Annex C

Improving educational outcomes for looked-after children in Northern Ireland

This case study discusses the emerging policies and practices concerned with looked-after children in Northern Ireland. This case study explores the holistic approaches to supporting child well-being and standard setting with a focus on continuous improvement, as well as some targeted interventions that show some promise for meeting the complex needs of looked-after children and supporting long-term success. The findings and recommendations of this case study form part of the overall recommendations of the Northern Ireland Public Governance Review.

Introduction

Prior to the mid-1980s, in Northern Ireland as well as in other countries, education for looked-after children – that is, children who are in the care of a local Trust[1] – was a low priority. Since then, efforts to improve educational outcomes for looked-after children (LAC) have intensified across countries. Various reports, policies and programmes have attempted to raise the priority of education and to improve interagency co-operation (Goddard, 2000). Based on available international data, it appears that outcomes for looked-after children in Northern Ireland and beyond have improved in the ensuing decades.[2]

This case study on looked-after children in Northern Ireland provides an opportunity to bring together evidence from a range of policies and programmes from different countries, to identify gaps in provision, and to consider how these might be addressed. Emerging policies and practices are explored, including holistic approaches to supporting child well-being, and standard setting with a focus on continuous improvement, as well as some targeted interventions that show some promise for meeting the complex needs of looked-after children and supporting long-term success.

Based on findings from the case study and the review of literature, these indicate a real need to continue to build the evidence base on "what works" and to innovate, as well as to address some basic aspects of provision in Northern Ireland. For example, as the numbers of looked-after children continue to grow, more high quality home and school placements are needed. Social workers, who frequently have heavy caseloads, need to have more time to devote attention to looked-after children, their families and carers. According to the Department of Education educators and carers may need training to understand how to address behavioural challenges or to better support well-being and achievement. To achieve any of these goals, while there is evidence that schools have access to a range of training/support regarding understanding and managing the behaviour of LAC children, more strategic investment of limited resources will be needed.

The next section sets out the methodology for this case study. In Section 3, recent benchmarking data on looked-after children educational outcomes are presented in comparison to outcomes for general student populations in the United Kingdom. These data highlight major gaps in achievement. Section 4 turns to a short discussion of factors that support looked-after children educational achievement, and which are important to consider in the development of more effective policies and practices.

This case study is one of five case studies being conducted in the context of an overall Public Governance Review (PGR) of Northern Ireland; their findings will be integrated into the final Public Governance Review report. Efforts to improve interagency working as well as links between central departments, local trusts and voluntary organisations (Section 5) and to implement policies and programmes (Section 6) are therefore the major focus for the study. OECD recommendations conclude with the next steps to be taken.

Methodology

Findings are based on a review of relevant literature and interviews conducted with key stakeholders in the Northern Ireland Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and numerous advocacy organisations serving looked-after children, their families and carers (see Appendix C.1).

Key information interviews focused on:

- priorities for improving outcomes for looked-after children in Northern Ireland
- what is known about gaps in services and their impact on learning
- interagency working and co-operation. Organisational and professional cultures, communications and barriers to effective working were of particular interest.

The diverse stakeholders from the Department of Education (DE) and Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety (DSSHPS) and leaders from non-profit and voluntary organisations that were met shared many insights on current policies and practices, challenges related to intergovernmental communication and implementation[3]. Analysis of the current system and barriers to address draws on the information shared in interviews and in official documents.

We also reviewed academic and policy literature, focusing on factors that affect educational achievement of looked-after children and interventions. This review was not systematic, but rather an opportunistic analysis. Several promising practices and policies that have been developed and implemented in other countries were identified to inform OECD recommendations for Northern Ireland. Indeed, key informants interviewed in Northern Ireland also noted interest in several of these programmes (Scotland's Getting It Right for Children, the Virtual School Head in England, and other interventions to support learning). Brief descriptions of these policies and programmes, as well as studies and evaluations of their implementation are provided. Northern Ireland can learn much from others' prior experiences to better anticipate challenges.

Finally, it's important to note that while some studies that measured the impact of specific interventions were found they were mostly of small scale. It is difficult to make any strong claims about "what works" to improve educational outcomes of looked-after children. Nevertheless, these studies raise important questions and highlight areas where further research is required.

Benchmarking data on looked-after children

A number of studies across countries have consistently shown that looked-after children have lower educational outcomes than mainstream learners. They are also more frequently excluded from school, which may be due to problems of behaviour. Looked-after learners are more likely to be bullied. Few care leavers go on to university (Condie et al. 2009; Zima et al., 2000).

Benchmarking data on qualification levels puts the challenges into sharp focus.[4] The following tables show the highest level of attainment for all school leavers and for looked-after leavers for the 2013/14 academic year.

Table C.1. **Highest level of educational attainment**

	Northern Ireland		England	
	Looked after children	General school population (NI)	Looked after children	General school population
1 or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) at grades A*-G	73%	100%	*NA*	*NA*
5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-G	49%	98%	*NA*	*NA*
5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C	29%	82%	12%	52.1%

Source: Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety of Northern Ireland (DHSSPS) (2015), "Children in care in Northern Ireland", *2013-14 Statistical Bulletin*, 18 June, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/child-care-ni-13-14.pdf.

The GCSE examinations are taken by most pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at the end of compulsory school education, year 12, and are intended to communicate attainment in different subject areas (there are 50 GCSEs). They are not compulsory; and schools may choose not to enter students (see www.politics.co.uk/reference/gcses).

Table C.2. **School age children with statement of special education needs (SEN)**

	Looked-after children	General school population
Northern Ireland	26%	5%
England	29%	2.8%

Source: DHSSPS (2015), "Children in care in Northern Ireland", *2013-14 Statistical Bulletin*, 18 June, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/child-care-ni-13-14.pdf.; Department for Education, England (2014), "Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England as of 31 March 2014", *Statistical First Release*, SFR 49/2014, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/384781/Outcomes_SFR49_2014_Text.pdf.

For Scotland: attainment of all school leavers and looked-after school leavers, by their highest level of attainment 2013/14, see Table C.3.

Table C.3. **School age children with statement of SEN**

	Scotland	
	Looked after leavers	All school leavers
1 or more qualifications at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 3 or better	91%	98%
1 or more qualifications at SCQF level 4 or better	74%	96%
1 or more qualifications at SCQF level 5 or better	40%	84%
1 or more qualifications at SCQF level 6 or better	12%	59%
1 or more qualifications at SCQF level 7 or better	2%	19%
No qualifications	9%	2%

The Scottish Credit Qualifications Framework (SCQF) covers all levels of education, from school to post-doctorate. The qualifications are intended to communicate the knowledge, skills and attitudes (e.g. autonomy, ability to work with others) students have attained (see http://scqf.org.uk)

Note: Differences in the education systems of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom mean that it is not possible to make direct comparisons.

Source: DHSSPS (2015), "Children in care in Northern Ireland", *2013-14 Statistical Bulletin*, 18 June, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/child-care-ni-13-14.pdf.; Department for Education, England (2014), "Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England as of 31 March 2014", *Statistical First Release*, SFR 49/2014, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/384781/Outcomes_SFR49_2014_Text.pdf.

Lack of educational qualifications is connected to higher rates of unemployment, mobility, homelessness, financial difficulties, physical and mental health problems for young people leaving care (Viner and Taylor, 2005).

What factors are associated with educational achievement for looked-after children?

There is a great deal of complexity and variation within the population of looked-after children, as Stein (2006) has observed, and thus a need for better theory and outcomes studies tracking not only "what works", but also "for whom", and "under what circumstances". The current evidence base nevertheless provides a good foundation for understanding factors that support educational achievement, and directions for new programme development and research.

To date, a few small-scale studies have focused on factors that support educational achievement for looked-after children. Within this literature, we identified three broad categories:

- responsiveness to the child's needs
- stability of home/school placements and the quality of relationships
- high expectations for educational achievement, and support when needed.

Responsiveness to the child's needs

Human rights frameworks and national legislation support the rights of children, young people and their families to have their views heard and taken into account in the provision of services. This is a first principle for services for looked-after children in Northern Ireland and for children's rights internationally.

A few studies have pointed out that there are, however, a number of challenges in ensuring that the voices of looked-after children and their families are indeed heard. In England, for example, Winter (2006) points out that looked-after children have had little involvement in developing assessment and care planning systems, and that there is little consideration for their privacy or safeguarding of their welfare (cited in McLeod, 2007). In a 30-country survey, Eurochild (2010) found disparities between children's rights and their actual involvement in policy consultations or in decisions that directly affect them. Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy (2013) have also found that research on programmes for looked-after children do not generally include their viewpoints. Borland et al. (1998) observed that there was little research on daily school experiences of looked-after children, very little attempt to gather teacher views, and no systematic observation of practice. Nearly 20 years later, it appears that little has been done to remedy this gap in the research.

McLeod (2007) and Munro (2001) identify a number of barriers to taking the views of looked-after children into account in planning of direct services. Real capacity to listen to young people, McLeod notes, requires a good understanding of development as well as the time and capacity to build supportive relationships with them. Moreover, dialogue with disaffected youth can be challenging. At the same time, looked-after children have noted the importance of establishing a bond – with their social worker or another adult who will listen, empathise and advocate for them (Butler and Williamson, 1994).

Another important issue from Munro's (2001) study was in regard to the lack of confidentiality, including sharing of documents and case notes. Many looked-after children were uncomfortable with this. Indeed, children may be less willing to confide vital information if they believe it will be widely shared.

McLeod (2007)[5] notes that youth may feel they have not been heard if their wishes have not been acted upon, particularly in regard to more significant issues, such as family visits (see also Munro, 2001). A report of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)[6] in England corroborates these views, finding that children and youth believe that being able to express their views is vital, but that they do not in reality have much say. Nor is it possible to generalise about children's preferences. Social workers, on the other hand, must deal with resource and time constraints as they attempt to help looked-after children and may not be able to respond to expressed wishes.

Effective listening and care, as found by McLeod (2007) and Monroe (2001), require sophisticated listening skills and discretion. More thought needs to be given on how to balance children's desire for confidentiality and the need to share information. More resources may need to be allocated to improve training and professional development, to lower staff turnover rates, and to ensure that case workers and other professionals have enough time to truly listen and respond (Boddy et al., 2014).

Stability and the quality of relationships

Stability – whether of home or school placements – is associated with better educational outcomes for looked-after children. For example, Aldgate et al. (1992) found that improved educational attainment was associated with long-term home placements. Jones et al. (2011) found that factors associated with outcomes included the number of placements, age at first placement, and any behavioural problems. Fernandez (2009) in an eight-year longitudinal study of outcomes for looked-after children in Australia[7] found that multiple moves and the loss of significant attachments lead to elevated behavioural and emotional problems.[8] Children who were fully integrated with their foster families, on the other hand, performed better academically and had fewer behavioural problems at school than their peers who were not fully integrated.

Key informants for this case study felt that decisions on whether to move children to a new foster home should also consider the stability of school placements. Ward and Skuse (2001) in their examination of data from a longitudinal study of 249 looked-after children in England found that while age, behavioural problems and the absence of mental health support contributed to placement breakdowns, the majority of moves were actually planned transitions between temporary placements, suggesting, as they note that "… the system may ignore the needs of those children who cannot swiftly return home" (Ward and Skuse, 2001, p. 333). A better understanding of reasons for placement moves in Northern Ireland may help to identify alternative approaches that can also support stability. When school transfers are absolutely necessary, they need to be planned so that any potential problems are addressed effectively. This also includes the need to share information when children transition from primary to post-primary education.

