Still Room for Improvement? The Educational Experiences of Looked After Children in Scotland

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Introduction and background

Concern about the educational experiences and outcomes of looked after children has gathered momentum over the last 10-15 years. Whilst there had been awareness in Scotland of the relevant research and inspection findings elsewhere in the UK, there was a tendency to think we might be different – perhaps our looked after children were better served by an educational system widely considered to be in good shape. In 1998, the then Scottish Office commissioned a review of research, policy and practice in the education of looked after children (Borland et al., 1998). While the review found that research findings in Scotland were sparse and supplemented them with findings from England and Wales, the authors concluded that there was no room for complacency. There was considerable evidence that being looked after away from home in Scotland constituted an educational hazard, thus adding to the disadvantage entailed in removal from home.

As a result of the review, Ministers decided that there should be an inspection in Scotland of the educational experiences of children looked after away from home, conducted jointly by the Social Work Services Inspectorate (SWSI) and HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) Two of the authors of the resulting report, *Learning with Care* (HMI and SWSI, 2001), found there was: 'room both for improvement and for cautious optimism' (Maclean and Gunion, 2003)

In a number of areas the findings of the inspection came as no surprise:

- Care and placement planning were often not in evidence and, even where they were, education was rarely addressed in sufficient detail. Social workers and carers were often vague and over optimistic about children's attainments. There had previously been very similar findings in England and Wales (Jackson, 1989; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990; Aldgate et al., 1993; OFSTED/SSI, 1995; Skuse and Evans, 2001).
- There were high levels of exclusion. Twenty one out of 50 children in the inspection sample had been excluded at least once and some had been excluded many times or for lengthy periods. During the course of the inspection the statistic that looked after children in Scotland - one per cent of the school population - accounted for 13% of exclusions had been published (Scottish Executive, 2000) Other Scottish research found a similar or even gloomier picture (Maginnis, 1993; Dixon and Stein, 2002).
- Slightly more than half of the 25 primary age children in the sample were under-achieving in the 5-14 curriculum in comparison with their peers. About one fifth were attaining one level below and about one third were attaining two or more levels below. Whilst most research into attainments has concerned young people undertaking qualifications, at least two previous studies have found significant underperformance by younger looked after children (Essen et al., 1976; Aldgate et al., 1993).

- Children and young people were, sometimes with good reason, concerned about how confidential information would be used by teachers. This had also been a finding in the OFSTED/SSI (1995) inspection and in English and Scottish research (Berridge et al., 1996; Gallagher, 1996).
- Hardly any social workers, carers or teachers had received training, either in their qualifying courses or since, concerning the education of looked after children.
- There was a lack of recognition of the positive role parents could play in the education of their looked after children and most felt excluded from this aspect of their child's care. This has also been a finding in England and Wales (OFSTED/SSI, 1995; Martin and Jackson, 2002).
- Local authorities were unlikely to have specific policies on the education of looked after children or to collect relevant data about their attainments. Whilst some progress has been made in England and Wales: 'the majority of recorded information cannot be used to assess the progress of individual children' (OFSTED, 2001: 7).

