Executive Summary

CHILDREN IN NEED AND CHILDREN IN CARE:

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND PROGRESS

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Introduction

Evidence shows that the educational attainments of Children in Need (CIN) and Children in Care (CIC) in England are lower than for other pupils. This represents sizeable numbers of children: the latest figures (March 2019) showed that there were 399,500 Children in Need in England and 78,150 Children in Care. The 'attainment gap' in reaching expected standards is approximately 25-30% at Key Stage 1 (aged 7) and KS2 (aged 11), and 25% at KS4 (aged 16). Researchers have often investigated the education of Children in Care; however, Children in Need have received very little attention.

Children in Need are those receiving social work services due to concerns over their health or development, or because they are disabled. They usually remain living with birth parents or relatives, supported by a multi-agency Children in Need Plan (CINP); or, when there are greater concerns over safety, by a Child Protection Plan (CPP).

The main reasons for becoming CIN or CIC are abuse or neglect, family dysfunction, family in acute stress or because children are disabled.

This project aimed to identify factors that might explain the 'attainment gap' for CIN and CIC. It did this through:

• Quantitative analysis of data from a whole birth cohort of children (471,688) born in England in 2000/01, starting school in 2006/07 and tracked through to their General Certificate of Education (GCSE) exams in 2017.

• Interviews with 123 children, parents/carers and professionals.

Research questions

1. Compared with all pupils, what are the educational attainments and progress of children who experience being In Need and/or In Care at some stage of their schooling in England?

2. What are the factors associated with attainment at Key Stage 4 (aged 16)?

3. How can we account for children who succeed in their educational attainments at 16 years despite experiencing severe early adversity requiring social work intervention?

4. What are parents', pupils' and professionals' perspectives on the overall factors affecting educational progress for Children in Need and Children in Care, including the impact of family resources, educational and social work support or their absence?

Research methods

This study builds on our previous work in this area (Sebba *et al*., 2015). It was a mixed methods study, with a prospective longitudinal design. Our *quantitative research* used annual data from three DfE datasets: the National Pupil Database, Children in Need and Children Looked After. We developed a classification of levels of social work interventions: comparing children with no interventions; children subject to a Children in Need Plan (CINP) or a Child Protection Plan (CPP); and Children in Care (CIC). Outcome data for different groups concerned pupils' attainment at KS1, KS2 and KS4 as well as KS4 Progress 8 – a measure of pupils' progress between KS2-KS4. Statistical analyses were used to show the prevalence and differences between comparison groups. Multiple regression modelling was used to identify the key factors that predicted higher or lower scores for attainment at KS4[1].

This was complemented by *qualitative interviews* in 6 English local authorities with 18 Children in Need, 23 Children in Care, 17 parents or Special Guardians, 16 foster/residential carers, 19 social workers and 23 teachers. Seven joint- or individual interviews were undertaken with Virtual School Heads and senior social work managers. Children were included between the ages of 6-17 years, including those deemed to be making 'good progress' or 'poorer progress' educationally in order to identify differences. Careful attention was paid to research ethics.

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[1] Scores from up to 8 exam subjects contributed to the 'Attainment 8' measure, which could total between 0-87 points.

Findings

1. Attainments and progress

- A significant minority of all pupils - 1 in 7 (69,246) - experienced an intervention from Children's Services at some stage between Years 1-11. For 76% the highest level of intervention was a Child in Need Plan; for 11% a Child Protection Plan; and 13% a Child in Care. In terms of volume, social work is clearly dominated by Children in Need services.

- Overall, there was much instability. Half our national sample received only 1 period of intervention from Children's Services and 13% 4 periods or more. However, nearly a fifth experienced an intervention within a year after the previous one ending. The proportion varied according to the child's highest level of need; and a third of those experiencing longer-term CPP[2] and shorter periods in Care needed further interventions within a year. It could be that unforeseen family problems emerged but it might also suggest that, for over 8,000 of the 69,246 children, social work interventions had not resolved adequately existing problems and were ended too soon.

- Many children were receiving social work interventions during the year of their GCSE exams. Excluding children whose primary need for intervention was disability, we were surprised to discover that as many as *a quarter* of those who had any interventions were receiving an intervention in Year 11. Half of those experiencing a short stay in Care as the highest level of intervention had entered Care in their final year of schooling; while three-quarters of the long-stay Care group were in Care in Year 11.

