



An Integrated Approach to Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children in Wales

Executive Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 The aim of this research was to assist the Welsh Government in shaping the future policy direction for supporting looked after children in education, to ensure the effective co-ordination of support, and to improve educational outcomes. We interviewed Local Authority (LA) social care and education stakeholders and practitioners in all 22 LAs, eight school leaders, five care experienced young people and other interested parties¹, about what is working well and less well within the current systems of support for looked after children in education. We also reviewed relevant Welsh and international policy and practice documents. Our aim was to identify and build upon what is already working, and present options for tackling what works less well, to better meet our ambitions for looked after children and young people.
- 1.2 This research focuses specifically on the need for integration and collaboration between education, social services, and others, primarily at LA level. This is in recognition that a child-centred approach will consider educational needs alongside concerns about well-being, health, and placement stability.

¹ Including the National Delivery Group for LAC, Directors of Education and Social Services, the Regional Education Consortia and the Education Priorities Group.

2. Key findings

Building on existing structures and practice

2.1 We identified practice perceived by research participants as good practice in the following areas that should continue in Wales, summarised below.

- capturing the voice of **looked after children** through less formal mechanisms and having the processes in place to act on what practitioners hear at either an individual young person or collective cohort level
- **collecting more holistic data**, on wider social and emotional factors, beyond attainment, that are likely to impact educational progress
- integration of Education and Children's Services into a single department or line management structure to foster integrated working between Education and Social Services teams, and having formal induction and ongoing training about looked after children's education needs across departments
- collaborative working at all levels of seniority within the relevant departments – strategic and operational so **practices are in place that support integration**. For example, a cross-departmental, strategic vision for looked after children support, with department directors and the senior leadership team (SLT) meeting to plan and review looked after children provision on a monthly or bimonthly basis, and LACE Coordinators having a seat at the table for discussions involving looked after children education.
- Having **processes that support integration**, such as having a single, person-centred approach to reviews of Personal Education Plans (PEP), aligned with Individual Development Plans (IDPs). For example, a PEP agreed across local areas that tend to host looked after children from the other area
- local authorities working with the wider community to create a place-based approach to improving lives (and educational outcomes), allowing **collaboration across LAs and regions**. For example, business leaders and owners providing apprenticeship opportunities or parks and leisure departments offering free leisure passes to looked after children
- **supporting schools to be more aware and prepared** for the needs of any looked after children in their school. For example, the Child Looked After Friendly Schools model, and provision of trauma- and attachment- informed training for all practitioners
- **evidence-based practice** and tailored interventions to support looked after children's outcomes, such as a well-being link in schools or support with transitions from primary to secondary, and post-16.

Challenges in existing structures and practice

2.2 The primary impact of local variation is a different support offer to looked after children, depending on where they are living at a given time. One head teacher described this as 'postcode lottery' and that the area the looked after children were placed in can significantly impact their experience of education and their outcomes. Given that looked after children already face significant challenges to educational attainment, it should not be acceptable that they experience additional inequality in support based on their geographical location.

- 2.3 Similarly, there is a high level of mobility among the population of looked after children (including in and out of Wales) and many will have direct experience of differences in structures and approaches when they move to new areas. Looked after children already face considerable uncertainty in their lives and, arguably, the structures in place to support their education should seek to actively avoid adding further uncertainty and inconsistency.
- 2.4 A second, significant impact of local variation is that professionals - who regularly need to engage with colleagues in other LAs - have to navigate and, to some extent, operate in differing systems. Many LAs and schools reported in this research that greater consistency and, where relevant, standardisation, would make their jobs much easier and far more efficient.
- 2.5 Other key challenges identified include:
- **The extent to which LAs capture the voice of child differed significantly.** Some LACE teams had very limited direct engagement with looked after children, hampering their ability to accurately capture the needs and wishes of the children.
 - **Few examples of celebrating the achievements of looked after children at LA level.** Not all looked after children want to be identified as such, however celebrating achievement can be a valuable way to engage young people and gather feedback.
 - **Outcome measures were found to be too limited,** focussing predominantly on academic attainment. Wellbeing measures were rarely used by LAs and there is currently no agreement on a standardised approach to measuring well-being making it impossible to measure outcomes with any rigour. The research also identified a need for standardised collection of longer-term data – specifically post compulsory education and post-18 when looked after children leave the system.
 - **Challenges with data systems** including transfer of data between education and Children’s Services teams and difficulty for LACE teams to obtain data on outcomes for looked after children placed out of area.
 - Considerable **variation in team structures**, including the role of the LACE Coordinators and their level of seniority and **no consistent approach to funding for LACE teams.**