Stability of school placement is also important. As noted above, looked-after children are frequently excluded from school due to challenging behaviour. Fletcher-Campbell et al. (2003) suggests that schools may do more to provide support for these students, including by developing strong relationships with children and providing support and assistance when needed. Gilligan (1998) argues that schools may also help looked-after

children to develop their resilience and self-efficacy so they will have the necessary skills to deal with challenges throughout life.

Other elements of stability include parental involvement, when appropriate. While each child's circumstances are very different, decisions on whether and how to maintain contact with birth parents may be important to stability. Contact may include simply being sure that parents have information on the child's health and progress in school, are involved in decisions related to the child's studies or other decisions regarding their everyday lives, or again that there is more active involvement or more informal visits with family (Boddy et al. 2014).

High expectations and extra support, when needed

A number of studies have found that adults frequently have low expectations or negative stereotypes that lead to the marginalisation of looked-after children in schools. The National Research Council (2000) and Rubie-Davis (2007) found that teachers who communicate low expectations for their students have a negative impact on student achievement.

Jackson (1998) found that many looked-after children who achieved five or more GCSE examinations at grade C or above had a role model or mentor to support them. Many of these children were also enthusiastic readers. Extra-curricular interests, social events, and extra learning support, when needed, are also important. Dweck's (2006) findings that individuals who have a "growth mind-set" (i.e. the idea that long-term success is correlated with effort rather than innate ability or talent) are more likely to succeed over time are also relevant here. Learners develop self-efficacy as they are praised for effort rather than ability.

In Northern Ireland, educational outcomes for looked-after children in residential care are lower than for those in home care. Key informants noted a number of conditions that disadvantage learners in residential homes, including lack of study space, lack of materials, and fewer hours dedicated to schooling. On the other hand, Emond (2014) found that children in residential care in Dublin had better learning outcomes with teachers who were able to build their confidence and trust, to stimulate their interest and to set out expectations for their learning.

The following section explores governance arrangements in Northern Ireland, identifies gaps in institutional communication and service provision, and suggests alternatives to address them.

Key actors work in a siloed structure lacking an integrated approach to looked-after children

Looked-after children in Northern Ireland have a diverse set of actors responsible for designing, implementing and delivering their care and education, as well as advocating on their behalf. Ideally, these actors should form a tight network around the child and his/her needs. Despite reported progress in working better as a group, the constellation remains fragmented across type of actor and responsibilities (e.g. strategy, implementation, service delivery, etc.) and falls short of taking an integrated, child-centred approach.

The children and their carers: A brief profile

As of March 2014, there were just over 2 850 looked-after children in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2014). The children may be living in foster care, with relatives or friends (kinship care), or residential homes or schools. In some cases, they may be in care but living with their parents. It is reported that approximately 75% live in foster care, with priority given to placement with kin; 12% remain with a parent; 7% are in residential care; and the remaining 5% are in another form of placement (DHSSPS, 2014). A significant portion of looked-after children have special education needs, disabilities, and come from environments with drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, mental health issues, severe economic pressures, as well as domestic violence. The fact is that they constitute a relatively small group in terms of the total population.

Carers are those responsible for looking after the child. The carer is generally a foster carer, with approximately 40% of foster carers being kin[9] (DHSSPS, 2014), a grandmother or an aunt for example; often not educationally advantaged and may be living on fixed incomes. The carers are often perceived as the greatest advocates and supporters of the looked-after child. As such they play a critical role in the child's education outcomes and overall well-being, but, according to interviews conducted for this case study, they sometimes face difficulty advocating on behalf of the children for whom they care.

Policy responsibility is divided among government departments and agencies

Northern Ireland's Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has the lead responsibility for looked-after children, particularly with respect to establishing overall policy. The Department of Education (DE) is responsible for setting education policy, which includes looked-after children. Other key department level actors are the Department of Justice (DoJ), which has jurisdiction over this cohort in juvenile justice detention, including ensuring their education, and the Department of Employment and Learning (DEL), which is responsible for universities and vocational training, and intervenes with respect to youth employment policies and opportunities for youth over 16.

Policy implementation occurs through a hierarchical system of agencies. The Health and Social Care Board (HSC Board) oversees the five regional Health and Social Care Trusts (HSC Trusts), and is responsible for management and operations, performance monitoring and management, as well as service commissioning. The HSC Trusts ensure that looked-after children policy is implemented and that the needs of the children are met, independently of their religious affiliation. HSC Trusts are the "corporate parent"[10] for children in their care. As such, the Trusts are responsible for care planning and review, and for ensuring education outcomes for individual children, working with their education counterparts as necessary. The Department of Education (DE) has one education authority (EA) with five regional offices. The EA is a new entity, replacing the five Education and Library Boards and Staff Commission that functioned relatively autonomously. The driver behind this change was the Review of Public Administration and a desire to introduce greater regional coherence in the delivery of services, including those for looked-after children, and to facilitate co-operation with other relevant agencies. The EA is legally obligated to ensure all children have suitable provision of education and if the child cannot participate in education, the EA must ensure that education is somehow provided, for example through "education otherwise than at school." The EA is

expected to work across Northern Ireland for children and youth, including looked-after children.

Within the parameters of their legal, policy, governance and accountability frameworks, the agencies of both departments can decide how policy is implemented. There is discussion whether a higher degree of standardisation is needed in order to ensure greater quality and uniformity among basic needs covered in Northern Ireland. The establishment of the EA is intended to support the goal of ensuring greater harmonisation, i.e. a more integrated Northern Ireland approach, in the services offered.

At the same time, there is an intention to remain sensitive to regional differences in service needs. Currently, Belfast and the South Eastern Region have dedicated joint "Looked-After Children in Education" teams. These are integrated into the education welfare service, and managed by the chief education welfare officer. The teams are multi-disciplinary and cross-agency as staff includes a representative from the education welfare service, a teacher, a youth worker, a member of the HSC Trust, a social worker, and at times a dedicated education psychologist. The HSC Trust also partially funds a Looked-After Children Teacher. As a unit, the team manages all the referrals from schools relating to looked-after children, provides individual tutor support, support to all residential units, youth work support for individual young people, and runs specific projects with identified schools. The North Eastern Region has a similar model and the Southern and Western Regions historically, which have not had such teams, have focused on capacity building for schools to improve understanding of the needs of LAC and educational outcomes as part of an integrated approach across Children and Young People's Services which includes tutoring to increase attainment.[11] Despite their different approaches, these regions all aim to create a closer working relationship between the sector agencies.

Advocates and the voluntary sector speak for children's rights and deliver services

While implementation responsibility for services supporting looked-after children rests with the agencies noted above, most of support services, particularly with respect to specific programmes (e.g. advocacy services, youth groups, parental support groups, etc.), are delivered through the voluntary sector and civil society organisations (CSOs). Among the representatives interviewed it was clear that advocates and the voluntary sector do not split along the lines of communities of origin or religious affiliation. In fact, one representative indicated that in organisations specifically for youth activities, these often represent the first time that children or youth interact with peers from a different community. Overall, advocates and the voluntary sector operate in a unique space: 1) they do not work along communities of origin; 2) they are contracted for service provision by government departments or agencies or by both; 3) they will often serve an advocacy function; and 4) in some cases they provide policy advice and research on relevant topics related to their advocacy area. The advocacy groups differ in terms of human resource and financial capacity, although they all depend to varying degrees on department or agency funding. For example, the Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) is funded by the HSC Board, and DHSSPS to provide advocacy services. Contact between VOYPIC and the government is at the Department and Board level, though service implementation with the government is at the Trust level. At the same time representatives of different advocacy groups indicated to the OECD team that they felt their capacity to reach the children can be limited by the HSC Trust social workers and

child carers who act as gate-keepers. In addition, the government also funds individual programming initiatives within the voluntary sector, for example the Fostering Network's "Fostering Achievement" programme, funded by DHSSPS, the HSC Board, and the DE.

This combined model of advocacy in addition to service delivery seems to work for the region. However, it creates a voluntary sector and civil society that is very dependent on the government for funding and contracts, and spins a web of interrelated activity that circulates a limited amount of funds through itself – action and funds circulating in a limited sphere. As discussed in Chapter 3, this focus on service delivery and dependence on contracts also has its risks.

Other actors play an important role in outcomes and public opinion

Other actors that play a strong role in the education outcomes of looked-after children are schools, principals, and teachers. Schools with a leadership focused on improving learning for all students can make a difference with looked-after children and their outcomes. School management, however, is autonomous from DE. There is a looked-after children policy and a pupil attendance strategy in development, and the DE is planning to provide guidance on best practice approaches in schools to support implementation. We face some information gaps with respect to information regarding how the schools work with looked-after children, incentives and disincentives for enrolment and how schools, school leaders and school staff work with the system surrounding this cohort.

Finally, despite not being directly involved in looked-after children care, the media is a powerful influence and can shape public opinion regarding social issues, especially around children and the elderly.

Analysis

While there seems to be a general understanding of the need to work together among the various actors, it does not seem to be the case or to be actively pursued, an issue also discussed in the main report. It is in part stymied by hierarchical and fragmented institutional structures. Inter-institutional exchange is most active and dynamic at the technical (agency) level, driven by the need to co-operate, and supported by mechanisms such as the Personal Education Plans (PEPs). The Looked-After Children in Education Teams serve as a bridge in the education space, placing them figuratively between the departments and Agencies. This may be due at least in part to the fact that it is really through the looked-after children teams that representatives of the two departments (DHSSPS and DE) come together in one unit where the work for the children can coalesce. In the rest of the institutional space, key actors seem to remain more firmly within their sectors, i.e. education or social services, and the voluntary sector and schools are most strongly associated with the institution for which they are delivering services.

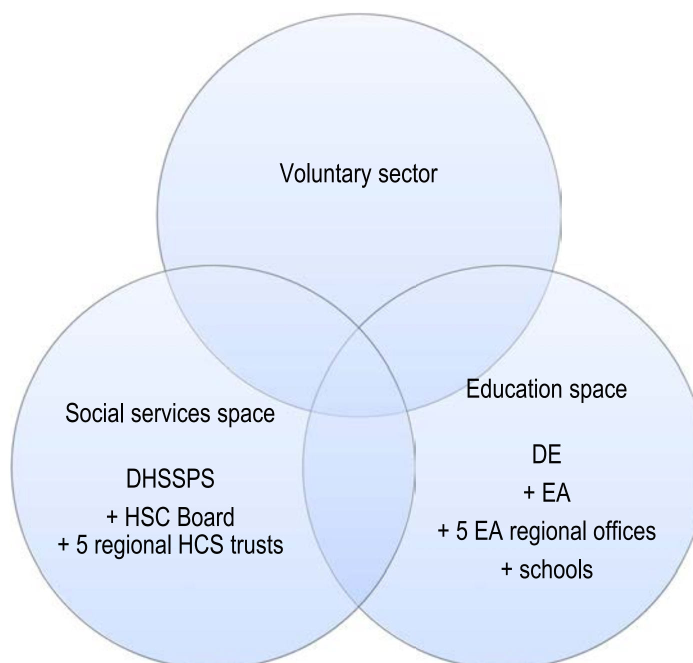
The need for stronger co-operative activity at a department level – where objectives and priorities are set – is recognised by department and agency officials. Currently, such co-operative activity is limited, which can weaken or even jeopardise cross-sector co-operation and collaboration. It has been noted in other OECD studies dedicated to public governance, that the behaviour of higher-level officials is often linked to the expectations of ministers or the highest-ranking senior civil servant. If ministers or senior civil servants reinforce hierarchical and siloed working mechanisms, are reluctant to share information, and have difficulty clearly stating objectives, a more dynamic and effective interaction at higher civil service levels may be impeded. Conversely, if ministers expect

senior civil servants to act in a co-ordinated manner and collaborate among themselves, they can often create an enabling environment for more fluid collaborative working (OECD, 2011). Part of this fragmented approach at the strategy setting level may be due to the different or divergent political considerations of ministers and their constituencies. Not only does this appear to impact the capacity of departments to work together, for example on a joint social services/education looked-after children strategy, as explored later in this case study, it also may be affecting firmer advocacy for the rights of children in Northern Ireland, including those of looked-after children, where in some communities advocacy is considered the right and responsibility of the family.

