

Vulnerable (Looked After) children

“ I just hope I've got enough time to help her on her way. Will I have enough time to make the difference, so that she can grow? ”

Foster carer

Introduction

This final summary brings together the key messages from three C4EO Knowledge reviews with the aim of supporting you to develop effective services for looked after children and young people (LACYYP). The reviews include up to date evidence from research and from validated local practice as well as the views of service managers, children, young people, parents and carers gathered in consultations organised by C4EO for the purpose.

C4EO started its work before the Coalition government was elected in May 2010. New policy priorities will be set by the Government. However, the evidence of 'what works' contained in the reviews remains very relevant, as there is a clear focus on outcomes. It will help your work, whatever the future policy framework.

C4EO's work focused on three specific areas in relation to this topic: improving educational outcomes, improving emotional and behavioural health, and increasing the number of care leavers in safe settled accommodation. The reviews found that the separate elements of care for looked after children interact with each other, and that progress in one area of children and young people's lives will be linked with progress in others. Evidence tells us that successful education outcomes are closely associated with placement quality, stability and continuity (feeling loved and part of the family), being looked after until older, and a supportive and encouraging environment for study.





Other cross-cutting themes emerging strongly from the evidence are:

- Listening to young people and implementing what they say can produce significant improvements in provision. For example, high proportions of children and young people think that being looked after has benefited their education but overall they identify high unevenness within their individual journeys through care. Their involvement in planning, developing, commissioning and providing services can suggest where and how to improve.
- Policy and practice developments have produced very positive impacts: examples include virtual school heads, personal education plans, and designated teachers (education), school-based anti-bullying strategies to address negative stereotypes about the reasons for being in care (emotional health), and the development of leaving care services, and the joint work between these services and housing services
- Achieving independence is a gradual, continuing process, and young people who successfully make the transition to adulthood (not only leaving care) tend to do so at an older age, and when they have had good emotional support and good quality care during the time they have been looked after. For example, ensuring that looked after young people can go on to further and higher education and training can help them to make the transition in similar ways to other young people.
- We need more knowledge about the complex learning and emotional needs of looked after children, particularly how to help them achieve emotional wellbeing and to reach their potential.

Training

Training and supporting foster and other carers is key to the young person receiving necessary support, and residential childcare staff gain from learning and practising therapeutic approaches. Training is highly valued by foster carers and residential staff as it can help to improve children's care.

'Now we are going on training which is marvellousbecause the more I know the more relaxed I feel' Foster carer, Sellick 1994

“Very vulnerable looked after children benefit from early, targeted, intense and ‘joined-up’ support.”



Using the evidence to improve practice:

Looked after children and young people say that:

- Receiving emotional and practical support enhances their self-esteem, sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing.
- The quality of their relationships with foster carers, childcare workers and other professionals (particularly social workers) is crucial: they value being part of a family where they feel loved, and are treated as a member of their foster carer's family. They want social workers who are reliable and accessible.
- They want to stay in contact with family members and friends of their choice.
- They want to have their achievements valued and recognised, and also to be reminded of the possible consequences of not reaching their potential.
- They want to be offered a choice of accommodation when they move to independence, in a location where they feel safe, secure and supported, and with access to transport, education, employment and amenities.

Strategic approaches

- Ensure that you work in partnership with a range of agencies, for example, housing, health, adult services, schools, further and higher education, local employers and training agencies. Protocols and corporate strategies between leaving care services and housing agencies have improved accommodation choices for young people.
- Focus on improving transitions, for example, for those young people who are moving to independence, or who need additional services such as health. Improved service planning and delivery across local authority education and health boundaries, for example, between child and adult mental health services, housing, social services, and education can bring real improvements in children's lives.
- Very vulnerable looked after children benefit from early, targeted, intense and 'joined-up' support. These groups include those who leave care younger, those with social and emotional problems, offenders, including those with a history of violence, young people who run away, young disabled people who do not meet the threshold for adult services, and young asylum seekers with mental health problems.



“There is evidence that foster carers feel more supported when they can approach these services readily and can use peer support networks.”

Service structure, provision and delivery

There is some evidence that:

- Treatment and multitreatment foster care may¹ be effective in reducing behaviour disorders, and placement moves.
- Multi-systemic therapy² may improve emotional health, educational outcomes and family relationships, and reduce offending behaviour.

The reviewed evidence base on mentoring, although small, suggests that it can have a modestly positive effect on educational and psychological outcomes, especially if it is well structured, and the mentor has a helping background, focuses on the quality of the relationship, and receives ongoing support and training.

Support looked after children and young people to stay in contact with family and friends of their choice and to ‘make sense’ of these sometimes difficult relationships. *‘Children told us that being away from brothers or sisters was the worst thing about being in care’* (OFSTED 2009a).

