**The Fostering Network**
**Y Rhwydwaith Maethu**

# Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales

**- a review of the third year of the Welsh Government's looked after children's Education Strategy**

**March 2019**

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# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1  Background and purpose of the review

The purpose of the review is to establish and report on foster carers' views on the implementation of Welsh Government's Strategy, 'Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales' (January 2016). This is the third consultation on the implementation of the strategy, following the first in late 2016 ('Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales': a review of the first year of the Welsh Government's looked after children's Education Strategy' – The Fostering Network) and the second in the Spring of 2018.

The national objectives within the strategy are simple and are to bring about improved educational outcomes for children and young people who are looked after in respect of:

- 25% achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English or   Welsh and Mathematics in 2016.
-  75% of care leavers who, on their 19th birthday, are in education,     employment or training by 2018.

There are seven strategic aims and six operational aims which map clearly the anticipated products of the strategy.

**Strategic:**

- Promote a consistent national approach to raise aspirations at every level.
- Provide stronger corporate leadership committed to improving the education of children who are looked after.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of all involved in the lives of children who are looked after.
- Strengthen and reinforce arrangements and partnerships of all agencies - improve communication between all those involved in the lives of these children and care leavers.
- Ensure corporate commitment to find ways of doing things better to influence educational outcomes positively.
- Make more effective use of data to understand how attainment can be balanced with the individual's personal, social and emotional development (well-being).
- Strengthen the level of collaboration between the Welsh Government, regional education consortia, local authorities, schools, educational settings, foster carers and looked after children to ensure that decisions impact positively on learners.

**Operational:**

- Identify and implement practical action needed to overcome barriers to delivery.
- Provide robust challenge to under-performance.
- Give clarity and alignment of expectations of the key roles in supporting children who are looked after.
- Share good practice and ensure interpretation of existing guidance is consistent.
- Monitor outcomes for funding available to support children.
- Exchange information within local authorities between social services and education departments, particularly LACE Coordinators.

The Fostering Network continues to applaud the Welsh Government's commitment to review the implementation and outcomes after the third year of the strategy's implementation. The strategy has been operational for nearly three years and while it may not be long enough to achieve significant change, by this stage there should be sufficient evidence to indicate that the strategy is having a positive effect on the lives of children and young people who are looked after.

This report reflects the views of foster carers in Wales between November 2018 and January 2019. The foster carers who are with the children every day have the most critical role if the strategic and operational aims are to be realised. Foster carers have been identified as key stakeholders whose views and ideas need to be gathered as part of the work to raise the ambitions and educational outcomes of looked after children, which is a shared priority of The Fostering Network and Welsh Government.

The 2015 consultation helped shape the strategy and identified what foster carers in Wales said they needed to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education. The 2016 consultation set out the response of foster carers to the Action Plan developed by Welsh Government to implement the strategy. It aimed to determine whether any changes were needed to the strategy and see if there were any early signs of change. The 2017 consultation matched the lines of enquiry with the actions as set out in the strategy's 37 point Action Plan.

This consultation not only tests whether foster carers have seen any signs of positive change in relation to the education of the children in their care but also identifies what more is now needed to drive the actions through. It recognises that to bring about change, the wellbeing and educational progress of children and young people who are looked after in Wales must be addressed hand in hand.

## 1.2. Methodology

The findings of this review are based upon evidence from two focus groups held with foster carers during 2018/19 (one in north Wales and one in south Wales), and a survey of foster carers nationally in January and February 2019. A total of 19 foster carers were involved in the focus group discussions and there were 85 respondents to the online survey. Additional, corroborating evidence has also been drawn from the extensive dialogue and documented feedback that has taken place with foster carers in the three series of master classes, which have been run as part of the Fostering Wellbeing Programme, and from other training events for foster carers on building good relationships with schools.

The focus group consultation method led by The Fostering Network has been used with foster carers and local authorities across Wales for over a decade. Our evaluations of previous work indicate that the approach is robust and demonstrates the following strengths:

- Reflects what foster carers want and are comfortable with.
- Ensures engagement in a non-stigmatising environment.
- Generates a richness of data, using both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Obtains detailed information about personal and group feelings, perceptions and opinions.
- Saves time and money compared to individual interviews.
- Provides a broad range of information and feedback.
- Offers the opportunity to seek clarification.
- Provides useful material such as quotes for public relations and presentations.

The focus groups followed a similar pattern to the previous two consultative sessions. They considered what changes, if any, foster carers had seen in relation to the education, and related wellbeing, of children they had looked after since when they were last consulted. The questions explored how far foster carers felt involved by various agencies, what kinds of support they most needed and provided an opportunity for foster carers to say anything else they felt was important. The questions allowed them to say not only what had changed since the introduction of the strategy, but also how effective they now found services.

The findings of the focus groups were used to structure a questionnaire which was circulated to foster carers in early January 2019. The questions which were included in the questionnaire were based upon issues which had emerged from the focus groups. 85 completed questionnaires were returned. The findings from the survey reinforced the emerging findings from the focus groups and allowed opinion to be measured quantitatively.

While the focus groups, by their nature, involved a relatively small number of foster carers, the findings to date from the Fostering Wellbeing Programme (involving nearly 100 foster carers) support much of what the focus groups and survey have reported.

However, the research process was structured in a way that allowed participant validation. This means that the process began with a series of generally open questions in the focus groups and the findings which emerged from the focus groups were then tested by a structured questionnaire through a survey. This process strengthens confidence in the findings.

In a number of cases the findings, as previously, are not wholly conclusive, but on this occasion, given that the strategy has been operating for three years, greater weight can be given to the conclusions. While there are patterns discernible in the responses, in some respects there are clear geographical variations in the consistency of those responses e.g. in the involvement of foster carers in Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

In some cases, the findings were very clear with an overwhelming majority of foster carers saying the same thing. In these cases it is possible to have much more certainty about the findings. The report presents the views and the perceptions of foster carers which are based upon their own direct experience. This 'grass roots' perspective of how far the strategy is succeeding is, therefore, invaluable if the lives of those in care can be made better through an authentic partnership between all those involved.

The report, as with the review of the second year, is structured to align with the six themes and 37 action points as set out in the Action Plan (Appendix 1) which seeks to plot how the strategy is to be implemented. By taking this approach, the views and experiences of foster carers, and The Fostering Network, will be reported and evaluated in the context of what the strategy is endeavouring to achieve. Most of the 37 actions are phrased in broad, quite strategic, terms but by setting what foster carers have to say in the context of the seven strategic and six operational aims of Welsh Government and then the themes and actions of the Action Plan, the success or otherwise of the strategy can be better evaluated and gaps more easily identified.

Not all themes and action points are directly relevant to foster carers, though all are indirectly. Of the 37 actions, only four refer specifically to the role of foster carers. It is the case that in a further 27 actions, foster carers have an important role to play and could and should contribute positively to the success of that action; the report is able to offer comment on progress with these actions.

## 1.3    About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change, so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

## 1.4    Acknowledgements

This report has involved many foster carers from across Wales who have been both generous with their time and expertise. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to them, as this report is grounded in and informed by the everyday experiences of foster carers.

The Fostering Network would also like thank:

- Trevor Guy for his contribution to the findings and subsequent authoring of this report.

- Alain Thomas and Janet Stanton for facilitating the foster carer consultations.

- Alun Richards, Fosterline Wales co-ordinator, for providing his feedback on the text.

# 2.0   Executive summary

## 2.1   Main findings

The third review of the effectiveness of Welsh Government's strategy,
['Raising the ambitions andeducational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales'](#), from the perspective of foster carers has shown that good progress has been made with a number of the action points. There is now sufficient momentum to bring about more significant change in several areas. In other respects, progress has been slow. It is clear that attitudinal and culture change has to precede structural and system change. The pressures on public services make this more difficult but there are examples of both practice and culture overcoming barriers, especially where there is a readiness by services to work in a genuine partnership with foster carers and children and young people who are looked after. Regional variations, however, and variations within and between institutions, mean that progress has not been as widespread or is as embedded as might be hoped.

## 2.2   Theme 1:   Effective leadership – roles and responsibilities

There is some evidence that the leadership coming from the national strategy is starting to work through at a regional and more local level. Even though foster carers will not know of the regional co-ordinators employed through the four education consortia, the effects of aspects of their work are beginning to become apparent. Foster carers appreciate knowing that someone in a position of responsibility can be approached if necessary and has their interests at heart. However, a named councillor in local authorities for children who are looked after is very much the exception, the role being subsumed in a wider, more generic title.

The adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which children who are looked after almost invariably suffer are significant determinants of how well they fare in formal educational settings. Many children in care also have Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and there is an increasing awareness at strategic level that the most common ALN for these children relate to their emotional and social needs, particularly where mental health is affected. While the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales)Act 2018* has been passed, it is hoped that the Additional Needs Code to accompany the Act, once the consultation is complete, will recognise and be supportive of the specialised needs of those in care. Foster carers' experiences of dealing with their children's ALN vary. Generally, it is still the case that a majority are not getting the level of support they need. Behavioural issues, arising from the child's ACEs, can mask a greater potential for learning than is always identified. If foster carers are more involved in the IDP and PEP processes they are better placed to offer their detailed knowledge of needs and what works for the child.

The Educational and Social Care Pilot Strategy initiated by the Ministerial Advisory Group is nearing the end of its two-year trial. The Fostering Wellbeing Programme has been enthusiastically received and has promoted the principles of social pedagogy and how they can be applied in everyday practice. From the pilot has come a recognition that all parties, including foster carers, have much to learn from each other and if a set of shared values and principles underpin the work of all professionals, children and young people who are looked after can only benefit from the greater consistency of attitude and interventions which they experience. Joint service planning based on practitioners' experience is emerging from the pilot as one of the sustainable benefits from the programme.

Foster carers would like their role to be better understood and appreciated. They feel that their abilities to improve the lives of those in care are not fully recognised and so they are not always seen as equal partners by other professionals. As reported in last year's review of the strategy, the role of the LACE co-ordinator is also critical but not always as effective as it could be. This is due in part to staffing issues in some local authorities and partly due to the limited authority they enjoy.

It is not enough simply to offer training to foster carers about education since the relationship between foster carer and school must be two-way and painless. The survey of foster carers indicates that the majority do feel involved, with nearly half feeling very involved. However, nearly one third do not feel involved. Training alongside schools is favoured when dealing with the same issues e.g. related to attachment. Where there has been more innovative training, which does not offer the same content and mode of delivery each time, the training is very well received e.g. a mix of participants from different services and contributions from front-line workers and young people as in the Fostering Wellbeing Programme's master classes. Foster carers surveyed believe that more of the training should be mandatory, more in-depth options should be available and opportunities be given to gain qualifications.

## 2.3    Theme 2:   Building effective partnerships and collaboration

Foster carers' perceptions of involvement with Welsh Government are generally better than in the previous survey. It is not so important that foster carers feel knowledgeable about or directly involved with the Welsh Government strategy, but that the effects of the strategy are felt on the ground and are making a difference for children and young people who are looked after.

