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Starting Out Right: early education and looked after children

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Executive summary

The importance of early education

High quality early education makes a difference to children's outcomes throughout their time at school and beyond. It is particularly important for children who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds: this is recognised in the government's funding of free early education for the most disadvantaged two year olds, including looked after children, and for all three and four year olds. While there is a lack of specific research on the impact of early education for looked after children, there was a strong consensus among interviewees that it is important for them to access high quality provision, alongside a home environment which supports both learning and emotional needs. Looked after children have worse outcomes at every stage in their education, and a good early education may help to close the 'achievement gap' between them and their peers. Although there is no statutory duty on councils to support early education for looked after children, it is seen as a priority by Ofsted and by many local authority teams.

Access to high quality early education

There is no published national data on looked after children's access to early education. 89% of local authorities hold local data on this topic, although there are sometimes gaps where children attend a setting in a different local authority. Based on these local authority returns, looked after children are less likely than their peers to access early education: 71% of those aged between two and four are in early education, compared to a national average of 85%.89% of looked after children are attending a setting which is rated by Ofsted as 'good' or 'outstanding': this is similar to the overall proportion of children in such settings. Our interview data identified a number of barriers to access, included the relative priority given to attendance at high quality early education by social workers and foster carers, alongside a number of practical barriers, including the short-term nature of many foster placements. A lack of accessible national data on take-up, on the quality of settings attended and on educational attainment prior to statutory school age makes the exploration of LAC's early years experiences in England considerably more challenging. This is a significant barrier to monitoring the educational experience and progress of LAC under five years.

Good practice in early education

This study revealed consensus that looked after children need 'the same as other children, but more so' from their early education provider. This means that many general aspects of good practice, particularly around child-centred education and adequate levels of staffing, are important for this group. However, settings often need additional resources to meet the needs of looked after children, both to support their developmental needs and to cover the time needed for meetings and administration. The Early Years Pupil Premium is used to the support these needs, but is significantly lower than the equivalent premium for school-aged children. Local authority virtual schools play a crucial role in supporting looked after children to access high quality early education, and real progress is being made in some authorities. The strength of the relationship between the virtual school and the social work team is emerging as a key determinant of success.

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Looked after children (LAC) are those for whom the state assumes parental responsibility because the adults caring for them – usually the birth parent/s – are no longer able to. In England, 60 per cent of LAC enter care following abuse or neglect (DfE, 2016b). The majority (74 per cent) are placed with a foster carer, either a registered foster parent or 'kinship care' with a relative or friend (DfE, 2016b) rather than in residential children's homes; and for very young children this proportion is even higher.

The number of LAC in England has been rising steadily in recent years, reaching 70,440 in 2016[1]: the highest number than at any point since 1985 (DfE, 2016b, Zayed & Harker, 2015)[2]. Government data show that LAC have significantly poorer educational outcomes than children not in care throughout primary and secondary school, with the gap widening as children get older. By secondary level, only 18 per cent gained five GCSEs at grade C or higher in 2015, compared to 64 per cent of children not in care (DfE, 2016c). Beyond compulsory education, just seven per cent of care-leavers in England progressed to higher education in 2014, compared with 50% of the general population aged 17 to 30 (DfE, 2014a). LAC are also four times more likely to have a special educational need than children within the general population, and almost ten times more likely to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan (DfE, 2016c).

Just under one fifth of the 70,440 children in care at the 2016 census date were under the age of compulsory schooling[3] although the population is very fluid, with children frequently moving in and out of care. While data (in England, at least) are not available on the progress of LAC prior to school-age there is strong evidence for disadvantaged children more broadly that the attainment gap begins well before primary school. For example, disadvantaged children are already almost a year behind their more advantaged peers in terms of vocabulary development by the age of five (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010). Given that many LAC are from disadvantaged homes (Simkiss et al., 2013) there is a good reason to believe that the same applies for this vulnerable group.

There is also strong evidence that attending early years provision can help disadvantaged children catch up with their peers (Sylva et al., 2010), with the benefits both more significant and more sustained if provision is of good quality (Sylva et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). In England, all three and four-year-old children are entitled to a free part-time 'early education' place within an early years setting, with take-up rates of more than 90 per cent within the general population. Recent policy initiatives such as free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds (for which all LAC are eligible) and the early years 'pupil premium' for disadvantaged children offer huge potential to improve access to - and the quality of – early education for LAC. However at present not enough is known to ensure that these benefits

1 This figure reflects all children looked after as at 31st March 2016.
2 The increase is partly attributed to a rapid increase in the number of children being taken into care following high-profile incidents such as the death of 'Baby P' in 2007 and cases of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham (NAO, 2014).
3 12,680 aged between birth and four years (DfE, 2016b)

1: Introduction

translate into improved outcomes. We know little about the degree to which LAC access early years provision and – if so – whether it is of sufficient quality to reduce their risk of developmental delay. This exploratory study aims to address this gap, and explore the current situation in England.

