Learning with care The education of children looked away from home by local authorities in Scotland

This article by Kirstie Maclean and Morag Gunion outlines the findings of a recent inspection in Scotland of the educational experiences of looked after children. It considers assessment, care planning and review; attendance arrangements; progress, attainment and support for learning; personal and social development; carers’ support for learning; working in partnership; and policies, management and quality assurance. The methodology of the inspection was influenced by previous research and comparison is made between the inspection’s main findings and the broader research evidence. Conclusions are drawn about the need for further development.

Introduction

Learning with Care: The education of children looked away from home by local authorities (HM Inspectors of Schools and the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) is a report of an inspection of the educational experiences of looked after children.¹ It was undertaken by HM Inspectors of Schools (HMI) and the Social Work Services Inspectorate (SWSI) in Scotland in 1999 and 2000. The report was prompted by concerns about the poor educational outcomes of looked after children, and the subsequent severe disadvantages that they experience in adult life, that had been revealed both through research and through the OFSTED/SSI inspection in England and Wales (Office for Standards in Education and Social Services Inspectorate, 1995). A Scottish Office-funded review of research, policy and practice (Borland et al, 1998) allowed no room for complacency, finding that there was considerable evidence that being looked after away from home constituted an educational hazard, thus adding to the disadvantage entailed in removal from home.

These research findings were both a trigger for Scottish ministers deciding that the inspection should be undertaken and a major influence on the issues considered during the inspection. This article aims to summarise the main findings of the inspection and to compare these with the available research. Comparison is mainly made with research findings available at the time the inspection was undertaken as this was the benchmark we used to develop our inspection methodology. However, where relevant, more recent research is also mentioned. The authors of the article were both members of the inspection team.

Methodology

The inspection was undertaken jointly by HMI (now HMIE) and the SWSI. It focused on the arrangements and outcomes for children living away from home continuously (ie not in respite care), and placed either in family placements or in residential units that did not provide education on the premises (ie not in residential schools or secure units). This group of children seemed likely to be most vulnerable to poor outcomes and their educational arrangements had not previously been inspected in Scotland. Only children who had been looked after away from home for more than six months were included in order to assess the impact of local authority care on their education. Given the provisions of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, the inspection focused particularly on the role of

¹ Children who become looked after in Scotland under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 include those accommodated with parental consent and those made subject to Supervision Requirements (roughly the equivalent of Care Orders and Supervision Orders in England and Wales). The Requirements made by children’s hearings also specify whether they should be placed in foster care, residential care or residential schools, care of relatives or at home.
the local authority as a corporate parent. The inspection procedures are summarised as follows:

- All local authority education departments and social work services in Scotland were sent a brief questionnaire requesting information about current initiatives in the education of looked after children.
- Children’s Services Plans from each local authority were scrutinised and reviews of these plans were examined where available.
- Five local authorities of different sizes were selected for inspection. These were Aberdeen City, South Lanarkshire, Stirling, Highland and West Dumbartonshire. These authorities covered urban, rural and mixed settings and had both above and below average numbers and percentages of looked after children.
- The education and social work files of ten looked after children in each authority were examined and their social worker and key teachers were interviewed. Where there was contact with parents, the parents were sent a brief questionnaire.
- Twenty-one of these children and their carers were interviewed.
- Education and social work senior managers, with responsibility for looked after children, were interviewed in all five authorities. A Children’s Reporter in each authority was interviewed. Two Children’s Panel Chairs were interviewed.

The inspection targeted a sample of 50 children at the later stages of primary school and at the period of secondary school when pupils take their Standard and Higher Grade Examinations (usually aged 15–17 years). These are crucial educational periods where stability of schooling is likely to be particularly important. Children’s placements, at the time the samples were chosen, were in proportion to the placement patterns in the five local authorities inspected and were as outlined in Table 1.

Two children (4 per cent) were from minority ethnic or mixed-parentage backgrounds. It is estimated that less than one per cent of looked after children in Scotland have such origins.