- At each Key Stage, attainment and progress were lower for children who had any social work intervention during their school years compared with those who had no intervention. The gap increased with the severity of the intervention:
  - at KS1, children who ever had a Child in Need Plan during the school years scored 14% lower than those who had not; those who ever had a Child Protection Plan scored 17% lower; and those who were ever Children in Care scored 24% lower.
  - at KS2, CINP scored 10% lower, CPP 12% lower, and CIC 16% lower than children with no social work interventions during the school years
  - at KS4, CINP scored 34% lower, CPP 46% lower, and CIC 53% lower than children with no social work interventions during the school years.

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[2] 'Short-term' is defined as under 6 months for Children in Need and under 1 year for Children in Care. This reflects usage in local authorities and a reasonable period of time by which a positive impact might be expected.

- From our interviews, serious difficulties at home clearly impacted on life at school: indeed, significant social, emotional and mental health difficulties were reported for practically all Children in Care and most Children in Need.

2. *Factors associated with KS4 attainment at 16*

   - Factors that previous evidence has shown to relate to educational attainment were also relevant for this cohort. Specifically, poorer KS4 scores were linked to: gender (male), ethnicity (White British or Irish), special educational needs and disabilities and missing school (due to exclusions, absences or changes of school).

   - A substantial part of the relatively poor attainment at age 16 of pupils who had ever been In Need or In Care was accounted for by information available at age 7: the child's KS1 attainment, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and special educational needs and disabilities.

   - After taking all other variables into account, the size of the relationship between all types of social work intervention and KS4 attainment shrank. In comparison with the size of the gender effect (a well-established difference that is relevant for all children), the only substantial attainment gaps that remained were for those who had spent time in Care and those who were receiving social work interventions in Year 11 (with scores falling 3-6 points lower than for their peers).

   - Focusing specifically on Children in Care, lower GCSE scores were achieved by those who:
     - entered Care during secondary rather than primary school (by 1 point)
     - had a higher number of placement changes (1 point lower for every 2 changes)
     - experienced a final placement in residential or other types of Care (such as hostel or lodgings rather than foster care - 2 points)
     - had a higher average levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties (1 point lower for every 4 extra points on the difficulties measure).

3. *Children who succeed at 16 despite severe early adversity requiring social work intervention by the end of KS1*

   - As with the larger cohort, individual characteristics (gender, ethnicity and SEND) and school experiences related to the likelihood that children would have higher scores at KS4. For this group, however, information on these factors at KS4 (i.e. representing the longest time since their early adversity) was even more strongly tied to their KS4 attainment.

   - Higher GCSE scores were achieved by those who:

- were not receiving social work services in Year 11 (2 points higher - even after accounting for children's special educational needs and disabilities)
- had fewer than 4 separate periods of social work intervention (2 points)
- experienced a longer-term stay In Care, although their educational experiences in secondary school were also important.

4. *Children, parents, carers and professionals' perspectives on the factors associated with educational progress for Children in Need and Children in Care*

- From the interviews, social workers played a fuller part in the education of CIN than might have been expected, sometimes advocating on behalf of parents and pupils.
- Regarding family resources, most foster carers felt that they were able to provide adequately for children's education. This was in strong contrast to the parents of CIN, who found it very difficult to afford what that was required for schooling – school uniforms, computers, internet access etc. Most grandparents/relative carers said that they managed financially but life all round could be a struggle.
- Four main explanations were given by participants for the differences between children making good educational progress and those who were not. These were:
  - the experience of stability and continuity in helping children to overcome previous harmful experiences
  - children's social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) and the extent to which these were being addressed
  - school strategies and responses to deal with the difficulties of CIN and CIC, and whether these were perceived as understanding and helpful; and
  - children's problems with their peer relations, influenced by their SEMH.

These quantitative and qualitative findings were brought together into four overriding themes concerning the education of Children in Need and Children in Care:

Greater attention required to Children in Need

Despite little previous research on the education of Children in Need, the profile of the CIN group in policy has begun to increase, assisted by the government's [Children in Need Review](#) (DfE, 2019). Our results and conclusions are consistent with this DfE Review, including the need for: greater visibility for CIN; fewer school exclusions for the group; and better overall support in schools and the community for CIN and their families, including the role of other government departments as well as DfE. Given the prevalence of the

CIN group; their considerable educational difficulties as well as SEMH; and how most CIC usually start as CIN, greater attention is warranted. Schools' awareness of CIN as a group varied. Parents' efforts to support the education of CIN were hampered by a lack of resources: senior social work managers interviewed referred to the local context for families, including rising child poverty, insecure employment, benefit sanctions and poor housing. Cuts to local authority and school budgets had weakened their ability to assist. It was apparent that Children in Need did not benefit from the oversight that a Virtual School would be expected to provide for Children in Care.