At a regional level, the view of CAMHS and the services offered is poorer in 2018 than in 2017. Two-thirds did not think that there had been any improvement. Access to the service continues to be an issue. This appears to be due, in part, to some misunderstandings of who the service is for and the thresholds to access its services. One CAMHS staff member spoke of as many as 50% of referrals being inappropriate. Although this survey does not draw on an exhaustive evidence base, it is clear that practice and levels of resource vary between regions. Those who said that CAMHS had accepted their child mostly spoke well of the treatment they received.

At the local level i.e. school and local authority, the fact that nearly half feel that the school is listening more and responding better to the needs of children and young people who are looked after is encouraging. It is also a positive that only a very few are strongly disagreeing that schools are improving and reflects the intention of the strategy that its effects filter down through the regions, to local authorities and into schools. Nevertheless, half still disagree and when looked at alongside the finding that most foster carers believe that most change comes when they push for it, there is still a long way to go to achieve really effective working between all partners at the local level. The position is better when considering how far social services work collaboratively with foster carers but one issue which is still a significant one for foster carers is the relatively low status they feel is accorded to them by social workers, more so the child's social worker, rather than the supervising social worker.

Most foster carers are not aware of who the LACE co-ordinator is in their local authority. The LACE co-ordinator role is an important one and foster carers ought to know how to contact them even if they do not have a name. The workload and level of authority of the co-ordinators remains a concern. Anecdotally, foster carers are appreciative of the work they carry out and see them as 'allies' in advocating for their children.

## 2.4 Theme 3: Effective teaching and learning

**Finding an appropriate school placement**

While it is the local authority's responsibility to place the child, it often falls to the foster carer to research and apply for a suitable school place. If there is no definitive assessment of social, emotional and learning needs, the task for the foster carer is a daunting one. An additional factor for those children where placements have broken down, is the detrimental effect that moving schools has on educational progress. There is evidence to indicate that some foster carers, when they apply to a particular school for a place for their child, are not afforded the priority which they should have according to the admissions policy.

**Communication and relationships**

The experience of foster carers when liaising with schools varied very much according to the particular school. For some, the overall awareness of the need for better communication has improved; for others, they have seen little or no positive change. Where there is inadequate communication, such as with a fixed-term or illegal exclusion, it is the foster carer who has to manage the child in that time. Some of the inconsistency is with staff and how they apply policy. Good communication is not just about sharing information but having the right attitudes to act appropriately on the intelligence, which works both ways between school and home. Positive relationships require effort and a number of instances are apparent where this is the case. Where foster carers have developed a personal relationship with the tutor and shared information, everyone has benefited. It is disappointing in the context of young people transferring to further or higher education, to find that still not enough is being done to make this transition as smooth as possible through helpful exchange of information. The level of involvement of foster carers in the PEP process has improved in only a minority of cases, with half feeling strongly that they are still not properly involved. In the best practice, a PEP review meeting brings together the school staff who know the child well but the foster carer and the child/young person are also active participants, with all information shared.

**Meeting needs**

Foster carers are saying that schools are slightly more responsive to the needs of their children following the introduction of the strategy. There is a growing awareness amongst foster carers that some school staff are very supportive of children and young people who are looked after and are well equipped to understand and address their needs. This awareness can also highlight discrepancies in the ways that different staff or different schools approach the issues which children who are looked after present. Foster carers recognise that the right school ethos and culture come about partly through training but also in sharing and living certain values and principles. 'Person-centred' philosophy and practice, as promoted in social pedagogy, is becoming more widespread in care services and is also filtering into some schools e.g. through the use of one-page profiles. Foster carers are keen that more of this ethos is adopted in schools but they recognise that school staff need training.

A full assessment of needs is not the work of just the school, or any one agency. A child's different needs do not fall neatly under the labels of the different services available. The Fostering Wellbeing Programme talks of 5 basic needs – social, physical, emotional, cultural and learning – which are interdependent. When emotional needs, in particular, are not addressed, it is commonly observed that a child's capacity to learn is severely affected.

Most foster carers believe that the school their child attends has many qualities and, therefore, a good reputation; 70% rate their school as good or very good. This finding needs to be set against the

specifics revealed in other questions posed where the findings are not so positive. This apparent contradiction can be explained in comments made about schools being perceived as good in terms of their academic performance but less effective when catering for the emotional needs of children who are looked after and how this affects their achievements in school.

Approximately one-third of respondents surveyed reported some change for the better in the education of their children since the introduction of the strategy. Nearly one in five believes that there have been changes which have had a negative effect on their child's education. The strategy has come at a time when there is a growing awareness of the particular needs of children and young people who are looked after and has certainly helped to accelerate change, reinforced by the PDG LAC administered through the education consortia. Curriculum changes do concern foster carers. There is a perception that schools may be focusing on what they see as their core purpose, academic achievement, without sufficient regard for the wider needs of the pupils, especially their emotional needs.

**Aspiration and ambition**

Research suggests that the aspirations of foster children are not markedly different from other children and the results of the scoring in this survey seem to concur with this. High aspirations by children who are looked after, mentioned by their foster carers, included becoming a rock star, midwife, forensic accountant, mother, fire officer, nurse and professional footballer. Given the neglect and abuse they have suffered, their hopes and dreams may be focussed more on their own safety and wellbeing than on any career ambition. However, in an educational context, the many aspects of aspiration are linked, just as a child's wellbeing and educational achievements are closely linked. In some cases, unrealistically high aspirations can be masking very low self- esteem.

**Additional Learning Needs**

Approximately two thirds of children who are looked after have ALN according to the 2018 data published by StatsWales. Nearly half of children who are looked after who receive ALN support do so because of unmet emotional and social needs and related attachment and mental health issues; this is double the number who have been diagnosed with moderate learning difficulties. It is not that they necessarily lack the capacity to learn but that the barriers to learning arising from their background are holding back their progress. Language deficits and communication disorders continue to be a brake on learning for children and young people, particularly those who have experienced neglect. There are clear links across to behavioural issues and the capacity for more specialist diagnosis and support is needed. Schools are challenged to find the resources to cater for particular needs. As in other aspects of formal schooling, it is when foster carers and school staff profess the same aspirational philosophy, share information and agree support strategies that real progress can be made.

**Support to meet emotional needs**

Approximately one-third of foster carers surveyed believe emotional support has improved since the start of the strategy, which leaves two-thirds who do not believe that this is the case. This finding needs to be viewed alongside the generally negative perception of CAMHS; without enough services offering earlier intervention at a lower tier, foster carers become frustrated when the children in their care do not meet the CAMHS threshold. Foster carers speak of times when, in their eyes, the school did not respond appropriately to the child's needs but just attempted to 'correct' behaviours or exclude the child, officially or unofficially. This is clearly a challenge for schools when they need to be seen to be applying consistent standards across the school. How a school manages behavioural issues is a

reflection of its ethos. When schools take the opportunity to nurture understanding and empathy in their staff and pupils, foster carers feel that the right climate is being created to make progress.

**The achievements of children and young people who are looked after**

There have been changes to the examination system since 2017 but, while direct comparisons have to be treated with caution, when the results of young people who are looked after are set against the results of the whole school population in any given year, the issue of under-achievement is indisputable. The national objectives within the strategy are to bring about improved educational outcomes for children and young people who are looked after in respect of:

- 25% achieving 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE including English or Welsh and Mathematics in 2016.
- 75% of care leavers who, on their 19th birthday, are in education, employment or training by 2018.

In 2016, 23% achieved the GCSE target. This fell to 12% in 2017 and rose again to 20% in 2018. Reliable data on care leavers is not yet available and this remains one of the actions to be fulfilled. The general picture is one of the educational outcomes for children and young people who are looked after being so low that their career and life chances are significantly diminished. While there are many examples of young people leaving care and finding personal and career success, this is not the case for the majority.

The strong link between emotional wellbeing and educational achievement is borne out by the widespread anecdotal evidence put forward by foster carers. For many, pressing for academic achievement without being fully supportive of a child's emotional development, is counter-productive. Some foster carers speak of school as a safe place for the child, enabling behaviour to improve which then leads to better educational achievement. While children and young people who are looked after have major barriers to learning, the experience of being looked after gives them a better chance of educational success than if they were not looked after. The performance at GCSE of children on the Child Protection Register who are not looked after is lower than for those who are looked after.

## 2.5 Theme 4: Making better use of data

The only data on children and young people who are looked after appears just in the statistics under Health and Social Care and then only covers the past two years, 2017 and 2018. Data on educational performance can be found there but not in the Education and Skills section. By aligning some of the educational data e.g. those with ALN, those attending a Pupil Referral Unit, with some of the data for children who are looked after in the Health and Social Care sector of statistics, better use can be made of the data available. Data on destinations has been promised for 2019 and this too will better inform what preparation is needed for those moving on from care.

## 2.6 Theme 5: Strengthening funding arrangements

The negative findings from the survey on the Pupil Development Grant Looked After Children (PDG LAC) illustrate that the concept and practice of partnership working is not sufficiently developed. This is an issue which has not been addressed in the three years of the strategy's life. Nearly all foster carers had no involvement in decisions relating to how the grant is spent and those who were aware of its use, were often critical of the decisions made. The more strategic approach at consortium level is welcome to help raise awareness and expertise in schools and their clusters. When the grant is being used to support children who are looked after, at the school level, better engagement with

foster carers is necessary. Knowing the full needs of children who are looked after will help to determine which priorities should have first call on the resource.

## 2.7 Related issues not covered in the strategy

Foster carers often feel isolated and would benefit from more opportunities to network with other foster carers. The Pioneer foster carers in Cwm Taf, who have been recruited as part of the Fostering Wellbeing Programme, are developing such networks and some schools fulfil this function by convening meetings and training for foster carers.

It is important to give all children who are looked after in school every opportunity available to participate in musical activities, educational trips, sports, drama etc. Such activities help the children to socialise and can boost self-esteem and confidence. Such activities are seen as being therapeutic and help the children and young people to understand, express and regulate emotions. The success of the Fostering Achievement programme in Northern Ireland demonstrates the many benefits of such interventions, including raised educational attainment. Funding of foster carers, or schools, to provide such extra support is not deemed sufficient in Wales.

Many young people in care will have missed out on a full, formal education. Lifelong education needs to be encouraged and programmes and courses made available to them which are suited to their needs. Some foster carers are concerned that some children who are looked after are not coping in schools and are then permanently excluded, thus creating a learning deficit which is difficult to redress later. The view of some foster carers is that colleges are struggling to cope with young people who have mental health problems and display challenging behaviour; college staff would benefit from the training which is now becoming available in schools.

