Supporting the educational transitions of care leavers: a qualitative investigation

Summary report

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Acknowledgements

I feel privileged to have been granted some very moving insights into the lives of looked-after young people through undertaking this study. Although they must remain anonymous, I thank all the young participants for their invaluable contribution, and particularly for the thoughtfulness and openness with which they responded to the intrusive questions of a stranger. I hope I have done justice to their personal testimonies, which have inspired and motivated me in the more challenging periods of undertaking the PhD.

A study of this nature is not possible without significant support from professionals in schools and local authorities. I am very grateful to all of those who have taken time in their exceptionally busy working lives to participate and/or facilitate my research. That they have done so is a testament to their professional dedication and evidence of the importance accorded to the topic by those working with looked-after young people. I am especially indebted to staff in the virtual schools at the local authorities I have named Stonycross and Riversmeet in the study and to the designated teachers at Woodhall and Fairfields.

A number of colleagues were enormously supportive, and I particularly thank Professor Sharon Gewirtz, Professor Kathryn Hollingsworth, Dr Ann Lorek and Professor Meg Maguire.
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1

Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the study

Removing children from the care of their parents is a draconian step. It is a breach of the right of both the child and the parents to a private and family life under article 8(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which is incorporated into English law through the Human Rights Act 1998. A breach of article 8 by a public authority can only be justified under article 8(2), which requires that it is ‘in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health and morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others’. Consequently, taking children into state care is regarded as a last resort and in English law the making of such an order is dependent upon the court being satisfied that the child is ‘suffering or likely to suffer significant harm’ (Children Act 1989 section 31(2)).

Although statistics are hard to come by, the proportion of children in state care in England appears to be lower than that in many other European jurisdictions, notwithstanding a significant rise following the well-publicised case of the death of Baby Peter Connelly in 2007. The number of children in care in England peaked at 68,110 in 2013, the highest number since 1985 (DfE/NS, 2013a), and a rate of 0.6 per cent (DfE/NS, 2013b). This compares with 1.3% of the population in Denmark (YiPPEE, undated). Although applications for care orders fell for the first time since the scandal in 2013-14, they stand at 9.2 applications per 10,000 children, compared with 5.9 applications per 10,000 children in 2008-9 (Cafcass, 2014). Whether recent changes in the pre-proceedings protocol arising from the Children and Families Act 2014 and Statutory Guidance on Court Orders and Pre-Proceedings (Department for Education, 2014d) account for this reduction, in which case it may be only a short-term phenomenon, remains to be seen: at the present time, local authorities are struggling to cope as a sharp rise in the numbers of children in their care coincides with shrinking budgets. Moreover, despite wholesale reorganisation and wide-ranging reforms under New Labour in the first decade of this century, children’s social care services in England remain primarily child protection focused rather than
family-support oriented, with the consequence that non-stigmatising and supportive services for parents who are struggling to care for their children are less developed than in nations such as those in Scandinavia (Lonne et al., 2009). Children entering care in England are likely therefore to have experienced a lengthy period of maltreatment or inadequate parenting and have high levels of need across all domains of their lives, including emotional and educational difficulties.

Compulsory state intervention to remove children from their parents can only be justified if the state provides the child with ‘better’ parenting and improved outcomes in adulthood than would have been the case if the child had remained in the care of his or her parents. Given the high levels of need and vulnerability of the looked-after population, it is difficult if not impossible to assess the extent to which the care ‘system’ can or does improve the lives of the children entrusted to it, and there is no means currently by which judges and lawyers involved in care proceedings can know what happened to the children on whose futures the court has adjudicated. There has been for some time considerable concern regarding the poor outcomes of looked-after children, including a degree of uncertainty about the extent to which care actually improves the life-chances of looked-after children or whether in some cases it might consolidate disadvantage (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), although recent research suggests that care improves outcomes for most children (Hannon et al., 2010; Wade et al., 2010). It is likely that this is due at least in part to support for children leaving care introduced since the turn of the century, and concerted attention to the education of looked-after children. Academic achievement has been identified as a key factor in determining adult well-being in relation to fostered children in the US (Pecora et al., 2006) and children brought up in care in the UK (Jackson and Martin, 1998).

1.2 The education and life-chances of looked-after children

The education of looked-after children is a relatively young area of research, dating from Sonia Jackson’s seminal work in the late 1980s (Jackson, 1987). Following the introduction of provisions for the review of looked-after children’s welfare in the Children Act 1989, political attention to the fate of this group of children increased (Jackson, 2013a) and they came to the fore in policy under New Labour (Smith, 2009) as part of wider attempts to tackle social exclusion. Since the turn of the century, there has been considerable legislative and policy activity aimed at improving the life-chances of children who have experienced state care, including through the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, Children Act 2004, Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and, under the current government, the Children and Families Act 2014. At the start of this project, the role of the designated teacher for looked-after children had recently been made
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statutory through section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, while the post of virtual school head for looked-after children, now a statutory requirement pursuant to section 98 of the Children and Families Act 2014, had been the subject of a recent pilot. Most recently, policy has tended towards encouraging care leavers’ participation in further and higher education by prioritising support for young people who remain in education longer.

Research pertaining to looked-after children is rendered complex by the diversity of the population of looked-after children (Biehal et al., 1995). Consideration of the education of looked-after children has tended to take a social care, rather than educational, perspective (Jackson, 2013a) and although research has elucidated factors associated with the high achievement of looked-after children (Jackson et al., 2005; Chase et al., 2006), understanding of the challenges facing care leavers remains greater than that of effective systems to support their transition to independence (Wade and Munro, 2008). Care leavers’ educational participation and attainment, and especially their experience of educational transitions, are under-researched areas (Bluff et al., 2012). Care leavers are ‘among the most excluded groups of young people in society’ (Stein, 2006b: page 423; Jackson, 2007), but there is some evidence that the political initiatives of the last fifteen to twenty years have begun to take effect. Jackson described progress as ‘disappointingly slow’ in 2010 (Jackson, 2010: page 57), but the last three years of statistics for Key Stage 4 results (DfE/NS, 2014a) show a slight narrowing of the attainment gap between looked-after children and their peers, following a decade in which the gap had widened (DoH/NS, 2003; DfE/NS, 2011b). However, historically there has been a tendency for professionals to assume that level 2 qualifications represent the most that looked-after children can aspire to (Jackson, 2010) and currently only 6 per cent of care leavers enter higher education at the age of nineteen (DfE/NS, 2014b: National Tables F1). Perhaps as a consequence, there is little research on the education of care leavers beyond compulsory school age, not only in the UK but in other European nations as well (Höjer et al., 2008).

This deficiency in the research base is of particular concern at the present time, for two reasons. First, government reforms to require young people to remain in education and/or training to the age of eighteen are in the first year of full implementation at the time of writing; and second, the UK is currently emerging from a global recession which has had a particularly deleterious effect on youth employment. Global youth unemployment reached record levels as a consequence of the economic crisis (International Labour Office (ILO), 2012). Job-seekers with limited secondary educational qualifications are particularly vulnerable in such conditions and the decline

\[\text{1 although direct comparison with previous years is not possible because of changes in methodology}\]
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in the employment rate in the UK for those with fewer GCSE or equivalent qualifications exceeded the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average (Chung, 2012). Unsurprisingly given their generally poor educational outcomes, care leavers as a group appear more vulnerable to adverse economic circumstances such as those prevailing currently.

1.3 The aims and objectives of the study

The overarching aim of the study was to explore how looked-after young people experience educational transitions in Years 11-13 and how these transitions might best be supported. This is a critical time in young people’s lives because they are required to make decisions in Years 11 and 13 which are likely to influence their future career trajectories and life-chances to a significant degree. Looked-after children are likely also to experience transitions in other areas of their lives during this period, compounded for many of those ageing out of care by late entrance into care. A longitudinal study was undertaken to capture young people’s experiences of these multiple transitions and the effect of decisions that they made on their early adulthood. The main objectives of the study were:

1. To explore the key barriers to academic progress for looked-after young people at and beyond Key Stage 4 and how looked-after young people experience and navigate these barriers;

2. To consider the interdependence of young people’s experiences in and before entering care and their educational outcomes in order better to understand the most effective means by which young people may be supported to reach their educational potential;

3. To assess the effectiveness of the virtual school head and designated teacher roles in promoting the engagement and progress of looked-after young people in further education and their participation in higher education; and

4. Critically to examine the current legislative and policy environment in the light of the findings from the study with a view to identifying how young people transitioning out of care might best be supported to fulfil their educational potential.

