CELCIS
Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland

RESEARCH BRIEFING 1

The education of looked after children in Scotland: Some comparisons with Scandinavian countries and Finland

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Improving care experiences

SUMMARY

- **Scotland appears to be distinctive, when compared with Scandinavia and Finland in having a significant national initiative aimed at raising the educational attainment of looked after children.**
- **Children and young people in the care systems in Scandinavia and Finland are more likely than their Scottish counterparts to attend school, to stay on in school after the minimum leaving age and to go on to gain further and higher education qualifications.**
- **They are also less likely than looked after children in Scotland to experience exclusion from school.**

INTRODUCTION

This research briefing paper has been prepared by CELCIS to support the inquiry by the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament into the educational attainment of looked after children.

Over the last 25 years, research interest in the education of children in public care has grown considerably. While some more recent studies conclude that poor educational outcomes are not inevitable for those with a care background (Duncalf, 2010; Happer, McCreadie & Aldgate, 2006; Martin & Jackson, 2002) - with two notable exceptions in relation to *longer term* foster care placements (Daly & Gilligan, 2009; Pecora et al., 2006) - studies in several countries have consistently found that the educational attainment of those in, or formerly in, the care of the State is considerably lower than for the general population.

Scottish concern about the education of looked after children can largely be traced back to a major review of policy, practice and research undertaken by the Scottish Centre for Research in Education (Borland, Pearson, Hill, Tisdall & Bloomfield, 1998). Since then, several initiatives have been implemented, including the publication of *Learning with Care* (Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools and Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) and *Looked After Children & Young people: We Can and Must Do Better* (Scottish Executive, 2007) and the roll-out of comprehensive training for professionals. Some of these initiatives, and their wider context, are discussed in a recent Scottish Parliament Information Centre briefing (Kidner, 2011) and Connelly and Furnivall (in press).

The purpose of this research briefing is to present quantitative research studies and national government statistics that allow comparisons to be made between Scotland's performance in relation to the education of looked after children, and that of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. These four countries were chosen because they are regarded as having strong education systems (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

[OECD], 2010), high levels of child well-being (Adamson, 2007), are European countries and have similar population sizes to Scotland. They also have established research traditions in relation to the collection and use of comprehensive national statistical data.

After providing an overview of education and child welfare in these countries, this briefing compares them with Scotland in the following five areas:

- Further and higher education: highest qualifications of adults formally in care
- Age of leaving school and destinations
- School leaving qualifications
- School exclusions
- School attendance

There are limitations in a research briefing of this nature, including differences in how child welfare terms are used in different countries (Thoburn, 2007).

First, while the term 'looked after', as it is used in Scotland, includes children and young people living at home under the auspices of a children's hearing supervision requirement, the terms used in Scandinavian countries and Finland generally only denote children and young people in residential and foster care. Similar issues arise in relation to education. The most obvious difference is that the term 'secondary education' has a different meaning in Scandinavian countries and Finland compared with Scotland, but perhaps more challenging is whether and how Scots, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes and Finns think about concepts such as 'enrol', 'attend', 'complete', 'credit', 'achieve', 'attain' and 'qualify' in their own languages and how these or related terms are translated into the languages of others.
Secondly, the summary draws only upon Scandinavian and Finnish research literature published in English, i.e. a subset of the research literature considered to be of interest to a wider Nordic or international audience.

Thirdly, less material has been identified for Norway and Finland, than for Denmark and Sweden. Finally, while acknowledging that we should be cautious in conflating attainment and achievement, this briefing is limited to addressing five selected metrics.

EDUCATION AND CHILD WELFARE IN SCANDINAVIA AND FINLAND

Internationally, Finland's education system is seen to perform very well. In the latest *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) world education ranking report (OECD, 2010), Finland was ranked second out of 34 OECD countries in reading and maths, and first in science (Scotland by comparison was ranked the equivalent of 12th, 13th and 11th respectively, although the main PISA publication reports on the United Kingdom as a whole and OECD rankings are derived from this; the UK was ranked 20th, 22nd and 11th respectively). Denmark, Finland and Sweden had similar scores to Scotland in reading and maths and lower scores than Scotland in science (Scottish Government, 2010).