# 3.0 Strategy review by theme

## 3.1    Theme:    Effective leadership – roles and responsibilities

### 3.1.1  Leadership and Co-ordination

Actions 1, 2, 3 and 4

*'Leadership is important – leadership that puts the child at the centre.'*

The strategy itself offers a view of how the leadership role might or should be taken forward at national, regional and local levels. At a national level, with the recent change of minister responsible for this area of work, it has yet to become clear how far the new minister intends to promote the strategy and allocate resources to its implementation. There is some evidence that the leadership coming from the national strategy is starting to work through at a regional and more local level. Even though foster carers will not know of the regional co-ordinators employed through the four education consortia, the effects of aspects of their work are beginning to become apparent. In Central South, the initiatives being taken to develop a Quality Mark for Children Looked After Friendly Schools and offer ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) training to foster carers as well as school staff, is indicative of how the national lead can be implemented at a regional level.

At national and regional levels, foster carers are not well placed to know or take a view on strategic leadership. However, as long as the actions in the Wales Action Plan 2015-16 are taken forward with vigour and imagination at the regional and local levels, they and those in their care, will derive benefit from those strategic decisions. The publication, for example, of national guidance on the role of the designated lead member of staff in schools is helpful in providing a template of good practice which, if sympathetically built into a school's ethos and procedures, will nurture better understanding and relationships between children and young people who are looked after, foster carers and the school.

Reporting on the action to reinforce corporate accountability and the statutory role of the Director of Social Services is beyond the scope of this review but the appointment of a lead member in local authorities and a lead governor in schools to have a named responsibility for children who are looked after appears not to have happened in all instances. While neither role has to be created statutorily, previous advice has been that a person with such a responsibility be identified. One complaint often heard is that, *'As corporate parents, the Local Authority is not supportive'* and foster carers do not find it easy to follow lines of accountability. In the checklist for councillors about 'Providing political leadership', the questions are posed:

*Have you ensured that there is clear political leadership and responsibility for children through one or more Executive Members taking lead responsibility for service delivery?*

How do you make the links between the lead Member with responsibility for children's partnership planning processes and other lead members with responsibility for children's services?

(**If this were my child** …. A councillor's guide to being a good corporate parent to children in care and care leavers: Welsh Government and the WLGA, June 2009)

Foster carers appreciate knowing that someone in a position of responsibility can be approached if necessary and has their interests at heart. There is not sufficient transparency at present as to who champions children and young people who are looked after; Swansea is a notable exception.

### 3.1.2 Additional learning needs (ALN)

Action 5

We know, from the data available, that those children and young people who are looked after, on average, continue to underachieve throughout their time in school. The adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which they almost invariably suffer are significant determinants of how well they fare in formal educational settings. A range of factors contribute to a child requiring additional support in school, including:

- An absence of sensory and cognitive stimulation in early childhood.
- Language deficit.
- Trauma and loss.
- Physical and mental health issues.
- Attachment difficulties.
- Instability in home and school placements.

While the *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales)Act 2018* has been passed, the Draft Additional Needs Code to accompany the Act is still out for consultation (until March 2019).

Under the 2018 Act, the duty to decide whether a looked after child has ALN and to prepare, maintain and review an Individual Development Plan (IDP) is placed upon the local authority looking after the child. A good majority of children and young people who are looked after also have ALN. The requirement for the local authority with corporate responsibility for a child to lead on the IDP process gives certainty on who should be proactive in this regard. Foster carers are often not aware of where this responsibility rests at present. Likewise, the clarification is welcome of the 2014 Act in the 2018 Act provision that:

(a)     A care and support plan for a child looked after for the purposes of the 2014 Act must include a record of the arrangements made to meet the child's needs in relation to education and training, to be known as a 'personal education plan' ('PEP').

(b)     Any IDP maintained for a child looked after for the purposes of the 2018 Act must be incorporated within their PEP.

These amendments ensure that where a looked after child has ALN, they have a single education plan that covers all of their educational needs in a comprehensive and more integrated way. Foster carers will be in a better position to understand fully, and contribute to, this more holistic planning for meeting the needs of the looked after child. However, the draft code appears to exclude foster carers and speaks just of the child, the child's parents and the IRO being party to preparing the IDP.

Foster carers' experiences of dealing with their children's ALN vary. Generally, it is still the case that a majority are not getting the level of support they need. Behavioural issues, arising from the child's ACEs, can mask a greater potential for learning than is always recognised. When a child's ALN are identified, foster carers are not always seen as partners in helping to meet those needs.

> *'Our child attends the Special Resource Base – I don't know enough about how they teach there – the methods used.'*

*'Our school is noted for being good. My foster child has additional needs but is in a class with others who do not have ALN – he's described as 'attention-seeking'.*


### 3.1.3 Educational and social care pilot strategy

Action 6

The strategy's action plan includes '*a pilot programme that will deliver a combined educational and social care approach that will help to improve placement stability and provide a stronger and better equipped workforce in Wales.*'

The two-year pilot, in the shape of The Fostering Wellbeing Programme, is due to end as a Welsh Government funded programme in March 2019. The pilot region, Cwm Taf, is working with The Fostering Network to ensure that the momentum generated to date is not lost while Welsh Government makes a decision on its future. The programme is based on ten principles of social pedagogy and aims to bring together foster carers, education, social services, health and other relevant services such as youth justice, to effect better care and educational outcomes for those who are looked after.

There are three strands to the programme:

  i.   A series of five multi-disciplinary master classes which have been repeated four times.
  ii.  The appointment and training of foster carer Pioneers to work with schools, social services and other foster carers in taking the messages from the master classes out into the field.
  iii. Strategic planning across services to bring about culture and system changes as identified by participants in the course of attending the master classes.

Foster carers and their co-professionals have benefited greatly from the shared learning. Working and learning on an equal footing has increased understanding of roles and knowledge of what works if common principles and approaches are pursued. Endorsement and encouragement from chief officers is helping to make the programme sustainable in the longer term. The 10 underpinning principles of the programme are informing Cwm Taf's training programme. All participants have contributed to an agenda for change and a strategic action plan is being drawn up to take forward the 8 areas in which change is seen as being needed:

  1. Assessment of needs.
  2. Planning to meet needs.
  3. The holistic experience for child and foster carer.
  4. Access to support.
  5. Communication.
  6. Development of personal skills, knowledge and attitudes.
  7. Practices and structures.
  8. Systems and policies to create greater stability, improved wellbeing and good outcomes.

### 3.1.4 Roles and responsibilities

Actions 7, 8, 10 and 11

Action 7 states that '*local authorities should make arrangements to:*

*ensure a designated elected member with a lead responsibility for the education of children who are looked after is in place and equipped to undertake the role*'.

The document issued in 2009 by Welsh Government and the WLGA, '***If this were my child'*** and quoted on page17 should be reinforced by this requirement placed upon local authorities.

In a sample of Welsh local authorities approached, all but one reported that the '*designated elected member with a lead responsibility'* is the same as the lead member for Education or Children's Services, or both. Only one, Swansea, had a named 'councillor champion' with direct responsibility for children who are looked after. Having such a person identified in that role is very helpful for foster carers when looking to make direct representation to a well-informed and 'equipped' elected member. This becomes even more urgent and problematical when a foster carer has to deal with two local authorities.

> *'Across counties – who is responsible? Local authorities battle not to have responsibility.'*

With regard to Action 8 to review the roles of key workers and ensure that responsibility and accountability exists in all parts of the system, foster carers can only comment on their direct experience of how key workers are supportive, communicate well with them and each other and act responsibly in the best interests of the child.

The workloads of Looked After Children Education (LACE) co-ordinators vary across local authorities as the ratios of staff to children and young people who are looked after differ, quite considerably in some cases. The role of the LACE co-ordinator is defined by the local authority but the expectations of the role by Welsh Government, as set out in the document, 'Making a Difference – a guide for the designated person for looked after children in schools' (2017), are dauntingly onerous for one person, although all the functions are necessary. Foster carers in the smaller authorities are more likely to be aware of the role and the person in post and many speak positively of their support. As raised in the review of the second year of the strategy, the LACE co-ordinator in Wales does not carry the same status as the Virtual School Headteacher in England, although expectations of their efficacy may be similar.

Action 8 also states that 'the promotion of education is paramount and under-performance is not accepted. All carers must be equipped, through training if necessary, with the skills necessary to challenge schools where the child's attainment is not at the expected level….'. Foster carers mostly feel that they have the ability to support their children and offer such challenge to schools, 77% feel able or very able.

**Fig.1: In supporting my foster child's educational development, I believe I am:**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very able | 52 | 49 |
| Able | 42 | 39 |
| Adequate | 11 | 10 |
| Inadequate | 2 | 2 |

It is encouraging that such a sense of empowerment exists.

> *'I turn up to every LAC Review, every test, every parents' evening. It's really important that they know that it's my role to push them to achieve the best.'*

> *'When they come home with homework, my expectation is that it's done, it's done in the best handwriting.'*

However, comments also reflect concerns that they are not sufficiently informed or 'equipped' to make that challenge and offer the support effectively.

> *'I feel I'm very able but not equipped. Where is my toolbox? When you are trying to get additional resources, it's very difficult.'*

The positive gradings on how foster carers feel about their own abilities do not work through into effective systems and support for the child. The frustrations are evident in the foster carers' comments. In some cases, mutual support between foster carer and school is not forthcoming:

> *'I felt only 'adequate' as our foster child won't let us in. He won't show us homework. I refuse to sign things until I see evidence. The school is not communicating on this. I bring it up every parents' evening.'*

> *'We have a homework book, but we don't talk homework. When we attend parents' evening, they say it's always done.*

> *'I personally am very able. I attend everything. When I went to the support group, they used to ask me to teach the parents. But the school is useless. LAC reviews are held at the school, but the teachers don't attend. Homework is not generally set and when it is, it is not checked.'*

There are also environmental factors which can mitigate against the child receiving a stimulating and varied life experience:

> *'A lot of children we are dealing with grow up in cultural ghettos and never leave the villages they grew up in'.*

### 3.1.5 Training

Action 9

With the obligation upon local authorities to support foster carers 'so that the promotion of education is paramount and under-performance is not accepted' (Action 8), the degree to which foster carers are and feel involved by education professionals is critical. It is not enough simply to offer training to foster carers about education since the relationship between foster carer and school must be an open one and two-way. The survey of foster carers indicates that the majority do feel involved, with nearly half feeling very involved. However, nearly one third do not feel involved. The nature of the involvement will vary, some because they are called in to address behavioural issues, some to encourage better academic performance and some because the school is very pro-active in involving foster carers in the life of the school. The pro-active school has less need to call in foster carers for the wrong reasons.

Foster carers have a greater sense of involvement by educational professionals in the education of their children. While this is partly due to the greater effort made by schools to engage with foster carers, a more significant factor appears to be that foster carers are taking the initiative more and increasingly advocating with schools on behalf of their children. These findings were accompanied by pleas for better understanding from schools of the child and of the role of the foster carer.

*'As a teacher get to know the children in your care.'*

*'Teacher/child connections are important.'*

*'More supportive communication is needed. '*

*'The biggest skill of foster carers is empathy – do teachers have time to follow up?'*

*'Resources are falling away: one to one support has gone; units have closed – austerity!'*

**Fig. 2: Training for Foster Carers has improved since January 2016**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 7 | 7 |
| Agree | 34 | 34 |
| Neither agree not disagree | 35 | 35 |
| Disagree | 18 | 18 |
| Strongly disagree | 5 | 5 |
| I do not know enough about this to answer the question | 0 | 0 |

The balance of opinion is that there has been an improvement in training although 1 in 5 think that this is not the case.

