

Response to Scottish Government consultation on measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it

November 2017

CEL CIS (Centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland), based at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, is committed to making positive and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Scotland's children living in and on the edges of care. We welcome this opportunity to consider how the attainment gap can be measured in Scotland, particularly with regard to looked after children and those on the edges of care.

As of July 2016, there are 15,404 looked after children in Scotland (1.5% of the 0-18 population), 5,659 of whom are primary school aged (5-11), and 6,330 are secondary school aged (12-17). Over half of all looked after children live with their own family – either in kinship care or 'at home' - and approximately 35% live with foster carers. Nearly 10% (1,477) live in residential homes or schools.¹ These children are all individuals with their own unique strengths, needs and vulnerabilities, who come from a diverse range of backgrounds. Whilst all have experienced some form of difficulty in their lives, many of these children have experienced multiple, serious adversities, including socio-economic disadvantage, parental drug and alcohol misuse, and domestic violence.² Looked after children are significantly more likely to have particular physical health conditions, poorer mental health (even when poverty and disadvantage are accounted for), emotional difficulties, and face multiple barriers when it comes to addressing such difficulties. Educational outcome indicators show that the gap between looked after children's attainment and achievement in school, and that of all children, remains unacceptably large.³

In recognition of the vulnerability of this group, and the state's responsibility to safeguard, support and promote their wellbeing, schools, local education authorities, NHS Boards, Scottish Ministers, and a wide range of other publicly funded organisations are all considered 'corporate parents' within the terms of [Part 9, Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#). This means they are under explicit duties to assess and promote the wellbeing of all looked after children.

Question 1: Have we based these proposals on the right principles?

The recognition and distinction that SIMD is not a measure of poverty, but a measure of area-based deprivation is welcomed. We also welcome the decision to use SIMD as an indicator rather than Free School Meal Entitlement, as it is a more reliable measure. The poverty related attainment gap is a significant visible challenge within Scotland, and research shows that targeting funding towards children from the most deprived areas will have a positive impact on attainment.⁴ However, we urge caution in focusing solely on this group. Our concern is that using SIMD data alone is rather a blunt instrument, and fails to capture the unique circumstances of many looked after children.

Official Scottish Government statistics published annually show a concerning attainment gap between those children who are looked after and those who are not.⁵ These statistics also indicate that educational outcomes for children who are looked after for part of the year (i.e. those children living on the edges of care) have even poorer outcomes than those who are looked after for longer periods, often in more stable placements. Whilst many children living in and on the edges of care also reside in areas of high deprivation, SIMD measures cannot be used as a proxy measure to assess the needs of this vulnerable group of children, due to the additional chronic and pervasive trauma that they have experienced, and in some cases continue to experience. In addition to collecting data on the attainment gap based on SIMD data, the National Improvement Framework should include measures to determine the attainment gap between those children who are looked after and those who are not. Differentiation of the data collected through teacher assessment at the key stages suggested for those children who are looked after and on the edges of care and those who are not would be a useful way of demonstrating and understanding this nuanced attainment gap, which is not solely based on poverty.

Question 3: Are the proposed key measures the right ones?

The measures proposed are sensible in relation to the stage that children are at in their school education, but we have concerns that the measures do not move beyond the age of 18. The [Looked After Children's Data Strategy 2015](#) recognises that data collection is not sufficient to allow longer term outcomes of looked after children to be properly understood. One of the gaps contributing to this is the lack of reliable post school data. We propose that key measures are agreed and extended to collect attainment data up to and including a person's 26th birthday. This would align with legislative corporate parenting responsibilities, which remain in place until a care leaver's 26th birthday.

There continue to be difficulties around tracking and reporting of looked after children's attainment due to the inconsistency of recording of Scottish Candidate Numbers (SCN). There is large local variation (25% - 100%) between the percentage of looked after children who have an SCN.⁶ Without this identifier, attainment and achievement data for these children cannot be reported to Scottish Government or included in Educational Outcomes statistics. This results in only a partial picture of the attainment levels of this vulnerable group of

children being provided, and also limits the potential to use this identifier to track children and young people's progress post school if they enter into Further or Higher Education or undertake SQA verified courses.

As the consultation document recognises, there is inconsistency in data collection and reporting in the early years. Whilst we welcome the inclusion of measures from the 27- 30 month review of developmental milestones within the framework, this could usefully be expanded. By delaying the collection of data until 27 months, there is a risk that earlier key measures for some of the most vulnerable children (e.g. those eligible for early learning and childcare placements from two years of age) are ignored. We would welcome the inclusion of a key measure which can report on the progress of children aged less than 27 months, to ensure that not only are we appropriately assessing the needs of the most vulnerable children, but that we also have the most robust data available to adequately identify and understand the attainment gap for those children.