In terms of other OECD (2011) education indicators, one in particular stands out; Finland and Denmark have the highest percentages of 20-29 year olds enrolled in education, with Sweden and Norway being placed fourth and 13th respectively,

whereas the UK is 31st and near the bottom of the table of OECD countries (no separate OECD data on Scotland for this indicator has been identified).

While there are some differences between the education systems of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, there are significant similarities. Common characteristics include widespread pre-school education, limited private schooling, compulsory schooling commencing at age six or seven, a broad curriculum with comparatively high levels of teacher autonomy, mixed ability classes, only a limited use of school exclusion, most young people progressing to upper secondary education after completing their compulsory schooling, and free higher education (Alanen, Sauli & Strandell, 2004; Danish Agency for Universities and internationalisation, 2011; Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007).

All four countries are often described as adhering to the Social Democratic or Scandinavian welfare model (Eydal & Satka, 2006). In relation to child welfare, however, there are differences across Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland:

- Denmark has a much higher proportion of its children and young people under 18 in care than Norway, Sweden or Finland (Nordic Social-Statistical Committee, 2007; Thoburn, 2007).

While Danish data include children with disabilities (Nordic Social-Statistical Committee, 2007), this may indicate that the thresholds for coming into care in Denmark are lower than in other countries and may also partially explain their comparatively good child outcomes (Thoburn, 2007).

- Just over half of Danish children and young people in care are in residential care (Thoburn, 2007) and on-site education provision is common (Bryderup & Trental, 2011). Residential care is sometimes used for children under the age of three (Browne et al., 2004).
- In Sweden, contact family programmes are provided in which 'contact families' are recruited to provide respite care for a child, as well as direct support to the child's family (Andersson, 2007; Barth, 1991).
- Sweden has a growing number of private sector providers (Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011).
- Finnish researchers have pointed to a growth in their country of new types of family-like professional care (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001).
- A Norwegian study across the Nordic countries found that, in terms of the balance between parental interests and children's needs, Danish social workers were more likely to prioritise the former while Norwegian social workers the latter (Grinde, 2007).
- Finland, Norway and Sweden have over recent years seen steady rises in the percentage of children and young people in care, whereas Danish figures are comparatively stable (Bryderup & Trental, 2011; Hiilamo, 2008; Höjer, *Johansson & Hill,* 2011; Storø, (2008).

There are also some similarities:

- Child welfare (and indeed education and health) services are provided by municipalities (local authorities), which by Scottish standards are very small; specialist services aimed at the education needs of children in care are limited (Vinnerljung, 1998).
- Residential and foster care tend to be focused on older children (Grinde, 2007); in Sweden, for example, 78 per cent of those under 18 and in care are aged 10 or over (Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011). Also, the Swedish care system accommodates some young people who in Scotland would be remanded or sentenced to a Young Offender's Institution.
- In Scandinavia, but less so in Finland, many young people remain in care beyond their 18th birthday (Nordic Social-Statistical Committee, 2007; Thoburn, 2007) and often stay until the completion of upper secondary education (Bryderup & Trental, 2011; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010).
- Generally, parents agree to care placements (Nordic Social-Statistical Committee, 2007).
- All four countries rank in the top seven OECD countries in the 2007 Unicef Innocenti report card on the well-being of children (Adamson, 2007); in contrast, the UK was ranked bottom of the 21 participating countries, though separate data for Scotland were not published.

With some exceptions (Danish Ministry of Social Welfare, as cited in Bryderup & Trental, 2011; Tideman, Vinnerljung, Hintze & Isaksson, 2011) and in common with most other countries (Forsman & Vinnerljung, in press) there are few research or evaluation studies from Scandinavia or Finland on specific initiatives aimed at raising the educational achievement of children in public care.

FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION: HIGHEST QUALIFICATIONS OF ADULTS FORMERLY IN CARE

Scotland: No Scottish quantitative research or national statistical data has been identified in relation to the highest qualifications of adults formally in care.

Scandinavia and Finland: A recent Danish study (Bryderup, Trental & King, 2011) of 3,419 adults aged 27-30 who had been in care throughout their 16th year, found that 7.5% had gained a higher education qualification from a college or university. While this figure includes higher education courses as short as 18 months, most of these adults had the equivalent of an honours or master's degree. The same study also found that another 31% of adults with a care background had some form of qualification from post-compulsory education.

The picture in Sweden is similar. A study of 31,355 former child welfare clients aged 20-27 (Vinnerljung, Öman & Gunnarson, 2005) found that 6.4% had a university or university college education, whereas another 43.9% had completed a post-compulsory (upper secondary)

programme. More recently, in their study of 76,121 adults formerly in care born between 1972 and 1992, Höjer, Johansson and Hill (2011) found that 12 per cent would have been in receipt of *some* academic credits from a university or university college. This Swedish research also found that 40% (including the 12% with higher education credits) had an upper secondary qualification, although it should be noted that those with a care background were over-represented on upper secondary *individual programmes* because their grades at the end of compulsory school were too low for more mainstream programmes.

The research on this topic in both Finland and Norway is more limited. A Finnish study of former residents of the country's six state-owned residential education facilities for high(est)-risk adolescents (as distinct from those in the more numerous municipal children's or juvenile homes) in 1996 and 2000 found that 10 of the study's 52 participants aged 16 to 24 (already) had an upper secondary education (Jahnukainen, 2007); researchers interviewed 36.4% of the 1996 cohort and 22.4% of those who left in 2000 (four other individuals were identified but dead).

While it can be inferred from these and other studies that educational outcomes for those who have been in pubic care are better in Scandinavia and Finland than they are in Scotland, the key finding from Danish and Swedish research is that children with a public care background nevertheless have considerably lower educational attainment in comparison with their non-looked after peers (Berlin, Vinnerljung & Hjern, 2011; Bryderup, Trental & King, 2011; Clausen & Kristofferson 2008, as cited in Storø, 2011; Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011; Vinnerljung, Berlin & Hjern, 2010; Vinnerljung, Öman & Gunnarson, 2005; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008).

AGE OF LEAVING SCHOOL AND DESTINATIONS

Scotland: Approximately 90% of looked after children leave school aged 16 or under (Scottish Government, 2011a); by comparison, the percentage of all school leavers who left school aged 16 or under is 37%. In comparison to 36% for all school leavers, only just over one per cent of looked after children who left school in 2009-10 progressed to higher education directly from school. While the rates of those going into further education were broadly similar across the two groups, another noticeable difference was that 41% of looked after school leavers were unemployed; the figure for all school leavers was much lower, at 12%.

In the follow up survey six months later, the unemployment rate for these looked after school leavers had risen to 54%, with corresponding reductions in the rates of those in 'further education' and 'training'. Caution should be exercised in interpreting the follow up survey data as 862 of the school leavers could not be contacted.

Scandinavia and Finland: The interface in these countries between compulsory schooling and further education is quite different to that of Scotland. The provision of academic or vocational upper secondary education for young people from age 15 or 16 through to 19 or 20 is a feature of all four education systems. While not a legal requirement, the expectation in Sweden, for example, is that almost all young people will progress

to upper secondary education after their compulsory schooling (Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011). The proportion of those with a care background completing upper secondary was considerably lower than for the general population. The Swedish study found that 13% of those with a care background went to university or university college, either after their upper secondary education or at a later date.