While there is greater possibility for information exchange at the implementation level, information flows remain top-down, siloed and sector driven, limiting information sharing across institutions. As noted above, networked activity through inter-institutional exchange is most active at the technical level. However, these various agencies are working within their sector and with specific regional counterparts, rather than in a larger networked environment. This can reinforce a sector driven perspective regarding the needs of looked-after children, and can more easily support achieving sector-based outcomes rather than holistic ones. It can also promote territorialism in the development policy, as seen with the proposed looked-after children strategy, as well as with respect to resources, evidenced by some sector representatives expressing concern that their resources were being used to support initiatives linked to other sectors, and a general reluctance to pool resources. This is despite the fact that representatives also remarked during interviews that pooling resources would be helpful and pointed to the looked-after children teams as an example of where this can work.

The institutional landscape might look significantly different if the children were actively placed at the centre (Figure C.1). In this schematic, the children are at the core, together with the current Looked-After Children Teams (LAC Teams), families, and carers. The social services space, formed by DHSSPS and its agencies responsible for looked-after children overlaps with the education space. In the education space, the schools are brought more directly into the education dynamic. The various overlaps imply a more complete interaction by all entities, a more fluid inter-institutional exchange, and stronger collaboration with respect to looked-after children. The existing institutional hierarchies in each sector may hold for delineating responsibility, accountability and authority, but there is some hope that if all actors in the social service and education space are putting the children at the centre, and are working toward shared objectives and add an emphasis on child well-being, then there will be greater room for a building a networked structure. The voluntary sector interacts fully with the social services and education spaces, as well as with the core. In addition, the advocacy space is easily identified as the intersection between the voluntary sector and the government, and with ties to the core. This is less evident in the current structure where the voluntary sector seems to act as part of the hierarchy delivering services rather than as a recognised central partner to advocate and act for the well-being of the child. In this model there is more room for collaborative working, shared information flows and a pooling of resources. An operational model more akin to Scotland's Getting it Right for Every Child, or other possibilities presented further in this study (see section entitled *Strengthening collaboration and building stewardship)* may support creating such a space.

Figure C.1. **Institutional space placing looked-after children at the centre in Northern Ireland**



Note: LAC Teams refers to the "Looked-After Children in Education Teams".

Source: Author's own work.

The objective – and challenge – is for the various actors in Northern Ireland to think first about what drives poor outcomes for looked-after children, key among which, are low responsiveness, instability, and low expectations, – and what the child may need from the care structures to address these drivers, and then about how individual institutions can contribute expertise to supporting these needs in an integrated and institutionally appropriate way. Accomplishing this may require an institutional shift in action, moving to a model akin to what is seen in Scotland with its *Getting it Right for Every Child* policy, where the system is structured so that service planning and delivery runs across children's services – including for looked-after children – and so that practitioners are supported to concentrate on the issues that make a difference to the lives of children and youth. As the Guide states: "*Getting it right for every child* […] draws help toward the child rather than passing the child from one service to another." (Scottish Government, 2010) (Box C.1).

Box C.1. **Scotland's Getting It Right For Every Child**

In Scotland, policies for looked-after children are embedded within the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework. GIRFEC sets out consistent principles for all people who work with all children and young people (professionals, carers, parents). These principles are being integrated into all policies and practices, strategies and legislation affecting children, youth and their families.

The central aim of GIFREC is to improve outcomes and well-being for all children. The framework sets out eight indicators of well-being to ensure that children develop as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Children who are well are: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included.

These eight indicators are used to track each child's development and to create individual plans. In addition to the well-being indicators, a My World Triangle and Resilience Matrix helps with understanding individual needs and aims.

Under GIRFEC, every child has a "Named Person" from birth until their 18th birthday. The Named Person is usually a health visitor or senior teacher, already known to the family. Although the Named Person does not have any special duties, in most cases, when children do need extra support (as is the case for looked-after children), the Named Person is the first point of contact for the family, and will help arrange the support necessary to safeguard the child's development and well-being (see www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/named-person). In principle, the Named Person remains the same, creating a point of stability in the child's life.

Whenever two or more agencies need to work together to provide services to children and family, a lead person is designated to guide the process. The lead person ensures that both child and family understand what is happening and that they are involved in decisions, act as a main point of contact, promotes interagency working, ensures that plans are implemented and reviewed, and that children are supported through transition points. The lead person is also expected to be familiar with the working practices of the different agencies, to support involved staff.

The GIRFEC implementation plan, which was first published in 2006, set out a strategy for streamlining children's records, assessments and action tools, the development of national tools for practitioners, training materials and guidance, a pilot test of the ICT system for records sharing across agencies, and a communication strategy for managers and staff working with children's services.

Evaluations of progress across local authorities and at the national level follow a similar format, reporting on signs of progress and learning points, ongoing challenges and areas for further development in changing professional practice. These implementation reports have noted steady progress, but also acknowledged that it takes time to put systems in place, and most importantly, to change mind-sets of professionals who may need to make significant changes in their practice. A 2009 evaluation of GIRFEC noted that some of the early successes were due to the fact that professionals were involved in the early development of policy, and therefore had a sense of ownership.

A 2013 report summarises findings from self-assessment questionnaires that were sent to Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). The self-assessments included a 5-level Maturity Model matrix, with Level 1 being commitment at the most senior level, Level 2 the development of a corporate strategy, Level 3 service development, Level 4 implementation and Level 5 the vision and strategy are embedded. CPPs ranked their own perceptions of progress for different areas of programme design. The majority of CPPs ranked themselves at Level 3, with GIRFEC processes implemented in critical areas of business. Of 30 CPPs, only two reported that GIRFEC had become an integrated part of normal business.

The GIRFEC model is ambitious. It sets out a broad vision for child well-being and achievement for all children. Importantly, policies to support looked-after and other vulnerable children are embedded in the broader strategy, rather than as add-on programmes. It has involved a careful design and consultation process, implementation planning, training and capacity building. Ongoing monitoring and formative evaluation of the implementation process has been useful for identifying successes as well as areas where more attention is needed.

Scotland reports improvements in educational outcomes for looked-after children (as has England). Further progress in this area will likely require more in-depth consideration of learning needs and appropriate teaching strategies for this vulnerable population. But the vital elements of responsiveness, stability and expectations for children's learning are now being put in place.

Source: Scottish Government: www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/named-person; www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright/lead-professional; www.gov.scot/Publications/2009/11/20094407/1; www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright.

To a strong degree, this is the approach supported by the Minister for Education who, after spending time with looked-after children and listening to their experiences and perceived needs, requested the development of education policy specifically for looked-after children. Both he, and his policy team, were recognised during interviews conducted by the OECD for their dedication to, and championing of, this cohort, and a great deal of forward movement in this area is attributed to them. This is a positive development for policy relating to looked-after children, who usually enjoy little visibility in the policy arena. However, care must be taken to institutionalise the momentum given by the Minister and his team so that the agenda and its impact continues past the electoral cycle. One way to achieve this is by developing a shared vision and strategy centred on the needs of the child.

Northern Ireland's legal and regulatory frameworks guiding the care and education of looked-after children place the full responsibility for care on DHSSPS and its Trusts. They make little mention of the role of education and there appears to be some incoherence in the regulations or rules across the departments. This can exacerbate issues of instability for looked-after children, which is precisely what both departments say they wish to avoid. One example provided by looked-after children stakeholders was the gap created with respect to ensuring transport for the children or youth. Concretely, if a child needs to take a taxi to school, there are some circumstances under which a social worker may not be able to ensure that the cost is covered or be reimbursed because: 1) the Children's Resources Panel had not yet determined which expenses would authorise payment by the HSC Trust; 2) the child was in short-term placement which is outside the criteria for DE's policy of ensuring home to school transport. When both of these circumstances combine, a gap is left, which causes uncertainty and more stress for the child. This not only serves to highlight incompatibilities in policy, but also a degree of institutional inflexibility that can negatively impact a child.

Current legislation, rights and standards may not fully support putting the child at the centre

Legislation makes little mention of education for looked-after children

The parameters for the care of looked-after children are set by the *Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (S.I. 1995/755 [NI2])*[12] and the *Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 (c.11 [NI])* (Box C.2). The Children (NI) Order 1995 establishes the "right to review" which includes not only having care plans reviewed but also that the child can express his or her concerns, desires and feelings about any issue affecting them, although as noted above, listening to and building trust with children and youth requires both time and skill. It also establishes the right of the child to receive written notification of the main points discussed during his or her care review (Children's Law Centre, 2012a). What the Children (NI) Order 1995 does not do, however, is ensure or guarantee education beyond what is mentioned regarding employment, education and training – when there is a need to consult with the Education Authority (formerly the Education and Library Boards as mentioned in the legislation); or to make provision for education supervision orders.

Box C.2. **Key legislation governing looked-after children in Northern Ireland**

The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (S.I. 1995/755 [NI2]) is the primary law governing the care, upbringing and protection of children in Northern Ireland and focuses on the role of DHSSPS and especially the HSC Trusts. There are three layers to the Order: primary legislation, regulations (or subordinate legislation), and Department Guidance. The Department Guidance does not have the force of law but rather indicates how professionals (e.g. social workers) should carry out their responsibilities with respect to looked-after children. The Children (NI) Order 1995 includes a series of guiding principles, primary among which are: 1) children are best off in their families; 2) the welfare of the child must come first; 3) a partnership approach is best. This means that HSC Trusts are empowered to help children by providing services to their families in an effort to maximise the possibility of a child growing up in their own family setting, or to remove children from their families as a last resort to protect the child. It also places the welfare of the child above that of adults. Finally, it recognises that the various actors involved, ranging from social workers, professionals in statutory and voluntary entities, parents and children (as far as age and development allows) should work in partnership for the best of the child.

An amendment to the Children (NI) Order 1995, the Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 (c.11 [NI]) relates to young people leaving care, and seeks to improve their life chances as they move towards an independent life. Critically, it makes HSC Trusts responsible for assessing and meeting the needs of looked-after youth until they are at least 21.

Source: DHSSPS (n.d.), "Child Care Law Rough Guide", www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/child-care-law-roughguide.pdf.

International agreements and rights of children could be adhered to more strongly

There are some critical matters with respect to looked-after children that are not supported through laws or legislation, for example ensuring timely PEPs, barring exclusion from school, and promoting or ensuring access to advocates. Such access, and other rights especially relevant to looked-after children, are supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), notably by Articles 3, 5, 9, 12, 20, 25, 28 (Children's Law Centre, 2012b). At the European Union level, the rights of the child are set out in Article 3 of the Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The articles emphasising a child's right of determination face some challenges in Northern Ireland. It is reported by advocates that this is due in part to a lack of knowledge about rights in general and about the rights of looked-after children specifically. As communicated during interviews for this study, it is also because parent's views are seen as having more weight than those of children in Northern Ireland. This results in weak adherence to the right of the child to participate in decisions that affect them and affects the capacity of advocates to play their role. It also reflects a general tension between the rights to protection and to participation in UNCRC (O'Neill and Zinga, 2008).