### The findings

**Assessment, care planning and review**

The inspection was completed three-and-a-half years after the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 came into force in April 1997. The Looking After Children (LAC) materials, amended for Scottish use, were being implemented in most local authorities. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and its Regulations and Guidance, specify that, at the time a child becomes looked after, an assessment of needs, including educational needs, should be undertaken; a care plan should be drawn up to meet these identified needs; and the child’s carers should know clearly their responsibilities for carrying this out. Subsequently, the care plan should be reviewed at specified intervals, appropriate records maintained and confidentiality respected.

Unfortunately, practice in many regards fell a long way short of these statutory requirements. It was unusual for any form of assessment to have been undertaken by social work departments. Likewise, schools did not undertake assessments at the time children became looked after, nor did they often share their considerable knowledge of the children concerned with social work departments.

Care plans were lacking in a considerable minority of cases and it was unusual to find placement agreements. Even where these documents were in place, they often did not address educational needs in sufficient detail and there was no evidence of direct involvement of school staff in drawing them up.

Reviews of the care plan were a more robust aspect of the local authorities’
planning systems. Most review meetings took place on time and involved children and their parents. However, discussion of educational issues tended to focus much more on behaviour and attendance than on attainment. For looked after children to be ‘settled’ in school was often seen as an end in itself. Apart from in one authority, invitations to teachers to attend reviews appeared fairly random. Teachers were more likely to accept an invitation where there were ‘problems’, whereas children were more likely to welcome their attendance when they got positive feedback.

It was notable in all the above planning documents and in minutes of meetings that information supplied by social workers and carers tended to convey an inaccurate and usually over-optimistic picture of children’s attainments.

Social work case files and pupil progress records (PPRs) held by schools were examined. While the majority of records were up to date, many had basic information missing. In the case of social work records, this often concerned the child’s education and, in the case of PPRs, the social work services the child received. Nevertheless, in almost all schools, relevant teachers had been kept well informed about children’s looked after status. The more detailed and personal information held on looked after children was usually shared with teachers on a ‘need to know’ basis.

Although disappointing, these findings did not come as a surprise. Skuse and Evans (2001) found a significant minority of looked after children did not have care plans and even more had no placement plans. Where these documents were in place, many had missing data concerning educational attainments. The OFSTED/SSI (1995) inspection found very little involvement of schools in care planning and insufficient priority was given in these plans to educational arrangements. A number of studies found that there was much greater focus on behaviour and school attendance than on attainment at statutory reviews and that social workers were over-optimistic about children’s attainments (Jackson, 1989; Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990; Aldgate et al, 1993). More positively, although Francis (2000) found that ‘details (on school files) of the attainment levels of the 14 children proved to be elusive in the extreme’, in most cases the inspection had little difficulty finding this information.

**Attendance arrangements**

All five authorities inspected had policies of maintaining pupils in their current schools when they became looked after and all had good arrangements for them to attend school. Local authorities often provided taxi transport to facilitate attendance, but they differed in how they expected education and social work departments to share the cost. A few of the social workers interviewed felt that, on occasion, they had to ‘fight’ for transport costs to be paid for longer periods of time.

At the time of the inspection, 48 of the 50 children in the sample were enrolled in a school. The majority were in mainstream schools but nine were in special schools or units and two were receiving home tuition. In most cases, the specialist provision was appropriate for those concerned. Two were excluded without any alternative educational provision.

The inspection revealed that a number of the children had experienced some disruption to their education. Two children had attended eight different schools before they became looked after. Once children became looked after, school moves were usually only made for good reasons, for example moving from primary to secondary school, from mainstream to specialist provision or, in two cases, at the request of a parent or foster carer. Attendance had been a problem for most children in the sample before they became looked after, but this usually improved once they were removed from home. For a small minority, mainly secondary pupils, it remained a problem. Those in foster or relative care placements had better attendance than those in residential units. One young person told us that her foster carer ‘gave her no choice’ about going to school, whereas she stated that there had been little pressure to attend in her previous residential unit.
Looked after children account for 13 per cent of all exclusions in Scotland although they represent only one per cent of the school population. In our sample of 50 children, 21 had been excluded from school at least once. A significant minority had been excluded on many occasions or for long periods. One pupil had had no school placement for seven months, two had been without a placement for three months, and two had been ‘informally’ excluded from school without clear arrangements being in place for their education. These were all boys.

