

By email: CIN.REVIEW@education.gov.uk

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ADCS Responds to the Department for Education's Review of Children in Need

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department for Education's (DfE) call for evidence on the educational outcomes of children in need. ADCS is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the Children Act (2004). The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education.
- 1.2. The experimental data published alongside this call for evidence attempts to provide an insight into the characteristics of this diverse cohort, however, children in care and those on a child protection plan are included here which does not reflect the accepted definition of need under section 17 of the *Children Act (1989)*, which seems strange given the focus of this exercise. Children in care receive support with their education via additional pupil premium funding, access to the virtual school head (VSH), a designated teacher and a personal education plan. Under the DfE's definition of 'children in need,' as of 31 March 2016, 6% of the total child population received support from children's social care at some point over the preceding 12 months.
- 1.3. The call for evidence poses three wide ranging questions about the attainment of children in need: what is it that makes a difference to the educational outcomes of children in need; how do some children in need achieve better outcomes than others; and, what helps them to achieve their potential? When this review was first announced it was widely assumed that a broader lens would be applied to meeting all the needs children requiring help and support have, not just their educational progress and attainment. It is well documented that whatever else goes wrong in children's lives, if their educational outcomes are good, then that provides a valuable cushion against poorer social outcomes in the longer term. And, whilst ADCS welcomes the focus on raising aspiration, it is not immediately clear how the findings of this consultation will be utilised by the DfE to improve children and young people's outcomes and ultimately their life chances.

2. Understanding the wider context in which children live

- 2.1. Whilst this exercise is primarily concerned with the educational attainment of a defined cohort of children, it is important to understand the wider context in which they live and the barriers they face to success. As highlighted in our '[*Safeguarding Pressures 5*](#)' research, the effects of the 'toxic trio' - domestic abuse, parental mental ill-health, and substance abuse - continue to be a major and increasingly prevalent reason for our involvement in the lives of children and their families. A turbulent home life will understandably impact on a child's ability, capacity and preparedness to learn.
- 2.2. Last year, ADCS published a position paper, '[*A country that works for all children,*](#)' which explores the impact of public policy, including the impact of austerity, on children, young people and their families. There are currently four million children living in poverty and a growing number rely on breakfast clubs and free school meals to meet this basic human

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd
Piccadilly House, 49 Piccadilly, Manchester, M1 2AP
0161 826 9484 | info@adcs.org.uk | www.adcs.org.uk | [@ADCStweets](https://twitter.com/ADCStweets)

need. Poor nutrition affects children's ability to learn both academically and socially yet not enough national attention or resources are being focused here. It is concerning that England does not have a child poverty reduction strategy, particularly in light of research by the [Institute of Fiscal Studies](#) which estimates that the number of children living in poverty will top five million by 2020/21.

- 2.3. The call for evidence may be interested in recent research conducted by [Bywaters et al](#) (2017) which suggests that where children live is a central factor in inequality. Those living in the most deprived areas in England are 10 times more likely to be on a child protection plan or become looked after than their wealthier counterparts. In our policy paper, *A country that works for all children*, we called for a cross-government review to understand better the reasons for, and links between, rising levels of child poverty and demand for children's services.

3. What will help children and young people to achieve better outcomes at schools?

- 3.1. What makes a difference to children and young people in need of help and protection is no different to any child – they need someone who cares for them individually and acts to improve their outcomes, either via the provision of practical support or advocacy and encouragement. At present this isn't institutionalised or systemic, it is reliant on someone caring and offering children and young people the help they require to achieve their potential. For children in care it is likely this is the VSH or a foster carer, for children in need this might be a family member, a teacher or a sports coach, for example.
- 3.2. More needs to be done to offer parents and carers early help and support to increase their capacity to meet the needs, both social and educational, of their children. It would be helpful if there was a more systematic focus on supporting parents and carers to create a positive home learning environment via access to high quality early education in the early years or children's centres. Broadening out access to childcare for working families remains the government's policy focus in the early years despite an ongoing commitment to social mobility. Indeed, research tells us that children from poorer backgrounds have worse developmental outcomes in the early years which translates into worse educational outcomes in their school career and in later life. A little extra help here can be transformative in terms of 'closing the gap.'
- 3.3. Whilst tailored interventions to support classroom learning may be required to meet the needs of individual children and young people experiencing difficulties, given the size of the cohort identified here and the it would be beneficial to take a more holistic approach to improving outcomes. Schools should be encouraged, and incentivised if necessary, to better meet the needs of learners who are experiencing adversity e.g. illness, a bereavement or family breakdown, which will invariably impact on their studies. ADCS is concerned that the growth of 'zero tolerance' behavior policies in schools does not serve children in need well. They require a flexible approach to discipline and school leaders who go the extra mile and do not seek to exclude them because they are experiencing personal difficulties which may impact on their behaviour. However, in the context of reduced funding and an accountability system that prioritises academic attainment, the stakes are high for school leaders who wish to adopt inclusive approaches.
- 3.4. Building on the findings of an important piece of [research](#) by the Universities of Oxford and Bristol (2015) which demonstrated that care is a protective factor and early admission to care is associated with consistently better educational outcomes, ADCS worked with the DfE, VSHs and the National Consortium of Exam Results (NCER) to develop a national

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data tool to track the progress of all children in care across the country. This information is then used to gauge the effectiveness of support and assist with the identification of ways of improving attainment. The '*Children Looked After Project*' has been live for two years and there may be some valuable and transferable learning here. Given the diversity in the cohort of children and young people designated as 'in need' there is no single solution to the question of how to raise attainment. ADCS therefore supports a greater focus on progress in the future and we would welcome discussions with the DfE and NCER to this end. ADCS would also support the involvement of the National Schools Commissioner and his eight regional schools commissioners in these discussions given their role in overseeing the performance of academy schools in England.

- 3.5. Additional funding is allocated to help raise the attainment of disadvantaged students and the DfE's experimental data show that a large number of this cohort are eligible for pupil premium. However, these funds are not ringfenced and the DfE has not yet published comprehensive guidance on 'what works' in supporting disadvantaged pupils. As the funding pressures schools experience grow so too does the risk that this targeted funding is used to subsidise core education functions. It would be helpful if guidance was forthcoming to ensure this investment is having the desired effect.
- 3.6. On poor academic outcomes for this vulnerable group, it is clear that meeting their social and emotional needs so that cognitive functioning is possible must be the first priority. Only social-emotional interventions over a sustained period of time will free up children to learn. The Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 aimed to improve services for children by promoting early help, however, myriad changes to legislation and policy have occurred over the last decade which have impacted on this goal. ADCS members are particularly concerned that our ability to provide help and support earlier is being eroded due a lack of resources which is driving up referrals to, and demand for, statutory child protection services. Preventative work is the only way to turn around the lives of the most disadvantaged children in terms of attainment, health and access to services, yet local authorities are being forced to make difficult choices about where to target increasingly limited resources.
- 3.7. ADCS would welcome the opportunity to remain in dialogue with the DfE. Please contact Katy Block, ADCS Policy Officer, katy.block@adcs.org.uk, to arrange.