In other areas, however, findings in the inspection were more promising than previous research findings:
- Attendance, availability of school places and continuity of education, for instance by using taxis over substantial distances in rural areas to retain children at their original schools, were better than could have been anticipated from previous English and Scottish research (Maginnis, 1993; Kendrick, 1995; OFSTED/SSI 1995; Lockhart et al., 1996; Borland et al,. 1998; Dixon and Stein, 2002)
- Three-quarters (19 out of 25) of the sample young people in secondary school gained at least the national target for looked after young people of two Standard Grades. However, only eight out of 25 obtained the national average of seven Standard Grades and only three achieved the national average of three awards at 'credit' level. These results were considerably better than could have been anticipated from research findings (Stein and Carey, 1986; Biehal et al., 1992; Garnett, 1992) However, the sample was small and subsequent research and statistics (see below) have not found such a positive picture.
- There was no indication in the inspection that bullying concerning their looked after status was an issue for any of the children and young people. This was in contrast to other research studies both from Scotland and England (Fletcher, 1993; Berridge et al., 1996; Dixon and Stein, 2002).
- The sample children all had good access to extra-curricular activities, some provided by carers and some by schools. There were good examples, particularly in rural areas, of children being introduced to a wide range of musical, sporting and cultural activities. One primary age boy played in football and shinty teams, attended four different youth clubs, was learning the chanter (bagpipes), had given a Gaelic recitation at the Mod (a cultural festival held annually in Scotland) and still found time to read for pleasure.
- Strong educational support was provided by all the foster and relative carers and they generally engaged very positively with the children's schools, although some of them, particularly the

relative carers, needed more information and practical help from the social work departments in order to do this. However, the educational needs of the children in the sample made it unlikely that carers' undoubted commitment, on its own, would be sufficient to help the children overcome their educational difficulties. The educational support provided in residential units was more variable than in foster homes. Some provided educationally rich environments with considerable emphasis placed on valuing education and study support but others were providing educationally poor environments. Whilst this was a mixed picture, it was somewhat better than had been anticipated from previous inspection and research (OFSTED/SSI, 1995; Berridge et al., 1996).

- Working relationships between senior managers in education and social work appeared close – this was often contrasted with a more negative picture from a few years previously when, as one manager described it: 'we never actually met but would fight about money or placements' (ibid.: 41) A more negative picture would have been anticipated from research (Kendrick et al., 1996; Fletcher-Campbell, 1997).

What do we know about attainments?

Statistical data concerning the educational attainments of looked after children in Scotland was published for the first time in 2002 (Scottish Executive, 2002a) Not all local authorities were able to make a return and only 'headline' figures were published. Of 16 and 17 year old care leavers in 2001-2002, six out of ten did not achieve any qualifications. Only 27% achieved the Scottish Executive target of both English and maths at Standard Grade.

The 2003 statistics (Scottish Executive, 2003a) were considerably more detailed but showed little if any improvement. However, whilst only 41% of looked after young people achieved any qualifications as opposed to 92% of young people in the general population who achieved 5+ Standard Grade awards at level 3 or above, 50% of young people looked after away from home achieved qualifications as opposed to only 30% of those on home supervision requirements. [The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (see www.scqf.org.uk) is a system of attainment from Access 1 (level 1) to doctorate (level 12) Standard Grade courses (roughly equivalent to GCSE) taken by 14-16 year olds lead to awards at three levels: foundation (level 3), general (level 4) and credit (level 5)]. Likewise, 35% of young people looked after away from home achieved the target of English and maths Standard Grades, whereas only 19% of those looked after at home did. Although further research is needed, this difference may indicate that care away from home does help young people recover, at least to some extent, from educational disadvantage.

A further interesting finding is that although there is some disparity between authorities in Scotland in the proportions of young people in the general population who achieved qualifications, ranging from 82% - 97% who achieved 5+ awards at level 3 or above in 2002-03 (Scottish Executive, 2003a), there is enormous disparity between authorities' looked after children's attainments - 18% - 100% achieved

some qualifications (Scottish Executive, 2003b) There does not appear to be any correlation between authorities whose general population young people do well and those whose looked after young people do well. Some of this disparity can probably be explained by the fact that many authorities have very small numbers of 16 and 17 year old care leavers and, therefore, results are likely to fluctuate year on year. However, if results from local authorities that have at least 50 16-17 year old care leavers are taken, the disparity still remains stark.