The importance of effective early intervention
A significant number of children in our cohort (1 in 7) received interventions from Children's Services at some stage. Child in Need Plans were the most numerous, and this was how more serious interventions usually began. Moreover, multiple periods of intervention were not uncommon, and nearly 3 in 10 of children experiencing interventions were receiving a social work service in Year 11 – earlier, effective interventions might have avoided some of these. KS4 attainment was also poorer for those in non-mainstream school settings in Year 11 (including special schools, pupil referral units and alternative provision). Although for many children, a non-mainstream setting might be the most appropriate to support their learning needs, for others they are the result of escalating emotional and behavioural difficulties, which might have been addressed more effectively at an earlier stage. It, therefore, seems sensible to invest heavily in good quality, early intervention services. However, targeted 'preventive' services had been cut noticeably over the previous decade and statutory and acute services prioritised. Long delays were reported in accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and school-based supports had been reduced.

Instability in children's care and education
The finding that children with multiple periods of intervention achieved lower educational attainments than those with fewer, might reflect the chronic problems that families were experiencing; but, linked with the previous point, earlier resolution of problems could have been possible and desirable. Children who entered Care or had moved to live with relatives often spoke of the improved stability and consistency in their lives, although a higher number of placement changes was linked with poorer attainment. School instability was also related to KS4 exam results: missing a greater number of possible school sessions through absences or exclusions, and changing school in Year 10 or 11, were all predictors of poorer attainment. From interviews, school transfer was usually taken in their stride by children making good educational progress but was much more problematic for others, especially for Children in Need. Some schools made considerable efforts to facilitate transfers, especially for vulnerable pupils, while

others did less. High turnover of social workers was reported and some children said they had given up trying to form relationships with them.

The nature of secondary schooling and educational policy for vulnerable learners

The final overall theme from the research concerned children's experience of secondary education. The general conclusion from our interviews was that primary schools were often more flexible than secondary schools, being inclusive institutions that could cope with children's difficulties; whereas there was much more variation in how secondary schools responded. Not all schools were described as understanding or sympathetic to children's difficulties, reflected sometimes in an inflexible approach to academic excellence and disciplinary codes. Relationships with teachers and teaching styles emerged as very important for children in our study, in order for them to be confident and participate in the classroom, producing their best results. One in three children interviewed raised unprompted the specific problem of teachers shouting and its personal impact.

Recommendations for policy and practice

We set our research in the social and policy contexts in which services were being delivered. Resource availability remained difficult with significant real-term cuts to local authorities' spending power, a fall in schools' funding per pupil and with services for children with special educational needs and disabilities being under particular pressure (NAO, 2019). Our recommendations to improve the educational attainment and progress of Children in Need and Children in Care are the following:

- Efforts to increase the visibility of the Children in Need group should continue, including proposals contained in the Government's *Children in Need Review* (2019). This should include raising the profile of the Children in Need group within schools, to bring more parity with Children in Care. While conscious of the burden of inspections on schools, Ofsted should report on the situation of Children in Need in schools as well as Children in Care.
- There would be strong advantages in Virtual Schools, or a similar service, overseeing Children in Need as well as Children in Care. This would need additional resources.
- There is a case for Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) payments (currently £2,300 per annum for Children in Care and former CIC) to be extended in some form to Children in Need.
- Approaches that address the impact of poverty on education should be promoted (for example 'Poverty Proofing the School Day' [http://www.povertyproofing.co.uk/] is an interesting initiative we encountered in our research in the North-East, in which affordability of schooling is taken into account in school policies).

- We recommend a review of decision making procedures surrounding 'case closure' so that families are not left without adequate support. Efforts to improve stability in care placements and with social workers should continue.
- Teacher training for pupils' well-being should include the specific circumstances of Children in Need and Children in Care: for example, 'attachment awareness' issues in which children's behaviour in school might be linked with previous experiences of neglect or abuse, or separation from family.
- There should be less variation across secondary schools in their inclusiveness; including reducing permanent and fixed-term exclusions, and monitoring the impact of disciplinary codes on CIN and CIC.

Other general policy concerns highlighted include: problems with the implementation of reforms for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; the provision of better legal advice and general support for relative carers; and the growing problem of child and family poverty.

The study was a collaboration between the University of Bristol, School for Policy Studies and Rees Centre, University of Oxford. The full report on which this Summary is based can be found on the University websites.

References

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