



Starting out right: looked after children and early education

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For the sake of brevity, references are not cited in this brief. Full references can be found in the main research report.

Introduction

Looked after children (LAC) are those for whom the state assumes parental responsibility because the adults caring for them – usually the birth parent/s – are no longer able to. In England, 60 per cent of LAC enter care following abuse or neglect. The majority of LAC are placed with a foster carer, either a registered foster parent or ‘kinship care’ with a relative or friend. The number of LAC in England has been rising steadily in recent years, reaching 70,440 in 2016. Just under one fifth of these children (12,860) were under the age of compulsory schooling.

The research evidence is conclusive on the link between early adversity and poorer outcomes. Looked after children are at risk of poorer cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes and are almost ten times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. In England, the starkest differences are seen towards the end of schooling, with only 18 per cent of LAC achieving five GCSEs at grade C or above, compared to 64 per cent of children not in care. However, research suggests that the gap between LAC and their non-looked-after peers emerges well before school-age.

There is also strong evidence that attending early years provision can help disadvantaged children catch up with their peers, with the benefits both more significant and more sustained if provision is of good quality. Given that many LAC are from disadvantaged homes, there is a good reason to believe that the same applies for this vulnerable group. In England, all three and four-year-old children are entitled to a free part-time ‘early education’ place within an early years setting, with take-up rates of more than 90 per cent within the general population. Recent policy initiatives such as free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds (for which all LAC are eligible) and the early years ‘pupil premium’ for disadvantaged children offer huge potential to improve access to - and the quality of – early education for LAC. However at present not enough is known to ensure that these benefits translate into improved outcomes. This exploratory study aimed to address this gap, and explore the current situation in England.

We aimed to:

1. review national and international research evidence relating to pre-school LAC, focusing on risk of developmental delay prior to school-age, and the potential of good quality early years provision to help narrow the gap between LAC and their non-looked-after peers;
2. summarise current English policy relating to early education for LAC;
3. establish what data are currently available on the take-up of early years provision by LAC in England and on the quality of that provision, with a focus on free early education places;
4. establish the views of key stakeholders on the importance of early education for LAC, and on the extent to which LAC in England currently access early years provision;
5. establish the views of key stakeholders on how best to meet the needs of LAC within early education settings, and on the current preparedness of providers to meet those needs;
6. establish current local government systems for encouraging take-up of early education by LAC and ensuring that provision is of high quality, and highlight examples of existing good practice.



Methods

1. A purposive review of the national and international research literature;
2. A review of English policy relating to early education for LAC;
3. Twenty three semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and experts within the field, carried out during 2016. These included academics, foster carers and the organisations representing them, representatives from early years settings, local authorities and central government, and health professionals.
4. An online survey of all 152 local authorities in England conducted in spring 2016. Freedom of Information (FoI) requests were submitted to non-respondents, resulting in full or partial submissions from 89% of local authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

The potential of early education for LAC

In addition to confirming the link between early adversity and poorer outcomes for LAC, both the literature review and interviews identified preschool provision as a powerful means of early intervention, alongside strong support in the home. The foster carers we spoke with highlighted the need for young LAC to 'learn how to be learners' by engaging in social and structured play, so that they could access the learning opportunities available to them throughout their lives and catch up with their peers. Preschool also offers support for language development, early diagnosis of possible delays, an additional source of stability in children's lives, and support for health needs and habits. Our review also confirmed the importance of the home learning environment, and the benefits to LAC of carer involvement with their early education setting, highlighting the need for carers and early years providers to work together in supporting the care and learning needs of young LAC.

English policy relating to the early education of LAC

Recent legislation places an obligation on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of LAC, and to appoint a virtual school head responsible for monitoring their progress. All preschool children must have a Personal Education Plan (PEP). LAC are also entitled to receive the free early education entitlement for deprived two-year-olds (alongside the universal entitlement for three- and four-year-olds) and the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) provides a source of additional funding for settings and schools catering for disadvantaged children, including LAC. While many local authorities are effectively promoting the educational needs of school-age LAC, we found that practice is not yet consistent for LAC under the age of five, and that a considerable gap may exist between government aspiration and on-the-ground experiences for LAC. We now need to build on the clear commitment at government level, and the good work already being done at local level, to ensure early intervention for the learning needs of LAC.

Access to early years education

The government is following strong evidence in offering free early education to disadvantaged children from age two. However, evidence from the survey of local authorities indicates that take-up of the free early education entitlement for two, three and four-year-old LAC is at least 14 per cent lower than take-up in the general population. Given that these data were drawn only from local authorities which keep accessible records on take-up, we estimate that the true gap may be larger. A number of interviewees noted that traumatised LAC may need time to bond with carers before attending group provision, and reported that LAC may attend fewer than the free entitlement hours or even – in some cases – not attend formal provision at all. However, our findings suggest that the lower take-up is not solely due to



sensitive and informed decisions being made regarding LAC's needs, and that work is needed to inform foster carers and social workers of the potential benefits of early years provision.