Arrangements for school attendance, actual attendance and continuity of education were all better in our inspection sample than might have been anticipated from research findings. Non-attendance prior to coming into care was found to be between 30 and 50 per cent in three Scottish studies (Kendrick, 1995; Ramsey, 1995; Triseliotis et al., 1995) but only 16 per cent in an English study (Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990). Once in care, high levels of non-attendance were still the norm. OFSTED/SSI (1995) found that 12 per cent of all children, and 25 per cent of 14- to 16-year-olds, did not attend regularly, were excluded or had no school place. Maginnis (1993) found 14 per cent of young people in Lothian’s residential units permanently excluded and eight per cent without a school place. Surveys of children in residential care in Strathclyde (Lockhart et al., 1996) and Lanarkshire (survey undertaken in 1997, quoted in Borland et al., 1998) found 35 per cent and 40 per cent respectively not attending school on the day of the survey. Dixon and Stein (2002) in their recent study of care leavers in Scotland, found that 71 per cent reported temporary or permanent exclusion – often, according to the young people themselves, for ‘daft’ things – and that 83 per cent had truanted, 41 per cent ‘often’.

Kendrick (1995) found that almost 60 per cent of his looked after sample moved school once during the study year, 14 per cent moved twice, and six per cent had three or more changes. Moving school is likely both to lead to placement breakdown (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987) and to lower attainments (Biehal et al., 1995). Research published since undertaking our inspection might have challenged our assumptions about the appropriateness of specialist provision. Evans (2000) and Gordon et al. (2000) found very different patterns of school placements among children with disabilities and/or Statements of Needs. Looked after children were much more likely to be in special schools than ‘statemented’ or disabled children living in their own families, even where the nature of their disability or difficulty was less severe.

Progress, attainment and support for learning
Most of the children in the inspection were under-achieving in comparison with their peers. Of the pupils at the primary stages, just under half were attaining the expected level in the 5–14 curriculum appropriate for their age. About one-fifth were attaining one level below and about one-third were attaining two or more levels below that expected for their age. Previous research findings on the attainments of younger looked after children also show significant under-performance (Essen et al., 1976) and even children in stable, very long-term foster placements were achieving well below average (Aldgate et al., 1993).

Three-quarters (19) of the 25 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 two achieved the national average of three awards at credit level. Three of the young people in the sample had not been entered for any external examinations.

These results were again somewhat better than might have been anticipated from research findings. Three care-leaving studies found that more than two-thirds of young people left with no qualifications whatsoever and that those who achieved qualifications obtained much lower grades than the general population (Stein and Carey, 1986; Biehal et al., 1992; Garnett, 1992). A recent study in Scotland of care leavers found only 39 per cent had achieved one or more Standard Grades (Dixon and Stein, 2002).
Some schools in the inspection sample seemed complacent about the under-achievement of their looked after children, perhaps feeling that they were doing ‘as well as could be expected’. When teachers were asked to comment on the progress of the children, most tended to comment on aspects of their behaviour and whether they were ‘settled’ in school. Many social workers lacked knowledge about the attainment of the children on their caseload. Some social workers appeared not to understand the system of attainment levels in Standard Grades, or in the 5–14 curriculum. Social workers tended to over-estimate the abilities of individual children. One girl in primary school was described by her social worker as ‘doing very well’ when in fact she had average attainment in English language, and was below average in mathematics. A social worker described a secondary pupil as ‘an able girl academically’. The picture provided by the school was that of a slow worker who had been referred for specific support with her written work. Similar misperceptions were identified by Dixon and Stein (2002) who found that:

\[\text{\ldots over a quarter of social workers \ldots did not know whether or not the young person had any qualifications at the point of moving on from care. (p 72)}\]

Two local authorities had employed ‘link teachers’ to work directly with individual children in residential units, supporting them with their homework and helping them with their study plans. The link teachers also offered advice on educational matters to residential staff, and liaised with schools and residential homes on issues of attendance and exclusion. We found that link teachers were a useful support, but that they did not always keep sufficiently complete records of work with individual pupils to allow their progress to be carefully monitored. Their services were not available to children in foster care.