Help children and young people to develop informal social support and community networks, including family and friends, which will provide valuable support and nurture their self worth.

Consider developing education projects (either school based or extra-curricular) which work directly with young people to improve their education outcomes, as they are both popular and sustainable.

Ensure that staff assess looked after children’s mental health needs early on, and that there is good access

to both local targeted and non-targeted mental health services. There is evidence that foster carers feel more supported when they can approach these services readily and can use peer support networks.

‘They tell you they can’t see the child until they’re in a stable placement but how can the child get stable until they get help?’ Callaghan et al, C4EO KR 2.

Ensure that social workers share information appropriately with foster carers and other professionals.

Tackle the bullying and stigma associated with being looked after, particularly in schools.

As one young person said:

‘In school people get bullied because they are in care ...they have not been educated about being in care, it’s ignorance’ (Action for Children consultation for C4EO).

Ensure that leaving care staff appreciate the importance of adequate planning, preparation and support, especially for the very vulnerable groups of children and young people, and have high aspirations for all.

The planning and coordination of services for disabled care leavers needs to be enhanced, and the preparation skills of young men need better consideration.

¹ Treatment and multitreatment foster care (TFC, MTFC) refer to a range of approaches to parent training in behaviour management, and providing a structured and therapeutic living environment for the young person (C4EO Scoping review Fish et al 2009)

² Multi-systematic therapy (MST) is a multi-component, community-based treatment programme for children and young people with serious psychological and behavioural difficulties; it is not however designed specifically for looked after children and young people. (Henngeler and Borduin 1995)

Local practice that has made a difference

Practice examples have been submitted to C4EO and assessed against a range of criteria to determine the extent to which evidence can improve outcomes. The three fully validated examples below have a good evidence base about both outcomes and how well they can be replicated in your services:

Validated Local Practice examples

The **Kirklees Blueprint** project was set up to improve the participation of looked after children and young people in the statutory review process. The aim of the project was to *'enable LACYF to participate in planning their lives, not just communicating their views when asked to do so at a particular point'*. An innovative aspect of the project is the different ways that looked after children and young people are now involved in their review, for example, using video and online forms. Everyone involved in running the project has been trained: this emphasises the need to ensure that reviews are positive and 'child friendly'. As a result more looked after children and young people are consistently participating in and enjoying their reviews.

The total project cost over one year was £30,000 for 150 children, equating to £2.56 per child per week.

Dreamwalls in Southampton, is a 'time-out' programme that supports carers by ensuring that they have planned breaks. The aim is to prevent foster carers reaching 'crisis' point. The overwhelming success of the programme has been a 95 per cent reduction in the number of carers leaving fostering as a result of 'discontent' or 'burnout'. Foster carers note benefits in their emotional wellbeing, resulting in greater placement stability, a key outcome for looked after children. The programme also provides children and young people with opportunities to experience support with their personal, social and emotional development during the breaks.

The cost per child per year equated to £674.43 per child per year, and 182 children received the service. The social return on investment (SROI) indicated £1.63 per £1.00 invested.³

Holding the space is a multi-model intervention delivered in residential care settings with looked after children and young people who have experienced sexual and emotional abuse. The intervention regards behaviour as symptomatic of underlying issues resulting from trauma, and includes training staff in person-centred approaches, using a therapeutic group work method, and providing art and personal therapies.

Children and young people report that they feel listened to and cared for since the programme has been introduced. It has led to an increase in the number of looked after children and young people accessing and continuing with therapeutic services through CAMHs. The innovative use of both individual and group approaches is reported to provide a safe space where both staff, and children and young people, can reflect on their emotions, behaviour, and how they are communicating. This has helped to provide a trusting and healing environment.

At the time of publication the costs for this project were not available.

Further details on these examples and more validated and promising local practice, can be found on the C4EO website www.c4eo.org.uk

³ Social Return on Investment (SROI) is an analytic tool for measuring and accounting for social, environmental and economic costs and benefits in decision making, providing a fuller picture of how value is created (or destroyed). www.neweconomicsfoundation.org.uk

Stay involved with C4EO

- Access the range of support and national and local data on the C4EO website and compare your data with that of other areas.
- Encourage managers to consider applying to be C4EO sector specialists.
- Use C4EO Tailored support: discuss with your colleagues and DCS whether you could use the **free** support from C4EO's accredited and trained experts to develop your service for disabled children.
- Suggest that your organisation submits local practice examples which can be validated and placed on the C4EO website.

Final summary and recommendations

This summary is a concise overview of C4EO's work in this theme for directors of children's services. Please visit www.c4eo.org.uk to download full, in-depth versions of the Knowledge Reviews as well as copies of this summary and other materials.