Where there has been more innovative training which does not offer the same content and mode of delivery each time, the 'training' is very well received. Feedback from the Fostering Wellbeing Programme's pilot master classes in the Cwm Taf region, is pertinent here. The main factors for the perspective that the master classes were different from the usual training, and therefore valuable, were:

- The mix of participants which included staff from health, social services, education and youth justice alongside care experienced young people and the foster carers themselves.
- Major contributions from front-line workers and young people.
- Opportunities to help bring about change.
- An appeal to the heart as well as the head.

This approach was echoed to some degree elsewhere by what some foster carers said: *'Workshops presented by carers based on their experience – it is so enriching as they can present the lived experience.'* Other training favourably referred to included PACE training and [Confidence in Care.](Confidence in Care.)

Common concerns raised related to the level at which the training was pitched i.e. foster carers took very little away in terms of knowledge or skills. Foster carers were not happy with the 'One size fits all' training that they were offered.

> *'The same training is on offer over and over – very little progression offered – levels, degrees etc. We have been to 10 or 11 courses over 7 years – much of it is repeated – but there is a value in networking.'*

> *'…we go to all the training possible, but it is very repetitive and at a low level.'*

Training has to be practical, offering skills and strategies for managing the pressures and challenges they faced as foster carers

> *'Strategies we want – tools, what to do when…..'*

> *'Foster carers cannot get to training if children are excluded from school. The local authority need to put something in place to allow foster carers to attend.'*

For some, training at the induction stage is not sufficiently joined up or focussed and accreditation would be welcome.

> *'All the training should be linked to the Wales Induction Framework and be accredited so it is recognised.'*

When asked what foster carers would want in the toolbox, the main responses were:

- Knowledge.
- Empowerment.
- Meeting around the child.
- Knowing what services can be called on.
- Training in practical strategies.
- Communication.
- Online hub – up to date information and advice.

Foster carers acknowledged that those who turned up for the consultation were highly motivated and that getting foster carers to engage in training can be problematic. They were of the opinion that training should be:

- Mandatory.
- Have more in-depth options available.
- An opportunity to gain qualifications.

Some are prepared to pay for their training, but this should not have to be the case e.g. an intensive therapeutic attachment course was very much appreciated and recommended, but there is a waiting list and it is expensive.

## 3.2 Theme: Building effective partnerships and collaboration

(Actions 12 – 20)

### 3.2.1 Partnership working at a national level

Foster carers' perceptions of involvement with Welsh Government is generally better than in the previous survey. There is no clear reason for this, although the fact that The Fostering Network, on behalf of Welsh Government, is engaging with foster carers suggests that they are now more understanding of their involvement, albeit indirect. In one sense, it is not so important that foster carers feel knowledgeable about or directly involved with the Welsh Government strategy, but that the effects of the strategy are felt on the ground and are making a difference for children and young people who are looked after.

> *'A foster carer needs a whole raft of things that are specific to their needs. The first I heard of this strategy was an email from a participation officer. How do we get to know about this strategy?'*

> *'The Welsh Government could have a database and could circulate all foster carers with strategy/info etc to ensure we are informed.'*

### 3.2.2 Partnership working at a regional level

**Fig. 3: Mental Health support for LAC (e.g. CAMHS) has improved since January 2016**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 | 1 |
| Agree | 7 | 7 |
| Neither agree not disagree | 18 | 18 |
| Disagree | 34 | 34 |
| Strongly disagree | 32 | 32 |
| I do not know enough about this to answer the question | 9 | 9 |

The view of CAMHS and the services offered is poorer in 2018 than in 2017. Whereas in 2017 some 20% agreed that they had seen improvements, of those responding fewer than 10% agreed this time. Two-thirds disagreed that there had been any improvement.

Access to the service continues to be an issue. This appears to be due, in part, to some misunderstandings of who the service is for and the thresholds in place to access its services. One CAMHS staff member spoke of as many as 50% of referrals being inappropriate.

Familiar frustrations include:

- The time it takes to get an appointment.

- Reluctance by CAMHS to persevere if a child is reluctant to engage.
- The absence of a routine mental health assessment.
- The paucity of lower tier interventions services or difficulty in knowing about and accessing them.
- 

*'By the time you get a child in CAMHS he's moved on or has been excluded. It's a roundabout.'*

*'I would like to see another layer to CAMHS so when a child comes into care for the first time, there is an early assessment – a baseline assessment. If that shows an intervention is needed – put it in then rather than remedially later.'*

There is a general willingness by foster carers to learn more to meet a child's emotional needs; mental health issues can be, however, often a step too far.

A child for whom there was an inconclusive diagnosis, but it centred on anxiety and depression, had a pre-CAMHS appointment which then led to a report by an educational psychologist. The foster carers were advised to put pressure on the school for support and they applied for and received very useful training in attachment and nurturing. What made them angry was that the onus remained with them to bring about change for the child at home as well as in school. In a separate case, a foster carer felt that she had to pay for counselling herself.

In a different instance, a child psychologist who worked part-time and with a time-limited contract, said that she could not take on a foster child as her short-term intervention would be too disruptive for the child. Instead, the foster carer was told how to look after the child. It is unfair to expect foster carers to take on behaviours that need to be addressed by mental health professionals e.g. in dealing with enuresis. Another foster carer described herself as well read in attachment and psychology, and her close relatives are clinical psychologists. She believes that she should not be expected to take on such sensitive issues as her foster children show. She said that it can feel like a 'pressure cooker' in her house and is concerned about the impact of the foster children's behaviour on her birth children.

A less common perspective is that of the foster carer who, because they have developed a relationship with the foster child and the child trusts him, believes he can provide better intervention himself than sending the child to therapy every week

Although this survey does not draw on an exhaustive evidence base, it is clear that practice and levels of resource vary between regions. In one South Wales health region the team of LAC nurses carry out the vast majority of their initial health assessments in the scheduled timescales. In two other regions, some children have not had an initial assessment in the 2 or sometimes 3 years they have been in care. Early assessment and intervention is seen as absolutely vital:

*'Life story work – a few years ago, our child was threatening to kill herself and was having to be followed around school. We got to the bottom of it and she needed life story work. Once she'd got it, she settled. It really helped. What would have happened if this had been done at an earlier stage?'"*

One foster carer was happy to relate that the foster child had a referral made to CAMHS by the high school and this happened when she needed it. She had weekly counselling as a result which the school led; CAMHS was duly praised for its intervention. Those who said that CAMHS had accepted their child, mostly spoke well of the treatment they received.

### 3.2.3 Partnership working at a local level

The fact that nearly half feel that the school is listening more and responding better to the needs of children and young people who are looked after is encouraging. While only a very few are strongly disagreeing that schools are improving is also a positive and reflects the intention of the strategy that its effects filter down through the regions, to local authorities and into schools. Nevertheless, half still disagree and when looked at alongside the finding that most foster carers believe that most change comes when they push for it, there is still a long way to go to achieve really effective working between all partners at the local level.

The position is better when considering how far social services work collaboratively with foster carers but one issue which is still a significant one for foster carers in establishing effective working relationships is that of how they are perceived.

> *'The professionalisation of foster carers is a massive issue.'*

> *'What do we hear, 'you're professionals, you're professionals'. And then 'sorry you can't come, it's a professionals' meeting'. I now say, 'I am a professional. I will come to the meeting'.'*

> *'I spoke assertively and was told that I should not speak to a professional like that.'*

The Fostering Network's policy position on 'Status and Authority' makes clear what true partnership working means:

> *Foster carers are a key part of the team working with fostered children. They must be treated as co-professionals and given all the information and authority they need to be able to look after these children to the best of their ability*

Foster carers wish to be listened to by social workers and schools because they have so much to contribute to the assessment of and planning for the child.

> '*I am actually knowledgeable about the children and their needs*.'

**Fig. 4: Do you know who your Looked After Children Education (LACE Co-ordinator is?**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 34 | 40 |
| No | 50 | 59 |
| Not applicable | 1 | 1 |

The latest evaluation of the PDG LAC grant (Evaluation of the Implementation of the Pupil Development Grant for Looked After Children: Final Report (January 2019) states that local authorities should:

> *'Ensure they have a designated LACE coordinator whose role reflects the responsibilities set out in Welsh Government guidance.'*

The findings were that at local authority level, LACE coordinator capacity, expertise and working arrangements vary greatly:

- *'In a few cases, redundancies (due to yearly funding cycles) or retirements led to gaps in resourcing.*
- *High turnover of post-holders in the last three years were reported in some LAs.'*

Against this background, it is not surprising that most foster carers are not aware of who the LACE co-ordinator in their local authority is. Whether they need to know is a debatable point, but the LACE co-ordinator role is an important one and foster carers ought to know how to contact them as a matter of course. The workload and level of authority of the co-ordinators remains a concern. Anecdotally, foster carers are appreciative of the work they carry out and see them as 'allies' in advocating for their children, although there are occasions when their intervention may not be helpful:

> *'My school wanted my foster child to have counselling, but the LACE officer stopped it as she was of the opinion that it was not the right time for the child and wanted to go through to CAMHS. I'm going to try and get it back on and the school is responsive.'*

## 3.3    Theme:    Effective teaching and learning

Actions 21 - 29

### 3.3.1  Access to and stability in appropriate provision

We know that gaining a place in a child's first school and changing schools can be very challenging times for both the child and foster carer. While it is the local authority's responsibility to place the child, it often falls to the foster carer to research and apply for a suitable school place. The process can become further complicated when there is no definitive assessment of social, emotional and learning needs. If the foster placement is intended to be long-term, geography will also be an important determining factor of where the child attends school. An additional factor for those children where placements have broken down, is the detrimental effect that moving schools has on educational progress. Moving schools for any child in any circumstance will usually be disruptive to the extent that they will achieve significantly less well than if they had not moved schools.

There is anecdotal evidence to indicate that some foster carers, when they apply to a particular school for a place for their child, are not afforded the priority which they should have according to the admissions policy. Foster carers are not always sufficiently aware of the prioritisation of children who are looked after when it comes to being admitted to a school. For some it is even more fundamental than that:

> *'Foster carers need to know the rights of the child and feel able to represent the child's rights.'*

### 3.3.2  Communication

**Fig. 5: Communication between my foster child's school/college has improved since 2016?**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Agree | 41 | 42 |
| No change | 36 | 37 |
| Disagree | 21 | 21 |

In this third review, foster carers were more vocal about communication than previously. This may be the result of General Data Protection Regulations (GPDR) coming in which for some have created more of an obstacle to good communication:

> '…professionals are more cautious about sharing about children as a result of GPDR.'