A significant number of children in the sample had special educational needs and a number had a Record of Needs (the Scottish equivalent of a Statement of Needs in England). They generally received appropriate support from their schools and local authorities. There were, however, examples of children receiving insufficient support or waiting some time for appropriate support. One boy in primary school had struggled unhappily for a number of years before the school asked for his needs to be assessed by the psychological service. The OFSTED/SSI (1995) inspection found that in terms of accessing support services, children were not always identified early enough. Being looked after did not confer priority for additional action and sometimes intervention was not flexible or immediate enough to turn around a deteriorating situation.

**Personal and social development**

Every school in the inspection had appropriate procedures for the pastoral care of their children. All young people in secondary school had an allocated guidance teacher. In primary schools, class teachers and head teachers undertook pupils’ pastoral care. The ethos and pastoral care in the schools in the sample were generally positive, supportive and caring. There were good examples, particularly in primary schools, of children and young people being given praise and having their self-esteem enhanced by their school. Some children displayed certificates they had gained in school on their bedroom walls.

Most of the children had, to varying degrees, emotional and social problems associated with their life experiences. In most cases, the children we interviewed were unconcerned about their looked after status being known to some teachers and peers. However, three children reported unhappiness about inappropriate remarks which teachers had made to them concerning their status. These were taken up with school staff by the children’s social workers, or in one case, by the young person herself.

There was no indication, in the inspection, that bullying was an issue for any of the children because of their looked after status. One girl in primary school said she had been bullied because she was overweight; another said she had been bullied because she was ‘not good at her work’.
The children did not feel that being looked after contributed to incidences of bullying or falling out with their peers. A few of the young people were themselves described as bullies.

There is little available research concerning the personal and social development of looked after children in school. Our finding concerning lack of bullying was more positive than those found in research studies (Fletcher, 1993; Berridge et al, 1996; Dixon and Stein, 2002). We were not surprised to learn from research studies that young people experienced concern about information at school not being kept private (OFSTED/SSI, 1995; Gallagher, 1996), that teachers and social workers had different understandings of confidentiality (Berridge et al, 1996) and that:

In most schools there was insufficient guidance on the use of confidential information – only one school had an explicit policy on confidentiality. (OFSTED/SSI, 1995, p 21)

In all the local authorities, children had good access to extra-curricular activities. Some of these were provided by carers and some by schools. Schools generally provided opportunities for children to participate in trips both within the UK and abroad, and most schools had some sporting teams, usually football, in which children could participate. One rural primary school provided a wide range of extra-curricular activities and had encouraged the sample child to learn to play a musical instrument in an effort to raise his self-esteem. Carers supported a variety of activities for the children, including athletics, Scottish and Irish dancing, horse riding, brownies and guides, shinty and swimming. Children in primary schools were more likely to be involved in extra-curricular activities than those at secondary school. The importance of extra-curricular activities and positive reinforcement for achievements is underlined by research findings that positive experiences at school, ‘academic, sporting or social in nature’, can minimise the affects of adversity (Sylva, 1994; Romans et al, 1995).

All the young people in secondary schools were given access to the careers service and to information about future careers. In the majority of cases young people had appropriate levels of vocational guidance. However, in a significant minority some problems had occurred. In one instance, the school guidance teachers had been dismissive of a young man’s career aspirations and he had mainly been helped by his social worker to access careers advice. A few young people seemed to lack the confidence to approach the careers service.

Recording of the ethnicity, language and culture of children was poor in both social work and school files. School staff were somewhat better than social workers at recording children and young people’s religious background. The inspection found that whenever parents wished their child to attend a denominational school this stipulation had always been met. A young person who was from a minority ethnic background had materials and support for his language and culture provided in his residential unit. Another child of mixed parentage had contact with a voluntary agency to help him understand his ethnic and cultural background.

