

# A better education for children in care

## SUMMARY



OFFICE OF THE  
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER



Social  
Exclusion  
Unit

# FOREWORD

If we are serious about building a prosperous, fair and strong society, then every child, whatever their background, must have the chance to make the most of their talents and potential. That's true of a child in care as much as any other.

It's why the Government is committed to giving children in care all the same life chances any parent would give their child, and none is more important than a good education which is crucial to a brighter future.



This sets major challenges. Being separated from family and friends, changing neighbourhoods and spending time out of school are difficult experiences for any child. Such an unsettling time makes it much harder to learn. It helps explain why almost half of children leave care with no qualifications at all. It is also a measurement of how society has failed these children in the past.

We are determined to put this right. We have already put the basic building blocks in place through investment and reform to provide all children with a better education. But we need to do more, which is why I asked the Social Exclusion Unit to look at what the Government can do to help raise the educational attainment of children in care.

The report is the result of a thorough investigation into the problems we must overcome to provide children in care with a good education. The changes identified will mean fewer children frequently moving placements or spending time out of school. Young people in care will be given more help, encouragement and support to access education, to turn up to school and to stay on after reaching 16. There will be more help for those children who fall behind and better training for teachers, social workers and carers to improve the health and wellbeing of every child.

These reforms are all part of the Government's wider aim to provide children with the services they need, when they need them. We have also announced today the Government's plans for children's services set out in the Children's Green Paper *Every Child Matters*. This includes proposals to improve integration of services, provide clearer accountability and responsibility, and reform and empower the workforce. It will bring stronger child protection and provide a voice for the disadvantaged.

I am confident that together these changes will at last give children in care the chance they deserve to fulfil their potential – vital for the young people themselves, but also for the health and prosperity of our society as a whole.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Blair". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a solid horizontal line.

# SUMMARY

## Our aim

1. The Government's long-term policy objective is to ensure that every child in care is able to fulfil his or her potential.
2. The report from the Social Exclusion Unit examines the barriers that prevent children in care achieving their educational potential and highlights specific areas of action to improve their life chances.

### Key changes – Social Exclusion Unit report on the education of children in care

- **Greater stability** – so that children in care do not have to move home or school so often.
- **Less time out of school – longer in education** – help with school admissions, better access to education with more support to help children in care attend school regularly and stay on after age 16.
- **Help with schoolwork** – more individual support tailored to the child backed by more training for teachers and social workers.
- **More help from home to support schoolwork** – by giving carers better training in children's education.
- **Improved health and wellbeing** – with teachers, social care staff, health workers and carers all working together in the interests of the child.

3. Major changes to improve the life chances of all children are proposed in the Children's Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*.

### Key proposals in the Children's Green Paper

Action will be focused on four main areas:

- **Supporting families and carers**
- **Early intervention – early identification and effective protection**
- **Improving accountability and increasing integration**
- **Workforce reform**

4. The Social Exclusion Unit reviewed the existing target for the education of children in care, and a new target has been set. Increased funding is available to underpin delivery.

### New Target

The new Public Service Agreement is to:

#### Improve life chances for children, including by:

- **substantially narrowing the gap between the educational attainment and participation of children in care and that of their peers by 2006.**

This target will have been achieved if, by 2006:

- outcomes for 11-year-olds in English and Maths are at least 60 per cent as good as those of their peers;
- the proportion who become disengaged from education is reduced, so that no more than 10 per cent reach school leaving age without having sat a GCSE equivalent exam; and
- the proportion of those aged 16 who get qualifications equivalent to five GCSEs graded A\*–C has risen on average by 4 percentage points each year since 2002; and in all authorities at least 15 per cent of young people in care achieve this level of qualifications.

### Increased funding

The Government announced increased funding in the Spending Review 2002:

- The Vulnerable Children's Grant, £252 million over 2003–06, will provide additional educational support for children most in need, including children in care; and
- An additional £113 million over 2003–06 will improve care placements and stability through the Choice Protects programme.

## Government progress

5. The actions set out in the Social Exclusion Unit report come in addition to recent investment and reform aimed at improving the life chances of children in care. Developments include:
  - *Quality Protects*, a five-year programme launched in 1998 with national objectives for children's services and £885 million of new money;
  - joint *Guidance on the Education of Children and Young People in Public Care* (the 'joint Guidance'), published by the Department of Health (DH) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2000;
  - National Minimum Standards for children's homes and fostering services, published in 2002; and
  - additional responsibilities for local authorities to support care leavers, introduced in October 2001.

6. These have brought notable improvements for children in care, such as better training for frontline workers on children's educational needs. However, progress has been inconsistent. Fewer than one in four local authorities met the 2001 target of half of care leavers obtaining one or more GCSE level qualifications.
7. **The Social Exclusion Unit was commissioned to look at what more could be done to improve the life chances of children in care by analysing the problem, talking to children in care and staff, and delivering cross-government plans.**

## Background – the current situation

8. Many children in care enjoy school, and almost all think it is important. But as a group they have poor experiences of education and very low educational attainment.