The aims of the study are in line with three of the seven priorities identified by the Department for Education for future research in relation to children in care, namely supporting the education of looked-after children; improving the support to care leavers; and promoting strong corporate parenting and the ‘voice of the child’ (Department for Education, 2014a).
Methodology

2.1 Study design
The research questions and methods for this study built on those of a pilot study involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with 7 care leavers aged sixteen to twenty (Driscoll, 2011; Driscoll, 2013), but expanded on the earlier study by capturing the perspectives of designated teachers and virtual school heads as well as a larger number of young people and by adopting a longitudinal design. The study was designed to recruit approximately twenty young people, to interview them about their educational experiences and plans in Year 11 (aged fifteen to sixteen), and then to re-interview as many as possible in Years 12 (aged sixteen to seventeen) and 13 (at eighteen), in the expectation of a high level of disengagement as the study progressed. The designated teachers or safeguarding officers (in further educational colleges) of the young people participating in the study were also invited to participate through an interview about their wider experience of their role in supporting looked-after young people in school or college. Two local authorities agreed to support the research and ethical approval from the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) was gained in order to access additional cases outside those local authorities, including where young people in care to one authority were in school in another.

In total, 21 young people participated in the study, nine of whom were interviewed in all three years. Eighteen young people took part in Year 11, seventeen in Year 12 and ten in Year 13, making a total of 45 interviews with care leavers. Twelve designated teachers, seven in mainstream schools and five in alternative provision; three officers in further education colleges with responsibility for care leavers; and five professionals from local authority virtual schools also participated. In all, therefore, 65 interviews were conducted.

2.2 Strengths and limitations of the methodology
There were a number of practical and ethical challenges associated with the study, which resulted in some significant limitations. ‘Gatekeepers’ such as teachers have an important role in protecting children and young people from potential harm (Masson, 2000), but they may also be inclined to ‘err on the side of caution’ where vulnerable children are concerned (Cree et al., 2002: page 50), and can ‘use their position to censor children and young people’ (Masson, 2000; page
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36, including to exclude young people who might not behave conformably (Crow et al., 2006). In a review of research studies involving adopted or fostered children, Murray (2005) describes gatekeeping practice as reflecting ‘the pervasiveness of a protectionist model of children and young people over a citizen-with-rights model’ (page 64), although in that review, as in this study, it is clear that in many cases professionals had good reason for taking such a stance. However in general in this study, social workers appeared willing to allow young people more autonomy than did their teachers, perhaps reflecting differences in professional roles and relationships with children. In a study of researchers working with children and young people, Heath et al. (2007) concluded that in institutions such as schools which separate children from society as a whole there is a tendency to construct young people as incompetent to make decisions for themselves, resulting in the conflation of the right to grant access with the right to consent.

Decisions made in managing the study’s feasibility also limited its scope. First, although the study incorporated contributions from young people and from educational professionals, the views of social workers and carers are absent. It was apparent from conversations with carers that many held strong views, particularly on the support available to them from their local authority, but these are not included in the study. Second, issues of mental health were not explored and were not pursued when raised by young people themselves, for ethical reasons. The high level of need and difficulties in accessing mental health services (Mooney et al., 2009) both remain significant concerns for this group which are likely to impact on their educational experiences and attainment and should be borne in mind, particularly in relation to accounts of challenging behaviour from looked-after children. Third, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) might perhaps be the most appropriate lens through which to view the complex feelings young people have towards their birth families. There is much controversy over the use of attachment theory and associated therapies with children in care, however (Osuwu-Bempah, 2010), and given the educational focus of the study, attachment theory was not employed as a theoretical lens.

2.3 Participants

2.3.1 The young people

The twenty-one young people participating in the project were a diverse group, in keeping with the looked-after population as a whole. There were 12 boys (57 per cent) and 9 girls (43 per cent), close to the gender ratio of 56 per cent male and 44 per cent female nationally at the time the fieldwork commenced (DfE/NS, 2011a). Only nine were white British, with the sample reflecting the diverse populations of the geographical areas in which the participants lived. Of the eighteen whose care status was known, ten (56 per cent) were the subject of care orders,
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compared with 60 per cent in the looked-after children population as a whole in England, and seven were voluntarily accommodated, compared with 31 per cent of all looked-after children, with one having been remanded into care. The group therefore reflects the constituency of looked-after young people reasonably well. As can be seen from Table 2.1, thirteen of the young people attended mainstream schools (marked M in the table) in Year 11, three were in Pupil Referral Units (PRU), two attended special schools (S) and three (accessed through the charitable organisation by which they were accommodated) were not in education at all.
### Table 2.1: young people participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name* (gender)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Into care</th>
<th>School Year 11</th>
<th>Special needs etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>Woodhall M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashir (M)</td>
<td>Asian DLR†</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>Woodhall M</td>
<td>EAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callum (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>End Year 7</td>
<td>Woodhall M</td>
<td>Offending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devora (F)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Ravenscourt M</td>
<td>Orphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott (M)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>Fairfields M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farouk (M)</td>
<td>Asian UASC‡</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>King’s M</td>
<td>EAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilroy (M)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>End Year 7</td>
<td>Clifton M</td>
<td>Offending, speech impediment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habib (M)</td>
<td>Asian refugee</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>PRU</td>
<td>EAL, ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imogen (F)</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>Queen’s M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacinda (F)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Queen’s M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla (F)</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Garden House M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis (M)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>The Grove S (EBD)</td>
<td>Long-term support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Age 4</td>
<td>Meadowpond M</td>
<td>Asperger’s Syndrome SEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niall (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>Redhouse PRU</td>
<td>Literacy SEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ollie (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Stonehouse S</td>
<td>Physical &amp; learning disabilities SEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priya (F)</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Age 13 (Year 8/9)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teenage mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadira (F)</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Age 12/13 (Year 7/8)</td>
<td>Not in school (PRU)</td>
<td>Secure care home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley (M)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Age 15 (Yr 10/11)</td>
<td>Seaview PRU</td>
<td>Offending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia (F)</td>
<td>Black/mixed UASC‡</td>
<td>Age 16 (Year 11)</td>
<td>Fairfields M</td>
<td>EAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmin (F)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Age 8</td>
<td>Fairfields M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity (F)</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Age 11</td>
<td>Not in school (PRU)</td>
<td>Secure unit 4 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants and schools*
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†DLR = Discretionary Leave to Remain  
‡UASC = Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child

It was not possible to meet with all of the young people each year: eighteen interviews were carried out with young people in Year 11, seventeen in Year 12 and ten in Year 13. Nine young people participated in all three interviews.

2.3.2 The designated teachers

The teacher participants came from twelve institutions in eight local authorities, comprising seven mainstream schools, including one academy; one private and two maintained special schools; and two alternative providers (or pupil referral units), one maintained and one private. All the mainstream schools included sixth-form provision. The three state-funded non-mainstream institutions took young people to the age of sixteen, but the two private institutions included young people up to seventeen and nineteen respectively. Of the seven mainstream schools, two were faith schools, (one Christian and one Jewish) and two were girls’ schools. All five of the non-mainstream institutions accepted a mixed intake, although the two private schools had only boys on roll at the time of the research. All the designated teachers interviewed had experience of young people looked after by a number of different local authorities, enabling them to compare practice between local authority areas: Ms Olive dealt with nine different authorities. Table 2.2 summarises the roles and experience of the teacher participants.
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Table 2.2: Designated teachers
*pseudonyms are used for teachers and schools to maintain anonymity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name* (school)</th>
<th>Post held</th>
<th>Experience No of LAC (time in post)</th>
<th>School profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Black (Ravenscourt)</td>
<td>Assistant head-teacher</td>
<td>3 (4 years)</td>
<td>Mixed Voluntary Aided faith school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Brown (Woodhall)</td>
<td>Part-time, pastoral leadership role</td>
<td>c150 (10 years)</td>
<td>Mixed Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Carmine (Redhouse)</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>2 (2 years)</td>
<td>Private mixed alternative education provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Coral (Seaview)</td>
<td>Deputy head</td>
<td>9 (2 years)</td>
<td>Mixed Pupil Referral Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Green (Fairfields)</td>
<td>Assistant head-teacher</td>
<td>10/11 (18 months)</td>
<td>Mixed Community school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Grey (Stonehouse)</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>c140 (28 years)</td>
<td>Mixed special school, learning and behavioural needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Gold (Queen’s)</td>
<td>Assistant head-teacher</td>
<td>7 (5 years)</td>
<td>Girls’ Community school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Olive (The Grove)</td>
<td>Head</td>
<td>c70 (7 years)</td>
<td>Private mixed special school, Educational/ Behavioural/ Social needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Rose (Garden House)</td>
<td>Inclusion and learning support manager</td>
<td>4 (6 months)</td>
<td>Girls’ Community school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Tan (Sunnyhill)</td>
<td>Head of Care</td>
<td>c150 (15 years)</td>
<td>Mixed Community school Educational/Behavioural/ Social needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Teal (Meadowpond)</td>
<td>Inclusion co-ordinator (senior management)</td>
<td>25-30 (9 years)</td>
<td>Mixed Foundation school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms White (Clifton)</td>
<td>Inclusion leader, upper school</td>
<td>5 (6 months)</td>
<td>Mixed Voluntary Aided faith school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3.3 Staff in Further Education colleges
Since there is no statutory or even conventional model for the oversight of care leavers within further education colleges, responsibility is held at different levels and through different roles and it was difficult to find out whom to approach in colleges. At Millbank College, Ms Willow was Learner Services Manager, which included responsibility for the safeguarding team of ten members of staff. The latter was a relatively new innovation, around five years old and Ms Willow’s background was unconventional, as she explained: ‘I’m a mum whose children had a lot of issues… I’ve got life experience’. Ms Maple at Eastside College had also come into the role because of her wider experience, in this case as a foster carer and she worked as an
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‘opportunities coach’, a role introduced two to three years earlier at Eastside College to motivate students who might be slipping behind or struggling to engage and to put in place appropriate support. Ms Oak at Forest Hill College was the most senior of the three officers in further education colleges, as Director of Learning Services.