Views on Virtual School Head and model

- 2.6 Overall views on Sir Alasdair’s recommendation were mixed. While some LAs were strongly in favour of implementing a Welsh version of virtual schools, others questioned the benefits of the model over their current system to improving outcomes for looked after children. Some key views are highlighted below:
- Some felt that **the remit of the VSH was different to what they were already delivering, others felt the role was fairly similar** either to the LACE role or that of their direct line manager. Some LAs, with already strong working relationships and shared processes between Education and Children’s Services, did not believe the virtual school model (VSM) would add further value. The LAs where education and social care departments were integrated recognised the similarities between their model and virtual schools and were supportive of a new Welsh-specific model, like VSM.
 - Some LAs felt that **greater consistency with the English and Scottish model** had potential benefits and would make collaboration easier with local authorities across the border. Others felt greater **consistency in LACE Coordinator roles across**

Wales was needed regardless of whether or not a new model is implemented, to support collaboration, communication and information sharing.

- **A key concern about the implementation of virtual schools for LAs was funding.** They felt a restructuring process and a new model would have significant cost implications and questioned where this funding would come from. Several felt that it was simply not possible to fund an additional, senior post like the VSH through the current system of LA funding.
- Another concern among local authorities was **how the introduction of a VSH would fit with the LACE Coordinator role and whether it would replace that role.** This was partly linked to the budget issue mentioned in the previous paragraph. It was felt that LACE Coordinators have a wealth of experience and expertise and more senior staff were very reluctant to lose these individuals. More broadly, some felt a **VSH should not come at the expense of ‘on the ground’ staff who have regular contact with looked after children themselves.** These concerns suggest that the seniority and scope of the VSH role needs further clarification.
- Many LAs reported they would benefit from having better access to **specialist resources** for looked after children, in **particular access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS).** Certain roles may or may not sit within the virtual school team itself, but a budget would be required to commission this support for the purposes of looked after children.