Table 1: Comparison of S4 general population attainments and the attainments of 16 and 17 year old looked after young people for 2002-2003, in local authorities with 50 or more 16 and 17 year old looked after school leavers

Local Authority	General population 5+ awards at level 3 or higher	Position out of 32 local authorities	Looked after young people Some qualifications	Position out of 29 local authorities (data were not available for 3 authorities)	Looked after children in residential care
Aberdeen	91%	19	76%	4	14%
Dundee	82%	32	28%	24	14%
Edinburgh	88%	27	44%	14	15%
Glasgow	85%	30	39%	19	13%
Inverclyde	95%	4	21%	27	17%
North Lanarkshire	92%	13	20%	28	14%
Renfrewshire	93%	8	43%	16	18%
West Lothian	92%	13	27%	25	10%

Table 1 demonstrates that results achieved by looked after young people appear not to be dependent on general educational outcomes but are more likely to depend on other factors. One hypothesis is that this may relate to particular and successful efforts that have been made in some local authorities to improve educational outcomes for looked after children. Another hypothesis might be that authorities with a higher proportion of young people in residential care would have worse attainments, but that relationship is not apparent in the above table.

What about attainments of young people in residential child care?
Within the general results for looked after children in Scotland there is not yet very much specific information about how young people in residential care fare. A recent small study (O'Hagan, 2003) found that 44% of a sample of 88 young people looked after away from home aged 15-18 had achieved some Standard Grades (an average of four against the national average of seven) However, only 29% of young people in residential units had achieved some Standard Grades as against 67% of young people

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in foster care. Results from England (DoH, 2001) point to young people in residential care having much poorer attainments than young people in foster care. Only 32% of care leavers in the year ending March 31st 2000 had any GCSE or GNVQ qualifications. However, 42% of care leavers from foster care had such qualifications whereas only 18% from children's homes and 7% from residential schools did. Although *Learning with Care* (HMI and SWSI, 2001: 36) did not provide percentages, it found that:

> *Children in residential care were, on the whole, those with more educational difficulties and lower educational achievements. It was beyond the scope of the inspection to evaluate whether they were placed in residential care because of their educational difficulties, or whether their difficulties were caused or exacerbated by their placement in residential care.*

The *Learning with Care* report only considered children attending schools in the community from residential units or foster or relative placements. It did not consider children placed in residential schools. Statistics provided by Glasgow City Council (2003a) show that 44 out of 56 (77%) secondary 4 pupils (i.e. age 15/16) living in residential schools were presented for Standard Grades compared with only 14 out of 38 (37%) living in children's units. The proportion of those entered gaining an award was comparable in the two settings. Residential schools have traditionally provided a narrower curriculum than mainstream secondary schools, though this is changing. Some residential schools have been able to provide a broader curriculum and improve attainments. Table 2 shows some examples of the attainments of pupils at Oakbank School in Aberdeen, an independent secondary-stage residential school with provision for around 40 young people experiencing significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. In an inspection of the school in September 2003, inspectors highlighted: 'The high regard the young people had of the quality of education they received and their opportunities for achieving qualifications' (Care Commission and HM Inspectorate of Education, 2003: 6)

Table 2: Standard Grade results at Oakbank School (compiled from data provided by the school's Principal)

1995	2002
Pupils were entered for Standard Grade examinations in English, mathematics, science and craft and design.	Pupils were entered for Standard Grade examinations in English, mathematics, science, art and design, craft and design, history, modern studies, French and German.
Of the pupils entered for four subjects, 75% gained passes at Grade 6 and above. Of the pupils entered for three subjects, 100% gained passes at Grade 6 and above.	100% of pupils who had been on the roll from August 2001 and who were still on the roll at examination time, gained five or more passes at Grade 6 or above. Two pupils gained eight passes; four pupils gained seven passes; three pupils gained six passes; one pupil gained five passes. All pupils who joined the school late or who had not maintained their place gained passes at Grade 6 or above in two, three or four subjects.