Local authorities provided several examples of good practice in this regard, including training for foster carers and working with the social care team and foster carers to organise access to suitable provision. However these practices were by no means universal, largely because the majority of local authorities do not yet have a designated early years lead within the virtual school.

Practical barriers to access included the large number of meetings foster carers need to attend in relation to their LAC, and the often short-term and unpredictable nature of placements. Early years settings involved in our research worked with foster carers to provide cover for meetings, and to hold places open for children while care placements were being set up. Local authorities could support this latter point through flexibility in funding arrangements, since models based on initial uptake may disadvantage providers holding a place open for a LAC.

Interviewees highlighted the important role played by early years settings in providing continuity and stability for LAC moving between placements, and research confirms the negative impact of frequent moves between education providers. Where possible, efforts should be made to ensure continuity in provision, and to support a child in returning to their early education provider after a placement move. Some tensions were noted, however, in balancing the need for quality and stability where a child is already attending a setting considered to be of insufficient quality.

Finally, our research indicates that monitoring of early education take-up by LAC is an important area for attention. The most significant feature of the data we received in response to our local authority survey was the difficulty in accessing it. Responses were returned in widely varying formats and levels of detail. Some local authorities kept no data at all. A common framework and expectation on local authorities to track uptake and attendance in a format which can be submitted for collation at national level would greatly increase the possibilities for monitoring access.

In relation to LAC's access to early years provision, our findings indicate that:

- 1. virtual schools and early years teams should continue efforts to work closely with social care teams in ensuring that social workers, kinship and foster carers are aware of the benefits of early education, and where and how provision can be accessed;**
- 2. there may be benefits in extending the remit of virtual schools to include explicit responsibility for monitoring and supporting the educational progress of LAC prior to school age. It would also be valuable to extend the practice of designating a specific early years lead within local authority virtual schools more widely;**
- 3. decisions made regarding early years provision for LAC must necessarily balance the need for children to attend high quality provision with the need for stability and continuity in their early education experience.**

Quality of early years education

It was clear from both the literature review and interviewee responses that LAC have a greater need to experience high quality provision than their peers. They are more likely to be delayed in their development and to have special educational needs; many will have suffered neglect or trauma, and



have greater need for support with social and emotional development and self-regulation. A skilled and knowledgeable staff team is a key requirement for high quality provision. Our findings suggest that practitioners working with young LAC require:

- knowledge of attachment and the potential consequences of early trauma;
- the ability to support the additional needs likely to result from such early adversity (including emotional and behavioural difficulties, speech and language delay and health needs) and to collaborate with carers in meeting these needs;
- experience with the system surrounding LAC, and negotiation skills with the relevant agencies.

These requirements were not considered to be unique to LAC – settings which are good for LAC will be good for all children - but to be more *important* for this group. Flexibility in staffing is also required to meet children’s needs when problems arise, provide individual support and allow time for staff to attend meetings with carers and other professionals. Strong partnership with other professionals (e.g. speech and language therapists, psychologists, health professionals) was considered critical, as many LAC require intervention over and above day-to-day support within the setting, such as nurture groups, access to psychological support services and relevant therapies. Close monitoring of progress in all aspects of development was also considered essential.

The survey suggested that 89 per cent of LAC receiving the free entitlement do so in a setting graded as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, which is broadly comparable to national trends. However, given the greater need for LAC to access high quality provision, there are still significant improvements which could be made. Eleven per cent of LAC attend settings graded as ‘requires improvement’ or ‘inadequate’ and, given the broad brush nature of Ofsted inspections and the specific needs of LAC, it seems clear that a higher quality bar is required, alongside additional support for settings in meeting children’s needs.

While we found excellent examples of good practice in our study settings, interviewees reported that this is not happening consistently for all LAC in all settings. Maintained sector providers - nursery schools in particular – were considered to be particularly suited to meeting the needs of young LAC due to their experience, staff qualifications, and access to specialist services. This is consistent with previous research showing that quality is highest in the maintained sector, and that disadvantaged children attending private and voluntary sector settings are less likely to experience good quality than their more advantaged peers. An obvious conclusion is that all LAC should attend a setting graded as ‘good’ or higher by Ofsted and/or receive their early education within the maintained sector. The reality, however, may not be so straightforward. Some areas have little maintained provision, particularly for two-year-olds. Although maintained provision is of higher quality overall, there is variation within all sectors and we found excellent examples of practice within settings of different kinds. Families may express a preference for a specific setting and retain the final decision. Lastly, moves between educational settings can be damaging.