Care standards could be introduced to ensure more uniform quality of care

The ability to ensure quality in care is mixed. For example, there are applicable regulations for foster care, as well as minimum cares standards for children's homes and supported accommodations. However, the regulations for foster care are not accompanied by a set of standards that can help ensure harmonised or quality provision. Standards can be useful to set guidelines for measuring and evaluating quality. Based on a review of foster care undertaken in December of 2013 by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, there is a general recognition that the regulations require revision and a series of standards should be developed to better guide the foster care of looked-after children (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, 2013).

Despite general agreement that PEPs are positive and support a child's education, there are no regulations or standards governing their development and use. It is estimated that only about 84% of children had PEPs in 2013-14 (DHSSPS, 2015). A Health and Social Care Commission Plan directed that, from April 2014, all school-age children who had been in care for 12 months or longer have a PEP (Health and Social Care Commissioning Plan, 2013). In the EA regions, there is support for the development and monitoring of PEPs in line with DE targets. This support is provided through different models, three regions with looked-after children in education teams and others within a multi-service team co-ordinated from staff outside the Education Welfare Service. Based on interviews, our understanding is that the Western region has no LAC team, but assists with LAC PEPs by offering training, advice and follow-up with schools when the trust requests it.

Analysis: Finding stability for the "right reasons"

There is ambiguity reported with respect to the legal underpinnings for the care of looked-after children, including for education. There also seems to be regulatory and jurisdictional incoherence, both of which can generate more instability and stress on the children in all aspects of their lives. For example, educational placement does not need to be considered in a care placement approach, potentially putting at risk the stability a child may gain from attending the same school, despite moving homes. This is not the case, in practice, in NHSCT area where school/education placement is considered in the proceedings. This is mirrored in the education of looked-after children (and all minors) in the Juvenile Justice Detention system, which is under the purview of Northern Ireland's DoJ not the DE. Under this arrangement continuity in learning could be jeopardised once the child is placed in the detention system.[13] The DE has the legal obligation to ensure all children receive an education, but whether or not this extends to children in the detention system is unclear, and illustrates further ambiguity in competence attribution and the exercise of responsibility.

In terms of rights, child participation and agency are important principles, but support of these may be falling short in Northern Ireland. A looked-after child's participation in care planning is protected by the legislation, is part of the policy structure, and is generally considered a good practice. However, despite being invited to participate in review meetings, interviewees reported that most children do not, either by choice or due to a lack of information. This is consistent with research in England, as discussed above (McLeod, 2007; Munro, 2001). In its report, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority noted that children interviewed indicated little awareness about decisions made concerning them, and were not informed that decisions were being taken (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, 2013). This indicates that the right to review is not

actively upheld, nor indirectly is UNCRC article 12.[14] Children are often uncomfortable with these proceedings. Given that this is widely known, the fact that it is not addressed by creating an environment of greater comfort for the child in order to support their participation, runs counter to the notion of putting the child at the centre. From an education standpoint, teacher attendance at looked-after children reviews is not required and thus they do not always participate.[15] This can make planning for the child more difficult, especially in cases where they move schools (Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, 2013).

The issue of standards is a bit of a tightrope walk. While they can support authorities who are trying to ensure similarity in the type and quality of services provided, for example, they can also reduce the space implementing bodies may need for flexibility and making common sense decisions that help the children (e.g. in the introductory example of paying for a taxi, there needed to be some room for the social worker to make a decision). Developing standards is a complex issue, as they need to go beyond aspiration to something concrete and that can be realised. Australia's standards applicable to children and youth in "out-of-home care" are concise in number (13 in total), are concretely and simply stated, and are accompanied by 22 measures that help identify if the standard is being met. Few standards have more than one measure associated with them. For example: "Standard 2: Children and young people participate in decisions that have an impact on their lives". This is accompanied by one measure: "The proportion of children and young people who report they have opportunities to have a say in relation to decisions that have an impact on their lives and that they feel listened to" (Government of Australia, 2011). Not only is the standard easy to understand, the measure is clear and it puts the children at the centre since, in order to identify if the standard is being upheld, it is the children who are asked about their opportunities to have a voice.

Current frameworks and practices are facilitating education responsibilities to be split out from DE for a segment of the child population; low active support of child participation and agency; and little activity in establishing quality standards. Ultimately the frameworks underscore a gap between putting children at the centre and an ability or practice of doing so. In its *Getting it Right for Every Child* policy, Scotland has strived to manage these issues by ensuring that the policy is woven into all existing strategy, policy, practice and legislation that affects children, youth and families (Scottish Government, 2008), as has Australia with its standards of care (Box C.3).

Box C.3. **Standards of care in Australia**

Key informants in Northern Ireland noted that the quality of care children receive across the local trusts varies a great deal. While the central agencies may decide to withhold funds from trusts that do not develop appropriate strategies for looked-after children, there are few other instruments to focus attention on quality.

Australia dealt with similar problems related to uneven quality across its states and territories by introducing standards of care for vulnerable children, including looked-after children. Policy makers and stakeholders identified six key areas for well-being for all children and young people nationally: health, safety, culture and community, spirituality, emotional development and learning and achieving. The standards of care for looked-after children are grounded in these six areas, but are also tailored to the particular needs and context of the individual child. The Standards are part of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

Box C.3. **Standards of care in Australia** *(continued)*

Standards of care are a particularly promising practice because they focus attention on a common vision and expectations for provision. Key documents clarify definitions and indicators that are used to track implementation. The data help identify areas where there are promising practices, as well as where improvements are needed.

The 13 standards are:

1. Stability and security
2. Participate in decisions
3. Tailored to needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
4. Individualised plan
5. Health needs
6. Education and early childhood
7. Education, training and/or employment
8. Social and/or recreational
9. Connection with family
10. Identity development
11. Significant others
12. Carers
13. Transition from care planning

Services linked to these standards are tracked through system of nationally comparable data, with data from various agencies brought together in one comprehensive database.

National measurement and reporting arrangements have been rolled out progressively, with the full set of 22 measures matched to the 13 standards included in the database by the end of 2015. Measures most relevant to educational outcomes are to be reported from 2015. They include reading and numeracy: the proportion of looked-after children achieving national reading and numeracy benchmarks (Standard 6) and the proportion of young people who complete year 10, year 12 or the equivalent vocational education and training (Standard 7). All measures are to be improved or replaced for reporting beginning in 2016.

Monitoring results are reported in the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children Annual Report to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). The national results are used for various analyses and reports and may help identify geographical gaps in services or best practices that may be shared more widely. These national data have also been used by non-profit and voluntary organisations in various reports and position papers. For example, the CREATE Foundation conducts an annual survey of children in a specific area of interest, linked to the Standards of Care.

Box C.3. **Standards of care in Australia** *(continued)*

Although a full evaluation of the standards and measurements has not yet been conducted, it appears that there is improved transparency and focus on the quality of care and children's outcomes. More analysis on the data reporting process, and whether and how they are leading to improvements in policy and practice will be needed.

Source: Government of Australia (2011), "What do the National Standards Cover?", *An Outline of National Standards for Out-of-Home Care,* Australia, Department of Social Services, Canberra, ACT Australia, www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/an-outline-of-national-standards-for-out-of-home-care-2011?HTML#sec_7; McDowall, J. (2013), "Experiencing Out-of-Home Care in Australia: The Views of Children and Young People", http://create.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2013-CRE065-F-CREATE-Report-Card-2013-Web-File-web.pdf.

Care and education strategies for looked-after children should target the underlying causes of poor outcomes

There is general agreement among Northern Ireland's stakeholders for looked-after children that improving outcomes for this cohort, including education outcomes, requires a holistic, integrated and strategic approach; one that is anchored in a shared vision and supported by common language and definitions. Such an approach can translate into a strategy focused on ensuring the overall well-being of the children, where the different aspects of their care, including education, are acted upon through this lens and begin to target some of the underlying causes of poor outcomes. However, this does not appear to be the case in practice; and the lack of a strategy supported by outcome objectives for this group may be contributing to the dissonance in approach. Specifically, with respect to education, the responsibility for poor outcomes associated with looked-after children cannot be placed squarely on the shoulders of any one actor. They are the result of circumstances, attitudes, and multiple, cross-sector and multi-stakeholder interventions.

Strategic frameworks

While there is a great deal of discussion and recognition in Northern Ireland that to best improve outcomes for looked-after children an integrated approach is necessary, the reality is that much of the activity, especially at the strategic level remains fragmented and unclear; and this affects the ability of agencies and other service providers to ensure quality services.

There are three active framework documents linking to looked-after children: *Care Matters; Our Children and Young People: Our Pledge 2006-2016;* and *Every School a Good School. Care Matters,* introduced by DHSSPS in 2009, is a comprehensive, cross-department guide for looked-after children policy and activity in Northern Ireland. It forms the looked-after children component of OFMDFM strategic initiative – *Our Children and Young People: Our Pledge 2006-2016* that establishes six broad outcomes objectives for children and youth. Children should be: 1) healthy; 2) enjoying, learning and achieving; 3) living in safety and with stability; 4) experiencing economic and environmental well-being; 5) contributing positively to community and society; 6) living in a society that respects their rights (DHSSPS, 2007). The DE's *Every School a Good School,* was introduced in 2009 as a general education policy which, while taking a

mainstreaming approach to looked-after children, also recognises the need to consider their outcomes by looking at progress for students that may not achieve GCSE Grades A*-C due to personal challenges faced (Department of Education, 2009). To support achieving the objectives outlined in the *Our Children and Young People* strategy, the HSC Board led the introduction of the Children and Youth Strategic Partnership as a means to bring the various service agencies for children, as well as the voluntary sector, together to share planning, identify ways to share resources, and build consistency among HSC Trusts. It has been quite active especially as a means to prevent children from entering care, for example by establishing Family Support Hubs.

Neither strategy – that of OFMDFM or DE – carves out a specific space to address the needs of looked-after children. Meanwhile, *Care Matters* has never been accompanied by an implementation plan or a monitoring and evaluation system. In addition, responsibilities for action and accountability for results is vague, and appears to cause tension – particularly with respect to financial responsibilities – between DHSSPS and DE agencies.

Analysis

Northern Ireland is currently embarking on a new round of strategy development for children and youth, including an updated children's strategy to be introduced by OFMDFM. This presents an ideal opportunity to develop a vision that puts children at the centre, one that takes a holistic approach to their well-being and that also promotes greater integration among the actors and their interventions. At the moment, however, it appears that this opportunity may well be missed, and that *Care Matters,* the social services and education component will be split into two separate policy documents.

As part of OFMDFM initiative, DHSSPS is working on an overall policy for children that includes looked-after children and will seek input from other Departments with an interest in the policy area, including DE. The Department remains informed of DE policy with respect to looked-after children and will provide advice and input where required. The DE has a more accelerated time scale for developing the looked-after children education policy but both Departments have been engaged in discussions to ensure both polices can be co-ordinated and developed in tandem so that they are supportive and complementary.

There are a number of concerns with respect to this approach, not the least of which being that DHSSPS and DE are forging their own paths in a policy area where success depends greatly on a coherent and integrated strategy, shared objectives and a co-ordinated approach. It is notable that agencies, advocates and the voluntary sector generally remarked during OECD interviews that this split approach did not seem consistent with the desire to take a holistic perspective regarding looked-after children. It also risks falling short of correcting some of the weaknesses in the looked-after children governance system with respect to strategy – among these being the lack of a shared vision and clear strategic objectives, as well as confusion regarding priorities, fragmented policy implementation and limited monitoring and evaluation of what is already in place.