2.3.4 Virtual school heads and staff
Of the five staff interviewed from virtual schools, three were virtual heads, one was employed as a ‘consultant teacher’ and the fifth was a secondary senior advisor with responsibility for looked-after children. Four of the five participants came from urban local authorities: the fifth was employed by an authority in a largely affluent and white middle-class area. Four had extensive teaching experience, one as a head-teacher, one as a deputy head, one as an assistant head and designated teacher for child protection and looked-after children, and the fourth progressing to the local authority’s behaviour management service. The fifth virtual head was an educational psychologist by background. The local authorities had different structural arrangements, and in one case the work was contracted out to a private company. In order to ensure that the local authorities are not identified, further details about the post-holders are withheld.

2.4 Ethical considerations
Ethical approval was granted both by King’s College London and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services. Research with adult participants complied with the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2004; 2011). Research with young people was conducted in accordance with the National Children’s Bureau Guidelines for Research published in 2009 (National Children’s Bureau, 2009) and since superseded by Shaw et al. (2011). All participants were assured anonymity. It was made clear to participants in information sheets that participation was entirely voluntary, that they could choose not to respond to any questions they would prefer not to answer, and that they could withdraw themselves and/or data about them from the research at any time up until a given date. Enhanced disclosure certification was acquired from the Criminal Records Bureau (001293316593, issued 28th August 2010). Young people were informed in the information sheets that

\[e\]verything you say will be treated as confidential, unless I am worried that there is a risk of harm to you or another young person, in which case I will inform the designated teacher or your social worker, as you prefer.

No issues of concern in relation to confidentiality or participant distress arose in the course of the fieldwork.
3:

Key Findings - Care

3.1 **Entry into care was generally positive**
All seventeen young people who took part in interviews in Year 12 were clear that entry into state care had been the right decision for them, with the notable exception of Imogen, who claimed not to understand why she had been removed from her mother’s care and did not consider that it had been necessary for her welfare. For a number of participants, it is likely that entry into care at an earlier age would have reduced the disadvantages they faced upon entry and enhanced their prospects as they approached adulthood.

3.2 **Too few young people enjoyed happy and stable care placements**
Just over a third of the group appeared to have enjoyed stable and supportive placements. Others had achieved a stable placement or support but not both. Unfortunately, but not unusually, for many of the group, experiences of loss in their family histories were compounded by multiple placements in care. Table 3.1 shows the number of placements experienced by participants and the last known placement, highlighting especially the changes likely over the period of the study. A number of participants were eloquent about the reality of living as a stranger in other people’s family unit, describing a pattern of short-term carers, failure to get on with foster families and differential treatment from the birth children of foster parents. Some failed to settle in care at all and deliberately disrupted their placements. Only three girls appeared to have the kind of relationship with their (current) carers that could be regarded as being as close and supportive as one would expect from birth parents, but even apparently stable placements often appeared to become more fragile as young people approached adulthood. Even where relationships were good, participating young people – like many adolescents – might not feel able to confide in their carers. Stability of placement in this country is poorer than elsewhere in Europe (Höjer et al., 2008) and urgent attention needs to be given to the recruitment and retention of good quality foster carers (Colton et al., 2008; House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009), in issue identified as a key research priority by the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2014a).
### Table 3.1: young people's placement histories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Entry into care</th>
<th>No. of known placements</th>
<th>Last known placement Since</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Year 6</td>
<td>Foster care (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashir</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>Foster carer (intending independent at end of school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callum</td>
<td>Summer after Year 7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devora</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Kinship care (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott</td>
<td>Summer after Year 6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>Foster care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farouk</td>
<td>Year 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Independent (with elder brother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilroy</td>
<td>End Year 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habib</td>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Supported (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imogen</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>‘loads’</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Semi-independent (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacinda</td>
<td>End Year 1</td>
<td>At least 4</td>
<td>End Year 4</td>
<td>Foster care (until finishes uni.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>End Year 4</td>
<td>Foster care (until end 1st year uni.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Foster care (prob. stay post-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Age 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Age 4</td>
<td>Foster care (will stay post-18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niall</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>About 5</td>
<td>Year 13</td>
<td>Semi-independent (didn’t attend housing panel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ollie</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1 or 2?</td>
<td>? since age 9</td>
<td>Residential care home (ends at 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priya</td>
<td>Age 13 (Year 8/9)</td>
<td>About 6</td>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>Supported (ends at 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadira</td>
<td>Age 12 or 13, (Year 7/8)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>Supported (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Age 15 (Year 10/11)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>Supported lodgings (awaiting independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Age 18</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmin</td>
<td>Age 8 (Year 3/4)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>Foster care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Age 11 (Year 6/7)</td>
<td>About 10</td>
<td>Age 16</td>
<td>Supported (ends at 18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Findings: Care

In general local authorities endeavoured to avoid placement changes during Key Stage 4, in accordance with guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). However the extent to which representation from the virtual school was included in placement decisions varied and virtual heads considered that they were not always consulted appropriately, with a particular concern arising over young people being brought back into the local authority from therapeutic out-of-borough placements at sixteen.

3.3 Young people experienced corporate parenting as intrusive and impersonal

Young people expressed frustration at high levels of surveillance and bureaucracy in social work practice. Unquestionably, there is a need for foster care to be monitored by social services, but the level of surveillance was a source of considerable frustration for some young people.

Social work delay could cause considerable difficulties for young people at this time in their lives, and young people described problems in transport to school; college admission; accessing bursary money; obtaining a passport or National Insurance number; finding accommodation; contact; and even, in Farouk’s case, £2 a week for football sessions when he was unable to attend his Sports course at college as a result of problems over his immigration status. Accordingly there was strong support for foster carers to be given greater control over day-to-day decision-making, something that the government has now introduced (Department for Education, 2013).

Often, the source of frustration lay in the fact that it was difficult to obtain timely (or any) responses to requests and yet social workers appeared to undertake many tasks that seemed unnecessary to young people, and to visit or complete administrative tasks for no specific purpose other than regular monitoring.

Some of the problems appeared to derive at least in part from the high turnover of social workers. It is frustrating that, despite this issue having been highlighted in the literature repeatedly (Cashmore 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Berridge et al., 2008), it remains a core defect in looked-after children’s experience of the care
Key Findings: Care

system. Social worker continuity was raised repeatedly by young people throughout the study and designated teachers commented on the difficulties that discontinuity of social workers and stretched social services provision created for inter-agency working, timely service provision, and stability in school.

The direct result of the high social worker turnover, bureaucracy and delays was that almost all young people described poor relationships with their social workers, although they were generally hesitant to criticize social services’ provision and appreciative of individuals who were supportive of them. Frustration at not being listened to could lead to young people disengaging or to active hostility. The young people’s accounts suggest that the high turnover of social work staff and pressured working conditions continue to undermine the potential for effective practice (see Holmes et al., 2013), despite recent attention to strengthening social work training and attempts to promote a return to relationship-based practice (Department for Education, 2011; Munro, 2011).