### Children in Care – Key Statistics

- At any one time, around 60,000 children are in care. In 2001–02, 41 per cent of children in care were aged 10 or under.
- Most children – 80 per cent – enter care because of abuse or neglect, or for family reasons. Less than 10 per cent enter care because of their own behaviour.
- Two-thirds live in foster care and one in 10 in children's homes.
- One in four children in care lives outside their 'home' local authority.
- In 2001, only 8 per cent of children in care achieved five or more A\*–C grades at GCSE, compared to half of all young people.
- Children in care have poor results in Key Stage tests at age seven, 11 and 14. Just 1 per cent go to university.

9. Some care leavers go on to be very successful later in life. However, for many, poor experiences of education and care contribute to **later social exclusion**:
  - between a quarter and a third of **rough sleepers** were in care;
  - young people who have been in care are two and a half times more likely to be **teenage parents**; and
  - around a quarter of adults in **prison** spent some time in care as children.
10. As well as the cost to individuals, this has **high social and economic costs**. Improving education, employment and training of care leavers to the level of their peers could save an estimated **£300 million over three years**. Savings from reduced crime and homelessness would be even greater.

## Underlying problems

11. Five underlying factors have inhibited change and led to slow progress:
- **capacity** – extremely high vacancy rates in the children’s social care workforce and insufficient staff training about the educational needs of children in care;
  - **management and leadership** – lack of commitment and time at a senior level, staff feeling powerless to affect change compounded by a lack of understanding between frontline staff and managers;
  - **resources** – while funding has increased in real terms, some areas struggle to deliver an adequate service, exacerbated by a lack of strategic planning and poor use of resources;
  - **systems and structures** – a widespread lack of joint working between frontline workers and between local authority officers in different departments; and
  - **attitudes** – many carers and social workers are positive about children in care, but negative attitudes and low expectations can be commonly found among professionals and wider society.

## The five big issues

12. The Social Exclusion Unit has identified five key reasons why children in care underachieve in education:
- (i) too many young people’s lives are characterised by **instability**;
  - (ii) young people in care spend too much **time out of school** or other place of learning;
  - (iii) children do not have sufficient **help with their education** if they get behind;
  - (iv) carers are not expected, or equipped, to provide sufficient **support and encouragement** at home for learning and development; and
  - (v) children in care need more help with their **emotional, mental or physical health and wellbeing**.

## Stability

13. Most children in care only enter care once and only have one care placement. However, **one in seven had three or more placements** in 2001–02. **Over a third of the young people the Social Exclusion Unit consulted had changed school at least twice** as a result of a change in care placement.
14. Finding and keeping a suitable care placement is key to improving stability. The lack of placement choice and poor strategic planning and commissioning of care placements can hamper social workers.

## Time out of school and time in education

15. Evidence on access to early years provision is very limited. Many local authorities do not know how many three- and four-year-olds in their care attend nursery.
16. Most school-aged children in care are in stable places in mainstream schools. However, **a significant minority are in non-mainstream settings**, with some only receiving a few hours tuition per week. Many miss long periods of school because:
  - **they do not have a school place;**
  - **they are excluded;** or
  - **they do not attend regularly.**
17. In 2001–02, only 46 per cent of care leavers were known to be in employment, education or training at age 19, compared to 86 per cent of all 19-year-olds.

## Help with schoolwork

18. Children in care may need **extra support in education**, either because they have **missed out on schooling**, or because they have special educational needs (SEN). **Of those children in care for a year or more, 27 per cent have a statement of SEN**, compared to 3 per cent of all children.
19. Children in care can benefit from whole school support measures such as learning mentors, or anti-bullying and anti-truancy initiatives. In addition, the joint Guidance introduced Personal Education Plans for each child in care and designated teachers in every school. Early evidence about the impact of these is mixed.
20. Children in care and care leavers in further and higher education may need additional support, particularly if they are re-engaging in education having missed out on school.

## Help and encouragement from home

21. Carers and social workers who support education successfully have high expectations, a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, up-to-date information about education, and the skills to support development and learning.
22. There is **wide variety** in the amount and quality of support provided for children's education, even within the same local authority. Although some carers provide excellent support, others do not – either because they do not know how best to help the child or do not see it as their responsibility.
23. **Youth work and out-of-school activities** can make a significant contribution to children's wider learning and development. Around three-quarters of those in care have access to after-school activities and clubs.

## Health and wellbeing

24. Educational outcomes are strongly influenced by a **child's emotional, mental and physical health**. School can boost a child's health through raising self-confidence and self-esteem, enabling participation in sports and access to health education.
25. Placement moves can exacerbate health problems and make diagnosis harder. Instability, bullying and trauma can all impact on a child's emotional health.
26. Children with mental health problems can have difficulty accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Waiting times can be as long as 12–18 months in some areas. The Government aims to expand CAMHS by a minimum of 10 per cent year-on-year, with additional funding of £250 million over the next three years.