Carers’ support for learning
Without exception, foster and relative carers tried to provide children with a positive environment for learning. However, the majority had no personal experience of further or higher education and were often unsure how to help children with their studies. Some had purchased educational books or computers, encouraged the children to use libraries, or had visited the children’s schools for advice. Relative carers were less likely than foster carers to have educational materials in their homes. They were often on pensions or benefits and their lack of resources was exacerbated, in some authorities, by the policy of paying relative carers lower allowances than foster carers. Older sons and daughters or other relatives of carers, or older siblings, were often helpful in providing educational support and some also provided good role models by attending college or university. Conditions in foster homes varied quite con-

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siderably. Some children had their own rooms and could find quiet space for study, whereas others might share a room with up to three other children. In two foster homes, with considerable numbers of children in placement, homework was done more formally around the kitchen table, with one of the carers advising and supervising and the children helping each other. This worked well. Most children in the sample were reported to read for pleasure.

Despite the positive support found in foster homes, 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 advice, training and support that foster and relative carers need to provide an educationally rich environment should be assessed as part of their approval, and should be more readily available.

Children in residential care were, on the whole, those with more educational difficulties and lower educational attainments. 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. It is likely that a mixture of those two processes was at work.

The educational support provided in residential units was more variable than in foster homes. In some units it was very good, with considerable emphasis placed on valuing education and on study support. In one unit, a separate room had been equipped as a study with computers, desks and a small library. It was well used. In others where space was less generous, efforts were made to create quiet space by supervising children’s homework in a dining room or staff office. One authority had made considerable and fruitful efforts to make their residential units educationally rich environments.

By contrast, some units in other authorities were providing educationally poor environments. In one unit that we visited, which reported ‘appalling Standard Grade results’, young people were doing homework on their beds in shared bedrooms. A different unit claimed that it had no money to buy basic educational resources such as books, pencils and rubbers. We gained the impression that some staff were demoralised; they had run out of strategies to try to ensure that the youngsters in their care received a worthwhile education, and felt unsupported by their management, the education department and the young people’s schools. We recommended that local authorities should undertake regular audits of their residential units to assess how far they are educationally rich environments and, where shortcomings are found, take appropriate action.

Most research has found that foster carers are committed to acting as ‘good parents’ as far as the education of their foster children is concerned, but that they do not often receive enough resources or support to help children overcome earlier disadvantage or to cope with special needs (Fletcher-Campbell and Hall, 1990; Aldgate et al, 1993; Quinton et al, 1996). As Borland and colleagues wrote, summarising Aldgate et al (1993):

*Even in stable foster placements which provided educationally rich environments, children were unable to overcome early educational disadvantage . . . ‘normal family life’ and ‘normal’ parenting are not enough to compensate for earlier deprivation.* (Borland et al, 1998, p 91)

Biehal et al (1995) and Jackson (1994) found that intensive support from foster carers could help young people achieve qualifications, and OFSTED/SSI (1995) ascertained that when foster carers or residential carers took a keen interest in children’s education and valued educational achievements, it was both much appreciated by the children and led to better attendance and engagement in school activities.

**Working in partnership**

The partnership which makes up the ‘corporate parent’ should support the education of children looked after away from home, and include the social worker,
school, carers or residential workers, parents and/or family, and children’s hearings. We found the working relationships between school staff and carers were generally positive and strong. Schools treated carers as they would parents for all school-related purposes. School staff usually spoke very highly of the contact and support they received from carers and vice versa, although a few residential units were commented on less favourably. Social workers were equally positive about the parental role carers maintained with schools. They often described themselves as partly or fully delegating this role to carers, although such delegation and its limitations were not always clear to carers. We found a minority of carers, in particular relative carers, who, because of age, infirmity or lack of confidence, required greater social work support than they were receiving to play a parental role with the school.

Co-operation between social workers and school staff was of more mixed quality although, encouragingly, both parties considered that partnerships had improved over recent years. As might be expected, working relationships were generally best when there was regular contact between school staff and social workers. Regular joint meetings involving the social worker, guidance teacher, young person and carer were held for some young people in order to try to resolve difficulties, and they were usually successful in doing so.