Echoing the findings of The Care Inquiry (2013), this study suggests that there is an urgent need to refocus attention on looked-after young people’s personal relationships with significant adults. In particular, consideration needs to be given to how the legal parent of looked-after children can provide the same level of individual care and attention as most children are able to take for granted from their birth parents: it is perhaps time to question again the notion of the ‘corporate parent’. Bullock et al. (2006) conclude that ‘the ‘state’ as an impersonal entity clearly cannot provide the day-to-day care that would normally be taken to constitute ‘parenting’ (page 1349: see also Bluff et al., 2012), a view endorsed by Ofsted’s (2013a) conclusion that ‘overall trends of improvement mask failings for individual children’ (page 6). The question therefore, is whether, and if so how, the corporate parenting model can provide children with individually sensitive and responsive exercise of parental responsibility and with a consistent and caring relationship with a supportive adult or whether, in reality, effective parental responsibility can only be exercised by an individual adult with a close and caring relationship with the child. The Independent Reviewing Officer role might potentially provide such a role, but is currently underdeveloped (Ofsted, 2013b; Jelicic et al., 2014). In this study, young people rarely mentioned their IROs and none appeared to regard them as of particular significance. The role could be strengthened by implementation of The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 section 11, which makes provision for post-holders to be employed independently of the local authority, but the provision
Key Findings: Care

is not yet in force and is subject to a ‘sunset clause’ in section 14, under which it will cease to have effect if no order has been made within seven years of the passing of the Act itself in November 2008. The House of Lords Select Committee on Adoption Legislation (2013) has recommended that this provision be implemented, but the government appears resistant to these suggestions (HM Government, 2013).

Alternatives might include greater use of Special Guardianship Orders where young people have strong and enduring relationships with their foster carers (see eg Re S (Care Order: Immigration) [2014] EWCH 529 (Fam)); a guardian model, as currently in place in Scotland for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and being trialled in England for trafficked children; or a ‘named professional’ service similar to that of the ‘named person service’ introduced by The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 section 19. Alternatively, social workers could be universally appointed to schools to fulfil a similar named person role, which would bring a number of advantages. First, social workers within schools can provide a bridge between social care and education services within the local authority and enhance multi-agency working with respect to child protection and safeguarding concerns and referrals as well as for children in state care. Second, embedding social work as a more generic service would help to lift the stigma associated with receipt of social care services which has blighted safeguarding work in this country for so many years. Third, if the social worker allocated to their case was based in the school of a looked-after child, he or she would be more readily available and have greater opportunities to interact outside statutory review requirements, which tended to be experienced by young people in this study as serving the needs of the corporate parent rather than the child. If embedded in schools, such a role might be likely to be more stable than those within local authority children’s social care teams in the current environment. Professionals in this study who had experienced social worker support within their school had found it an effective model, but such practices had been significantly reduced by recent cuts.

3.4 Birth families became an increasing preoccupation as the study progressed

Although their personal backgrounds and circumstances varied greatly, experiences of loss and/or rejection had affected all the young people. Five of the young people had suffered the bereavement of someone close to them, and one had lost her own child to the care system. The principal sense of loss concerned young people’s relationships with their birth families, which were a preoccupation for almost all of the participants. Maintaining relationships with their siblings was particularly complicated for some of the young people, many of whom came from large and/or separated families, while a sense of parental rejection continued to impact most of
the young people many years after their entry into care. As young people approached adulthood, however, they increasingly demonstrated a sense of responsibility for managing birth family relationships and for some, attaining eighteen enabled them to re-forg[e] relationships with members of their birth family whom they had previously been prohibited from seeing. This opportunity can provide a ‘turning point’ (Masten et al., 2004) in young people’s lives, but could become a significant distraction from other issues, such as their education. More research is needed into contact with siblings for children in out-of-home care (Sen and Broadhurst, 2011), particularly in the context of the complex family structures described by many participants in this study. Where young people have had limited or no contact with members of their birth family when they are under eighteen, more attention could be paid to preparatory counselling and advice for young people before they seek to re-establish these relationships.

3.5 Young people opted for independence at 18 in preference to ‘Staying Put’

The cumulative effect of high social work turnover, delay and bureaucratic procedures on young people’s engagement with social services tended to manifest in participants taking control over their own lives as far as possible and many demonstrated considerable initiative in doing so. In many cases the consequences of such self-reliance were positive, but it was noticeable that this group comprised young people who described generally good levels of support from social workers and/or carers. Other young people, however, appeared resistant to seeking support because of their experiences. The most vulnerable young people were often those who were most adamant that they controlled decisions in their lives, although this was not borne out by the circumstances in which they found themselves, as these young people were more likely to have dropped out of college and/or become NEET as the study progressed.

The initiative and self-reliance exhibited by young people may account in part for the tendency for living independently to become more attractive to them as they aged through the study. This finding appeared to apply to some of the young people in successful, stable placements as well as to those who were less settled. Legislation to allow many more young people to remain in their foster placements until the age of 21 has recently come into force (Children and Families Act 2014), after a successful pilot of the Staying Put initiative (Munro et al., 2012). However, the pilot was only made available to young people with ‘established familial relationships’ (page 6) with their carers and who were engaged in education, employment or training or able to demonstrate a commitment to being so. As acknowledged by the authors of the study report, these conditions rule out a proportion of care leavers, including some of the most vulnerable.
In this study, a surprising number of participants presented themselves as actively choosing independence, even where they described a good relationship with their carers and could have stayed beyond the age of eighteen. They cited a variety of reasons, including not having such strong relationships with foster carers as they would with their birth parents; choosing to live with a sibling; feeling it to be important to take up the offer of independent accommodation to ‘get on the ladder early’; liking the idea of having their own flat; not getting on with a recent arrival in supported lodgings; and being conscious of being a significant drain on their (kinship) carer’s finances. Others had not chosen to live independently, but had been forced to do so when placements had broken down.

Only four young people seemed likely to ‘stay put’ in their foster placements after the age of eighteen, while at least thirteen of the cohort were or would be living independently at or shortly after they reached eighteen, an even higher proportion than the national figure of 34 per cent at nineteen (DfE/NS, 2014b). Two of the young people were concerned that independent accommodation would mean moving back to live near their birth families or peers they had struggled to disengage from.

3.6 Pre-care and in-care experiences impacted heavily on young people’s education

Notwithstanding the established association between placement disruption and educational difficulties (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; O’Sullivan et al., 2013), this study suggests that the shortage of appropriately skilled foster carers (Sinclair et al., 2007; Norgate, 2012) continues to affect young people’s placement stability and impact on educational stability. While many of the young people had behavioural difficulties prior to entering care, for some, the distress associated with the events leading to their entry into care manifested in disruption at school on entering care. Seven of the young participants had been excluded from school or college. Many of the young people referred to difficulties in behaving conformably in school, and in particular keeping their temper, as well as an impaired ability to concentrate and learn at school. For a few young people, outstanding issues in their personal life appeared to preclude being able to engage in education at all. These difficulties were acknowledged by designated teachers and virtual heads. A significant advantage of the virtual school system was evidenced...
in enhanced communication to schools of the background and needs of new entrants into care and better links between social care and education. Professionals highlighted the fact that children entering care in Year 8 or later were likely to have a history of instability in their personal lives and their education, including considerable involvement in and understanding of the procedures leading to their entry into care. As a result ‘they are a lot angrier’ (VH Ms Lea) and ‘there are all kinds of things that need to go in first before there’s going to be any kind of fruitful learning or engagement’ (VH Ms Mason). Professionals also recognised that behaviour at school was often much less challenging than behaviour in the placement, and it was important for the school to be supportive of carers.

3.7 Young people negotiated multiple transitions in care and education from 16-18

A number of professional participants expressed concern that preparation for GCSE qualifications often coincided with planning for leaving care and moving to college, exacerbating the considerable stress young people were already under. Although specialist leaving care services have been associated with increased entry into further education and higher numbers of care leavers in employment or training (Hai & Williams, 2004; Dixon et al., 2006), some participants also expressed concern that post-sixteen teams were not fully_staffed by qualified social workers and that the knowledge and education of some staff ‘is sometimes quite limited’ (VH Mr Steel). Wadebridge and another local authority had disbanded their Leaving Care team in favour of social work continuity. Professionals who had experienced these arrangements felt that they worked better.

Designated teachers and virtual school staff recognised that sometimes it was unrealistic to expect looked-after young people to perform to their maximum academic potential in the face of placement uncertainty and disruption, when their grades were likely to be their ‘last priority’ (Ms White) and advocated vigorously for placement continuity post-sixteen. Disruption was particularly acute where young people were moved back into borough from out-of-borough placements at sixteen, for example where therapeutic residential care homes only cared for younger children (VH Mr Steel) or consequent upon resources issues (Ms Olive). Some participants described young people placed out of borough being told that if they did not achieve the GCSE grades required for sixth form entry, they would be relocated to their home borough to attend college, losing their carer, social worker, school and friends.
4: 

Key Findings: education

4.1 Young people demonstrated an acute appreciation of the importance of education

Despite the difficulties in coping with the demands of school life, without exception the young people in the study acknowledged the importance of education, and particularly qualifications, for their future success. This is in keeping with studies such as that of Ball et al. (2000) in relation to young people more generally, but in contrast to the findings of Allen (2003), that care leavers came to value education and training late, through the bitter experience of the job market.