There is no vision-based strategy and objectives are ambiguously defined for looked-after children

The role of strategy is to provide a clear direction for decision makers and other relevant actors. Strategy needs to consider present and future challenges and opportunities, setting a course for a policy area and providing the framework to align resources and capacities in order to meet the strategy's objectives. Behind a strong strategy is a vision and this appears to be missing for Northern Ireland's looked-after children. While there are numerous plans and initiatives encompassing this group, there is no specifically articulated and commonly agreed upon vision as to what Northern Ireland wants for its children in care in the next 10 to 15 years. For example, this could translate into ensuring that looked-after children grow and develop into well adjusted, productive, and civic-minded members of the adult community, with a solid educational foundation, by taking a well-being approach to their care. (The vision is of well-adjusted adults, the strategy is a well-being approach). Putting a strategic emphasis on well-being to realise the vision automatically supports the various areas the government seeks to address for this cohort, including: education and health outcomes, job training, housing, life satisfaction, civic mindedness, etc. Ensuring positive outcomes in these areas will require strong qualitative relationships among all institutional actors, the children and carers, and among the institutions themselves. A focus of this sort shifts the concentration away from what it is an institutional actor wants to achieve, to what it is they need to do to ensure the overall well-being of the child.

Once a vision is established, it is easier to build a strategy that supports it and set appropriate objectives. The issue of objectives can be looked at in two ways. The first is through the perspective of the departments, which is currently the case, and ultimately puts the departments and their priorities ahead of the children. What this means for each actor, particularly DHSSPS and DE, can be subtly different and can guide action differently. The second is through the perspective of the child, and is based on what needs to be accomplished for the child's well-being. Objectives may not be realised right away. Thus, like a strategy, on the one hand they need to be supported to withstand electoral cycles, and on the other, they must incorporate priority actions that will result in appropriately timed outputs (short, medium, and long term), as stakeholders – most importantly the children – need to see results.[16] An approach such as this, with social services, education, service delivery and advocacy focusing on a strategy and series of objectives that explicitly place the child at the centre, can also increase stability for the child, one factor behind poor outcomes. A relevant example of vision setting, strategy development, the identification of strategic objectives, priority actions with associated outputs, and evaluation mechanisms is found at the agency level in Ireland (Box C.4).

Box C.4. **Establishing a strategic and results-oriented approach to child service in Ireland**

Ireland's Child and Family Agency, Tulsa, was established in 2014 as an independent legal entity having merged parts or all of three other Irish agencies: HSE children and family services; the Family Support Agency; the National Education Welfare Board. Among its numerous services are Alternative Care Services (i.e. foster care, residential care, special care and aftercare), Educational Welfare responsibilities, Child Welfare and Protection Services (including family support services), and adoption services.

In its 2015-2017 Corporate Plan, Tusla articulates a corporate vision – that "all children are safe and achieving their full potential" and a mission – "With the child at the centre, our mission is to design and deliver supportive, co-ordinated and evidence-informed services that strive to ensure positive outcomes for children." Recognising that quality services and adequate support for children and families is best supported with long-term, evidence-informed planning and sufficient resources, and aided by broad and active stakeholder consultation, the agency established eight clear strategic objectives. The objectives are aligned with a series of key actions within the agency's portfolio, and desired long-term outcomes, which in turn are associated with short-, medium- and long-term outputs. Finally, explicit and measurable targets, linked to strategic objectives, are established over the short term (1-3 years). For example, one specific indicator for looked-after children is "the percentage of children in care in full-time education" with the first year performance target set at 95%, and years two and three at 100%. This target is linked to a short-term output: "Attendance, participation and retention in full-time education is embedded in service delivery for all children", and supports achieving two different strategic objectives. Finally, the agency's plan also supports broader policy frameworks as well, including Healthy Ireland (2013) and Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014), the national policy framework for children and youth.

Source: Tusla – Child and Family Agency (2014), "Tusla Corporate Plan: 2015-2017", Tusla – Child and Family Agency, Dublin, Ireland, www.tusla.ie.

An exercise to better define objectives and develop a commonly agreed upon position regarding the necessary milestones to ensure well-being could help build greater coherence in looked-after children initiatives, including the development of a looked-after children strategy. In addition, taking a more dynamic approach to stakeholder engagement, including the perspective of the children – particularly at the policy design stage - may be one way to ensure that objectives and priorities not only those of departments but also of the children. Together, these combine to draw a clear roadmap for stakeholders, clarifying expectations in the care of looked-after children, and better ensuring appropriate outcomes.

Shifting perspectives on prioritisation and policy development could promote a more child-centred approach

The lack of a commonly defined strategic objective also leads to differences in prioritisation, which can, in turn, create dissonance in policy development. The priorities of DHSSPS for looked-after children focus on: keeping children out of care; ensuring good treatment – including the best outcomes in education and health; and supporting the transition into adulthood and independent living. DE's priority is its mandate – to ensure

education and educational outcomes – the achievement of which is reduced when stability in the child's environment is low. As in the case of strategy and objectives, there are two ways to look at the issue of priorities. The first is from the perspective of the departments and their practical mandates: ensuring the safety and care of the children for DHSSPS and ensuring the education of children for DE. This can generate different considerations as to what is in the best interest of the child and its education outcomes. For instance, while there may need to be a change in a child's care arrangement that requires changing schools,[17] this can also be considered disruptive for the child's stability, placing DHSSPS and DE at odds as to what is best for the child. While these concerns are not mutually exclusive, they are based on the perspective and concerns of the departments.

The second way to consider priorities for looked-after children is by standing in the place of the child, considering the factors that hinder positive outcomes, including low responsiveness, instability, and low expectations for success. This reframes the priority question into one focusing on "How do I (or my agency, or my department best counteract these forces so that the child has the best chance for a successful and fulfilled life"? To do so means that all actors need to work with and answer the same set of guiding questions regarding the care of the child. In addition, under UNCRC, children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, so it is important to actively seek their perspective when making such decisions. As part of its practitioner guidelines for *Getting it Right for All Children,* Scotland identified five questions[18] that all practitioners needed to answer to guide their actions. These are linked to Scottish well-being indicators for looked-after children, but serve to help prioritise intervention as well. They are not linked to the sector interests of the department, agency or other institution to which the practitioner is attached, but rather to the well-being of the child. Implementing an approach of this nature will require all concerned parties to come together in order to develop and define a commonly agreed upon strategic vision and objective for looked-after children.

Policy implementation and service delivery is challenged by fragmentation and resource constraints

Policy implementation and service delivery for looked-after children in Northern Ireland face some challenges: 1) the potential for disparities in quality of care or access to services across regions; 2) a fragmented approach to programming; 3) resources. In terms of potential regional disparities in quality and access to care, there are three factors to consider. First, at the agency level there is room for uneven quality in how policies are implemented and services are provided. For example, looked-after children teams have been acknowledged by all actors to be a positive introduction into the care mix, but for diverse reasons, they have not been implemented in each region. Second, each HSC Trust and EA can tailor activity to a region's needs – for example in rural vs. urban areas – and this is positive. Yet, it is coupled with a lack of standards or an established set of basic services that must be provided for looked-after children. There is a move by DE toward a stronger regional approach, but how this will be accomplished remains unclear, particularly as agencies stress the importance of retaining some flexibility or autonomy in how they execute policy. Finally, in the case of DE and EA, delivering on education outcomes rests with schools, principals and teachers. It was commented that DE and its agencies have little leverage to ensure policy implementation given school autonomy, and decision making power that rests with the Board of Governors. However, here DE may need to adjust its approach, ensuring that schools have a broader set of outputs or outcomes for which they are accountable with respect to looked-after children, and

designed in such a way as to minimise any tendency to avoid enrolling this cohort lest the schools' rankings be affected in league tables.

The services "space" for looked-after children is characterised by a project approach that results in a high number of individual projects, programmes and initiatives based on funding obtained. This can arise because programmes are not tethered to a strategic direction, rendering strategically designed programming with clear targets and exit strategies extremely difficult. It can also arise, or be compounded by, a lack of stewardship in cross sector initiatives – i.e. when there is no entity responsible for guiding and co-ordinating overall action in a policy area. This project fragmentation is reinforced by fragmentation in delivery as many of the services for looked-after children and their carers are provided by a panoply of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the voluntary sector. The result is a large amount of activity in a relatively limited space, with limited resources and with a small niche target. A fragmented approach like this can create confusion regarding service options, service overlap among organisations, and does not make an effective use of limited resources: in conversations with stakeholders it was noted that one voluntary organisation may be funded by eight different parts of the system. In addition, because these CSOs depend a great deal on the government departments and/or agencies for project funding – for example DHSSPS funds a large number of voluntary organisations that deliver support services – there is a significant amount of competition in the service space for contracts, coupled with a high degree of uncertainty surrounding funding streams. This means that projects can begin but may be abruptly cut off due to a lack of resources, impacting service contracts and the ability to retain trained staff at the CSO level. It also impacts the end user – looked-after children and/or their carers. Expectations within the system are created that cannot always be met, and the result is not only disjointed service delivery but also discontinuity and instability in the services available.

These implementation and service delivery challenges are compounded by resource challenges: funding, human resources (including time), and infrastructure.

While all actors are aware of imminent budget cuts (or at best a budget freeze), there is little visibility as to the degree of the cuts. Because there is little manoeuvre for financing in Northern Ireland given budget rules, human resource structures, such as the looked-after children in Education teams are faced with significant constraints. The funds had historically been spread across three regions but with the introduction of the single authority all five sub-regions are in receipt of the allocated funding. In other words, that the same amount is now spread across five teams. There is a last issue with respect to funding, and this is that funds provided for looked-after children do not appear to follow the child, but rather stay with the service provider. For example, a very recent initiative gives schools GBP 1 000 per looked-after child enrolled. This is, in principle, to help the school with any additional resource needs for the child. However, as with a typical block grant structure, there is no monitoring of whether or not the funds are used for the child, and if the child is moved to a new school the money does not move with them in that school year, but rather stays with the original school. This can mean that services intended to benefit the looked-after child are not reaching them, and that a new school may be reluctant to take a looked-after child mid-year because they will not receive the additional funds. While this funding scheme is well intended, its execution requires refinement: there is little flexibility built into this funding scheme and few parameters to ensure the money is used for the child. Dedicated funding that follows the child may be more appropriate. Given an increase in the number of looked-after children, the system for this cohort is under pressure to help more children, maintain or improve timeliness,

and continues delivering the same or more services. All of this affects the quality of care received by the children, as well as the capacity of social workers (who are already stretched) and education staff to do their jobs as effectively as they would like. Infrastructure, in terms of placement, is also a challenge as there may be an insufficient number of suitable foster care homes available. Despite the government's best efforts to avoid placing a child in care, or to actively place children with kin, foster care provided by non-family members is still the most frequently used fostering option. Being more active in performance monitoring and evaluation, and introducing programme and spending reviews could help decision makers shift resources by identifying where they are most effectively used (i.e. have highest impact), what may need to change, and which programmes are successful in terms of results generated.

Resource allocation could be more effective with greater monitoring, evaluation and programme reviews

Data generated from policy and programme monitoring and evaluation with respect to outcomes for looked-after children appears to be lacking in Northern Ireland. Information regarding education can be grouped into two categories: pupil assessment and education policy evaluation. While certainly schools in Northern Ireland provide feedback, report cards and other sorts of progress reports as a means to evaluate pupil performance (Shewbridge et al., 2014), at the policy level for the purposes of tracking looked-after children progress, the emphasis is on GCSE results, school attendance at exclusion. At least at the policy level, little else seems to be considered in terms of a child or young person's progress and the impact that education policy and initiatives may be having on such progress. This may be due, at least in part, to a lack of data; however a lack of data signals either a lack of data gathering or that the data gathered are not the necessary or relevant data.[19] At least two categories of data should be considered: 1) data on the children/youth and their needs; 2) data on the results or impact of programmes and projects designed to support looked-after children, including education policy and desired outcomes.[20] Closer monitoring of educational progress may also be important to identify a need to intervene and support children.

