



Vulnerable children

# Don't gloss over the gap for pupils in care, SNP told

Ministers warned not to glorify improvement in the results of looked-after children

EMMA SEITH

THE GOVERNMENT is being urged not to "over-emphasise" a steep rise in the achievements of vulnerable children, as fresh evidence has emerged of the huge attainment gap remaining.

Education secretary John Swinney has celebrated new figures showing that the proportion of looked-after children who left school with at least one qualification at the equivalent of National 5 rose from 15 per cent in 2009-10 to 40 per cent last year.

However, a *Tes Scotland* analysis of government data released last week illustrates the large attainment gap that remains. It also shows how the achievements of looked-after children vary dramatically according to where they are placed.

The proportion of all school leavers who achieved at least one qualification at the equivalent of National 5 was 86 per cent last year – 46 percentage points more than looked-after children.

And only 11 per cent of youngsters who were looked after at home – those children who remained in their home but under supervision, which can happen in cases of neglect or domestic abuse – achieved qualifications at the equivalent of N5 or above. A quarter of all children looked after in 2016 – some 3,800 – were at home, according to children's social work statistics.

The proportion achieving the equivalent of N5 or above rose to 64 per cent among those children placed with council foster carers.

More than a quarter – 26 per cent – of children looked after at home with their parents left school with no qualifications last

## A virtual school for looked-after children

Larissa Gordon describes herself as head of a school that "technically doesn't exist". She has no physical school building, yet her pupil roll consists of more than 450 children. Ms Gordon is a virtual school head and the children on her school's roll are those who are looked after by Aberdeen City Council and are still in education.

The role of "virtual headteacher" is statutory in England but Aberdeen City is thought to be the only Scottish council to have introduced the scheme. In

the local authority, Ms Gordon – supported by virtual school teacher Jacinta Birchley – tracks and promotes looked-after children's progress as if they were in a single school. The school was set up in 2015.

"For many of our looked-after children, moving schools means key adults who advocate for them will be changing more often than we would want," Ms Gordon says. "It's important for them to know that wherever they live and whatever school they attend, the virtual school headteacher

will be working with professionals on their behalf to get it right for them."

In England, these heads are responsible for the pupil-premium funding – the English equivalent of pupil equity funding (PEF) – for the looked-after children in their council area.

In Scotland, PEF money is distributed purely on the basis of the number of children in a school registered for free school meals, and there is no money earmarked specifically for children who are looked after.

year, compared with 13 per cent of children in care generally. Professor Sheila Riddell, director of the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity at the University of Edinburgh, acknowledged that any improvement in the attainment of looked-after children was to be welcomed – and put the recent boost down to successive governments focusing on this area.

But she added that "there is such a large gap to narrow – a tiny narrowing is not enough". "There is a danger of over-emphasising what is, after all, a pretty small improvement and not paying enough attention to the other messages in the paper, which really concern

the huge educational attainment gap between looked-after school leavers and others," she said. The attainment gap also increases "as people move up the attainment ladder", Prof Riddell highlighted.

## The impact of instability

School leavers generally were twice as likely to get at least one qualification at the equivalent of N5 or above as looked-after leavers. They were four times as likely to get at least one qualification at the equivalent of Higher and above, and 19 times more likely to get at least one at the equivalent of Advanced Higher level (see graphic, right). Attainment



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varies dramatically according to the number of placements that a looked-after young person has in a year. More than three-quarters of looked-after school leavers – 78 per cent – were in one placement for 2015-16, but those who experienced more than one placement performed considerably worse at school.

Nearly half – 45 per cent – of leavers with one placement reached level 5 or better, equivalent to N5, whereas just over a quarter of those with more placements – 26 per cent – achieved this.

Statistics which show that 78 per cent of care leavers were in a "positive destination" after school have also come under attack.

Last month, *Tes Scotland* revealed that school leavers on zero-hour contracts could be included in positive destination statistics. Riddell said they were a "fairly loose measure of success".

Linda O'Neill, from the Centre for Excellence for Looked-After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) at the University of Strathclyde, called for a focus on improving the proportion of looked-after pupils staying on at school. The best way to achieve this is to make it an enjoyable experience, she said.

Only 5 per cent of children in care go on to university, while more than 70 per cent leave school at the earliest opportunity, according to the latest statistics.

Ms O'Neill called for all schools to ensure that a member of the senior management team has explicit responsibility for looked-after children (see box, left).

There should also be a presumption against excluding looked-after children who had already suffered "rejection and trauma" but were eight times more likely to be excluded, she said.

Some schools were – albeit often unwittingly – breaking the law by failing to carry out the "critical" additional support needs assessment that all looked-after children were entitled to, Ms O'Neill claimed.

However, overall, a report on the latest statistics on the attainment of looked-after children states that "educational attainment among looked-after leavers has improved over the past seven years, narrowing the gap".

The gap between the proportion of all school leavers and looked-after school leavers attaining at least one award at the equivalent of N5

**How children in care get left behind**



was 62 percentage points in 2009-10. Launching the figures last week, education secretary John Swinney said it was encouraging to see the "notable improvement in the proportion of young people who are looked after and care-experienced gaining a qualification". However, he acknowledged that it was only "a step in

the right direction" and there was "still more to do to close the gap between our most and least vulnerable children".

The figures are based on the 468 young people looked after from August 2015 to July 2016 and who left school during 2015-16. @Emma\_Seith