ (HMIe, 2010). This has clear messages in relation to the implementation of the range of provisions: support is required to enable professionals to implement provisions more consistently and effectively and more robust methods of measuring the impact and outcomes of such provisions are required.

The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children
The low attainment of looked after children in Scotland persists and therefore it remains an important cause for concern. Only a small proportion of looked after children progress to higher education - around 3% of all looked after children, compared with 36% of non looked after children - and the high proportion who are neither in education nor in employment upon leaving school - 36% compared to 11% of non-looked-after children (Scottish Government 2009). Clearly, this has implications for the training and
education of teaching staff, as reflected in the Donaldson review of teacher education in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2011a). The review recommended that all new teachers should be aware of the key challenges such as improving standards of literacy and numeracy and doing more to overcome disadvantage and deprivation. Reviewing the revised content of qualifying courses and the impact of this on practice would be useful.

While outcomes generally still lag behind those of children who are not looked after, there is evidence of improvement in outcomes for some, notably in school attendance and the attainment of children in out of home care. However, the outcomes for children who are looked after while remaining in the family home are relatively resistant to improvement. This is reflected in rates of school attendance – of significance as attendance is inextricably linked to attainment (Roby, 2004).

The attendance at school of looked after children in Scotland overall is poorer than average: 87.8% compared with 93.2% for all pupils in 2009-10 (Scottish Government, 2011b). The new publication of statistics show that the attendance of children in foster placements (96.3%) is above average while the attendance of children in local authority residential homes (84.9%) is below average. But it is the very low attendance of children looked after at home with parents (78.7%) which contributes significantly to the low overall average attendance of looked after children. The reason for such variations between care placements needs to be explored further, however it does strongly indicate the need for the development of strategies aimed at engaging and supporting the parents of looked after children, whenever this is in the best interest of the child.

The attendance figures do not show the extent of part-time education among looked after children, a matter of concern for members of the Looked After Children Education Forum. For example, it may have been decided that a child should attend school or an out of school alternative education project. Attending the alternative setting for all sessions would result in no absences being recorded, despite the part-time pattern of the education. Part time education needs to be more accurately reflected in the figures in order to provide a true account of the attendance rates of looked after children.

Another matter of concern to practitioners is the delays associated with out of authority placements. This appears to be a particular problem where the child has additional support needs and the respective placing and host authorities have not reached agreement about funding arrangements. There is a clear need for a more explicit protocol in relation to this group of looked after children.

As with non-attendance, the rate at which some looked after children are excluded from school provides evidence of discontinuity in education. There is stability in the rate of exclusion of non-looked after children but in general the exclusion of looked after children has got worse and this observation is largely accounted for by exclusions of those looked after at home. It seems important to explore this issue with education and social work professionals and to identify existing good practice that lessens the need for suspension and exclusion.
What works?
A significant finding of the research into the Educational Attainment of Looked After Children Local Authority Pilot Projects undertaken for the Scottish Government was that intervening by providing support aimed at boosting attainment can make a difference, even with older children (Connelly, et al., 2008). Similarly, a recent Canadian study examined the provision of three hours of home-based tuition per week over 30 weeks with 42 children in foster care aged 6-13. The study group children made gains in reading and maths compared with the comparison group. Evidence suggests the nature of the activity may not be particularly important and that engagement is what is crucial.

There is evidence of the importance of support for reading and language in the early years. Apart from the instrumental advantage that facility in reading confers (e.g. in everyday living skills, decoding written instructions and making progress in school subjects), there are important psychological advantages associated with the intimacy of a parent or carer reading to a young child. There is also a clear relationship between early reading and later educational attainment. For example, researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago noted that children who were reading at or above ‘grade level’ at grade 3 were more likely to graduate from high school. In our terms this would mean that they would be more likely to progress to further and higher education.

An evaluation of a small-scale pilot of a Reading Rich programme with looked after children was carried out for the Scottish Government (Finn, 2008) and there are a number of useful messages but the feature which appeared to have high impact was the direct contact between authors and young people. There are many more local examples of success in reading programmes aimed at looked after children in Scotland, such as South Lanarkshire’s work to encourage reading through involvement in drama and the supporting residential staff who volunteered to act as literacy co-ordinators. The importance of early reading and home based support has important lessons for the education and training of the looked after children’s workforce, including foster carers and kinship carers, and supporting the parents of looked after children at home.

Currently there is interest in the proposition that the life chances of adults who were formerly looked after may not be as poor as predicted by low attainment at school. The contention (which requires further research and exploration) is that greater flexibility in access to post-school education and wider participation policies in colleges and universities will be of benefit to adults with experience of care (Duncalf, 2010). CELCIS would support the wider development of programmes to support the inclusion of care leavers across tertiary education.

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3 See: http://www.chapinhall.org/research/inside/students-and-above-grade-level-reading-grade-3-graduate-high-school-higher-rates-stu
Stability and Resilience
The 2011 publication of educational outcomes indicates that lower attainment is linked with multiple care placements. Clearly a disrupted childhood, with many changes of placement and of significant adults and inconsistent caring, is highly damaging to educational chances. CELCIS would support the findings of the recent Audit Scotland report (2010) that care planning needs to get better by focussing on more long term outcomes.

There is also a growing literature which emphasises the value of participation in sporting, cultural and leisure activities in developing resilience and promoting social, emotional and intellectual development (Gilligan, 2007). Educational psychologists in South Lanarkshire have developed support materials for teachers and carers, known as the Framework for Assessment and Intervention for Resilience (FAIR), based on the work of Edith Grotberg, and have reported good outcomes⁴.

The Role of CELCIS and LACSIG
The most striking aspect of the evidence overall is the relative disadvantage of young people who are looked after at home. Encouraging local authorities and schools to examine this problem and to consider creative ways in which improvements in attendance of this group could be achieved locally is likely to make the single most significant contribution to the attainment of looked after children. This is clearly a long-term commitment.

Scotland’s recently established Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (CELCIS) will support parents, carers, care professionals, health workers and teachers to strengthen the welfare of children in all care settings. The Centre will enable the various settings and systems working with looked after children to collaborate more closely, providing a whole systems approach to improving the outcomes of looked after children. CELCIS also provides the programme office for the Looked After Children Strategic Implementation Group (LACSIG) which has brought together key stakeholders to lead and drive forward an implementation programme to improve outcomes for looked after children and young people, including educational outcomes. The group is leading on key parts of the implementation agenda and the research findings and examples of good practice outlined within this paper have informed the priorities and activities of this group.


⁴ See: http://www.lookedafterchildrenscotland.org.uk/health/initiatives/fair.asp