3. Conclusions

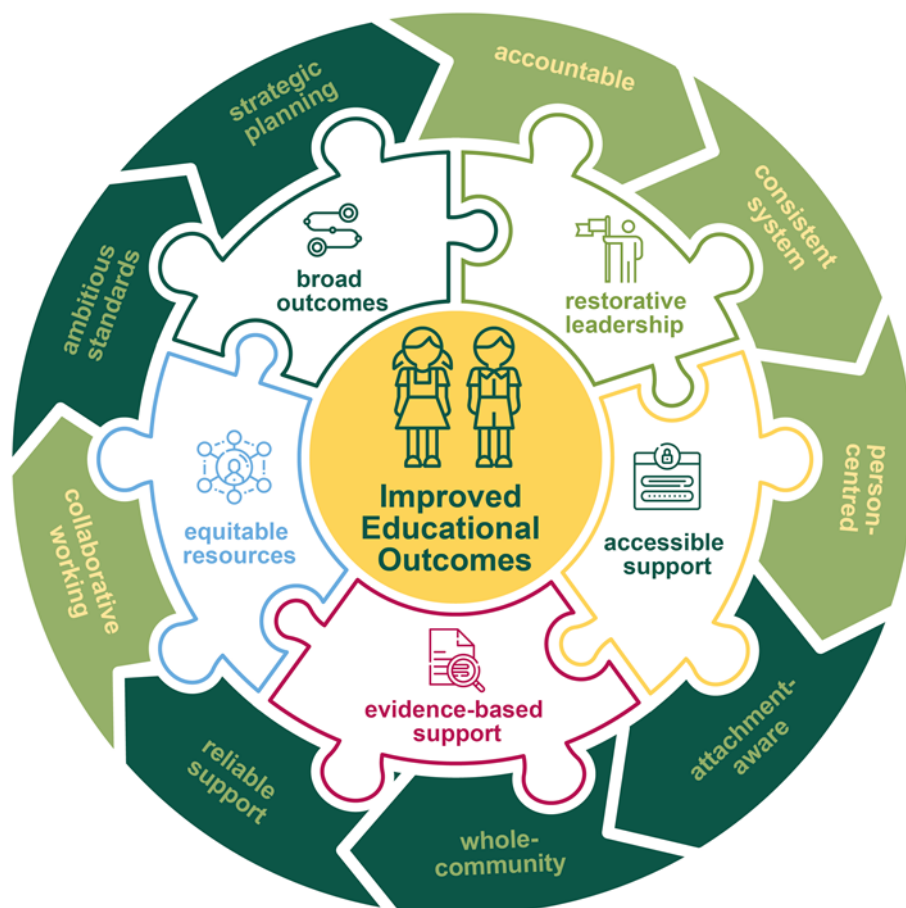
An integrated approach for Wales

- 3.1 The national strategy Prosperity for All² sets out the ambition to; “raise the educational attainment and improve the life chances of children in care, adopting a child centred approach, through the collaboration of education, social services and others.”
- 3.2 Based on this evidence we consider it would be premature to endorse a national roll out of a virtual school (VS) model in Wales. Currently the level of support for virtual schools is mixed; there is resistance to policy transfer from England, there are doubts about its evidence base, and there are fundamental concerns around funding, resourcing and the effect on existing roles. Should a VS model be imposed top-down by the Welsh Government there is a chance it would fail, not because it is not the right solution, but because there is not the buy-in at local level from those who must make it work. We are also mindful of learning from the Scottish model, that we need to not only consider the shape of an integrated model but also the context and conditions that sit around it, to ensure that it is a success.
- 3.3 With these considerations in mind, the necessary conditions to achieve the strategic ambition and which form the context for the implementation of an integrated approach are summarised in the figure below. These are based on identified good practice and framed as ‘principles’ which relate both to systemic ways of working and to individual young people and practitioners. It is expected that all LAs adopt these principles and that they would be enshrined in local strategies for looked after children. The component parts of an integrated approach have been developed from our review of the structures and practice that

² <https://wcva.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prosperity-for-all.pdf>

characterise an integrated approach to supporting looked after children’s education in Wales, Scotland, England and Australia (State of Victoria). LA should build these components into an integrated approach, with support from the Welsh Government, and by doing so capitalise on the successes of the VS model without attempting to replicate it.

3.4 Principles are presented in the outer ring of the diagram. Light green reflects system-level principles and dark green reflect individual-level principles. The ‘jigsaw pieces’ represent the component parts of an integrated approach. Together, these principles and component parts ultimately achieve improved outcomes for looked after children, shown at the centre of the diagram.



4. Recommendations

Creating the conditions for change

4.1 To be genuinely effective and sustainable, the appetite for change and the detail of the solution must come from LAs themselves. The two components designed to foster an integrated approach at local level are ‘broad outcomes’ and ‘restorative leadership’. In both cases, the aim is to drive increased scrutiny and greater accountability, strengthening the corporate parenting function. However, the Welsh Government must also provide the commitment and resources to create the conditions for change.

4.2 We recommend the Welsh Government:

- uses statutory data that is already available, produce more granular reports on looked after children's educational attainment which take account of additional needs and context, and looks at broader attainment metrics (i.e. progress since entering care, wider range of exam grades). It should consider creating an interactive platform that can be used by education and social services would facilitate the distribution and use of this data
- extends the CLA and CRCS Census to age 21
- agrees an approach to measure well-being for all Welsh schoolchildren, in line with the new well-being curriculum. This may be SDQ, Boxall or another existing, standardised measure but whatever is chosen should be consistently applied across Wales.

4.3 In addition, local authorities should:

- collect data on the type of educational provision (i.e. EOTAS, mainstream), NEET status and accommodation type for all care leavers, as part of CLA and/or CRCS Census
- proactively maintain contact with care leavers beyond 18, up to age 21.

Restorative leadership

4.4 We recommend the Welsh Government commissions a pilot to test different approaches to restorative leadership. We know that some LAs are already trying out different approaches to supporting the educational outcomes of looked after children, as discussed in the findings chapter. These are informative but to provide the evidence required to make Wales-wide strategic decisions; pilots need to be larger, systematic and evaluated.

4.5 Our recommendation to pilot reflects an effort to avoid prematurely creating a rigid all-Wales approach that fails to account for both local conditions and different rates of existing progress towards better integration. Scotland is trialling different models of restorative leadership, allowing LAs to test what works best, and we suggest Welsh LAs are afforded the same opportunity.

Equitable resources

4.6 The Welsh Government will need to consider how best to make the three forms of resources – transformational, systems and individual funding - available. PDG funding impact is continuously evaluated by Welsh Government, who work with the consortia to ensure interventions are evidence based. As part of this work, Welsh Government should reflect on the most effective mechanisms to ensure LAs have the funding needed to resource strategic initiatives and interventions with looked after children's cohorts.

Accessible support

4.7 Local authorities should consider how their structures and processes can be configured to best support looked after children. This includes encouraging more open data sharing between education and children's services departments, and enable read/write access to both systems at a minimum. The Welsh Government should support local authorities to establish the legal basis for open data between departments, and accompanying processes to ensure GDPR compliance

- 4.8 To address poor quality PEP in the short term, the Welsh government should set minimum standards on PEP completion and quality, Education services should have the responsibility for quality assuring it.
- 4.9 The Welsh Government would be pushing on an open door if it were to advocate a Wales-wide PEP, integrated with the IDP. Work to integrate these documents is underway in multiple areas, in different ways and plan to be used from September 2021. The Welsh Government may want to choose one approach and formalise that design across Wales, before the next academic year.
- 4.10 There would also be value in scoping the requirement (with local authorities) for a digital PEP hosted online for all of Wales. This could include personalised education, social, and well-being measures and targets. This would encourage a child centred approach to identifying targets and measuring progress as well as producing data that will help drive improvements across the whole of Wales.