This picture contrasts with the statistics from England (see above) and may indicate that the smaller residential school sector in England is primarily used for children with learning disabilities rather than children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Although the evidence is still incomplete, it would appear that young people placed in residential care in Scotland attain considerably less well than young people in foster care. This may partly be a reflection of their difficulties but may also be a reflection that considerable numbers of residential settings are not yet educationally rich environments. Young people in residential schools appear to attain better than young people in residential units. This may reflect both the difficulties that some units have in getting young people to attend school and looked after young people's perception that some mainstream schools see them as more trouble than they are worth and quickly exclude them 'for daft things' (Dixon and Stein, 2002) This point is illustrated by the following extract from a case study of a 12 year old looked after boy with ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome:

> Sam (name changed) was excluded from school three times. On two of these occasions the exclusion took place prior to 9 am. These two exclusions were both as a result of him being on top of the school roof and refusing to come down, disobeying the head teacher and causing disruption in the playground. Upon investigation it transpired that Sam got dropped off at school by taxi at 8.20 am. He then spent the time between 8.20 am and 8.55 am unsupervised in the playground. Sam was often a victim of 'fun-taking' in the playground and inevitably reacted to being bullied/wound up by other pupils.

What helps?
It is easy to be critical of the attainments of looked after children, particularly those living in residential units. However, there are also reasons to be optimistic for the future as a result of work in progress aimed at raising the attainments of accommodated children and young people, particularly approaches designed to create educationally rich environments in residential care settings. A number of illustrative examples of such work are now discussed.

Assessing the educational richness of the home environment
The Scottish Executive funded the development of information and training materials aimed at carers and teachers (Ritchie, Morrison and Paterson, 2003; Hudson et al., 2003; Connelly, 2003)[1]. The materials included self-evaluation indicators which could be used by a range of care settings, by schools and by local authority managers to monitor the quality of support provided to help children and young people to have satisfying school experiences, attain qualifications, and develop cultural and sporting interests (HM Inspectors of Education, 2003) The instrument is based on the framework of *How Good is Our School?* (HM Inspectors of Schools, 2000, 2001) which has gained widespread respect in Scottish education. It provides indicators to help practitioners recognise key strengths, identify areas where good quality needs to be maintained or where improvement is needed, identify priorities for a development

plan, and report on standards and quality. In essence, the audit process invites staff groups to ask themselves three questions: How are we doing? How do we know? What are we going to do?

At the time of writing it was too soon to evaluate the impact of the instrument but pilot work undertaken in residential units provided encouraging results. In one unit, senior staff completed the audit document independently. In another the audit was debated at an open staff meeting, while in a third unit both staff and young people completed the audit independently. Table 4 shows for illustration a comparison between the ratings and comments given by a carer and those of a 16 year-old in relation to one aspect of the pilot instrument. In this case both agree that the availability of educational materials such as books represents a weakness in practice, though the young person rates it more severely.

Table 4: Extract from pilot testing of the self-evaluation instrument in one residential unit

Key feature	Description	Level (1-4)	Comment
Books, newspapers, computers and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are available	Young people need to have access to writing and drawing materials, reference books and computers to help in completing homework and for intellectual stimulation. Carers should actively encourage young people to purchase books of their own.	2	**(carer)** 'Presently books, computers, space available for study is not adequate and craft materials not always in use due to other priorities. New educational room described before will address this as will an allocation of money to each young person…'
		1	**(young person)** 'We need more books and magazines.'

One of the authors has provided the services of a 'critical friend' for a residential unit involved in the pilot, meeting occasionally with the unit manager and deputy to discuss progress on action points identified by the self-evaluation exercise. Action included conducting staff briefing using the *Learning with Care* information booklet (Connelly et al., 2003), more focussed staff development centred on providing home support for young people (aged 14-16) in relation to Standard Grade English, and setting up a room dedicated to homework.

