

## Children and Social Work Bill, House of Lords Second Reading Promoting early educational achievements of looked after children under-five

**Contact:** Megan Jarvie, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Family and Childcare Trust,  
[Megan@familyandchildcaretrust.org](mailto:Megan@familyandchildcaretrust.org), 020 7940 7528

Zoe Renton, Head of Policy, Public Affairs and Information, National Children's Bureau,  
[zrenton@ncb.org.uk](mailto:zrenton@ncb.org.uk), 020 7843 6000

High quality early education plays an important role in ensuring that children are ready to start school and build the soft skills that will help them thrive in life. In order to improve looked after children's access to early education, the Family and Childcare Trust and the National Children's Bureau (NCB) asks that the role of the virtual head extended to be responsible for two, three and four year olds.

While uptake of early education for three and four year olds is 96 per cent in England, evidence from some local authorities suggests that too many looked after children are missing out on this provision. In Kirklees, only 37 per cent of looked after three and four year olds accessed their entitlement in 2011 (Kirklees Council, 2013). Having identified this gap, the council took action to address it and was able to raise attendance by looked after children to 95 per cent by 2013. Good quality provision, especially for 2 year olds, can narrow the gap between vulnerable children and their peers. Unfortunately, the very limited data available suggests that looked after children are less likely to take up their entitlement to early education and, when they do, they are not necessarily accessing high quality provision. This negatively affects a child's school readiness and long term educational achievements.

The Children and Social Work Bill will extend the role of virtual school heads to promote the educational achievements of previously looked after children, for example by making sure they have the information and advice they need. This represents an important step in improving the prospects of looked after children. However, if this is to be properly achieved, more still needs to be done for looked after children in the crucial early years. If virtual school heads are to adequately promote the educational achievements of looked after children, they must be responsible for two, three and four year olds.

### **The need to support for looked after children under-five**

Looked after children have significantly poorer educational outcomes than their peers. In 2014, the Key Stage 1 attainment gap between looked after and non-looked after children was 25 per cent for writing and 20 per cent for mathematics. Looked after children are also four times more likely to have a special educational need than their peers (DfE, 2015)

The attainment gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged children begins well before they reach primary school. For example, disadvantaged children are already almost a year behind in terms of their vocabulary by the age of five (Washbrook and Waldfogel, 2010). We also know that good quality early years provision can help to narrow this attainment gap (Sylva et al, 2004).

Unfortunately, evidence from the few local authorities which currently publish this data suggests that take-up of free early education places by looked after three and four year olds is lower than the almost universal attendance seen nationally. The realities of fostering can make access to early years provision difficult. Foster carers need to attend frequent contact sessions, making pick up and drop off at sessional provision challenging. Children often move between foster, kinship and family care, making continuity of attendance difficult. While there is little evidence from England, a review conducted in the Netherlands found that foster carers were sometimes unaware of the provision available for their looked after children due to miscommunication or lack of consultation with the relevant authorities or service providers (Vandenbroeck et al, 2011). The review also identified a lack of information provided to foster carers on provision and its enrolment process, which contributed to low take-up.

Research also shows that when disadvantaged children do attend early education settings, they tend to experience lower quality provision than their more advantaged peers (Mathers and Smees, 2014).

The specific challenges of foster and kinship care can make access to good quality provision even more difficult. As an illustration, a foster carer juggling multiple demands may be less able to compromise on location and flexibility of opening hours, limiting the provision they can access. Looked after children may therefore be doubly disadvantaged, firstly through restricted access to early years provision, and secondly by the quality of provision they experience when they do access it. Family and Childcare Trust and NCB believe this unfairness must be addressed.

### **The role of virtual heads**

Section 99 of the Children and Families Act 2014 requires every local authority in England to appoint at least one officer with adequate resources to promote the educational achievement of looked after children aged 5 to 16. The officer, who must be employed by a local authority in England, is commonly referred to as a virtual school head as they are responsible for monitoring and tracking the progress of children under the care of their local authority as if they were attending a single school. Their duties include ensuring there are effective arrangements in place to work with the range of professionals involved in supporting the education of looked after children, working closely with schools to make them aware of their role, gathering information about the requirements of their children and putting in place mechanisms to give a voice to children in care. Virtual school heads also have a responsibility to implement pupil premium arrangements for looked after children in accordance with the conditions of the grant.

If the virtual school head was also obligated to offer these services to two, three and four year olds, it could improve their access to high quality early years education, increasing their school readiness, educational achievements and long term life chances. Even though attending formal early education will not be appropriate in all cases, local authorities must ensure that decisions about early education are made part of a wider assessment of the needs of looked after children.

### **Lack of data**

Data on access to early education by looked after children is sparse. Very little is known about their outcomes as compared with non-looked after children, or about their experiences of early education. There are few easily obtainable figures on the number of looked after children accessing early education in England, on the types of settings they attend when they do, or - crucially - on the quality of the provision they experience. There is at present no way of knowing whether looked after children are receiving the good quality early years provision they need to improve outcomes.

Improving the data on looked after children under-five would enhance understanding of how well their needs are being met. This would allow the UK to better address the challenges of this group.

#### **Questions for Ministers:**

**What is being done to ensure that early years education is being prioritised within care plans for looked after children?**

**Will the government seek to improve the access to and quality of early years education for looked after children?**

**What provision will be made to coordinate early years education for looked after children?**

**Given the role that high quality early years education plays in narrowing the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers, how will the Government improve data on looked after children accessing this provision?**

Department for Education (2015) Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31st March 2015. London: DfE. Kirklees Council (2013) Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2013. Huddersfield: Kirklees Council

Mathers, S. & Smees, R. (2014) *Quality and Inequality: Do Three and Four-Year-Olds in Deprived Areas Experience Lower Quality Preschool Provision?* London: Nuffield Foundation; Dowsett, C., Huston, A. C., Imes, A. E., & Gennetian, L. (2008). Structural and process features in three types of child care for children from high and low income families. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23, 69-93.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Smees, R., Dobson, A., Jeavons, M., Lewis, K., Morahan, M. and Sadler, S. (2004) The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project – A Longitudinal Study Funded by the DfEE (1997-2003). University of London: Institute of Education.

Vandenbroeck, M., Coussée, F., Bradt, L. and Roose, R., (2011) 'Diversity in early childhood education: A matter of social pedagogical embarrassment' in Cameron, C. and Moss, P. (Eds) *Social pedagogy and working with children and young people: Where care and education meet*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Washbrook, E. & Waldfogel, J. (2010) Low income and early cognitive development in the U.K. London: Sutton Trust

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Smees, R., Dobson, A., Jeavons, M., Lewis, K., Morahan, M. and Sadler, S. (2004) The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project – A Longitudinal Study Funded by the DfEE (1997-2003). University of London: Institute of Education.