Evidence-based support

- 4.11 To address the need to build capacity at local level for sharing evidence-based practice, Welsh Government should support Wales-wide communication of good practice and evidence-based intervention. Leveraging existing structures would be an efficient way of achieving this, for example, strengthening the role of the Regional Education Consortia to join up knowledge and communicate across regions.
- 4.12 Many LAs have been working towards whole-school approaches to emotional and mental well-being, including trauma-informed approaches. This has been formalised in the Welsh Government's recent Embedding a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being. This could usefully be extended recommended that awareness of looked after children is included in ITT and for newly qualified teachers – this would include specific training on Trauma and Attachment informed practice (as proposed in Sir Alasdair's report).
- 4.13 LAs need the ability to capture and interrogate authority-wide intelligence to inform service and practice decisions, and to have the capacity, and commitment, for undertaking robust self-evaluation. Welsh Government should support authorities to have essential performance monitoring infrastructure and tools, with senior management having the necessary oversight to identify and address any issues with performance or delivery. Facilitating opportunities for authorities and schools to partner with universities or organisations to evaluate initiatives would also help build an evidence base for all practitioners to leverage their work.
- 4.14 Table 1 lists these recommended actions including their timing, and ownership.

Timescales	Responsibility	Actions
Short-term	Welsh Government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consult and agree the principles underpinning an integrated approach. 2. Agree the new standard for outcomes data and reporting, including setting the outcome measures and operationalising these (see Annex C). 3. Create a national standard for PEP integrated with IDP, potentially choosing one approach already underway in many areas and formalise that design across Wales before the academic year. Set the expectation that the revised PEP process should be person-centred and based on attachment-aware principles 4. Require all LAs to have essential performance monitoring infrastructure and tools, with senior management having the necessary oversight to identify and address any issues with performance or delivery. 5. Agree models to pilot and publish invitation to LAs to take part in pilots.
	LAs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conduct a strategic review of your service supporting looked after children in education, against the these principles and ensure they are reflected in local strategies for looked after children 2. Put forward proposals for piloting a locally determined restorative leadership model. 3. Once announced and if not already in place, put in place infrastructure and processes, and communicate to staff: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. new standardised approach to measure well-being 2. new standards for outcomes data and reporting 3. new electronic PEP aligned with IDP 4. essential performance monitoring 5. accessing and engaging with evidence-based practice shared by Regional Education Consortia
Medium-term	Welsh Government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish a standardised annual reporting model locally and nationally, featuring the broader outcomes. 2. Agree standardised approach to measure well-being for all Welsh pupils, in line with the new well-being curriculum. 3. Consider how best to make the three resources – transformational, systems and individual funding – available to LAs to support their transformative change to better support looked after children outcomes. 4. Use existing statutory data to produce more granular reports on looked after children’s educational attainment which take account of additional needs and context, and looks at broader attainment metrics (i.e. progress since entering care, wider range of exam grades) 5. Agree the title of a VS Head equivalent, for use in the pilots, and beyond if evidence suggests it is an effective model.

Timescales	Responsibility	Actions
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Require LAs to collect the type of educational provision (i.e. EOTAS, mainstream), NEET status and accommodation type for all care leavers as part of CLA and/or CRCS Census. 7. Work with the Regional Education Consortia to define their responsibility for joining up knowledge and communicating evidence-based practice across regions.
	LAs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work with local counterparts to join up data management systems, or at least ensure key personnel with a need for accessing key data can do so regularly. 2. Once changes to CLA and CRCS Census agreed, update data management systems to collect the required evidence. 3. Regularly and consistently publish data on broader outcomes and activities to improve outcomes.
Longer-term	Welsh Government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create an interactive platform for education and social services to facilitate the distribution and use of this data 2. Digitised PEPs 3. Work with curriculum and awarding bodies to incorporate awareness of the needs of looked after children in the ITT and newly qualified teachers – including specific training on Trauma and Attachment informed practice. 4. Extend the CLA and CRCS Census to age 21.
	LAs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ongoing review on structures, process and practices to ensure they are person-centred and capture the voice of the child.

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Available at: <https://gov.wales/integrated-approach-improving-educational-outcomes-looked-after-children>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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