## Delivering for children in care – national Government action

27. The Government will take action to build on Quality Protects and other programmes in eight areas. The full list of action in chapter nine of the main report includes:
  - (i) **Improving accountability through the Children's Green Paper consultation on legislating to:**
    - create the post of a Director of Children's Services;
    - create a lead council member for children; and
    - introduce a duty on the local authority to promote the educational achievement of children in care.
  - (ii) **Supporting the frontline more effectively:**
    - by clarifying roles and responsibilities for social workers and others working with children in care; and
    - by improving training and support for foster carers, to prevent placements breaking down and so that carers can provide better support for schoolwork from home.
  - (iii) **Ensuring that local authorities have adequate resources:**
    - through the Vulnerable Children's Grant (£252 million over three years) and Choice Protects funding (£113 million over three years). From 1 April 2004, the Quality Protects Grant will be mainstreamed into local authority budgets.
  - (iv) **Improving understanding of care, and attitudes towards those in care:**
    - by working with local authorities and others to consider how best to promote understanding and positive images of care, helping to prevent bullying and stigma.

(v) **Refining the legal framework and guidance in the longer term to improve placement planning, the Government will consult further on plans to:**

- reduce the number of school moves due to changes in care placements;
- reduce long distance placements; and
- improve regional commissioning of specialist services.

(vi) **Improving standards:**

- by recommending to the General Social Care Council (GSCC) that social care staff working with families must have up-to-date knowledge of children's education and development needs to remain on the GSCC register.

(vii) **Prioritising children in care in current and future policy development:**

- by recognising explicitly the needs of children in care and their carers in national programmes for pre-school children; and
- by working to improve children's emotional and mental health.

(viii) **Making better use of information and research:**

- using data from the School Census (particularly to understand outcomes for children from ethnic minority groups and children with disabilities); and
- by harmonising central government data requirements over the longer term.

## Delivering for children in care – recommendations for local action

**28.** Local authorities, schools and independent care providers need to take action to build on progress in six areas. The full list in chapter ten of the main report includes:

(i) **Improved planning:**

- at a strategic level, improved management information should be used to assess likely future placement needs to reduce frequent moves; and
- each child should have an individual education target.

(ii) **Putting a priority on children in care:**

- local authorities should ensure carers are fully aware of, and able to access, local services for pre-school children; and
- local education authorities should consider using the available funding to provide bursaries for children in care to schools to facilitate admissions.

**(iii) More support for children in care:**

- local authorities should ensure every child has access to good quality out-of-school activities and to appropriate and up-to-date educational books, toys and Information and Communication Technology equipment;
- local authorities should make immediate arrangements to provide full-time education for children who do not have a school place; and
- leaving care services should work with colleges and universities to raise awareness of the specific needs of care leavers, including through staff training.

**(iv) Listening and responding to children in care:**

- social workers should consult the Advisory Centre for Education exclusions helpline if a child has been excluded from school and, taking the views of the child and carer into account, mount a challenge as appropriate; and
- children and young people should be consulted about matters relating to their education provision, and their views acted upon.

**(v) Training and support for social workers and teachers:**

- local authorities should develop joint training for staff which includes sessions delivered by children and young people in or leaving care where possible; and
- local authorities should assess foster carers' ability to support a child's education as part of the initial assessment and give extra help to those yet to reach the required standard.

**(vi) Use of data to inform service improvements:**

- local authorities should monitor the number of children changing schools as a result of entering or leaving care, or a change in care placement; and
- local authorities should collect information on the proportion of children's individual education targets that are met.

To support local action, the Social Exclusion Unit has produced a good practice guide that includes case study examples of action to address these issues. Find it at [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk) or call 020 7944 8133.

## Measuring success – how will we know it's working?

29. As well as the new Public Service Agreement target, the Government will put in place a number of arrangements for ensuring that the action in the report is implemented in full.

Progress will be monitored and checked through:

- working with key inspectorates to ensure that local implementation of the report's action is included in performance assessments;
- using existing indicators of educational outcomes for children in care to monitor progress, and working with inspectorates to develop new indicators that monitor children's attainment in Key Stage tests, basic skills and participation in university or college post-16;
- considering, as part of the 2004 Spending Review, whether to introduce additional targets and indicators, including the option of 'value-added' targets to measure individual children's progress; and
- establishing a new project group to take forward implementation of the report. The group's work will be overseen by the Ministerial Committee on Social Exclusion and the Ministerial Sub-Committee on the Delivery of Services for Children, Young People and Families, and an external advisory group on the education of children in care.

## Further information

This summary is available in the following languages: Bengali, Gujarati, Cantonese, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi, from the address below. Copies of the summary in these languages can also be downloaded from the SEU website: [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk)

Braille and audio tape versions of the summary are also available from the address below.

The full report and further copies of this document are available from the website, or from the address below.

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