Young people exhibited remarkable determination in pursuing their educational goals and those who were settled in school were proactive in seeking help to ensure that they had the best chance of attaining their goals, including through requesting one-to-one tuition and through taking advantage of the Looked After Child Review process to raise concerns. A number of participants had curtailed their hobbies and social life to focus on their studies during the course of the study, but many felt that stigma still clung to them and/or that they had ‘something to prove’ to themselves or others, including consciously breaking away from the cycle of failure they saw in their birth families.

Often the young people were very appreciative of foster carers who actively enforced discipline in their studying. Strict rules in Year 11 could translate into self-discipline in the sixth form and where relationships with foster carers were strong, the family’s work ethic could be highly influential on young people in the way that might be expected within birth families. However, for some young people, the focus on education by carers and social workers as well as teachers could become overwhelming or maddening.

Most of the young participants were actively considering going to university and spontaneously referred to their expectation of progression to higher education in interviews. Looked-after children have preferential admissions status to the school of their choice, so some were in high-
Key Findings: Education

achieving schools where university entrance was the norm. Higher education has expanded significantly in recent years, so to an extent this may be a reflection of the expectations of their generation, or, in the case of UASC, of their family background.

Five of the participants had been in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in Year 11 and another was in a school for children with social, educational and behavioural difficulties. All six of these young people expressed the wish that they had focused and behaved better at school - or had been able to do so – or at least had managed to stay in school to make the most of their education. Those with behavioural problems that had affected their education demonstrated insight into that loss and frustration over barriers to their access to education, citing the limited curriculum and access to qualifications in alternative provision.

4.2 Professionals were focused on raising aspirations and attainment

Overall, the study provides evidence of a significant shift in professional attitudes in accordance with policy initiatives to drive up aspiration and attainment. Previous concerns apparent from the literature relating to looked-after children, of low expectations and prioritization of practical independence skills over longer-term career goals by professionals (Ofsted/SSI, 1995; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003; Hibbert, 2006; Jackson and Simon, 2006; Berridge, 2007), appeared to have been replaced by the same pressure to achieve reported to be experienced by this generation more generally (e.g. MindFull, 2013). Designated teachers were described as ‘committed to try and get the best out of their children’ (VH Mr Brook). It appears that such attitudes are not, however, universal. Ofsted (2012) found that virtual heads felt that some schools were still not demonstrating high expectations for looked-after children and in this study alternative education providers sometimes felt schools lost interest in the young people they had referred.

The concept of ‘monitoring’ was fundamental to the way in which virtual heads saw their role, which focused heavily on tracking educational attainment, but virtual heads acknowledged that understanding educational processes was often challenging for social workers, reflecting the findings of Ofsted (2012a). The virtual schools trained and supported social workers to ‘hold
Key Findings: Education

schools to account much better’ (VH Mr Steel) and in ‘challenging the school, and making sure these are stretched and appropriate targets’ (VH Ms Lea). Professionals, however, reported a more mixed picture in relation to the expertise and engagement of foster carers in educational matters, citing difficulties in recruiting more highly-educated carers.

While it is clear that the highest educational aspirations are appropriate for some of this very diverse group (and see Bentley, 2013), for some other young people in the study, the promotion of ‘high’ expectations, where these were narrowly defined by access to university or entry to high-status professions, was more problematic. In some cases young people appeared to be encouraged to aim for university entrance even though it did not seem to be an appropriate route for them, either because they were unlikely to achieve the necessary qualifications, or because university was not a helpful step on the way to achieving their career goals. There were also some differences of opinion among professional as to the effect of promoting high-status aspirations among vulnerable cohorts through the somewhat aggressive mechanisms of target-setting and monitoring. Some participants acknowledged that the focus on meeting targets might be a considerable source of stress for some young people who had experienced a recent placement move or breakdown and in some cases there was a mismatch between young people’s own ambitions and the expectations of professionals.

4.3 **Most young people felt they had not reached their educational potential at KS4**

Table 4.1 shows the young people’s attainment at Key Stage 4 and their destinations thereafter. From the table it can be seen that of the nineteen young people whose KS4 qualifications are known, only four attained 5 A*-Cs at GCSE in Year 11 including maths and English, but at least a further three did so through sitting retakes in Year 12.
**Table 4.1: Attainment at Key Stage 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 A*-C including maths &amp; English in Year 11</th>
<th>Year 11 qualifications</th>
<th>School/college in Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bashir</td>
<td>4 A*s, 8 As, 1 B (English)</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devora</td>
<td>2 As, 7 Bs, 1 C, 1 pass, 1 D</td>
<td>College (Performing Arts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacinda</td>
<td>2 Bs; 4 Cs (2 English, maths, Science); 1 Merit; 1D, 1E</td>
<td>School then repeated Year 12 in College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmin</td>
<td>Media, sociology, business, history, core subjects</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 A*-C including maths &amp; English in Year 12</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>6/7 A*s at GCSE, Maths resit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imogen</td>
<td>2 Ds, 3 Es, 2 Fs, 1G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Ds in English and maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia?</td>
<td>Took maths, English, Science, Dance GCSEs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did not achieve 5 A*-C</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Callum</td>
<td>'a couple of passes.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farouk</td>
<td>'Most everything Ds'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilroy</td>
<td>[grades not stated]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habib</td>
<td>Limited GCSE courses at PRU, qualifications unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>No qualifications Year 11, expecting Ds/Es Year 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niall</td>
<td>Functional skills &amp; 2 GCSEs Year 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ollie</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priya</td>
<td>Unclear if no quals or some BTECs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadira</td>
<td>NVQ level 1 in hair &amp; literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Ds, Es and Fs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Limited secondary attend'ee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qual status unclear**

| Elliott               | Coursework ‘mostly Bs & Cs’ | College (dropped out first term) |
| Michael              | Qualifications unknown | School |
4.4 Greater support needs to be in place for transition to College at 16

The inherent difficulties for schools in reconciling the need to ‘make allowances’ and provide strong and consistent pastoral support for this cohort with the focus on academic attainment, appeared to become most acute when considering the transition at the end of compulsory school, when young people are sixteen. The professional participants generally considered that remaining at school had significant advantages for these children in terms of continuity of relationships, a sense of security and ongoing support. There were two factors which might stand in the way of young people remaining in school, however. First, while some were apprehensive about leaving school, others were attracted by a new start and greater independence, or struggled to conform in school. Second, schools were often unable to offer suitable curricula. While there were admissions criteria for progressing to ‘A’ levels in the sixth form, all of the schools appeared to have some form of vocational courses on offer. However, these were relatively limited compared with the provision available at further education colleges, and often did not provide the same range of practical experience. An ironic consequence of looked-after children having preferential admissions status is that high-performing schools are likely to have fewer vocational opportunities at Key Stage 5. A number of designated teachers expressed concern that it would not be fair to keep students in the sixth form if they were not sufficiently academically able or prepared.

Notwithstanding references in the statutory guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009) to the role of designated teachers in helping young people make a smooth transition to college, liaison between schools and further education (FE) colleges appeared surprisingly limited. For some schools, contact with further education colleges of any kind seemed to be quite a recent development. Accordingly, there was little or no concrete knowledge of what support might be made available for looked-after students and although the introduction of the 16-19 bursary has prompted payment of greater attention to this group in further education colleges, the support available appears to be patchy and the mechanisms through which it is delivered varied. Colleges were seen to be to a certain extent in competition with school sixth forms, and there was perhaps at times a measure of mistrust of the further education estate. There are no universal requirements for looked-after students to be given priority in admissions arrangements at colleges, and these should be considered.
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For the most part designated teachers appeared to regard the role of liaison with colleges as within the remit of the leaving care team, and schools did little more than send the student’s academic record and references on request, while Ms Willow at Millbank College observed that the college worked well with social care but found it difficult to get information from feeder schools. Some schools undertook transition planning work with their looked-after children, but with the move to the leaving care team, the school would become less involved. This was likely to be particularly the case when the young person was looked after by a different local authority than that to which the school belonged, and the local authority were seeking further education provision closer to home.

These are areas in which there is significant potential for virtual schools to facilitate smooth transition arrangements for young people, and where necessary advocate on behalf of young people, but virtual heads currently report varied practice. Mr Brook, whose virtual school extended beyond eighteen, considered that the authority had good contacts with local colleges, but in the other local authorities the transition was more problematic. Mr Steel had recently started to focus more on post-sixteen work, as the virtual school was being extended to eighteen, but in the other two authorities post-sixteen education was the responsibility of a different team. Virtual heads highlighted establishing links with colleges as a priority and had given the issue considerable attention. However, as results had improved among this cohort, they were ‘becoming more choosy’ and ‘shopping around’, (VH Mr Steel), requiring the virtual school to establish new relationships with more institutions.