In the first instance, there is some contradiction in what is reported regarding data gathering and looked-after children. On the one hand it has been reported that social workers and carers gather a lot of data. On the other hand, it is reported that up-to-date baseline data are not available, and that there are data quality concerns: often data are not gathered in a way that takes all of the child's needs into consideration and so it is not possible to identify what the needs are (e.g. for counselling or protection services), not to mention being able to determine if needs are being met. The lack of baseline data may be due to the fact that there is no legislation requiring HSC Trusts to provide the government with data, and so any data gathered and reported is voluntary.[21] This is in contrast to England and Wales where there is a statutory requirement for local authorities to submit information regarding looked-after children to the Secretary of State (Box C.5) (UK Statistics Authority, 2013).

Box C.5. **Details regarding statistical information gathering for looked-after children in Northern Ireland**

Information gathered by Northern Ireland on looked-after children for statistical purposes focuses on the number of placements, changes of school, timeframe for adoption and the percentage of care leavers 19+ that are in training, education or employment. Information relating to educational outcomes is reported, and includes data on children eligible to sit exams, levels of progression and GCSE and GNVQ attainment. Inspectorates do not publish statistics regarding their findings on looked-after children services, children's homes, fostering and adoption services; and there is no publication on expenditures on looked-after children as this is not collected from HSC Trusts. Finally, the data reporting process in Northern Ireland is driven by the capacity for social workers to complete forms for each child, and the need to gather additional supplementary information from schools and the court systems as appropriate. Social workers have four months to complete their reports, and combined with an apparent lack of an information management system, a gap appears between the reference and publication dates. This system structure can negatively impact data quality, timeliness and compliance costs.

Source: UK Statistics Authority (2013), *Assessment of Compliance with Code of Practice for Official Statistics: Statistics on Looked After Children,* Assessment Report 265, November 2013, UK Statistics Authority, London, www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk; DHSSPS (2015), "Children in care in Northern Ireland, 2013-14"*, Statistical Bulletin*, 18 June, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/child-care-ni-13-14.pdf.

In the second instance, the ability to assess progress in achieving policy and programming goals rests on effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. These in turn rely on indicator systems nourished with information that is specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. Without such information actors do not know what they are planning for, or what they are expected to accomplish. Among the objectives indicators in the *Our Children and Young People* strategy, there are two specifically related to looked-after children using baseline data that dates from 2002 and 2003 respectively: 1) percentage of children under 16 (looked after for more than two-and-a-half years) in the same placement for the last 12 months or placed for adoption; 2) percentage of formerly looked-after children who at their nineteenth birthday are in training, education, or employment (OFMDFM, 2006). Desired outcomes are indicated with directional arrows, and there is no published target to reach.[22] In *Care Matters* there are very clear action statements, but no indicators that can serve as a yardstick to measure results.

Data are not enough, however. They need to be accompanied by analysis, and should serve to support an evidence-informed response to the issue(s) at hand. One area of analysis that is missing in Northern Ireland is the actual impact of the various looked-after children initiatives in place. The fact that there are no programme or spending reviews for looked-after children initiatives, especially those provided by the voluntary sector, can lead to an ineffective use of resources. At the same time, undertaking such an exercise may be more challenging in the absence of clear objectives, an evidence-informed understanding of the needs of the children, and monitoring and evaluation systems. Programme reviews can help identify the efficiencies, effectiveness, coherence and/or synergies of different initiatives with respect to policy aims. In addition, academic studies on the impact of certain kinds of programme interventions (e.g. reading

programmes, Virtual School Heads, and other programmes as outlined in Box C.6). Performance information on individual initiatives, obtained by monitoring and evaluating programmes based on a clear set of criteria can be used to support policy performance and budget allocations in order to: 1) help guide decision making regarding resource allocation and reallocation; 2) provide input for decision making, strategy development, budget formulation, setting performance targets, etc.; 3) support reporting and accountability with respect to the use of funds, for auditing, managerial and political accountability. Introducing programme and/or spending reviews for department or agency initiatives and for services provided by the voluntary sector would help decision makers understand the impact of the various activities supporting looked-after children. It can also help determine if these activities are aligned with overall priorities, and help identify which are successful, which require adjustment in order to yield better outcomes, and which may need to be replaced. Such an exercise would not only provide insight into what is best supporting for looked-after children but also understand how spending is taking place within programmes, and whether it is effective.

The majority of the strategic challenges explored stem from the lack of a shared vision and strategic objectives for looked-after children, and harmonised, well-defined priorities. However, given that looked-after children outcomes – be they in education or general well-being – depend on the effort of multiple actors, a strategic approach is not enough. Attention needs to be paid on the co-ordinating and collaborative capacity of the various actors in Northern Ireland, and the capacity for stewardship, as a lack of support for looked-after children does not seem to be the case, rather it is how this support is framed and how it is co-ordinated that seems to be the issue.

Strengthening collaboration and building stewardship could help support better overall outcomes

Ensuring the overall well-being of looked-after children, including their education outcomes, is a collaborative effort among multiple actors. A capacity to work together is more evident at the implementation level than at the strategic level. For example, HSC Trusts may be involved in the educational dimension of the children under their care; social workers and representatives from the corresponding EA are dedicated to ensuring the best for looked-after children; and there seems to be a move at this level to engage in professional networks as well as broader care networks that include advocates, carers and the children. Meanwhile, at the strategic level not only does there appear to be little collaborative capacity across departments but even co-operation appears challenging (Box C.7). The biggest evidence of this is that the departments are not working together to build an integrated or holistic strategy for looked-after children, incorporating education as a fundamental component. It is also evident in the fact that IT systems between the sectors are reportedly not harmonised; ideally Personal Education Plans would be made easily available (i.e. electronically) to the relevant authorities. In addition, EA is not explicitly represented on the Children's Resources Panel, mandated to look at and make decisions regarding looked-after children needs.[23] Not every Trust operates such a panel to determine/approve financial expenditure or to have a mandate to make decisions about the needs of looked-after children.

Box C.6. **Targeted interventions to support learning**

Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy (2013) conducted a systematic review of interventions to support looked-after children between 10 and 15 years of age and in mainstream schools. Partly because they used strict criteria regarding studies that could be included, they included only 11 studies in the analysis. They note that "[…] no study was robust enough to provide evidence on effectiveness." (Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy, 2013, p. 341).

Promising interventions identified included:

Tutoring programmes

Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy (2013) identified three studies comparing different approaches to tutoring (two in the United States and one in the United Kingdom). These studies found that tutoring was effective for looked-after learners, who improved the skills. Ritter et al. (2006) found that tutoring was effective for improving reading and mathematics skills for learners between 5 and 15 years of age.

Targeted funds

Scotland piloted a programme, which provided funds to 18 educational authorities to improve educational outcomes. The funds were used for programmes such as tutoring or mentoring, personal education plans, transition support, staff development and technology support. In their review, Connelly et al. (2008) note that the results of the programmes were positive, partly because programme leaders also worked hard to engage children (Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy, 2013).

Reading interventions

An evaluation of the Reading Rich programme, which promotes writers' residencies in children's homes, found that carers in the homes raised their awareness of literacy as an important activity outside of school. The Letterbox Club, which (sends reading materials to looked-after children) was associated with improvements in children's reading attainment (although low achievers' scores on pre- and post-tests actually went down) (Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy, 2013).

Designated champion of education

Berridge et al. (2009) evaluated the Virtual School Head (VSH) programme in 11 educational authorities during its initial pilot phase. They found that looked-after children in these areas performed well as compared to the national average, and most improved their GCSE results. This study found that the VSHs had succeeded in raising education for looked-after children as a priority. They also contributed to integrating of education and social work. The report authors also identified a few concerns during the pilot phase, including a disconnect between children and concerns regarding such issues as placement or a school move and the response of adults participating in the programme. It appears that adults were not sufficiently tuned into children's needs or views (Liabo, Gray and Mulcahy, 2013).

Harker et al. (2003) evaluate the Taking Care of Education programme, which designates a person responsible for working within the local authority to improve looked-after children's education, and co-ordinates local efforts. In an 18-month follow-up, the evaluators found that scores for well-being and self-esteem improved, although there were no other statistically significant changes. The youth participating in the programme believed that encouragement from carers and teachers supported their educational achievement.

Training for carers and other professionals

Another review of the literature, this time by Hock et al. (2011), reviewed training and support programmes for carers on the physical and emotional health and well-being of looked-after children. Six studies were included in the review (five randomised controlled trials and one prospective cohort study). Three studies found benefits from training and three found no effective – either positive or negative. Those studies which found benefits were of longer duration, a shorter time period for the follow-up assessment and were focused on carers of younger children.

Box C.7. **Co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration**

Co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration build on each other, where co-ordination is the basis and can grow into collaboration.

- **Co-ordination**: Joint or shared information insured by information flows among organisations. "Co-ordination" implies a particular architecture in the relationship between organisations (i.e. centralised or peer-to-peer; direct or indirect), but not how the information is used.
- **Co-operation**: Joint intent on the part of individual organisations. "Co-operation" implies joint action but does not address the relationship among participating organisations.
- **Collaboration**: Co-operation (joint intent) together with direct peer-to-peer communication among organisations. "Collaboration" implies both joint action and a structured relationship among organisations.

Source: Adapted from OECD (2005), *e-Government for Better Government*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264018341-en.

Analysis

Co-ordination and collaboration for improved looked-after children outcomes could be stronger among all relevant actors in Northern Ireland. Some initiatives to build a more joined-up way of working are already in place and appear successful. For example, looked-after children teams were established with the intent to better support children by promoting greater cross-agency work, and building a stronger understanding of each party's role and expertise. Other initiatives, such as PEPs are reported to also generate a stronger cross-sector understanding and foster better joint working practices (see Box C.8). Another method to build greater collaboration is through joint training with respect to looked-after children needs and education. This has been welcome by the various actors, each acknowledging that often educators and social workers were not fully aware of the nuances and challenges faced by the other when working with looked-after children. When thematically appropriate, such training can include not only agency professionals, but also the voluntary sector, carers, teachers and principals, school counsellors/psychologists, etc. Job-shadowing – wherein social workers and teachers shadowed their counterpart's work day over six half-day periods – is another option that has arisen in the literature to support stronger understanding among social services and education professionals (Harker et al., 2003).

Box C.8. **Personal Education Plans**

England first introduced Personal Education Plans (PEPs) in 2000 as a way to strengthen the focus on educational outcomes for looked-after children across social services and education. PEPs are to include targets for social and emotional development, and should also include transition plans for learners leaving care (e.g. further or higher education and/or employment).

In Northern Ireland the PEP model was adopted in 2011, although it is not currently a legislative requirement. During interviews, several key informants noted that implementation of the PEP had been far from smooth. In the 2013-14 school year, 16% of looked-after children did not have a PEP. The PEP, which is to be completed within the first 20 days, is frequently delayed. Sharing across sectors is also hindered by incompatible computer systems.

In many ways, Northern Ireland's experience resembles implementation challenges in England. For example, a 2012 Education Matters report found that timescales were frequently not adhered to, looked-after children were not involved in their development, and there was little follow through for the plans developed.

Hayden (2005) in a study on implementation of PEP in one local authority in England found that the system had helped focus attention on the educational needs of looked-after children. However, there were also problems with ensuring that social workers and teacher were able to follow through with the plans, that some care plans in the study simply seemed unrealistic and did not take account of significant conflict and disagreement, that the systems were not focused on children's needs as well as the practitioners and that frequently, children were not meaningfully involved in the process. Timescales were also unrealistic. The author also found additional barriers in residential care and secure accommodation, where staff saw themselves as being outside the education system and unable to plan appropriately.