SCHOOL LEAVING QUALIFICATIONS

Scotland: In 2009/10, the proportion of school leavers who were looked after away from home and gained five or more qualifications at level five or above on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (for example, Standard Grades at 1-2, Highers at A-C or Advanced Highers at A-C) was 4.7%, while the equivalent rate for all school leavers was 55.9% (Scottish Government, 2011b). The proportion of those looked after at home gaining this level of qualification was a negligible 0.5%. Similarly, on the Unified Points Score Scale (an aggregation of points accumulated across different course levels and awards) the average tariff score in 2009-10 for all looked after children who left school was 67, compared with a tariff score for all school leavers almost six times greater at 372 (Scottish Government, 2011a).

Scandinavia and Finland: In Sweden, the 2011 study referred to previously found that 86% of young people with a care background gained a school leaving certificate (Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011).

SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS

Scotland: In 2009-10, there were 2698 cases of exclusions of looked after children (Scottish Government, 2011a). The overall exclusion rate for looked after children was 365 exclusions per 1,000 looked after pupils, approximately eight times higher than that for all school children. This ranged from 32 exclusions per 1,000 looked after children in their first year in primary school (P1), to 881 exclusions per 1000 for those in their second year at secondary school (S2).

Scandinavia and Finland: While the power to exclude children from school and the use of this sanction is a feature of the education system in Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (along with Australia, New Zealand and the United States), this is not the case in most other countries (Parsons, 2005). Its formal use in Scandinavia and Finland is, by Scottish standards, very limited. In Denmark, for example, although exclusions are permitted under the law in some circumstances it is the responsibility of the head-teacher to arrange alternative provision before exclusion commences (Panayiotopoulos & Kerfoot, 2007).

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Scotland: In 2009-10 the overall attendance rate of looked after children was 87.8%, compared with 93.2% for all school children; looked after children had almost twice as many absences as other children. While the rate for primary aged looked after children was only a little lower than for all children, the attendance of those in secondary and special education was much lower at 80.5% and 84.6% respectively. In terms of differences between placement types, the published data is limited to those looked after children who remained in a single placement for an entire academic year, i.e. a particular subset of looked after

children whose situation was comparatively stable. Of these, the attendance rate for children and young people looked after at home was nevertheless lower than the average at 78.7%, while the rate for those in local authority homes was 84.9%. School attendance of children in foster care, however, appears to be generally very good – 96.3% (local authority foster carers) and 95.9% (foster carers purchased by a local authority).

Scandinavia and Finland: While one Swedish qualitative study of young people in foster care (which explored the experiences of and attitudes towards education) found that truancy and absence had been a problem for some of the research participants prior to and early on in their placement, **(**Hedin, Höjer & Brunnsberg, 2011), no other research literature or national statistics in relation to school attendance by children in either foster care or residential care has been identified for any of the four countries.

In relation to residential care in Denmark, one comparative study of children in residential care (Petrie, Boddy, Cameron, Wigfall & Simon, 2006) found that only 1.6% of Danish children under 16 in residential care were not attending school; this compared with 2.2% for Germany and 11.6% for England. More broadly, an audit of 156 Swedish residential homes (National Board of Health and Welfare/County Councils, 2008, cited by Höjer, Johansson, Hill, Cameron & Jackson, 2008) found that 24 children under 16 who had been in their placement for more than three months, out of 2,400 children, were not receiving education, i.e. one per cent, which the authors considered to be an alarming outcome.

CONCLUSION

In Scandinavian countries and Finland, there are very few specific national and local authority initiatives aimed specifically at raising the educational achievement of children in care. Other than the Danish and Swedish research undertaken as part of the *Young People from a Public Background Pathways to Education in Europe* (YiPPEE) project (Bryderup & Trental, 2011; Höjer, Johansson & Hill, 2011), there is little published research on the education of children in care.

In these countries, as in Scotland, the educational attainment of children in care is considerably lower than in the general population. Despite the significant differences in both the child welfare and education systems, and indeed probably because of some of these, the research evidence suggests that the 'performance' of Sweden and Denmark in particular in relation to the education of children in care is better than Scotland.

This review is intended to stimulate thinking in relation to the important questions for policy and practice in Scotland and to form the basis for future research to determine why these differences may exist and what can be done to support improvement.

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About CELCIS

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