Hardly any of the social workers or school staff had received training, either in their qualifying courses or in service, concerning the education of looked after children. A small number of schools seemed unaware of social workers’ roles and responsibilities towards looked after children, and saw appropriate concern and intervention as inappropriate interference. A number of school staff, including some head teachers, did not consider that they had any special role in regard to looked after children. A few did not consider them a disadvantaged group, perhaps naively believing that the children’s removal from unsatisfactory circumstances had solved their problems.

Most, however, recognised that the special circumstances of looked after children did merit consideration.

The majority of social workers saw their main role in the education of looked after children as liaison with carers, schools and other agencies, rather than actively promoting the child’s education or advocating on behalf of the child. Liaison with parents concerning their child’s education was rarely mentioned. Social workers’ caseloads varied considerably between authorities. The majority of social workers said that they did not have enough time to address fully the educational needs of looked after children. Nevertheless, some were addressing them well. This seemed more related to good personal organisation and clarity of purpose than directly to caseload.

Foster and relative carers described their role as ‘just getting on with it’ and most said they had not received any guidance on their role with regard to education. Some residential workers had a more considered view of their role, particularly in one authority where the education of looked after children was discussed regularly at unit managers’ meetings. Most residential and foster carers were confident that, if asked, their local authority would provide additional funds for items such as books, school trips, equipment or tuition, although the majority of foster carers had not put this to the test. Relative carers were less certain that additional resources would be provided, although they also had not asked. Social workers, carers and young people were often worried about whether finance would be available to support young people in further and higher education. While we were assured by social work managers that funding would always be found, lack of dedicated budgets could mean a long and sometimes detrimental wait for a decision. Given that all the local authorities inspected were aiming to increase the numbers of looked after children entering further and higher education, we recommended that specific financial arrangements should be made.

Parents retained parental responsibilities for almost all the children in the sample. The majority of children had
contact with one or both parents. Fourteen parents returned questionnaires. While these parents may not be representative of all parents having contact with their looked after children, their views are important, not least because there is so little research in this area. The majority felt excluded from their child’s education, receiving little information about their child’s progress in school and rarely being invited to school events. Nevertheless, they remained interested in their child’s education and wanted to be as supportive as possible. Many schools seemed uncertain how to deal with parents and were unaware that parents retain rights and that they might be entitled to information. Where parents were having intensive contact with their children involving overnight stays, arrangements for homework and sending letters concerning future events were often confused. Better communication between social workers, schools, parents and carers was needed in these cases.

While we considered that a number of aspects of working in partnership merited improvement, research findings are considerably more negative. The OFSTED/SSI report (1995) concluded that carers generally had unclear roles and that:

. . . in the majority of cases carers did not engage with schools and children’s educational progress and achievements were not usually acknowledged or encouraged. (p 31)

Berridge et al (1996) found that some residential carers behaved as uninterested parents, not attending parents’ evenings or school functions and failing to let schools know when children were ill.

Social workers have often been described as failing to appreciate the importance of education as a potential route out of disadvantage and as a means of enhancing self-esteem (Knapp et al, 1985; Jackson, 1989, 1994; Aldgate et al, 1993; Francis et al, 1995; Gilligan, 1998). The recent OFSTED inspection (2001) found that:

There is still a lack of understanding between education and social services of their distinctive roles in working together to support the children in public care.

This is linked to lack of joint training. (p 7)

Despite the duties of local authorities, few resources were made available to meet expenses associated with care leavers’ education (Broad, 1997; Ajayi and Jackson, 2002). Direct contact between social workers and schools was limited and irregular. Schools were often unaware of important changes in a child’s life, such as a change of placement, and were unable to anticipate or understand unsettled behaviour. In the words of the OFSTED/SSI report (1995): ‘Teachers may be ill-informed about social work planning processes and legal responsibilities’.

There is virtually nothing in the research concerning the role of parents in the education of their children when they are looked after away from home. Martin and Jackson (2002) found that the parents of adults who had successful lives after they left care had sometimes played a positive role in maintaining their motivation for school:

It did not seem that social workers or carers were aware that parents might be potential allies if they hoped to motivate children to do well at school. (p 125)

The OFSTED/SSI report (1995) stated that, in general, schools did not keep parents informed of their children’s progress.