Jackson (1988) observed that when education is made the central purpose, residential care can be a positive factor in enhancing a child's progress. In her case study of one home it was found that two key factors contributed to improved attitudes to learning, school attendance and attainment: the commitment and background of the head of home; and the appointment of a liaison teacher. Both factors are now more common features in care settings and one might expect that they would begin to impact on the educational experience of looked after children and young people. A number of interventions is likely to

be required, however, and Connelly et al. (2003: 17) provide the following suggestions of things carers can do to help improve the educational richness of the home environment.

- Collaborate with teachers to ensure the child attends school regularly.
- Become familiar with the courses, qualifications and attainment targets relevant to individual children.
- Help the child or young person with personal organisation (e.g. planning homework and study, using a homework diary, having the correct books and equipment).
- Keep in contact with the school (and individual teachers, if appropriate) and act early to avoid escalation of difficulties.
- Offer support and encouragement.
- Encourage intellectual activity (e.g. discussion of news, watching TV documentaries, provision of books and newspapers, reading to young children).
- Share enthusiasm for learning or particular expertise in a school subject, creative pursuit or sport with children in your care.

The general atmosphere of the unit and the expectations of carers appear to be crucial factors in both influencing and supporting the educational aspirations of looked after young people. Although it is a major challenge to overcome years of disadvantage, a stable home life can make a huge difference. Who Cares? Scotland and Save the Children (Ritchie, 2003) surveyed the perceptions of young people on their educational experiences while in care. While they found that most of the children aged under12 surveyed were positive about the help they received from residential care staff, older young people were more variable in their experiences of support. The discrepancy is largely unexplained but may be due to older children presenting greater social and educational challenges for care staff. Nevertheless, the contrasting experiences illustrated below in the words of the young people themselves, begs the question that if some looked after children can describe supportive actions should these conditions not be available to all (ibid.: 34)?

> *They don't really know when I've got homework or not…They don't ask me, I just do it of my own accord. I do it a bit late night, I suppose, last minute, like 2 O'clock I'm working on something for the next morning.*

male, 15

> *For my latest project I got one of the staff to help, and because of all my hard work and his hard work, I got an A+ for it and I was over the moon.*

female, 15

Providing educational support

The Care Commission (www.carecommission.com) was set up under the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 to regulate and inspect care services. In particular, the Commission takes account of National

Care Standards in evaluating provision. Standard 13 of the care standards for residential homes for children (Scottish Executive, 2002b: 32) includes the promise that care staff will:

…encourage and support you in school and homework activities. They work with the school or college so they know how to help to meet your learning needs. Books, newspapers, computers and educational, artistic and other cultural materials are available in the care home.

The staff in one children's unit, asked to describe 'good experiences' and 'difficulties' associated with their attempts to provide an educationally rich home environment, provided the account shown in table 5.

Table 5: Support for school and homework

Good experiences	Difficulties
There is an expectation that children will do homework when they come in from school. Staff check homework diaries and assist where possible, and they ensure that homework is completed to an acceptable standard (e.g. neat writing). A link teacher visits the home every Monday to help in homework supervision. All children are members of the local public library and staff accompany children on informal visits to look for resources.	There is one communal computer. This is adequate because computers are available at schools and in the public library. However, there is no internet access in the home because the council has not been satisfied that it can comply with safe care requirements.

A number of Scottish local authorities have instituted the role of link teacher, working directly with accommodated children in their placements, supporting teachers and liaising between schools and carers. In one authority with 190 looked after children (around 80 accommodated) a looked after children's team of teachers and support workers has been established. Unusually, they work not just with accommodated children but with children on home supervision and with children living in accommodation for the homeless. The work of the team is monitored by an inter-departmental forum that meets monthly. This provides a reviewing mechanism which emphasises the authority's corporate role in raising attainments of children in their care:

Each referral is referred to a multi-agency planning meeting and an Intensive Support Programme (ISP) is developed in full co-operation with the pupil and parents/carers. Each ISP is re-integrative in nature and is part of the continuum of support which is available in South Ayrshire. Many younger children are referred with the aim of early intervention and many children and families require the intensive support which an ISP offers on a long term basis.