Designated teachers in non-mainstream settings – usually the head-teacher – were much more focused on transition planning than their colleagues in mainstream schools, but this was something they undertook for all their children. They were acutely aware of their status as provision of ‘last resort’ for the children entrusted to them, and the Pupil Referral Unit heads considered that some schools were pleased to hand over a young person and were unwilling to engage further. A number of participants from alternative providers would have liked to provide ongoing support to eighteen for young people, but plans for at least one special school to extend to eighteen had been scuppered by funding cuts. In some ways there is much that the mainstream sector could learn from such providers, because they have long been used to dealing with resistance by colleges to taking on the young people from their institutions. All non-mainstream institutions contributing to the study also focused on providing the social skills young people would need to cope in college and were adept at putting together packages that would allow a gradual transition to provide some continuity at the outset.
4.5 Support in further education colleges requires strengthening

Unfortunately, ‘drop-out’ rates from college were reportedly high, for a number of reasons. About 25 per cent of the Ironbridge students dropped out of college, an issue that was the responsibility of the post-sixteen social work team, who could request the assistance of the virtual school should they choose to do so (VH Mr Steel). This figure was very similar to that given by Eastside College, where by March the sixty looked-after students enrolled at the start of the academic year had been reduced to forty-five. Of the eleven young people in the study who went straight to college in Year 12, four ‘dropped out’ of college while a further two were excluded for their behaviour. Often there was no equivalent to a designated teacher in colleges. Only the smallest of the three colleges in Wadebridge had a safeguarding officer. Ms Ford (VH) had ‘a very close relationship’ with her and she would provide a point of contact with individual heads of departments and facilitate meetings. Similarly, one of the colleges in Ironside had a named member of staff for looked-after young people, but often, virtual heads described ‘having to build a relationship with the individual course tutors’ (Ms Ford). Colleges, for their part, could find communication with local authorities challenging, but often the difficulties ran deeper. One of the colleges at Wadebridge was so big that ‘they don’t even know the students on some courses’ (VH Ms Ford) and another took a robust approach to non-attendance, with no consideration of students’ personal circumstances.

Among the three colleges represented in the study, there was considerable variation in the degree of development of services specifically for care leavers. At Eastside College, there was a designated opportunities coach for looked-after students, Ms Maple; Millbank College had a team of ten in safeguarding, of which Ms Willow, the learner services manager, was responsible for the looked-after students; and at Forest Hill College, the director of learning services, Ms Oak, took responsibility for care leavers. Until 2012, staff at Millbank College did not know how many looked-after students were at the college and relied on professionals to inform them of students. Without advance notice, students were often identified only once an issue occurred. The most developed was Forest Hill, were Ms Oak had initiated partnership agreements with
local authorities, through which advisory teachers from the virtual school or social workers were based in the college for the first six weeks of the year to support the transition of their young people into college.

Support for looked-after children started from interview because in Ms Oak’s experience ‘by supporting the transition to college we are far more likely to retain them’. Retention strategies included early introduction of the young person to a member of the college student support staff by the local authority case worker, so that there was an immediate and familiar point of contact within the college; enabling young people to make appointments with, and meet, their social worker at college; inviting local authority staff to any disciplinary or other meetings; and weekly reporting of attendance to virtual heads. Forest Hill also combined the course reviews young people undertook with their tutors with PEP reviews with their social worker so that they did not have to endure two similar meetings.

A scheme that Ms Oak regarded as particularly effective and employed with a number of vulnerable groups was an enhanced induction process, in which looked-after children as a group were given a talk from the student support team about what support the college offered and ensured that they all completed their 16-19 bursary application forms. The college highlighted to young people the practical support available, such as supporting the virtual school’s objections to a proposed placement move. What emerged from Ms Oak’s account was a strong sense of the importance of attention to the every-day details of a young person’s life and a willingness to advise and advocate for that young person in the same way that designated teachers described.

The retention rate for care leavers at Forest Hill College in the year of the interview was 95 per cent, higher than the overall college rate. This had been the result of focused attention to the issue, although Ms Oak pointed out that there were some circumstances, such as placement moves, or personal circumstances militating against the engagement of a young person, that were beyond the control of the college or the virtual school. She concluded that ‘it would be a lot harder…if we didn’t have good relationships with the virtual schools’, but ‘it isn’t difficult…once you start having the conversations’. Such examples demonstrate that the further education estate has the potential to facilitate good transitions for young people from Key Stage 4 to higher education or employment where colleges are willing and able to work with local authorities and to take time to understand the individual challenges faced by young people.
4.6 **There is significant scope for enhancement of educational qualifications at KS5**

Young people’s prospects were highly divergent. By the end of the study (the summer of Year 13), one third (seven) of the group were NEET, in line with national statistics for care leavers at age nineteen (DfE/NS, 2014b). Four young people appeared to be on track to attend university (a much higher proportion than in the national population), although one might not choose to do so if he secured an apprenticeship. A further two planned to attend university but would take another year or two to acquire the necessary qualifications.

Virtual heads evidenced growing attention to practice at Key Stage 5. They recognised that for policy reasons local authorities’ focus has tended in the past to be on Key Stage 4 attainment, and the prevention of young people becoming ‘NEET’. This had perhaps been at the cost of attention to post-sixteen provision for looked-after young people who attain reasonably well at Key Stage 4 and to encouraging young people who have not fulfilled their academic potential to enhance their educational qualifications at Key Stage 5. Virtual heads in the study referred to a need to refocus some of their work, from ‘supporting those young people post-sixteen, who look as if they are going to fall out of everything’ (VH Mr Brook) to ensuring that able students fulfil their potential at A level and through entry to higher education.

Analysis of the data suggested an emerging recognition that young people can often make up considerable ground at Key Stage 5, and commitment to enabling them to do so. The high proportion of children entering care after primary school age renders attention to flexibility and continuing high aspirations post-sixteen of particular importance. A key priority for local authorities should be ensuring that virtual schools extend to eighteen and beyond to enable improved transition arrangements from school to college and continuity of support to young people throughout their education career, regardless of changes of education and care placement and geographical moves across local authority boundaries. As their results improve, looked-after young people are able to access a wider range of educational institutions, but enabling them to do so will require considerable knowledge and expertise on the part of their corporate parent. Although the size of further education colleges may render attention to the individual needs of young people more challenging, there are fewer such institutions in each local authority and they are likely to include significant numbers of care leavers by virtue of their size. There is therefore
considerable scope for collaboration between virtual schools and further education colleges, but this is an area in which research is lacking.

4.7 Current government policy risks discriminating against the most marginalised

Improving educational outcomes for many looked after children in response to the initiatives of the last decade is undoubtedly a cause for celebration. Yet this study suggests that current government policy may serve to privilege the most educationally ‘successful’ young people. Young people continuing in education are the recipients of additional statutory support to the age of 25 through the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. These provisions have been criticized by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2009) as discriminating against young people who are ineligible to access those provisions by reason of their limited educational attainment notwithstanding the fact that they are by definition the young people most in need of additional support. There was further evidence in this study of preferential treatment for young people who demonstrated high educational attainment, including personal attention by virtual heads to university applicants and the provision of ongoing qualified social worker support to young people continuing in education, but personal advisors to those who were not. The accordance of privilege to the more successful looked-after young people was not generally reflected in the attitudes of participating professionals, but is rather apparent from the experiences of young people excluded from mainstream school and/or college, and from accounts of some financially-driven decisions around placement moves. Drivers appear to include the use of ‘outcome’ driven policies which impose targets and measure success in concrete terms such as the number of GCSEs children attain at grades A*-C: under such regimes, institutions are perversely led to focus on children at the margins of measurable success, removing attention and resources from those for whom the selected measure is unattainable (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

Of particular concern is the fact that seven participants were excluded from schools or college, in addition to Farouk, who was excluded from college as a consequence of his immigration status. These exclusions took place before statutory guidance weakened the protection against exclusion for looked after children (Department for Education, 2014b) and more generally (Department for Education, 2015). Designated teachers and virtual heads devoted considerable time and energy advocating against their charges’ exclusion, but once children were excluded, designated teachers in non-mainstream settings described a tendency for schools to abdicate responsibility.
Key Findings: Education

for those children to the alternative setting, placing them at higher risk of poor educational outcomes and social exclusion.

This conclusion has recently been endorsed by the findings of a survey of 100 care leavers by the Centre for Social Justice (2014), which concluded that despite genuine advances for care leavers in general, the ‘vast majority of spending and support’ has been targeted at ‘better-off’ young people, primarily those with more stable care experiences and who remain in education, at cost to those with the least stable placements and who are least likely to continue their education (pages 4-5).