Based on these and other problems identified in implementation of PEP, evaluators in England have emphasised the importance of:

- a clear and concise guide, outlining roles and responsibilities of the various actors
- a protocol to guide communication between the looked-after children Team, social workers, designated teachers and the child
- requiring that all children have a PEP within 20 school days of entering the care system
- materials explaining PEP and its process that are engaging and accessible for children and young people, and that are age appropriate
- having a "champion" for looked-after children within schools
- easing administrative burdens through integration of data systems
- providing regular training for all PEP users (social workers, teachers, and so on).

Source: DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) (2010), "Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children: Statutory Guide for Local Authorities", DCSF, UK Government, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/276468/educational_achievement_of_looked_after_children.pdf.

In the case of Northern Ireland, building greater co-operation may require taking a stronger "joined-up" approach. This can be promoted in a number of ways, and two of them merit particular considerations here. The first is a better mix of "soft" and "hard" mechanisms[24] that promote joined-up working among diverse actors. Soft mechanisms can include awareness raising campaigns, training programmes, working groups, and co-ordinating bodies to oversee a specific concern or policy initiative, for example. Northern Ireland already uses soft mechanisms with respect to building co-ordinated efforts for looked-after children, particularly through the looked-after children teams and PEPs. On the spectrum between "soft" and "hard" mechanisms are strategic planning requirements, contracts to establish norms for a specific exchange, and the use of performance results as part of a performance management tool. Currently, none of these appear to be applied to the looked-after children policy area in Northern Ireland. First, there are no strategic planning requirements specifically for looked-after children or requirements for collaboration in strategic planning or service delivery for this cohort, nor do there appear to be effective mechanisms for performance measurement through monitoring and evaluation. "Hard" mechanisms, such as statutory requirements for co-operation, for example in the development of an integrated strategy, are also weak or do not exist. This may change, however, if the *Children's Services Co-operation Bill* is passed (Box C.9).

Box C.9. **The proposed Children's Services Co-operation Bill**

In late 2014, an individual member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, introduced the Children's Services Co-operation Bill, which if passed would amend the Children (NI) Order 1995. This bill puts a statutory dimension to the six outcomes articulated the *Our Children and Young People* strategy (modifiable by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) via subordinate legislation), and would make inter-departmental co-operation obligatory for their accomplishment. It facilitates the pooling of departmental budgets and the sharing of resources to achieve these outcomes, while also establishing a duty for all key agencies to co-operate in the planning, commissioning and delivery of children services. The Bill introduces a reporting requirement, wherein the OFMDFM would be responsible for publishing the progress made on achieving the six outcomes, the degree of co-operation undertaken, and efficiencies associated with such co-operation.

Source: Campbell, J. (2015), "The Children's Services Co-operation Bill," *Research and Information Service Bill Paper,* Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service, Northern Ireland Assembly, Belfast, www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2015/ofmdfm/4015.pdf; Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (n.d.), "Comparative analysis: Children's Services Co-operation Bill", Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, Belfast, www.cypsp.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ComparativeAnalysisChildrensServicesCooperationBill.pdf.

Based on the international examples evaluated for this case study, particularly Scotland and Ireland, when the strategic approach is driven by child well-being, inter-agency collaboration is the primary way to meet objectives, and collaborative working – while potentially challenging at first – has the potential to become more integrated into the habitual working culture. This was featured in a study evaluating mechanisms to promote greater inter-agency collaboration for improved educational outcomes among looked-after children in three English local authorities (Harker et al., 2003). The same study also evaluates the use of other soft mechanisms and highlights the importance of

building networks and information flows, establishing commitment, having appropriate leadership, and ensuring adequate systems and resources (Box C.10) (Harker et al., 2003).

Box C.10. **Promoting greater inter-agency collaboration and "whole-authority" approach: Examining the application of Taking Care of Education in three English local authorities**

Early research into what is required to promote more effective inter-agency collaboration in a looked-after children education initiative was undertaken in three of the English local authorities participating in the National Children's Bureau (NCB) development project, Taking Care of Education. Researchers found that inter-agency collaborative working among professionals at the local level and a "whole-authority approach" for looked-after children education depended on a series of key factors:

- A commitment to working together: commitment needed to be expressed not only through shared strategic goals and working practices by staff, but also by senior managers, relevant professionals, and the political level.
- Appropriate co-ordination structures and a networked approach: in addition to key co-ordination mechanisms such as agreements, co-ordinating bodies and multi-professional networks, fostering greater understanding as to the work of professional counterparts through cross-sector training programmes and job-shadowing helped build a better understanding of professional roles and responsibilities and strengthened the collaborative relationship.
- Strong leadership: having a "lead officer" with a hand in policy statements and the ability to promote a corporate approach was critical, though insufficient without enough capacity to influence strategy.
- Ensuring adequate resources: time – or lack of it – was a key resource constraint and initially a more collaborative way of working was perceived to be too time consuming. This perception eventually changed, as inter-agency collaboration became a more customary working method.
- Aligning targets and priorities: it was recognised that when the targets and priorities of individual agencies are aligned with inter-professional ones work co-operation becomes stronger.

Of note is that information flows and timely communication were deemed important, including the development of information sharing protocols by education and social services. However, ensuring proper information exchange and communication was considered challenging for several reasons, including issues of confidentiality (there was a feeling that more guidance was needed from the government level with respect to this matter) and data uploading which often depended on a third party, such as schools.

Source: Harker, R. M. et al. (2003), "More than the sum of its parts? Inter-professional working in the education of looked-after children," *Children and Society,* Volume 18 (2004), pp. 179-193; published on line 13 September 2003 in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com), doi: 10.1002/CHI.787.

Another possibility for promoting a greater collaboration and a more integrated approach to looked-after children is to build a stronger culture of stewardship around their concerns in order to address the key issues – responsiveness, stability and expectations – that impact outcomes. This could be done in two ways. The first approach focuses on building stewardship within existing governance structures. Currently, there is no clear single leader or responsible entity for looked-after children that guides and co-ordinates relevant policies and initiatives and has a broad perspective on accountability systems. Establishing a single entity responsible for guiding and co-ordinating matters relating to looked-after children, and empowering it to ensure that strategic objectives are supported through sector policy and programming initiatives, oversee monitoring, evaluation and assessment, and clearly establishing roles and responsibilities for greater accountability, could help focus attention on what is leading to the poor outcomes of this group. Such an arrangement could also help the groups responsible for looked-after children to pool already declining resources. The entity could be identified by OFMDFM, assume the responsibility for strategic and policy coherence, set priorities, and ensure that programming is co-ordinated and effective as well as that resources are optimised for outcomes. This does not necessarily mean changing current structures, but rather identifying a clear leader who has the mandate and responsibility to prioritise the well-being – including education – of looked-after children and other vulnerable children.

The second approach could be accomplished by bringing all child or child-and-family services under one roof, including services for looked-after children. This is already done in some Australian states (e.g., Department of Family and Community Services in New South Wales; Department for Education and Child Development in South Australia; Department for Child Protection and Family Support in Western Australia); in certain Canadian provinces (e.g., the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Colombia, and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in Ontario); and in Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs). In some cases, for example South Australia's Department for Education and Child Development (DECD), the department has responsibility for both strategy development and implementation. The DECD's organisational mission is to put children and youth at the centre of its strategic and policy considerations. Policy implementation for looked-after children occurs through its Families SA unit. In other instances, action to build greater co-ordination is taken at the implementation (agency) level. This is the case in Ireland through Tusla, the child and family agency, established as an independent legal entity (Box C.11). Such agencies are also seen in various US states.

It bears remembering that just bringing people together in the same structure does not automatically generate greater joined-up working. Working cultures, mechanisms and incentives must be aligned so that "two-houses-in-one" do not form. Among other things, this can require strong and committed leadership, appropriate stewardship, incentive mechanisms for joined-up working, and clear and measurable objectives for cross-functional teams so that the results and benefits of working together can be communicated.

Box C.11. **Alternative governance structures for looked-after children: South Australia and the Republic of Ireland**

There appears to be a growing trend to bring child and child welfare or child-protection-related services under one roof. Models for this vary, and can range from a ministerial or department framework, as seen in South Australia, to that of an agency, as in Ireland.

The Department for Education and Child Development in South Australia, Australia is tasked with overseeing early childhood care and services, providing services of benefit to children and families – including health and well-being services for families – and leading and managing the state's education system. With respect to looked-after children, the department is responsible for child safety, including child protection services, out-of-home care, and adoption (Department for Education and Child Development, 2015). The Department has an overall four-year strategic plan, and sub-strategies for specific groups including a service plan for the delivery of child protection services. This service plan includes action for looked-after children and includes education outcome objectives (e.g. ensuring looked-after children can successfully engage with the school system) and performance measurement in the area (e.g. monitoring school absence rates for children in care and attending government schools, as well as schooling results for those attending government schools) (DECD, n.d.).

In 2013, Ireland passed the Child and Family Agency Act, which led to the establishment of Tusla, Ireland's Child and Family Agency. The Act dissolved the Family Support Agency and the National Education Welfare Board, and transferred the relevant portions of the functions of the Health Service Executive and all functions of the National Education Welfare Board to this new agency. Doing so also required an amendment to the 1991 Child Care Act. Among the various agency functions are to provide for the protection and care of children in situations where their parents are not, have not, or are not likely to do so adequately. It also establishes agency governance and accountability structures (Government of Ireland, 2013). As an agency Tusla is an independent legal entity, accountable to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. It is responsible for child protection and welfare, alternative care (which includes foster, residential and special care), family and community support, educational welfare services and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The agency does not take a strategic role – this is the role of the Department – but rather focuses on the delivery of services. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs acts as the steward for the relevant policy areas, harmonising issues impacting children and youth including early childhood care, education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, child and youth participation, research concerning children and youth, and other relevant cross-sector initiatives (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, n.d.). It consults with the Department of Education and Skills and Department of Health

Source: DECD (Department for Education and Child Development) (2015), "About the Department for Education and Child Development", Government of South Australia Department for Education and Child Development, www.decd.sa.gov.au/; DECD (n.d.), "Families SA: Service Plan", Government of South Australia Department for Education and Child Development, www.decd.sa.gov.au/aboutdept/files/links/2014_Families_SA_service_p.pdf; Government of Ireland (2013), *Child and Family Agency Act 2013,* House of the Oireachtas, Government of Ireland, www.irishstatutebook.ie/2013/en/act/pub/0040/.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

This case study has identified a number of gaps in the provision for looked-after children in Northern Ireland. Among these is the lack of a vision and strategic approach that considers the drivers behind poor outcomes for looked-after children which is compounded by strongly siloed and fragmented institutional structures[25] legislative structures and operating norms that do not put the child at the centre, and the need for an institutional steward responsible for guiding and co-ordinating policy in this area. No single actor bears the responsibility for poor outcomes among this cohort; rather they are the result of circumstances, attitudes, and multiple, cross-sector and multi-stakeholder interventions. The following policy recommendations bring together key points from the analysis undertaken in this brief case study.

Recommendation 1: Take a holistic, child-centred approach

The population of looked-after children is relatively small, and in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, policies and programmes to support their well-being and educational attainment tend to be seen as "add-ons" rather than integrated within an overarching strategy. Holistic programmes that support the well-being and achievement of **all** children, and not just looked-after children, will have higher visibility and political currency (policies targeted to looked-after children may fit within an overarching strategy). Moreover, a focus on well-being highlights the importance of children's right under UNCRC to participate in decisions that affect them. A well-being focus, in terms of care, emphasises the importance of quality relationships. These elements, although not directly related to education, all contribute to children's academic success and are particularly important for looked-after children.