All looked after children in the authority have Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and the looked after children's team provides support for school staff preparing PEPs, and also has a mechanism for reviewing progress annually. Parents are involved in the development of PEPs and the plans identify the people who should receive communication from the school, the arrangements for doing this, and who should take responsibility in care issues.

Another local authority employs a full-time teacher whose job is to work directly with children accommodated in the authority's three residential units. The teacher has advised on the purchase of books and toys, the supply of computer equipment and arranging safe internet access. She describes her role (personal communication) as follows:

- Planning and implementing of individual school placements.
- Communication: inter-agency/young people/parents.
- School/class support: learning/behaviour/mentoring/nurturing.
- Promoting high expectations within the units.
- Home-school liaison.
- Management of exclusions: provision of educational materials and one-to-one tuition; provision of daily timetables.
- Homework: monitoring/assistance/liaison.
- Standard Grades: folios/revision materials/supported study/ensuring attendance at exams.
- Ensuring attendance at school events.
- Attendance at statutory meetings.
- Contributing to residential assessments.

This is clearly a very demanding role. No individual teacher can easily cover both primary and secondary stages across the entire breadth of the curriculum, as well as offering consultancy to teachers and carers. However, an important aspect of this role is the task of proselytising: literally counteracting the grim messages of research and experience, and encouraging fellow-professionals to show faith in the capacity of looked after children to achieve – essentially providing a culture which values education (Lindsay and Foley, 1999) Teachers and carers need to believe that they can make a difference. Gilligan (2000) argues for the value of promoting resilience, the capacity of young people to do well despite adverse experience, a condition he suggests comes from carers, teachers and social workers investing interest, concern and personal commitment:

> *The rituals, the smiles, the interest in the little things, the daily routines, the talents they nurture, the interests they stimulate, the hobbies they encourage, the friendships they support, the sibling ties they preserve make a difference. All of these things may foster in a child the vital senses of belonging, of mattering, of counting.*

ibid.: 45

Educational attainment grant

In October 2001, the Scottish Executive's then education minister, Jack McConnell, announced a single grant allocation: 'to provide books, equipment and homework materials for every looked after child in Scotland.' The funding allocation was based on a sum of £2,500 for every child in residential care and £500 for each child in foster care or living with their family or relative carers, and the total allocation across Scotland amounted to around £10 million. Approximately half of the money was spent on purchasing computer equipment and software and arranging internet access. The funding was also used to purchase books, reference materials, art and craft materials, musical instruments, digital cameras and

furniture to facilitate private study. Table 6 provides illustrative extracts taken from the summaries of the use made of the specific grant money by two local authorities in the government's official report (Scottish Executive, 2003c)

Table 6: example of the use of the educational attainment grant

Local authority	Allocation	Report summaries
Moray	£113,000	ICT equipment. Licence for IEP (Individualised Educational Programme) Writer 2 has been purchased for each of their schools and each school will attend an in-service training day. 4 children currently studying for higher education will be loaned a PC laptop for the duration of their higher education studies. The three children's homes in Moray were allocated £25,000 to develop their range of ICT and general educational resources. £12,500 was allocated to out-of-Moray residential establishments.
West Dunbartonshire	£265,000	Residential Units - £67,500 All units received new computer equipment for sole use by young people. This covered: new computers, printers, scanners and equipment like tables etc. Money was spent on the creation of quiet areas in units for the use of the equipment for study, homework etc. All units have been hooked up to a permanent internet connection with payment for the first year's usage. Have also purchased access to a web resource for accommodated children from a local company Spark of Genius (Training) Ltd. This entails young people getting access to a web site with an electronic library of teaching materials and lessons. The extra funding also covered the following: each unit having a stock of reading material (educational and leisure); educational software; subscription to magazines; educational equipment (packs of material for each young person admitted); tutoring for individual young people (including homework sessions in units); rewards for young people achieving exam results.