4.8 **The designated teacher role can be highly effective but has inherent limitations**

The elevation of the role of designated teacher for looked-after children to a statutory footing has guaranteed a single point of responsibility for this cohort at a senior level within the school. The designated teachers in mainstream schools in this study played a key role in managing the tensions arising from young people’s pastoral needs spilling over into the school environment in a climate of pressure on schools to maintain high standards of attainment and behaviour. It appears that ensuring the role is held at a senior level within the school may allow the holder to be an effective advocate for those young people who do not always find it easy to conform to behavioural expectations or focus on their studies; enhance the management of information-sharing within and beyond the school; and enable effective petitioning of Children’s Services, for example where disruptive placement moves are planned, either directly or through the local authority virtual head. The external-facing aspect of the designated teacher role may be particularly important where social work staff are transient and/or have limited contact with young people. However, the high number of young people participating in the study who had been excluded from school or college suggests that professional participants in the study may have been unusually motivated and confident in advocating on behalf of children. This tentative finding is reinforced by Mr Brook’s comment that some designated teachers are ‘struggling to find their voice in schools’ and Mr Steel’s acknowledgment of high numbers of looked-after children from Ironbridge in Pupil Referral Units.

The seniority of designated teachers within the school hierarchy was seen as important by designated teachers and virtual heads, but the professional identity of teachers and the hierarchical structure of schools is very different from the ethos of social care, and the more senior the teacher, the more difficult and perhaps inappropriate it may be for a teacher to be involved directly in pastoral care. Young people were extremely reluctant to be treated differently
Key Findings: Education

from their peers in any way, and for the most part, therefore, had as little to do with their designated teachers as possible. The exception to this model in mainstream schools was Mr Brown, who was semi-retired and held a non-teaching role and was clearly someone in whom young people were readily able to confide. In all schools, much investment had been made to increase the pastoral support to such young people through social workers, pastoral leaders or mentors, but concern was expressed that these models may be difficult to sustain in the current policy environment, and one school had already been informed that its social work post was to be cut.

A weakness of the designated teacher role apparent from this study was the limited extent to which schools were directly involved in young people’s transition to college at sixteen, which was regarded as the preserve of the leaving care team and was also hampered by poor or non-existent relationships between schools and further education colleges. Additionally, there was usually no recognised role of designated teacher in the non-mainstream settings, which were for the most part very small, and responsibility for looked-after children (who often comprised a high proportion of the school’s population) lay with the head teacher. With the exception of Ms Coral, there was little engagement by these post-holders with the local Virtual School. Establishing robust links between virtual schools and designated or named teachers in alternative provision should be a first step to ensuring that individual attention is given to planning the educational progression (and reintegration) of young people out of mainstream school. On the evidence from Forest Hill College, similar arrangements with senior members of staff at further education colleges have the potential to improve retention rates at college.

4.9 The virtual school model is potentially powerful but under-resourced

This study was conducted at a time when the population of children in care was continuing to rise following the impact of the Peter Connelly case (DfE/NS, 2011a), yet local authorities were suffering from ongoing austerity measures which disproportionately affected children’s social care, especially in authorities with high numbers of looked-after children (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2011). In accordance with the findings of Ofsted (2012) in relation to inspections of nine local authorities, professional participants in this study reported significant budget cuts. One participating virtual school had lost its dedicated Year 11 transitions officer in budget cuts, and funding for a project to reduce the proportion of care leavers who are NEET had run out in another, while in a third, the looked-after children resources and staffing budget had been cut by 50-60 per cent. The introduction of a statutory requirement for local authorities to appoint a Virtual School Head (or analogous post) under the Children Act section
Key Findings: Education

22(3B), to monitor the fulfilment of the local authority’s duty to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children, is welcome. On the evidence of this study, virtual school heads are well-placed to co-ordinate work and ensure effective communication between education and social care, particularly in relation to attendance (and see Ofsted, 2012); the avoidance of exclusion; and transition planning. It should be noted, however, that a single appointment is sufficient to meet the statutory requirement and it was evident from this study that the participating local authorities were extremely stretched. All were part-time in that role and most had other responsibilities as well as very small teams.

Virtual heads in this study acknowledged that looked-after children are unlikely to be a priority for head teachers in mainstream schools. Overall, they felt that significant progress had been made since the virtual school system was instituted in the sensitivity with which schools responded to the needs of looked-after children. A number of strengths common to all the models can be identified, despite the variety of structures. All teams were multi-disciplinary or embedded within a multi-disciplinary structure. Virtual schools modelled themselves on school leadership teams and participants stressed that they deliberately mirrored schools also in the way in which the attendance and attainment of looked-after children were monitored and had worked to be more proactive, rather than primarily responding to crises brought to them by social workers.

Other common aspects of their role concerned ‘raising the profile’ of looked-after children within schools and ensuring that social workers and foster carers are equipped to act as would educated, knowledgeable parents, including in understanding the system of attainment levels; the complex qualifications available at sixteen and over; and working with further education colleges. As former senior teachers, members of the virtual schools found schools were much more willing to engage with them than with social workers, but worked to empower social workers to challenge schools.

Current priorities varied amongst the virtual heads, but a common concern related to enabling children to make smooth educational transitions when moving care placements, especially where children were placed out of the local authority area, an issue also identified by Ofsted (2012). The care of children placed outside their ‘home’ local authority has been an issue of concern in
its own right for some years: in this study half of the secondary school children from Wadebridge were in placement out-of-borough, for a variety of reasons, including access to specialist schools or residential facilities and deliberate placement at a distance from birth families. Transition at sixteen-plus was also an issue for all virtual schools in the study and it is imperative that all virtual schools extend at least to eighteen and preferably to 25, to match the potential obligations under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and support vulnerable young adults, including those with Special Educational Needs.

Although stressing that they operated like a school, virtual heads spoke about the children in their school from a parental perspective and appeared to take a very personal interest in ‘their’ children, attending personal education plan meetings where appropriate; organising achievement or celebration days; offering personal guidance to young people considering application to university and to accompany them to interviews; and offering work experience within the authority. The change in the conditions of grant of the pupil premium so that it is paid to virtual schools from 2014/15 (Department for Education, 2014c) should enhance the ability of virtual heads to meet the individual needs of looked-after children.

Despite the role of the Virtual Head being placed on a statutory footing, there are well-grounded fears that many schools in the future may not benefit from their services. At the time of the study, all participating virtual schools were still offering their services free to all schools within their local authority, but increasing numbers of schools were becoming academies and free schools were being set up. Such schools are independent of local authority control and may choose not to share data with the virtual school or use their support, particularly if in the future local authorities have to charge for such services.

‘the idea that any schools are going to commission our services is ludicrous…because half the time they haven’t got any looked-after children, and…as a head, I know that it wouldn’t be, probably, top of my list’ (Ms Mason).
Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Implications of the key findings

The evidence of this study confirms that the last twenty-five years have witnessed some improvement in the educational prospects of looked-after children (Jackson, 2013b). The focus of attention now needs to shift to the support available to young people over the age of sixteen. Many young people in care may not be able to realise their academic potential by the end of Key Stage 4. Some young people are able to make up lost ground effectively post-16, while others struggle to remain focused on their education. Consideration should be given to allowing care leavers priority admission to the college of their choice, to minimise further disruption and ensure that they are able to access high quality educational provision and a supportive environment. Initiatives such as the Frank Buttle Quality Mark for Higher and Further Education are valuable, but the findings of this study support the statutory introduction of a designated professional role in further education colleges, as recommended by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012). There is a need for greater involvement by schools in liaising with the college estate to ensure that young people’s needs are understood and that appropriate support is in place; and especially for increased understanding and provision for young people at college, to prevent the current high levels of drop-out. It appears that there may be considerable scope in some local authorities for improvement of retention rates for care leavers attending further education colleges through greater collaboration between virtual schools and designated staff in colleges.

As the average attainment of looked-after children rises and with the imposition of the requirement that young people remain in education and/or training to the age of eighteen, it is imperative that those outside mainstream schooling, young people who have become disengaged from education, and those who are unable to reach the government’s target grades at GCSE are given the level of personal and professional support commensurate with their individual needs. It is of particular concern that the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the Children and Families Act 2014 requiring ongoing support to care leavers continuing in education, and extending the time during which young people remaining in education may stay with their foster carers, will be expensive for local authorities to meet at a time when budgets for services for looked-after children and care leavers are under particular pressure. Consideration
Conclusion

should be given to making the support of their corporate parent and of the virtual school available to all care leavers without discrimination until they obtain permanent employment. At the least, the Government should match the provisions of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 sections 66-67 by providing all looked-after children aged sixteen the right to remain in care until they are 21 and extending local authority support to them until they are 26.