The experience of foster carers when liaising with schools varied very much according to the particular school. Foster carers felt very dependent on the school to be forthcoming and while for some the overall awareness of the need to communicate better has improved, for others, they have seen little or no positive change. While one's personal experience as a foster carer is of consistent communication, as the carers' representative in the school he is witnessing real inconsistency e.g. requests to keep the child out of school to allow things to cool down, which amounts to illegal exclusion. Where there is inadequate communication, such as with a fixed-term or illegal exclusion, it is the foster carer who has to manage the child in that time.

Some of the inconsistency is with staff and how they apply policy, *'The teacher shouted at me throughout the year, but the assistant head was phenomenal.'* It was noted that improvements to communication often came with a change of staff. Good communication is not just about sharing information but having the right attitudes to act appropriately on the intelligence, which works both ways between school and home. One foster carer explained to the headteacher the emotional issues being experienced by her child who is looked after, only to be told, '*I understand that, but don't bring it into school*.'

Communication within the school also has to be effective, particularly where the needs of the child have to be known and understood by all members of staff. One child threw a computer out of the window as he was anxious about having to take turns to read. While the behaviour is not to be excused, it may have been prevented. A school with a high number of children who are looked after was quoted as having just introduced a private all-staff bulletin aimed at preventing flare-ups.

> '*It ensures all the staff are informed about what's going on for pupils e.g. parents did not turn up for contact. It allows all staff to have an understanding of what's going on for the children.*'

Positive relationships require effort and a number of instances are apparent where this is the case. Where foster carers have developed a personal relationship with the tutor and shared information, everyone has benefited:

> '… if you give to schools, you get it back.'

> 'It's about setting the tone – if you can meet with a teacher who wants to change children's lives, you work together to make a difference.'

Some exchange frequent emails or texts about the children:

> 'The teachers message me asking if there is anything they can do to help.'

Different methods of communicating work in different circumstances and it is down to schools and foster carers to find what is best for them. For some it is the support book or home-school diary, which the teachers write in every day, positives as well as negatives, and the foster carer writes back. Essentially, foster carers want someone they can speak to if there is a problem, someone with knowledge of the child's circumstances and who will deal with it in a consistent way.

> 'I visited my secondary school and they tell me they have all these good things in place, but I'm going to introduce myself to everyone and build the foundations for next year.'

There are undoubtedly dilemmas for foster carers in talking to schools, and vice-versa. Schools do not always know what delegated authority a foster carer has and a foster carer can feel frustrated that they cannot do what they see as in the best interests of the child:

> 'We go over and above biological parents sometimes.'

Given that a move from school to higher education is very disruptive for the young person at the point of transfer, good sharing of information is critical. It may also be that the young person is at a stage of 'When I'm ready' when other reference points and life anchors which give stability and confidence are shifting. It is disappointing, therefore, to still find that not enough is being done to make this transition as smooth as possible through helpful exchange of information. Although the numbers involved are small, the message is very clear.

**Fig. 6: Did schools/colleges share information about your child in a way that helped ensure a smooth transition?**

| Grading | 1 <br><br> They were very poor at sharing information | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 <br><br> They were very good at sharing information |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number** | 11 | 10 | 16 | 11 | 8 |
| **%** | 20 | 18 | 29 | 20 | 14 |

Another critical area in which good communication is vital for the child's educational progress is the role and function of the Personal Education Plan (PEP). The level of involvement of foster carers has improved in only a minority of cases, with half feeling strongly that they are still inadequately involved. In the best practice, a PEP review meeting brings together the school staff who know the child well but the foster carer and the child/young person should also be active participants. A copy of the latest PEP, which is part of the Care and Support Plan, should be shared and foster carers and child have an input into the revisions made to the PEP.

**Fig. 7: I am more involved in my foster child's Personal Education Plan (P.E.P.) now than I was three years ago?**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 6 | 7 |
| Agree | 25 | 27 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 22 | 24 |
| Disagree | 22 | 24 |
| Strongly disagree | 10 | 11 |

| I do not know enough about this to answer the question | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|

In two recent training events, foster carers were asked if they were invited to the annual PEP review at the school. In one group, only one out of 12 had been invited. In the other group, three-quarters of foster carers had been invited to the PEP review. The second group were from the Cwm Taf region where the Children Looked After Friendly Schools initiative and Fostering Wellbeing Programme have been running. Although the evidence base is small, the strong drive in this region to build more effective partnerships between foster carers and schools is reflected in this finding.

> '*My foster child has blockages – he could achieve more. As a 7 year old he faces certain barriers and we need to work out how we can close the gap. There is a PEP meeting next week and I will be speaking up for him.*'

### 3.3.3 Learning opportunities for educational staff

There is a growing awareness amongst foster carers that some school staff are very supportive of children and young people who are looked after and are well equipped to understand and address their needs. This awareness can also highlight discrepancies in the ways that different staff or different schools approach the issues which children who are looked after present. The amount of awareness raising and training is increasing and the positive effects of such initiatives as the Children Looked After (CLA) Friendly Schools Quality Mark in the Central South Consortium are becoming apparent. There is, however, much still to be done.

> '*Now he is amongst lots of children, with lots of different moves within the school day, he has no support. The class teacher asked to be trained, but the school has not released him for training.*'

Foster carers recognise that the right school ethos and culture come about partly through training but also in sharing and living certain values and principles.

> '*You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink – providing training to education professionals is vital but info alone does not help. There needs to be a change in the understanding and attitude of schools – the <u>culture</u> needs to be inclusive and supportive.*'

'Person-centred' philosophy and practice, as promoted for example in the Fostering Wellbeing Programme and the social pedagogy which underpins it, is becoming more widespread in care services. It is also filtering into some schools through such initiatives as the use of one-page profiles. Foster carers are keen that more of this ethos is adopted in schools, but they recognise that school staff need training. Frequent reference is made to the need for attachment training, even though there has been good provision in some parts of the country. A foster carer who provides attachment training still finds that teachers have not necessarily had any training on brain function and attachment which, in turn, would lead to changes in policy and practice.

> '*I'm a primary school teacher and my friends who are teachers have never heard of attachment. I want all my friends to have this training – where do they get it? Even if it's a two hour INSET. We just can't get the training. When I have explained it to my friends, they are amazed at how it explains some children's behaviour.*'

*'It took us years to get attachment disorder diagnosis and now we have, the school is not able to put strategies in place.'*

In the focus groups there is strong support for initial teacher training and continuous professional development for all school staff on meeting the emotional needs of children who are looked after, particularly in relation to the effects of trauma, loss, neglect and abuse and the associated attachment issues.

*'Let's make Wales the first country that is trauma/attachment aware.'*

### 3.3.4   Perceptions of schools

**Fig. 8:  The school which my foster child attends is:**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very good | 37 | 36 |
| Good | 35 | 34 |
| Adequate | 19 | 18 |
| Unsatisfactory | 13 | 13 |

The strong rating of schools is encouraging; most foster carers believe that the school their child attends has many qualities and, therefore, a good reputation. This finding needs to be set against the specifics revealed in other questions posed where the findings are not so positive. This apparent contradiction can be explained in comments made about schools being perceived as good in terms of their academic performance but less effective when catering for the emotional needs of children who are looked after and how this affects their achievements in school.

*'My school – on the face of it they have everything – awards for everything; they have a LAC co-ordinator but they still cannot meet the needs of the LAC.*

*Other teachers shout at children and put them in detention – not helpful.'*

In talking about what a good school looks like from the foster carer perspective, points included

- Trauma aware staff.
- Staff being aware of contact visits and alert to the effects this may have on the child.
- Having a relationship with foster carers and knowing them personally.
- Responding positively to offers of help from the foster carer.
- Being inclusive of the family.
- Preparing the young person emotionally for transition.

Conversely, when asked what a poor school looks like, points raised included:

- Poor communication.
- Poor leadership.
- Lack of discipline impeding learning.
- Teachers being over-familiar with children.

- Lack of aspiration and being satisfied with low standards.
- No designated LAC contact.

**Fig. 9: Overall, how much has changed since January 2016 in relation to the education of the children you have looked after.**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| I have seen significant positive changes since January 2016 in relation to the education of children I have looked after. | 1 | 1 |
| I have seen a few positive changes since January 2016 in relation to the education to the education of children I have looked after. | 33 | 33 |
| I do not think anything has really changed since January 2016 in relation to the education of children I have looked after. | 48 | 48 |
| I have seen changes for the worse since January 2016 in relation to the education of children I have looked after. | 18 | 18 |

In general terms, one-third of respondents has seen some change for the better since the introduction of the strategy. A smaller minority believes that there have changes which have had a negative effect on their child's education. There is a question of whether changes for the better are down to the strategy or other influences, such as initiatives introduced by schools, e.g. mindfulness. The strategy has come at a time when there is a growing awareness of the particular needs of children and young people who are looked after and has certainly helped to accelerate change, reinforced by the PDG LAC administered through the education consortia.

Curriculum changes do concern foster carers. Since 2016, GCSEs have been revised and the changes schools, students and foster carers have had to address may have had a negative effect on the academic performance of young people who are looked after. Schools may be focusing on what they see as their core purpose, academic achievement, without sufficient regard for the wider needs of the pupils. Other reasons cited for a slowing or deterioration in educational progress include change of school, children being stuck 'in a school that's not going anywhere' and lack of an effective 'When I'm Ready' programme.

Where there have been improvements, a range of factors are at work including:

- The work of the LACES in providing support and giving confidence to foster carers.

- Schools taking ownership of children who are looked after.
- Recognition of the voice of the child and foster carer and offering more bespoke provision.
- Improved communication with foster carers instead of being presented with problems at the school gate

*'Our foster child has moved from non-attendance to regular attendance and we can walk through the school feeling comfortable and that this is a place where we belong, as opposed to being.'*

Research suggests that the aspirations of foster children are not markedly different from other children and the results of the scoring seem to concur with this.

### 3.3.5  Aspiration and ambition

**Fig. 10:  The aspirations of my foster child are:**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very high | 16 | 15 |
| Quite high | 34 | 31 |
| Modest | 40 | 37 |
| Low | 18 | 17 |

A genuinely held aspiration or ambition is a real motivator for children and young people who are looked after. High aspirations by children who are looked after, mentioned by their foster carers, included becoming a rock star, midwife, forensic accountant, mother, fire officer, nurse and professional footballer.

Given the neglect and abuse they have suffered, their hopes and dreams may be focussed more on their own safety and wellbeing than on any career ambition. However, in an educational context, the many aspects of aspiration are linked, just as a child's wellbeing and educational achievements are closely linked. In some cases, unrealistically high aspirations can be masking very low self- esteem.

*'…he has set it so high, but knows he is going to fail at it – it is a badge for now, but also involves self- sabotage.'*

*'My foster child is capable of doing level 3 but she wants to do level 2 because of her low confidence.'*

*'She has an ambition to be a vet. She is reasonably bright but has lots of relationship difficulties. A fear of failure holds her back.'*

*'The youngest doesn't have aspiration – she struggles along and can't cope.  Teachers think she's doing OK academically.'*

*'We've had a child from the age of 5 for 14 years. The whole family had special needs and alcohol misuse. We always encouraged him, but the older he got the wider the gap got. He felt he was only good enough to stack shelves.'*

The influence of family is important, be it birth or foster family.