Therefore, although efforts should be made to place children in settings already known to offer excellent practice for LAC, further effort is also needed to ensure wider workforce preparation. The local authorities involved in our research provided good practice examples in this regard, largely led by designated early years representatives within virtual schools, in partnership with local authority early years teams. Examples included bespoke training on attachment and trauma, and virtual school early years leads providing a bridge between carers, social workers and settings to support choice of



appropriate providers, clarify roles and responsibilities, support settings in meeting children's needs and monitor progress through the use of PEPs. As noted above, the designation of an early years lead within each virtual school would enable the good practices highlighted in this report to become more widespread.

The second key area for attention is that of funding, required by early years providers to pay for extra training, staff replacements to allow time off for training and to attend meetings, and any specialist interventions required to meet the needs of LAC. Although the EYPP is available for every LAC, the rate of £300 per year for a child accessing their full entitlement was not considered by interviewees to be sufficient, particularly for settings with only one LAC, or children attending fewer than 15 hours. LAC of statutory school-age attract £1900 per year of 'Pupil Premium Plus', set at a higher rate in recognition of the enduring impact of trauma in the lives of LAC. Adopting the same model for early education would enable providers to offer more effective early intervention.

In addition to being affordable, suitable training for early years practitioners also needs to be *available*. Here we face the challenge of identifying who needs to know what. Given that many settings will rarely or never provide for a child who is looked after, what level of specialist preparation is appropriate? We propose identifying a basic level of knowledge which all practitioners need in order to be part of a team catering for LAC (as identified above), and ensuring high quality training to ensure this knowledge. Such training would also be of great benefit to foster and kinship carers, and could be extended to social workers for similar reasons. This training would improve outcomes for all disadvantaged children, and increased knowledge of the benefits of early education could help professionals, including foster carers, to prioritise access for LAC. Including the basic components of child development training in initial practitioner qualification is also essential.

In addition to foundation training for all, practitioners catering for LAC need access to specialist knowledge, and appropriate supervision and support structures when providing for LAC. Models for providing this will vary from authority to authority, and a number of different possibilities were identified within this report, including settings with in-house expertise and peer-support models. Given increasing moves towards a sector-led improvement model, policy makers at national and local level could consider how existing expertise and networks can be built upon to provide access to specialist knowledge and supervision for settings catering for LAC.

Finally, significant gaps were identified in relation to monitoring the quality of provision experienced by LAC and their educational progress. As discussed above, no central systems exist for monitoring these trends, and there is inconsistency in how local authorities gather and respond to this data.

In relation to the quality of early years provision accessed by LAC, our findings indicate that:

- 1. virtual schools and early years teams should continue to work closely with social care teams to ensure that social workers, kinship and foster carers are aware of the importance of the quality of early years education and know how to identify a high quality setting;**
- 2. attention is needed to ensure that early years providers have adequate funds to meet the potentially significant needs of LAC.** This could be achieved through the introduction of an Early Years Pupil Premium 'Plus' for early years settings



catering for LAC, mirroring that for school-age children (currently £1,900 per child);

- 3. local authorities can help to ensure that early years providers are prepared for meeting the needs of LAC and other children at risk through effective training, information provision, supervision and access to specialist interventions.** The government's upcoming workforce strategy represents an excellent opportunity for considering the need for early years settings to be prepared for working with high-risk and potentially high-need groups such as LAC;
- 4. there are significant improvements which could be made in data collection and monitoring, both nationally and locally, to support LAC's access to early education provision.** Potential areas for attention include central government monitoring of LAC's take up of early education, of the quality of provision experienced and of educational attainment at age five; improving the consistency of data collection at local level; and ensuring Personal Education Plans are being used consistently and effectively to monitor and support the educational progress of LAC.

Joined-up working

Our findings confirm the importance of multi-disciplinary working in meeting the needs of LAC. Universal health visiting services have a key role to play throughout the lives of LAC, and the integrated review at two years provides an effective means of sharing information on health needs with both foster carers and early years settings. Virtual schools are well-placed to promote professional collaboration between local authority early years and social care teams, foster carers, health professionals and early education settings. Our advisory board also highlighted the importance of collaboration on decision-making at commissioning level. Finally, out-of-borough placements requiring liaison between local authorities were found to create a significant barrier to LAC's access to high quality early education. Currently many boroughs are not aware of LAC that have been placed in their borough, and the placing borough may not be aware of the best settings and available support services to support the child's early education.

In relation to joined-up working, our findings indicate that:

- 1. local authorities should work to ensure that decisions regarding the access of LAC to early years provision are made in a manner which is informed by all the relevant agencies (i.e. education, social care and health);**
- 2. urgent attention is required to ensure that LAC attending placements out-of-area do not fall through the gaps in terms of their access to high quality early education provision.** This issue would benefit from further clarity from central government regarding responsibilities, and the way in which information is shared for LAC placed out-of-borough in relation to early education.

Further research

Our research has addressed an important gap in knowledge relating to the early years experiences of children in care. However our findings and conclusions are necessarily limited by the fact that this was a relatively small and exploratory research study. Further work is urgently required in this important area to establish a more robust evidence-base in relation to early years provision and LAC.