The transfer of responsibility for careers advice from local authorities to schools effected by the Education Act 2011 is likely to have exacerbated the barriers to access to good careers advice for young people who are unable to follow a conventional path from school to work and was criticised by the House of Commons Education Committee (2013). The virtual school system may be able to fill this gap for young people ageing out of care in the way that an informed and motivated parent would do and it is important that the remit of all virtual schools is extended to enable continuity of support to be offered to young people throughout their educational career. In light of the absence of any single holder of parental responsibility for looked-after children, the role of the virtual head in monitoring and supporting the education of looked-after children should extend to all looked-after children within the local authority area, including those attending free schools and academies. This would strengthen the ability of virtual heads to ensure that looked-after children are able to take full advantage of legislation and guidance in relation to admissions and exclusion as well as providing quasi-parental oversight of their academic progress. The passing of responsibility for administration of the pupil premium to the virtual head (Department for Education, 2014d) will help to ensure that this money directly benefits the students it is intended to support.

In terms of young people’s broader care needs, this study has highlighted the continuing dearth of genuine parental figures in the perception of young people themselves. For the most vulnerable young people, close and supportive adult relationships may be especially challenging to achieve but are likely to be a pre-requisite for full engagement in learning. Arguably it is time to question whether the model of the corporate parent can adequately compensate for the absence of ‘flesh and blood’ parents, to use Freeman’s term (Freeman, 1983). Consideration should be given to the vesting of parental responsibility in an individual where possible and agreeable to the child themselves. Alternative models might fall short of investing a named person with legal parental responsibility but promote long-term relationships between children and adults whom they know or may come to know well. At the least, the most vulnerable young
Conclusion

people must be provided with highly-skilled, consistent and enduring social work support until such time as they attain genuine independence.

5.2 **Recommendations for future research**

There have been numerous legislative and policy developments in education and social care since the Coalition entered government in 2010 that impact on the lives of care leavers, aside from those introduced in direct response to the particular needs of this group. As a consequence, there are many areas of research which could fruitfully include consideration of the impact on this particularly vulnerable group of young people, such as the effect of the introduction of free schools and the expansion of the academies programme. In relation specifically to the education of care leavers, research to evaluate the effect of the Staying Put provisions of the Children and Families Act 2014 needs to be undertaken, but it should be designed in such a way as to capture the accommodation and support arrangements for all care leavers, not just those able to take advantage of the new statutory provisions. Particularly valuable also would be research on the experiences of looked-after children and care leavers in further education colleges, with a focus on the financial and practical pressures on young people who are living independently or semi-independently and comparing ‘drop-out’ rates with those of their peers. The efficacy of the role of the virtual head should be further investigated in the complex context of a minimal statutory requirement for a sole professional operating in an increasingly fragmented education system and funded by a shrinking social care budget.

In relation to children’s wider social care experiences, it would be valuable to explore the way in which the devolution of greater decision-making powers to carers operates and whether it has the desired effect of making children feel more ‘at home’ in their placements. In particular, attention should be given to how such arrangements are budgeted for; the extent to which they help to free up social worker time; the effect on relationships between young people, their carers and their social workers; and whether there is an impact on rates of placement breakdown and children’s decision to ‘stay put’ longer.

5.3 **The strengths and limitations of the study**

This is a small study, and the findings are advanced with acknowledgement that the professionals who participated are not necessarily representative of all post-holders. Designated teachers and virtual heads agreeing to take part in a study such as this are likely to be highly motivated by the challenges of the role and particularly reflexive in their professional practice. The difficulties encountered in selection and access to young people are such that the sample may well be
regarded as no more than opportunistic (see Barnard and Barlow, 2003), but the diversity and characteristics of the young people who participated do in many respects mirror those in the care population generally, including, for example, the fact that one third of the cohort was NEET at the end of the study.

Although it was not possible to include the perspectives of social workers and carers, the inclusion of designated teachers and staff in virtual schools ensured that the views of key policy-enactors contextualised the voices of the young people, as well as providing insights from professionals in relatively newly established roles whose insight had consequently rarely been included in research. A further strength of the study is its longitudinal design. By meeting with young people each year where possible, it was possible not only to follow their educational and care experiences over time, but to see directly and to discuss with them in the light of hindsight the consequences of decisions that they had made. It was also possible to develop a research relationship with some which enabled them to be more forthcoming in the third round of interviews than they were in the first, enhancing the confidence that can be placed in the findings.

5.4 Concluding comments

Care leavers remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in society (Stein, 2006b; Jackson, 2007). There has been considerable debate as to the extent to which children’s experiences in state care have had a remedial effect on their life chances or whether they may even have exacerbated the effects of early disadvantage. This has been neatly encapsulated in consideration of use of the terminology of ‘low’ achievement as opposed to ‘underachievement’ (Berridge et al., 2008). Although it is important to bear in mind that some of these young people, such as Ollie in this study, are in care for reasons which preclude them meeting population-level targets for attainment, recent statistics and research showing a narrowing gap between looked-after children’s educational attainment and that of their peers appear to confirm that state care has not previously succeeded in maximising the opportunities of looked-after children to achieve their potential. Furthermore, the gap remains wide, suggesting that there remains much work to be done. Support for some of the most vulnerable members of society to fulfil their educational potential requires a sensitive and flexible response to the needs of young people whose personal histories have prevented them from progressing in their education in line with the expectations of the school system.

Despite significant developments within the education system, including the introduction of designated teachers and virtual school heads, young people’s opportunities in the educational
Conclusion

arena are often at risk of being undermined by continued failings in the social care estate. The corporate parent must act not only as an educated and informed parent but also as a caring parent if it is to maximize the life chances of the children for whom it holds responsibility. Furthermore, it is vital that young people are not ‘written off’ and that their corporate parent provides the fullest support for its children to continue to develop their academic potential beyond Key Stage 4: care leavers should be entitled to the seamless and personal support typically available to their peers from their birth or adoptive parents. Perhaps most importantly, and also in line with the natural expectations society makes of birth parents, the corporate parent must be able to effect a personalized response to the needs of each individual child in its care and recognize that the most vulnerable children are entitled to the highest level of support for the longest period of time. If looked-after children are to develop their capabilities to the fullest extent, the corporate parent must accept that the states’ reparatory responsibility to the children placed in its care imports an ongoing obligation to young people until such time as they are able to overcome the consequences of the harm they have suffered.
Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings - Care

1. Entry into care was generally regarded positively by young people
2. Too few young people enjoyed placements that were both happy and stable
3. Young people experienced corporate parenting as intrusive and impersonal
4. Birth families became an increasing preoccupation as the study progressed
5. Young people opted for independence at 18 in preference to 'Staying Put'
6. Pre-care and in-care experiences impacted heavily on young people’s education
7. Young people negotiated multiple transitions in care and education from 16-18

Summary of Key Findings - Education

1. Young people demonstrated an acute appreciation of the importance of education
2. Professionals were focused on raising aspirations and attainment
3. Most young people felt they had not reached their educational potential at KS4
4. Greater support needs to be in place for transition to College at 16
5. Support in further education colleges requires strengthening and further research
6. There is significant scope for enhancement of educational qualifications at KS5
7. Current government policy risks discriminating against the most marginalised, through incentivising education
8. The designated teacher role can be highly effective but has inherent limitations
9. The virtual school model is potentially powerful but under-resourced
10. A significant advantage of the virtual school system was evidenced in enhanced communication to schools of the background and needs of new entrants into care and better links between social care and education.
Summary of Key Recommendations

1. More focused support to enable young people to continue to make up educational deficits beyond Key Stage 4.

2. Provision of greater support from schools and social workers to enable young people to make a successful transition to college.

3. Consideration should be given to allowing care leavers preferential admission to the Further Education college of their choice.

4. Introduction of designated staff in Further Education colleges.

5. Development of closer links between Further Education colleges and Virtual Schools.

6. Support from Virtual Schools to young people to be extended to the age of 25 (or 26 if recommendation 9 is implemented).

7. Targeted support for young people in educational placements outside mainstream schooling or who are disengaged from education.

8. Support of the corporate parent and/or Virtual School should not discriminate against the most marginalised and policy needs to be revised to ensure this.

9. Consideration should be given to following the Scottish model, in which young people may remain in care until the age of 21 and are entitled to support until they reach 26.

10. Consideration should be given to the possibility of Parental Responsibility for children in care to be vested in an individual.

11. Continued investment in the children’s social care workforce to ensure social workers have the time and skills to make meaningful relationships with children and young people.

12. Consideration should be given to the efficacy of the leaving care team model in comparison to prioritising continuity of social work support at a time of multiple transitions in young people’s lives.
References


Appendix 4


Appendix 4


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Appendix 4


Appendix 4