*'My 8 year old did not have any aspiration. He would smack his head and call himself stupid when he came to our family. He has become more aspirational over time.'*

*'My foster child's ambition is to work in a tanning salon. Her birth family had been encouraging her to work in the salon of a relative. The school is now encouraging her to do a health and beauty course. I am hoping this will widen her horizons and encourage her to think of owning her own business. She's slowly beginning to think differently.'*

It can be very difficult balancing the potential of a child with what the child's own dreams might be. One young person being fostered aspires to buying a house, with an apple tree, and to breed rabbits which will make her a lot of money. She will leave school next year to do level 2 animal care as part of this plan. The school is encouraging her on this path. The foster carer thinks the plan is not realistic and has recognised capacity in the young woman and would prefer for her to go into the sixth form.

Some teachers were seen as 'incredibly inspirational' whereas others saw the behaviours of children who are looked after as restricting them and tended to reinforce negative images they had of themselves. A range of factors were identified by foster carers as helping to promote the aspirations of children who are looked after, including:

- Not just focusing on academic achievement.
- Broadening horizons by introducing them to everyday activities they might not have had the opportunity to experience previously e.g. one school arranged a pottery making session for the children who are looked after and their foster carers.
- Getting them to see what's behind frontline professions e.g. tv camera operator, vet's assistant.
- Finding high value work experience placements e.g. chef at a good quality hotel rather than a fast food outlet.
-

## 3.3.6 Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

A disproportionate number of children who are looked after have ALN and research indicates that emotional, social and related attachment issues is the most common form of ALN for these children and young people. It is not that they lack the capacity to learn but that the barriers to learning arising from their background are holding back their progress.

Quite often too, children who are now looked after have suffered neglect and therefore a language deficit in their earlier lives. Without a good vocabulary, understanding of word combinations and the perceived meaning of language, children will be at a severe disadvantage in the more formal educational settings. Communication disorders will also have a negative effect on their ability to socialise and observe behavioural norms.

*My 5 year old in reception was unable to speak, he still has poor language skills. He cannot even name objects. He was born at the end of July and was not ready to enter school. I advocated for him to come out of school and be nursery educated. This has been refused. He loves school for the social interaction, and he has friends, but he cannot process information like the other children can.'*

Schools are challenged to find the resources to cater for particular needs. Tailoring provision is often costly and disapplication from national curriculum requirements is not always possible. Meeting a child's needs and ensuring they receive their educational entitlement do not necessarily sit

comfortably together. When a child has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or is on the autistic spectrum, settling in a classroom environment can be difficult.

> '*We worked really hard in primary and secondary. But they've put him in a volatile class and he is wound up by the behaviour of other children. He needs to be in a positive environment – I've spoken to school about this. I'd like to see more vocational rather than academic stuff.*'

As in other aspects of formal schooling, it is when foster carers and school staff profess the same aspirational philosophy, share information and agree support strategies that real progress can be made.

> '*There is a good SENCO who works with me.*'

### 3.3.7  Assessment and planning

**Fig. 11:  The school/college my foster child attends is more responsive overall to his/her needs than it was in January 2016**

| Response | Number | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Strongly agree | 5 | 5 |
| Agree | 31 | 32 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 26 | 27 |
| Disagree | 24 | 25 |
| Strongly Disagree | 7 | 7 |
| I do not know enough about this to answer the question | 4 | 4 |

A full assessment of needs is not the work of just the school, or any one agency. A child's different needs do not fall neatly under the labels of the different services available; educational, health and social care services each work to meet a range of needs, many of them overlapping and interdependent. The Fostering Wellbeing Programme talks of 5 basic needs – social, physical, emotional, cultural and learning. If one of the needs is not being sufficiently met, it is inevitable that there will be a deficit in how far other needs are being met. This is especially the case when emotional needs are not addressed and it is commonly observed that a child's capacity to learn is severely affected.

Foster carers recognise that 'analysing what is going on' for the child is important. Without an accurate and comprehensive assessment of needs and without the means of addressing those needs being communicated to those who should know, the consequences for the child can be serious.

> '*….because of anger issues, if he gets stressed he needs to leave the room (he wets himself). A teacher did not understand this and put down a boundary firmly. The child's needs were not taken on board.*'

*'The staff didn't know children were LAC and when told, they didn't know anything about processes to deal with the issues.'*

### 3.3.8 Meeting emotional needs and managing behaviour

Having secured a place in school, appropriate provision should mean that all the needs of the child are fully assessed and measures put in place to meet those needs. Only by meeting the basic needs of the child, including the learning needs, will the school become a place of safety, stability and achievement. Key to this for most children and young people who are looked after will be how the school caters for their emotional needs. Approximately one-third believe emotional support has improved since the start of the strategy, which leaves two-thirds who do not believe that this is the case.

**Fig. 12: My foster child receives better emotional support in school/college than they did in January 2016**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 7 | 7 |
| Agree | 26 | 26 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 32 | 32 |
| Disagree | 26 | 26 |
| Strongly disagree | 7 | 7 |
| I do not know enough about this to answer the question | 2 | 2 |

Foster carers appreciate the support mechanisms which schools put in place such as:

- Having someone they trust to go to when they feel stressed.
- Having a safe place within the school dedicated to supporting those who are vulnerable.
- Having a permission card that enables them to leave the classroom when feeling stressed
- Greater awareness amongst staff of mental health issues.
- Specific support programmes e.g. ELSA
- Life story work.

While some foster carers felt that they had to push very hard to get such support, *'You almost have to be the school's worse nightmare',* others found that *'being the school's best friend'* in informing the school fully and regularly about the child paid dividends.

When school staff understand the background of children and young people who are looked after and the adverse childhood experiences they have undergone, there is greater likelihood of behaviour issues being managed in a more sympathetic way. By accepting the person but not the unacceptable

behaviour, there is a better chance of the child not feeling they are worthless or at fault; this feeling only feeds the cycle of negative emotions and poor behaviour. This is clearly a challenge for schools when they need to be seen to be applying consistent standards across the school. One foster carer reported how her child was suspended for one day for taking a jar of sweets from the teacher's table. She felt it was an excessive sanction for the offence committed. Others spoke of times when, in their eyes, the school did not respond appropriately to the child's needs but just attempted to 'correct' behaviours.

> *'One teacher threatened my foster child that he would contact his foster carer in front of the whole class.'*

> *'The consequence for my child's behaviour was detention in isolation – not appreciating this is not helpful for a child with emotional issues.'*

> *'Our foster child will eat through anxiety and this causes problems in school.'*

> *'One child was with us for a couple of weeks. The school excluded him for a week but did not put anything in place.'*

How a school manages behavioural issues is a reflection of its ethos. When schools take the opportunity to nurture understanding and empathy in their staff and pupils, foster carers feel that the right climate is being created to make progress.

> *'As a foster carer, it's about getting the kids to a place where they can learn. Connection not correction.'*

> '*I foster two sisters, they are good girls, and they have been allocated an 'inclusion mentor'.'*

> *'There is recognition that while her cognitive challenge becomes more complex, she will be blocked. If they keep pushing, pressure will build and her behaviour will change and she will start to feel she is failing. It's when a sense of criticism happens, the cracks begin to show. They need constant encouragement and steps put along the way to aspirational targets.'*

### 3.3.9  Achievement

The most reliable performance data available measures how well those in Year 11 fare in their GCSE examinations. There have been changes to the system since 2017 but, while direct comparisons have to be treated with caution, when the results of young people who are looked after are set against the results of the whole school population in any given year, the issue of under-achievement is indisputable.

**Fig. 13:  GCSE results: Percentage of pupils achieving the level 2 threshold of 5 passes at A\*-C, including English or Welsh and Mathematics at key stage 4**.

| Year | Pupils looked after (%) | All Wales cohort (%) | Difference (%) |
|------|------|------|------|
| 2015 | 18 | 58 | 40 |
| 2016 | 23 | 60 | 37 |
| 2017 | 12 | 55 | 43 |

| 2018 | 20 | 55 | 35 |

The volatility of these results is partly explained by the much lower numbers of examination entrants who are looked after when compared to those who are not. The general picture though is one of the educational outcomes for children and young people who are looked after being so low that their career and life chances are significantly diminished. While there are many examples of young people leaving care and finding personal and career success, this is not the case for the majority.

The survey has not allowed for a more detailed analysis of how foster carers perceive the educational achievements of the children in their care. Nearly half regard those achievements as being very good or quite good which means that just over half are considered to be underachieving. Foster carer expectation and experience obviously play a part in their gradings; where foster carers and schools have worked together closely, both parties will have a more realistic assessment of the child's potential and therefore any degree of underachievement.

**Fig. 14: In school my foster child's achievements are:**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| a) Very good | 13 | 13 |
| b) Quite good | 35 | 34 |
| c) Adequate | 33 | 32 |
| d) Unsatisfactory | 22 | 21 |

The strong link between emotional wellbeing and educational achievement is borne out by the widespread anecdotal evidence put forward by foster carers. Nationally, performance at GCSE by young people who are looked after has been volatile and is still significantly below that of all pupils in Year 11. What the statistics also show is that those young people on the Child Protection Register but who are not looked after, perform even less well on average than those being looked after. While children and young people who are looked after have major barriers to learning, the experience of being looked after gives them a better chance of educational success than if they were not looked after.

> '*At the top end of the scoring: 'Our eldest girl did amazingly well – Bs and Cs, but she was so far behind. She had support from all directions.'*

Some foster carers speak of school as a safe place for the child, enabling behaviour to improve which then leads to better educational achievement.

One foster carer reported that their child was not achieving well when he came into foster care and he has improved over time. She attributed this partly to foster care, but also felt that the peer group change had a positive effect: '*His friends are trying hard and have aspirations and this has influenced him*'. Other foster carers agreed that a change of peer group when children come to foster care is an important factor in changing attitudes and behaviour in education.

A foster carer, speaking of a child who was achieving at level 4/5 despite her early schooling not being brilliant said, *'Emotionally she can't connect, but is more than capable intellectually.'*

For many, pressing for academic achievement without being fully supportive of a child's emotional development, is counter-productive. One foster carer spoke with frustration about a 13 year old who has the emotional development of an 8 year old. The teachers engage in argument with him and she has to keep reminding them that they are engaging with the emotions of an 8 year old, but the teachers persist. The school's ethos and how consistently it is reflected in the child's experience of the school, are critical. There is too much variation between and within schools.