Policies, management and quality assurance

The education of looked after children was not a prominent issue in most local authority Children’s Services Plans. The reviews of Plans were somewhat more likely to have addressed this issue than the original Plans. Such Plans provide an important opportunity to develop educational provision for looked after children and they are also an important means of being publicly accountable.

Approximately half of local authorities said that they had a policy on the education of looked after children or that such a
policy was being developed. Only a few of these policies, however, had the primary and specific aim of considering the educational needs of looked after children. We were only able to examine the implementation of such a policy in one local authority: the others were either too recently implemented or still in draft form. This policy related to the implementation of individual Educational Support Plans. These were soundly based and well presented. Helpful guidance on their implementation had been issued. Nevertheless, in practice, implementation had been partial, slow and sometimes only by social work or education staff alone rather than jointly. This highlighted the importance not only of policy development but of regular monitoring and review.

Three of the local authorities inspected had separate elected members’ committees for education and social work. The remaining two authorities had children’s committees and one had a joint children’s department. Given their recent introduction, it was not possible to evaluate the effects of these different organisational structures on the education of looked after children. Since the inspection, a few more local authorities in Scotland have reorganised their social work and education services. The effectiveness of different organisational structures for achieving better educational outcomes for looked after children will merit evaluation in future.

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 ago when, as one manager told us, ‘we never met but would just fight about money or placements’. All five authorities in the sample and 75 per cent of the authorities who returned questionnaires had senior managers in education with designated responsibilities for looked after children. The evidence we found of increased joint working at both member and officer level was welcome and encouraging.

Only four of the local authorities returning the questionnaire said that they maintained a central database of information about attainments, attendance, rates of exclusion and the types of services looked after children were receiving. In all these authorities, the information held was only partial; for instance it related only to children in residential care or only to children following a Standard Grade curriculum. Without accurate statistics it is impossible to monitor the effects of any strategies aimed at improving the educational performance of looked after children. It is crucial that local authorities keep such statistics.

Research paints a fairly bleak picture of inter-departmental working. In England and Wales, Fletcher-Campbell (1997) found limited co-operation in spite of a joint circular (Department for Education and Department of Health, 1994) and widespread dissemination of key points from the OFSTED/SSI inspection (1995). The 2001 OFSTED inspection found that although:

"LEAs are developing databases, often in liaison with Social Services Departments ... as yet the majority of the recorded information cannot be used to assess the progress of individual children. (p 7)"

A Scottish study of inter-disciplinary working (Kendrick et al, 1996) found tensions between departments and that joint structures did not necessarily resolve problems:

"There is a danger that, without proper monitoring, formal mechanisms and commitment to principles give the illusion that progress is being made, without significantly changing the experience of children and young people. (Borland et al, 1998, p 117)"

In 1996, only five local authorities in Scotland had specific policies or projects in relation to the education of looked after children (Borland et al, 1998). This figure had considerably increased by the time of the inspection.

Conclusions
The ‘Learning with Care’ inspection (HM Inspectors of Schools and the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) found?
mixed practice in the education of looked after children. Some of it reflected previous negative research findings, some of it was considerably more positive. This might be the result of our small sample, but could also be a sign of recent improvements in certain respects. Local authorities have initiated a range of new services and developments since the inspection and have received additional, dedicated funding from the Scottish Executive. A development project is in place, funded by the Executive. It is important that the effectiveness of these new developments is measured and findings disseminated.

We know a great deal now about what has gone wrong as far as the education of looked after children is concerned and a considerable amount about what can and should be done to make it right. Comprehensive and helpful guidance (Department of Health and Department for Education and Employment, 2000) has been issued in England and Wales. However, much of the progress made throughout the UK in the last decade has been partial and piecemeal, both within and between local authorities. Much more thorough and comprehensive approaches are required if looked after children are to attain the same opportunities and outcomes as their non-looked after peers. We conclude, therefore that there is room both for improvement and for cautious optimism.

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