Despite a general welcome for the additional funding, there were criticisms from many quarters concerning the nature of the grant: it was short-term; expenditure had to be approved and spent in a very short time frame (around 10 weeks); and the capital investment left local authorities with responsibilities to fund future maintenance and replacement. A report by the advocacy organisation Who Cares? Scotland (O'Hagan, 2003) indicated that of 170 young people surveyed, 98 (58%) were unaware that money had recently been invested in their educational attainment, and that few (22%) had been given a say in the spending. Among other criticisms expressed, some young people were disappointed that the expenditure did not appear to benefit them directly.

My £500 was spent on a laptop which the school kept. I only got to use it once before I moved school.

<div align="right">female, 12</div>

Money was given to [name] high School in April which was the same time plans were made for me to leave this school.

<div align="right">female, 14</div>

Some criticisms are surely justified: short-term fixes cannot solve overnight more intractable problems; the haste with which the money had to be spent was not a good example of strategic planning; and there is a bitter irony in the apparent lack of consultation with young people, though the need to act swiftly will have contributed to this omission. Nevertheless, the whole exercise arguably had a number of positive outcomes. Firstly, there was considerable capital spend on a neglected aspect of care provision. Secondly, the exercise itself acted as a form of audit of the resource needs to underpin the educational attainment of looked after children. Finally, it identified a number of creative uses of funding by some authorities which could be taken up by others. For example, one authority purchased corporate membership of leisure centres to encourage access to sport and physical activity, another provided each looked after child with a £10 book token every month for a year, and several paid for extra tuition or music lessons for individual children.

Local authority monitoring and reporting

Collaboration between key services is critical to the success of any developments aimed at improving the educational attainment of looked after children. To provide an illustration of the approach taken by one local authority, we report briefly on work by Glasgow City Council (2003b) which has 'corporate parent' responsibility for around a quarter of all looked after children in Scotland. The authority has developed its strategic response in three key ways: by appointing a senior officer to liaise between education and social work services; by developing a joint protocol of guidance to inform the working practice of both departments; and by developing an electronic means of monitoring attendance, exclusion and attainment.

The electronic reporting system works by creating a link between the social work and education management information systems. For example, the system ensures that when a child becomes looked after, or experiences a change in status or a change of placement, once the relevant information is entered by social workers certain fields are automatically updated in the education database and the child's school is alerted to consider what action might be required. Similarly, that child or young person's academic records become available to the Senior Officer (Educational Outcomes) The information created can be used for monitoring the progress of individual children and for providing reports for operational planning or research purposes. One practical application of the system is the collaboration between the authority and the University of Strathclyde which runs a Summer Academy (see:

) The Academy is aimed at 15 year-old pupils entering the fourth year of secondary education who for various reasons could benefit from additional motivation to aspire to further and higher education. The existence of the database allows easy identification of target children, ensuring that carers are aware of the opportunity and can encourage young people in their care to apply to take part.

Conclusion

The title of this chapter is 'Still room for improvement?' Attainments of looked after children in Scotland would certainly indicate that this is the case. There has been considerable support from the Scottish Executive and children's organisations to improve the situation. A number of local authorities have clearly taken on board the recommendations of the *Learning with Care* report and a range of projects and developments are in place. It is important that the effectiveness of these different approaches is evaluated so that it will be possible to take forward approaches that demonstrably make a difference for looked after children and young people.

Looked after children and young people are attaining much better in some local authorities than others. There is no reason why the results in the poorest cannot be brought up to the level of the best and why the best cannot improve further. This undoubtedly presents a challenge but results achieved so far show that improvement is both entirely possible and vital if the life chances of the children and young people concerned are to be transformed. We need to be able to report 'Fully reaching their potential' rather than 'Still room for improvement.'

Acknowledgements

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