Northern Ireland is now engaged in a renewal of child and youth strategy. This is an opportunity to engage both DHSSPS and DE in setting priorities and articulating a vision that puts all children at the centre. Consultation with the voluntary and NGO sector and children and their families will reinforce this goal.

Recommendation 2: Develop balanced, coherent strategies for implementation and strengthen a joined-up way of working

Improving outcomes for Northern Ireland's looked-after children will require some changes in approach among actors. First, all actors responsible for this cohort will need to better consider as primary the drivers behind poor outcomes (top among which are low responsiveness, instability, and low expectations of success), and what the children may need and receive from care structures and education in order to address these challenges. Second, individual institutions should contribute their expertise to supporting the needs of looked-after children from the perspective of addressing the primary causes of poor outcomes in an integrated and institutionally appropriate way. Any such changes in approach should be institutionalised in order to overcome the impact of electoral cycles. Ultimately the institutional space should actively place the children at the centre, which is currently not the case, and work to break down a fragmented, siloed and highly sector-based structure that works against implementing an integrated and holistic approach for looked-after children.

Clear institutional stewardship for looked-after children at the appropriate level of government can also ensure better interagency-working. A steward could be identified within existing governance structures, or adjustments could be made to these structures in order to bring child and/or child-and-family services under one roof (including those for looked-after children). Either possibility – but potentially the latter most strongly – could help build a truly child-centred approach to the care, education and well-being of looked-after children, as well as of other vulnerable children, and Northern Ireland's children overall.

Existing "soft mechanisms" should also be extended to promote co-ordination and should include joint-training programmes among professionals and potentially even job-shadowing. These could be complemented further by introducing other co-ordination mechanisms including strategic planning requirements, contracts to establish norms for specific exchange, and the use of performance results as part of a performance management tool. Adopting a strategic approach that puts the child at the centre can be a strong mechanism to promote greater joined-up working at the institutional level.

Both vertical and horizontal governance structures may also be reinforced through the development of national standards. Northern Ireland may learn from Australia's experience with the development of clear, concrete national standards. The standards have been important for focusing different providers on shared goals and delineating clear roles for staff, including those that cross professional boundaries. Streamlined measures have also been important for identifying gaps and areas for improvement, and ensuring equity of services across regions. When developing standards, however, it should be ensured that there is still sufficient flexibility for locally appropriate approaches to implementation.

When aligned with performance management, objectives clarify expectations. Performance management incentives related to provision for looked-after children should also be harmonised across agencies, and interagency working needs to be regularly reviewed, and adjustments made if necessary. Ensure that any strategy developed includes a clear statement of desired outcomes (results) and realistic short-, medium- and long-term outputs linked back to strategic objectives. Strategic priorities should be set from the perspective of the children. Ultimately the institutional priorities of departments and their agencies with respect to looked-after children should centre on what the children need in order to overcome the drivers behind poor outcomes, rather than the institutional priorities of the departments.

Training needs (and funding to support new training) should be identified. Professional staff and carers need to have the training and resources to respond to children's needs. Professionals across agencies and carers, families and children need to develop a shared vocabulary to ensure better understanding of processes and goals

Recommendation 3: Identify savings and set priorities for investment

A lack of resources – including insufficient funding, staff time, quality home placements, and underinvestment in research and programme evaluation – has been among the most important barriers to improving outcomes for looked-after children.

In the current environment, agencies are very unlikely to receive any funding increases. There is therefore a need to identify savings – for example, by addressing inefficiencies currently in the system – and redirect funds to priority areas. Northern Ireland should consider introducing regular programme and spending reviews – at both

the government and voluntary sector levels – in order to gain insight into what activities are best supporting outcomes for looked-after children, and whether spending is effective. This can help better orient resources in a system that is already under pressure, and especially in the face of budget cuts or freezes. It could also provide greater stability in terms of programming for the voluntary sector as well as the children and carers this sector serves.

There should be some flexibility for how spending is used – to meet urgent needs, to pay for special services or support for looked-after children, and so on. Finally, schools should be held accountable for using the extra funding they receive for looked-after children to provide services for these children. Funding should follow the children when they change schools.

Recommendation 4: Monitor implementation and use data to identify areas for improvement

The absence of good monitoring data and research has held back progress for looked-after children. This is a priority area for change. A first initiative will be to consider outcomes beyond GCSE results that can provide insight into well-being and educational attainment for looked-after children. Baseline data will need to be established and regular tracking mechanisms developed. Data can be used to track gaps in provision and identify areas for improvement.

Recommendation 5: Invest in innovative interventions, evaluate results

A number of promising policies and programmes have been identified. However, the evidence base is not robust. More research on what works, for whom and under what circumstances is needed. Evaluation should be incorporated into programme design from the beginning. This may also provide a basis for better evidence-informed policy and programming decisions.

Across the board, research and evaluation needs to include the voices of looked-after children, families, carers and of the professionals implementing the programmes.

Appendix C.1. List of organisations interviewed

- Children’s Law Centre
- Department of Education
- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
- Education Authority
- Health and Social Care Board
- NI Assembly
- NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency
- NI Youth Forum
- The Fostering Network Northern Ireland
- Voice of Young People in Care
- Youth Council for NI

Notes

1. Looked-after children may be living with a foster family, family relative or friend or in a residential home. In some cases, children are in the care of the local Trust but living with their birth parents. See www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hss/child_care/looked-after-children/care-matters.htm.

2. According to the DHSSPS Information Analysis Directorate (IAD) "The percentage of looked-after children achieving Level 2 or above in English has risen from 50.7% at September 2008 to 82% at September 2014. The figure for the general school population is 91%. The percentage of Looked After children achieving Level 2 or above in Maths has risen from 52.2% at September 2008 to 83% at September 2014. The figure for the general school population is 92%."

3. Neither children or youth who are currently in the system nor their families, carers, or school leaders or teachers were interviewed for this case study.

4. An attempt was made to extend this analysis to countries beyond the United Kingdom. It appears that many countries do not gather data on looked-after children at all. One international Eurydice report from 2005 was located, which brings together responses to a query sent to European countries regarding kinds of data gathered. Several countries stated they do not gather data for this population. Other countries noted specific studies directly or indirectly related to looked-after children, but they do not systematically gather data on looked-after children. Admittedly, the Eurydice report is dated, but it was impossible to identify any subsequent efforts to develop an international database. Among those countries that do gather data (e.g., Australia, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and the United States), the figures are heterogeneous, reflecting differences in definition, policy and legal frameworks, methods of gathering data, as well as demography (Eurydice, 2005; Boddy et al., 2014).

5. Some 22 interviews were conducted with 11 young people between 9 and 17 years of age, and 11 social workers. They had all been looked-after for at least six months.

6. The Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) in England is an independent, non-ministerial government department, which reports directly to Parliament. It is responsible for inspecting and regulating education and training for all levels.

7. The sample included 59 children (29 boys and 30 girls). Researchers gathered data on children's characteristics, history of care, family of origin, integration with foster family, and the parenting style of carers.

8. A 2012 survey by the CREATE Foundation in Australia included the views of 1 069 children. They found that for children, a good placement is one where they felt they were in a warm, caring home and were happy and safe. Having a variety of activities and control over their own space were also important.

9. Data reflect 2014 figures.

10. In other words, the carer with final statutory responsibility for the welfare of a looked-after child.

11. The North Eastern Region model is based on a dedicated multi-disciplinary team: the Education Welfare Service for Looked-After Children in Education. This model links Education Welfare Officers to each Residential Childcare Unit, has dedicated support from Education Psychology one day per week, provides peripatetic teacher support, after-school tutor support to residential units, and manages education welfare service referrals with respect to Looked-After Children, as well as any subsequent PEPs. The Southern and Western Regions historically have concentrated on developing capacity, co-ordinated by an Adviser (rather than a chief education welfare officer), in partnership with other region-specific services, Pupil Personal Development Services, the Education Welfare Service, the Youth Service and EOTAS. It also established a capacity-building programme for schools in partnership with the Southern HSC Trust. Here, the Education Welfare Officer linked to the school manages any non-attendance LAC referrals and the development of a LAC Forum staff (through the Education and Health Trust) is sought for to focus on educational outcomes for LAC through case discussion. In addition, each local HSC Trust has "Looked-After Children Teams" which address the Looked-After Children cases from a social services perspective, and there are Looked-After Children Strategy Management Groups, comprised of EA and HSC Trust representatives, that meet once every two months to review specific matters with respect to the children.

12. Note should be taken of the *Children (Northern Ireland Consequential Amendments) Order 1995 (SI 1995/756)* which introduces amendments to specific acts applying exclusively to Great Britain or the United Kingdom as a whole as a result of the Children Order.

13. It is reported by authorities in Northern Ireland that the Department of Justice and the Department of Education are in the process of integrating education services for young people held in detention with those provided for other young people unable to sustain a place in mainstream education. Responsibility for education at the Woodland Juvenile Justice Centre will be transferred to the regional Education Authority (EA) and this process should be completed before summer 2016. It is hoped that this will enable more effective management of educational transitions for youth entering and leaving the justice system.

14. UNCRC Article 12 states: "You have a right to have a say and be listened to. If a decision is being made that will affect you, then you have a right to say what you think and be taken seriously by adults." This however, assumes children know their rights and feel comfortable being present during deliberation (Children's Law Centre, 2012b).

15. However, teachers have the right to have a substitute teacher take over class while they attend care planning sessions, and the DE has dedicated funding for that purpose.

16. For example, short-term outputs (1-3 years) can focus on responding and managing crisis and helping children build coping skills and resilience; medium-term outputs (4-6 years) might emphasise development; and long-term outputs (7-10 years) being those that focus on helping the children meet hopes and aspirations for the future.

17. In the 2013-14 school year, 8% of looked after children changed school at least once. This is similar to statistics from the prior four years (DHSSPS, 2015).

18. These questions are: 1) "What is getting in the way of this child or young person's well-being? 2) Do I have all the information I need to help this child or young person?

3) What can I do now to help this child or young person? 4) What can my agency do to help this child or young person? 5) What additional help, if any, may be needed from others? (Scottish Government, 2015a)

19. It can also signal few or no incentive mechanisms for data reporting, though whether or not this is the case in Northern Ireland remains unclear.

20. This is different from performance reporting which does exist with respect to looked-after children and is undertaken by the HSC Board through formal and informal meetings with the HSC Trusts, as well as with an annual report on delegated statutory functions.

21. Statistical data reporting should not be confused with reporting for performance measurement systems established between the HSC Trusts and HSC Board in relation to the DHSSPS.

22. Establishing targets can sometimes be controversial as it can generate perverse incentives or have unforeseen (often negative) consequences. However, without some indication as to the degree of increase or decrease in desired activity, establishing and communicating the actual impact becomes all the more challenging. The fact that there is no published target does not exclude another fact that the relevant authorities may be working with an internally identified target.

23. The Children's Resources Panel is comprised of Trust chairs and health professionals, and while it includes a member of the Looked-After Children Team it does not specify if this member is to be a representative of the EA or if he/she remains a member of the HSC Trust. The Panel does not explicitly include a representative from the EA. Its purpose is to manage the access to service provision for looked-after children and their families based on a needs assessment. It also analyses and evaluates assessment reports to ensure that children are placed in the most suitable institutional environment or otherwise for their needs. The Panel does not concern itself with the education of the children.

24. "Soft" co-ordination mechanisms are less binding and easy to "do and undo"; "hard" mechanisms are more binding and establish a formal norm for action that is difficult to amend.

25. The issue of the lack of co-ordination among executive departments is also discussed in the case studies on Delivering Social Change, procurement governance and regulatory streamlining as well as in the main Report.

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