Q5: Is 3rd level the right measure to use of attainment at S3?

We welcome the inclusion of an indicator to measure young people's post school progress and the recognition that whilst this cannot track attainment in the most traditional sense, it can be an indicator of post school skills acquirement.

The [Education \(Additional Support Needs\) \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) (s.8) amended earlier legislation to clarify that as a general rule it should be assumed that a looked after child will have additional support needs (ASN) unless the education authority, after assessment, decides they do not need additional support to benefit from their education. The factors giving rise to additional support needs for looked after children, discussed above, are varied and can be complex in nature. Due to the range of additional support that can be required to ensure these children have equity of access to the curriculum and educational experiences, it is imperative that there is adequate understanding and scrutiny of the additional resource being provided to them. We would welcome the inclusion of a measure which accurately records, tracks and reports the additional support that is being provided to looked after children and young people, alongside attainment data. This would improve understanding of what the range of support requirements are for those looked after children achieving at level 3, and could begin to identify the most effective measures of support for looked after children to achieve in line with their non-looked after peers at this level.

Q8: Are these the right sub measures? Are there others that should be included?

We agree with the sub measures proposed to measure the attainment, gap but disagree with the proposed way in which the sub measures will be used. Whilst attendance is not a direct measure of attainment, as the document states, we

feel strongly that stretch aims should be included for such sub measures. Without the inclusion of stretch aims for measures which are known to contribute to attainment, there may be less focus on improving outcomes in these areas, which in turn could impact on the narrowing of the attainment gap. Stretch aims would also ensure that there is consistency of understanding nationally of the aspirations in each of these important areas. Tucker-Drob's (2012) 'twin study' showed that environmental influences on children's academic attainment (such as poverty) are much stronger for children who do not attend preschool.⁷ The study also found that preschool attendance had significantly greater impact on attainment in maths and literacy at age 5 for children from low-income households, than for their peers from wealthier families. This supports the consideration stated within the document to include an additional sub measure on the take up of pre-school places by eligible two year olds.

Whilst the use of SDQ's to measure wellbeing amongst looked after children and young people has been found to be a reliable predictor and informer of wellbeing, evidence suggests that results are only truly reliable, particularly for children aged 4 – 12, when they are used in combination with a parent, carer or teacher 'informant' questionnaire alongside self-reports from children and young people.^{8 9} Therefore, an 'informant' questionnaire from a suitable adult should be included in conjunction with this measure.

We welcome the inclusion of the sub measures relating to child development and aspects of health and wellbeing, and would again urge that stretch aims are included for these sub measures. This will ensure aspirational targets are set for crucially important elements that can impact on looked after children's attainment.

Q9: Is the use of stretch aims, by SIMD quintile, the right way to set milestones?

Whilst many children living in and on the edges of care also reside in areas of high deprivation, as previous noted, SIMD measures cannot and should not be used as a proxy measure to assess the needs of this vulnerable group of children. In the same way that the Pupil Equity Fund allocates an amount per child living in SIMD 1 or 2, a similar approach should be taken when measuring the attainment gap for children living in and on the edges of care, to ensure that measures are targeted at achieving equity for the most disadvantaged and those in the most need.¹⁰

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.

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¹ Scottish Government (2017). [Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland 2015/16](#). Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

² SWIA (2006). *Extraordinary Lives: Creating a positive future for looked after children in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Social Work Inspection Agency.

³ Scottish Government (2017) [Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2015/16](#), Edinburgh: Scottish Government

⁴ OECD (2015) Improving Schools In Scotland: An OECD Perspective
<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/improving-schools-in-scotland.htm>

⁵ Scottish Government (2017) Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2015/16, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00521222.pdf>

⁷ Tucker-Drob, E.M. (2012) 'Preschools reduce early academic-achievement gaps: a longitudinal twin approach', *Psychological Science*, 23(3), pp. 310–19

⁸ R Goodman, T Ford, T Corbin, H Meltzer (2004). Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) multi-informant algorithm to screen looked-after children for psychiatric disorders. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* [Suppl 2]

⁹ Goodman and Goodman Health in looked after children. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores and mental. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (2012) 200, 426–427

¹⁰ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/Raisingeducationalattainment/pupilequityfund>