> *'Based on government levels of achievement, I would say his achievements are 'adequate'; on a person-centred level, I would say 'very good'. Their education has to be person-centred.'*

*'He is starting GCSEs and doing incredibly well. He was previously two years behind. He now wants to be a police officer. He's now getting Cs and Bs and wants more. I think consistent care and support and working with the school has made a difference.'*

> *'Sadly, it's all about figures and grades, not about schools.'*

> *'If only they could put a positive rather than a negative spin on what they are managing to achieve; when being told, 'Must try harder', our child hears, 'you are last'.'*

> *'Schools should stop looking for gradual development and understand there will be peaks and troughs e.g. contact will affect them.'*

> *'Our foster son is in college. He didn't have any self-esteem and couldn't participate in the family. College encouraged him to do level 1 and told him all he would need to achieve at GCSE was 2 Gs. At that, he gave up on school. If he could get to college with 2 Gs, he didn't see the point in bothering.'*

Support can take various forms and some foster carers have pushed for additional tutoring.

> *'If mine had a tutor, I know he would make good progress – they won't fund one.'*

> *'I paid for my child to have a tutor.'*

> *'My child wants to be a forensic accountant and is doing A level maths. I got a tutor to support him, but the school said that if he needs a tutor, he should not be doing A levels.'*

It is very timely that Kirsty Williams, the Minister for Education, has issued a statement signalling something of a culture change, one which foster carers have been saying is needed to support children who are looked after.

> *'Secondary schools in particular have been driven to focus on trying to get pupils to achieve a 'pass' in a small number of qualifications, rather than providing a broad and balanced education that supports the progress of all learners.*

*In our reformed system, every child will count and schools will be evaluated according to the difference they make to the progress of every child. This will help schools focus on teaching and learning, the well-being of pupils and teachers, and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.'*

**Written Statement: Evaluation and Improvement – a new accountability system to raise standards for all** (Welsh Government February 19th 2019)

## 3.4    Theme:    Making better use of data

Actions 30, 31 and 32

The report of the second year of the strategy in 2018 found that, 'data on the educational performance for all young people aged 16 and in care does not appear on the StatsWales site, only the performance of those leaving care at 16; even then, the data can be 18 months or more out of date.' In 2019, the Statistics and Research website still does not carry the data in the Education and Skills sections. It can be found in the Health and Social Care sections for 2017 and 2018 only. Without this data set in the context of educational attainment across Wales over a period of time, it is not possible to gauge what progress is being made educationally by those in care from year to year and whether or not this compares favourably with those who are not in care.

In the Education and Skills section, those in care is not one of the 9 categories listed to enable good comparisons to be made with the various factors affecting achievement, such as free school meal entitlement, ethnicity, absence rates, those with English as an Additional Language, those with ALN and those attending a Pupil Referral Unit.

Local authorities and education consortia will have their own statistics but these are not made publicly available. For comparative purposes, they would benefit from having national benchmarks against which to test the effectiveness of their own provision and performance. The review which should have taken place under action 30, which would, 'include considering the availability of benchmarks and comparison across local authorities and regional education consortia' appears not to have been completed. In respect of Action 30, Welsh Government says that:

> '*It is for Regions to determine the most effective collection method and use of data to enable effective analysis. This is set out clearly in the revised terms and conditions for PDG-LAC.*'

Action 31 seeks to allow those who have been in care and are now adopted to have their progress tracked. The Minister has made a commitment to consider this and such consideration is currently underway. However, any changes to PLASC will require changes to secondary legislation. Action 32 recognises that there is a lack of information on the outcomes for children who were looked after once they leave the school system and move into other educational settings. Welsh Government is undertaking work to generate destinations data and anticipates the first data set should be available later in 2019.

## 3.5    Theme:    Strengthening funding arrangements

Action 33

### 3.5.1    The Pupil Development Grant LAC (PDG LAC)

The criteria for administering the PDG LAC have been refined and there is now greater strategic use of the grant as determined by each education consortia. However, there is still a reasonable case, if not expectation, that where the grant filters down to school clusters and individual schools, some consultation should take place with foster carers and the children in their care. The negative findings from the survey also illustrate that the concept and practice of partnership working is not sufficiently developed.

The Welsh Government's FAQ publication on the use of the PDG LAC states that: '*Consortia, local authorities and schools and other partners are expected to work collaboratively to develop effective*

*interventions that support the improved educational outcomes of learners and to ensure they reach their full potential.'*

**Fig. 15: Are you involved in deciding how the Pupil Development Grant (PDG LAC) is used to help your child?**

| Response | Number | % |
|---|---|---|
| **No** | 80 | 96 |
| **Yes** | 3 | 4 |

Approximately half of foster carers surveyed had heard of PDG LAC and of those who had, only 1 in 5 believed that they fully understood the purpose of the grant. Given that there is an expectation that consortia, local authorities and schools work collaboratively with 'other partners', it is not unreasonable to assume that foster carers, and the children and young people themselves, should be included in this partnership. This is clearly not happening at present. While the more strategic approach at consortium level is welcome to raise awareness and expertise in schools and their clusters, when the grant is being used to support children who are looked after at the school level, better engagement with foster carers is necessary. Consortia could, also, include foster carer representation when drawing up their plans for use of the grant. It is difficult to judge the appropriateness of some of the spending unless the full circumstances are known. Knowing the full needs of the child will help to determine which priorities should have first call on the resource.

> *'One of my children was given a very expensive camera. I didn't know it was going to happen, or why it was given, even. I wouldn't have recommended he have one. It was a waste of money.'*

> *'Maybe we could access it to get a tutor?'*

> *'My school used the PDG LAC to get a prom dress and everything to make her feel included.'*

> *'It's used for training for teachers in my school.'*

> *'I wrote to the Head thinking that if I raised it, it would be attached to my child, but I was told that it is allocated proportionately according to the number of LAC and used to help all the LAC, not individuals.'*

> *'In my child's class there are three 1:1s. I don't see any evidence of the 1:1 he was supposed to have that would be funded by PDG. If you have children with similar needs, then by all means pool to meet their needs.'*

The final report evaluating the implementation of the Pupil Development Grant for Looked After Children reflects some of the evidence gathered in this consultation. Spending decisions are rarely made in consultation with foster carers and the children and young people who are looked after and are not well evidenced by an analysis of needs. However, there is some recognition that investment is needed at a strategic i.e. regional education consortia, level too if systems and culture change is not to be piecemeal. In the report there is recognition that wider stakeholder organisations, foster carers and children who are looked after generally are not consulted during planning and review stages. The use of PDG LAC is supporting the Welsh Government strategy, albeit at a slower rate than hoped for.

As stated in the report, there is '*Some qualitative evidence that the grant is having a direct impact on the wellbeing and educational attainment of LAC.*'

## 3.6    Theme:    Participation of children who are looked after

Actions 35 – 37

Progress with these actions was not surveyed as it is being researched and reported in a separate review. The Fostering Network is always keen to involve children and young people who are looked after as much as possible in any initiative which involves their lives and will affect their futures. Where foster carers and children and young people who are looked after could have been consulted more effectively, there are comments to be found in the relevant sections of this report e.g. assessment of need, PDG LAC.

## 3.7    Related issues not covered in the strategy

During the consultation, a number of points were raised which did not align directly with the strategy, but which are, nevertheless, relevant to the overall aims of the strategy.

### 3.7.1    Networking

Foster carers often feel isolated and would benefit from more opportunities to network with other foster carers e.g.

- Local support groups to build a neighbourhood network.
- Specialist support groups e.g. for children who are looked after and have ASD.
- Area focus groups to feed into social services and education policy and practice.

The Pioneer foster carers appointed as part of the Fostering Wellbeing Programme in the Cwm Taf region arrange coffee mornings, organise summer picnics and in one local authority have a WhatsApp group to share information with foster carers. They also run a telephone helpline once a week. Some schools fulfil a networking function by holding training sessions for foster carers e.g. on internet safety, social groups and shared activities between school, foster carers and the children who are looked after.

### 3.7.2    Funding for social and extra-curricular activities

The cultural needs of children who are looked after can too easily be overlooked. It is important to give each child in school every opportunity available to participate in musical activities, educational trips, sports, drama etc. Such activities help the children to socialise and can boost self-esteem and confidence.

> '*Our girls have had violin lessons through school. We can't get funding for it now in England as we have to get it past the Virtual Head*' (This foster carer lived near the border and their child went to school in England).

Such activities are therefore seen as being therapeutic and help to understand, express and regulate emotions. Funding of foster carers to provide such extra support is not deemed sufficient and transport arrangements are not always conducive to facilitating such involvement of children and young people who are looked after. One foster carer's experience is that extra-curricular activities only become available after the child had disengaged. She praised a facility for children out of education where they go climbing, attend a forest school etc. but felt that preventative work of this

nature would have been better at keeping the boy in mainstream education. The success of the Fostering Achievement programme in Northern Ireland demonstrates the many benefits of such interventions, including raised educational attainment.

### 3.7.3  Young people and preparation for adulthood

Many young people in care will have missed out on a full, formal education. Lifelong education needs to be encouraged and programmes and courses available to them which are suited to their needs. Some foster carers are concerned that some children who are looked after are not coping in schools and are then permanently excluded. The experience of some young people after leaving school is not helped when Further Education opportunities are limited for them.

> *'The Welsh Rural Economy – where are the courses that prepare children for that – if they are practical in inclination, get them out at 14 or 15 to do some agricultural learning. Currently not catering for rural areas.'*

The view of some foster carers is that colleges are struggling to cope with young people who have mental health problems and display challenging behaviour; college staff would benefit from the training which is now becoming available in schools.

# 4.0 Key learning points

## Theme 1:  Effective leadership – roles and responsibilities

4.1.1   Those in a strategic role e.g. lead councillors and lead governors can, with a higher profile and greater knowledge of the issues, be effective champions for children and young people who are looked after.

4.1.2   The ALN code should ensure that the role of the foster carer in meeting the child's needs is recognised e.g. in contributing to and having access to the IDP.

4.1.3   The educational and social care pilot strategy, in the form of the Fostering Wellbeing Programme in the Cwm Taf region, has important lessons for taking forward a number of system and cultural changes across services which will enhance the wellbeing of children and young people who are looked after.

4.1.4   The role of the LACE co-ordinator is key in facilitating better joined-up working but the resource is not always sufficient to carry out the many functions required.

4.1.5   Training for foster carers is variable in quality, form and content and needs to be more attractive to all foster carers if they are to be equipped and empowered to meet all the challenges of their role. The training section of the National Fostering Framework will need to recognise and respond to this issue.

4.1.6   The role of the Third Sector is important, particularly in involving the 'hard to reach' foster carers.

## Theme 2:  Effective partnerships and collaboration

4.2.1   The pressures on CAMHS are due, in part, to the thresholds for access to the service. Limited understanding of the nature of the service and the absence or inadequacy of lower tier services result in far too many referrals inappropriately being made to CAMHS.

4.2.2   When foster carers are regarded as professional by co-professionals, and given equality of status in partnership working, their motivation and efficiency are enhanced. Attitudinal change, as well as changes in practice, are needed to bring this about.

## Theme 3:  Effective teaching and learning

4.3.1   The system for admitting a child who is looked after to a school is not widely understood. Matching the child's needs to a suitable school place is not easy and requires careful planning and a consensual approach from all those involved, including the child and foster carers.

4.3.2   The form of communication between foster carers and school is less important than that it happens effectively.

4.3.3   The sharing of information between and within services, including with foster carers, could be more efficient; this is especially the case at transition points in the child's life.

4.3.4   A culture of inclusion and empowerment leads to better outcomes for children and young people who are looked after e.g. in the development and tracking of a child's PEP.

4.3.5 Person-centred philosophy and practice, embracing principles from social pedagogy, are gaining ground to the benefit of practitioners and children and young people. Strategic leaders could give this even more momentum with a commitment to embedding this approach in their organisation's ethos and all professional development programmes.

4.3.6 Schools are developing a better awareness of the needs of children and young people who are looked after but this is still too variable within and across regions and different institutions.

4.3.7 The emotional development of children who are looked after has to be given greater weight if schools are to see improvements in academic performance.

4.3.8 Behaviour issues and language deficits are not always viewed as ALN and managed accordingly. Exclusions, unofficial or official, are unhelpful to a chid suffering the effects of abuse and neglect and alternative approaches need to be found e.g. by working with the child on preventative strategies.

## Theme 4:  Making better use of data

4.4.1 Data sets could be better aligned and located on the public Welsh Government sites to give a clear picture of how children and young people who are looked after are progressing educationally compared to other identifiable groups and the school population as a whole.

## Theme 5:  Strengthening funding arrangements

4.5.1 Funding for children who are looked after, through the PDG LAC, is having beneficial effects but could be even better used if foster carers were involved in the decision-making process at regional consortia, local authority and school levels.

# Next steps

The Fostering Network team would welcome further dialogue on the elements raised in this consultation, with foster carers, and will continue to play a key role in raising the educational attainment of looked after children and young people in Wales.

We propose that further work is undertaken to:

- Disseminate the findings of this report to foster carers, policy makers, social work practitioners, third sector organisations and organisations and individuals representing education.
- Bring together foster carers, social care and educational professionals to discuss the issues together.
- Continue and develop the publication of foster carer resources, such as *Making it Happen* and events, such as the masterclasses, to continue to inspire foster carers to help fostered children and young people in their care raise their ambitions and fulfil their potential in education. Encouraging them to consult, challenge and collaborate with schools as an integral part of the team around the child.
- Continue and develop The Fostering Wellbeing programme across Wales.

The Fostering Network Wales can offer bespoke and responsive consultancy-based services and interventions as Welsh Government further develops its looked after children's education strategy.

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# 5.0 Appendices

**Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales: Action Plan 2015-16 (Welsh Government)**

**5.1    Action plan: actions 1 – 11: Effective leadership – roles and responsibilities**

| Action 1:<br><br>Support each regional consortium to identify a lead co-ordinator who will retain a strategic focus on looked after children in education and ensure the delivery of an agreed, strategic programme of work |
| --- |
| Action 2:<br><br>Develop and publish guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the lead co-ordinator |
| Action 3:<br><br>Develop and publish guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the designated lead member of staff in schools, and on governing bodies in supporting that function |
| Action 4:<br><br>Reinforce corporate accountability and the statutory role of the Director of Social Services |
| Action 5:<br><br>Consider the responses to the draft *Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill* with a view to developing the Bill provisions on children and young people who are looked after. |
| Action 6:<br><br>Assess the feasibility of a pilot programme that will deliver a combined educational and social care approach that will help to improve placement stability and provide a stronger and better equipped workforce in Wales. |
| Action 7:<br><br>Develop training for elected members |
| Action 8:<br><br>Review the roles of key workers and ensure that responsibility and accountability exists in all parts of the system. This should be in accordance with a consistent national context set by the Welsh Government to ensure that local authorities do not implement changes in isolation of one another. In particular local authorities should make arrangements to:<br><br>• Ensure a designated elected member with a lead responsibility for the education of children who are looked after is in place and equipped to undertake the role. |

- Examine the roles of social workers and Independent Review Officers (IRO) to ensure that plans are in place and progressed to meet the needs of the child. This includes reviewing the child's educational needs, progress and development to support and strengthen the existing process.
- Review the roles and responsibilities of the LACE Coordinator and the designated person with lead responsibility in schools to ensure alignment and collaboration to raise the level and quality of support provided. This should ensure that the learner's progress is properly tracked in conjunction with schools, so that interventions are quickly applied where attainment appears to be in decline. The same high quality level of service and support should be considered for former looked after children who have been adopted or are subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).
- Support foster carers, residential childcare workers, kinship carers and parents so that the promotion of education is paramount and under-performance is not accepted. All carers must be equipped – through training if necessary - with the skills necessary to challenge schools where the child's attainment is not at the expected level, and must be aware of the key personnel to approach to do so such as seeking advocacy support through the regional education consortia and school challenge advisers.

Action 9:

Develop proposals to support foster carers and other carers with appropriate training which has a specific educational focus on children in their care.

Action 10:

Promote the role of the looked after children link governor and encourage all governing bodies to select a governor to represent the interests of these young people as standard good practice

Action 11:

All further education institutions should continue to work to meet the quality mark criteria set by Buttle UK and to build on existing good practice. Institutes should continue to demonstrate strong leadership and work in partnership with local authorities and other agencies to secure the best possible support for learners from a care background.

## 5.2 Action plan: actions 12 – 20: Building effective partnerships and collaboration

Action 12:

LACE co-ordinators

*To establish a national strategic group*

*involving local authorities, in particular LACE Coordinators and other key stakeholders to:*

- *Support consistent practice in supporting children who are looked after.*
- *Identify the interdependencies which exist between them.*
- *Promote peer support for practitioners, sharing good practice.*
- *Identify and overcome barriers to success.*

| Action 13: |
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| To implement a 'community of practice' to build more effective working relationships and communications between designated lead members of staff in schools and further education institutions, LACE Coordinators, carers and social workers |

| Action 14: |
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| To identify information which would better support collaboration and delivery at a local level, including the production of a thematic study, providing robust case studies and underpinning so that the LACE Coordinators and schools can draw on successful practices to help them provide better support. |

| Action 15: |
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| To strengthen the role of the third and independent sectors to ensure a more holistic approach to delivery and provide an advocate for children who are often difficult to engage in education. The Welsh Government's Strategic Steering Group will consider how outcomes for children who are looked after and care leavers can be improved through prevention and early intervention, improved collaborative working across agencies and through identifying and sharing good practice and making improvements where they are needed. |

| Action 16: |
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| Local authorities with similar learner profiles should work more collaboratively and to find more effective ways of sharing good practice, professional expertise and teaching support across authorities. Local authorities – working with regional education consortia in planning strategic actions – should actively explore opportunities for greater collaboration to support better and more consistent practice, and in sharing of good practice. |

| Action 17: |
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| To map and review existing local protocols, strengthening them where necessary using service level agreements and memoranda of understanding. |

| Action 18: |
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| To collaborate with the third sector to map existing materials to help carers and foster parents understand the importance of engagement with schools and post-16 education providers. |

| Action 20: |
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| To improve data sharing between schools and post-16 education providers, considering the particular needs of children who are looked after and care leavers as part of this. |

## 5.3   Action plan: actions 21 – 29: Effective teaching and learning

| Action 21: |
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| To ensure children who are looked after are prioritised in the admissions process and that unexplained absences are dealt with promptly. The key factor is stability. This also means that |

exclusions must be considered only in the most extreme circumstances. Schools will work closely with the LACE Coordinator and the Education Welfare Officer to monitor the attendance of children who are looked after and respond immediately to first day absences.

Action 22:

To place emphasis on information sharing which needs to be timely. It should be accepted good practice to set up information sharing meetings prior to a pupil starting a new school or educational setting. The meetings should involve appropriate personnel from the receiving and previous school together with social workers and other agency staff.

Action 23:

To ensure there are specific professional learning opportunities in schools and further education institutions on managing challenging behaviour and recognising the needs of children suffering from trauma and attachment issues. Schools should engage with regional education consortia and LACE Coordinators to consider how broader awareness training for school personnel in supporting vulnerable children could be commissioned and delivered regionally funded through the PDG. Personnel from further education institutions should also be included in the training wherever possible.

Action 24:

To implement arrangements to improve tracking to monitor the educational progress of children who are looked after and ensure meaningful Personal Education Plans and Individual Development Plans Regional education consortia should work with their LACE Coordinators to identify and share examples of good tracking and monitoring systems.

Action 25:

To set realistic, but challenging targets in conjunction and consultation with children and young people and recognise that education may be low on the young person's personal agenda due to other emotional issues This information must be formalised within the education plan. Education plans must also monitor and record the personal development of the child in greater detail.

Action 26:

To maintain a national contact list of key personnel such as LACE Coordinators, Education and Progression Coordinators (EPCs), further education and higher education student support officers to improve communications.

Action 27:

To ensure that the designated lead person for looked after children in further education institutions provides timely information about available courses and entry requirements to these prospective students in an appropriate environment which is non-stigmatising.

Action 28:

To formalise service levels agreements and protocols between schools and post-16 institutions to facilitate the smooth transition from school to post-16 education for children who are looked after.

| Action 29: |
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| To develop mentoring schemes for children who are looked after and care leavers to support stability in their lives and ensure they complete their studies. |

## 5.4    Action plan: Actions 30 – 32: Making better use of data

| Action 30: |
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| To review how the range of data on children who are looked after data is collected and analysed to consolidate numerous datasets and reduce complexity. This will also include considering the availability of benchmarks and comparison across local authorities and regional education consortia. |
| Action 31: |
| To identify and capture statistical information on the educational attainment of former children who were looked after and have been adopted. |
| Action 32: |
| To collate accurate information on the outcomes for children who are looked after once they leave the school system and move into other educational settings. The Welsh Government will commission an initial analysis which uses matched data to identify post-16 outcomes for children who are looked after, including retention, attainment and progression rates. This will help to identify the baseline provision which can then be used to carry out annual analysis, and to identify any crucial gaps in the available data. |

## 5.5    Action plan: Actions 33 – 34: Strengthening funding arrangements

| Action 33: |
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| To reinforce the regional education consortia accountability for delivering results, a new reporting process will be introduced to better track and monitor expenditure. A rapid review process will be introduced to evaluate the effectiveness of the first year of a new approach to Pupil Deprivation Grant funding for children who are looked after. |
| Action 34: |
| To capture information on effective interventions which are proven to have the greatest impact on the educational outcomes of children who are looked after and adopted children. The Welsh Government and Adoption UK (Wales) will develop guidance to help schools support adopted children in education. |

### 5.6 Action plan: Actions 35 – 37: Participation of children who are looked after and adopted to inform strategic approaches and operational decision making

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| Action 35:<br><br>To review the progress made against the action plan, seek the views of children who are looked after to measure the impact the strategy is having on their experience in education. |
| Action 36:<br><br>To support the Charter for children who are looked after and care leavers, which has been developed by the Care Forum Wales Looked After Children Network in conjunction with partners, and continue to push all agencies<br><br>involved with these children to adopt a greater use of person-centred thinking in delivering their services. |
| Action 37:<br><br>To ensure the views of these children are considered when planning and delivering targeted support |