Summary of aims and methodology

This study was intended as scoping research to:

1. review national and international research evidence relating to LAC within their first five years, focusing specifically on risk of developmental delay, the extent to which children may fall behind their non-looked-after peers before school-age, and the potential of good quality early years provision to help LAC narrow this gap;
2. summarise current English policy relating to early education[4] for LAC;
3. establish what data are currently available, locally and nationally, on the take-up of early years provision by LAC in England and on the quality of that provision, with a focus on the free early education entitlement;
4. establish the views of key stakeholders and experts on the importance of early education for LAC, and on the extent to which LAC in England currently access early years provision;
5. establish the views of key stakeholders and experts on how best to meet the needs of LAC within early education settings, and on the current preparedness of providers to meet those needs;
6. establish current local government authority systems for encouraging take-up of early education by LAC, and ensuring that provision is of high quality; and to highlight examples of existing good practice.

4 Although there remains some debate regarding the terminology used to describe early years provision, it is increasingly understood to include both education and care, even for very young children. Given that the focus of our report is largely on England, and on the take-up of the free provision known as the 'early education entitlement', we occasionally use the term 'early education' in addition to the broader term 'early years provision'. Where we do so, we recognise that this encompasses both early education and care, and that early years providers have a key role to play in meeting the needs of young children in a holistic way.

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Methods included:

- a purposive review of the national and international research literature;
- a review of English policy relating to early education for LAC;
- twenty three semi-structured interviews with key stakeholder and experts within the field, carried out between January and August 2016. These include academics, foster carers and the organisations representing them, representatives from early years settings, local authorities and central government, and health professionals[5].
- a short online survey of all 152 local authorities in England, distributed to virtual school heads (or equivalent roles) in early 2016. Freedom of Information (FoI) requests were submitted to local authorities which did not respond to the initial survey in spring 2016. Responses were gathered from a total of 136 local authorities, reflecting a response rate of 89%.

Further details on methodology are presented in Appendix 1, including details of interviewees, survey methodology and interview schedules.

The report is organised into six further chapters:

Chapter 2: Review of the research literature

Chapter 3: English policy relating to early education for LAC

Chapter 3: Attitudes and access to early education for young LAC

Chapter 4: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

Chapter 5: Local authority support for the learning needs of LAC

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

5 Direct quotes by interviewees are largely attributed. In a small number of cases, interviewees have been anonymised to avoid the risk of a child being identified (e.g. where there were small numbers of LAC within a particular local authority, or being cared for by a foster carer). Real names have been used for the early years settings contributing to the report.

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Key terms and definitions

Although this report draws on international literature, it relates primarily to England. Readers unfamiliar with the English policy context may find the following glossary of key terms useful.

How children are cared for

- *Looked after children*[6]: all children being cared for by their local authority, including those looked after by their own parents under local authority supervision, those with kinship and foster carers, and those in residential settings such as children's homes and secure units.
- *Foster care*: an arrangement whereby children stay in the homes of adults who are not related to them. This may be temporary, longer term or for short breaks. Foster placements are usually managed by the local authority, though foster carers may be supervised by the local authority or by an independent fostering agency.
- *Kinship care*: an arrangement whereby children stay with relatives other than their parents. For looked after children, this will be under the supervision of the local authority.
- *Child arrangements order*: a legal order which defines who a child is to live with, and who they are to spend time with or otherwise have contact with. This may or may not include living or spending time with birth parents.
- *Special guardianship order*: a legal order which appoints one or two people other than the birth parents as the 'special guardians' of a child, meaning that they have day to day responsibility for their care (not all children with child arrangements or special guardianship orders are looked after children).
- *Adoption:* a legal process which confers parental responsibility for a child to a person or people other than their birth parents. When children are adopted, they are no longer considered to be looked after children, but adoptive families may continue to receive additional support.
- *Children in Need*: children who need local authority support to reach or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development, or to prevent deterioration in their health or development. This includes, but is not limited to, children with disabilities.

6 We recognise that use of terms vary, with some preferring the term 'children looked after'. Other terminology (e.g. children in care, out-of-home care) is used in other countries. Throughout this report we use 'looked after children (LAC) for consistency but we recognise that there are different views and that language and practice are evolving.

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The local authority role

- *Corporate parent*: the local authority is the 'corporate parent' for all looked after children, meaning that they are expected to have the same responsibility for a child's health, education and welfare as a birth parent.
- *Social workers*: professionals who work with vulnerable children to ensure their welfare and safety. This includes managing foster placements for looked after children.
- *Virtual schools*: a statutory service in each local authority which is responsible for ensuring that looked after children succeed in education. They are not physical buildings and children will continue to attend an ordinary school. The virtual head leads the virtual school.
- *Personal education plans (PEPs):* individual plans for the education and development of looked after children, developed in partnership by the education setting, local authority and carer. They are a statutory requirement for school-age children and pre-school children (although the age of 'pre-school' is not defined). When used for younger children, they are often known as Early Years PEPs or EYPEPs.

Types of early years providers (known as 'settings')

- *Maintained setting*: early years provision run by a local authority, either as a standalone nursery school or as a nursery class within a primary school.
- *Voluntary setting*: a provider run by a charity or voluntary sector organisation.
- *Private setting*: a provider run by a private company. These may be individual businesses or part of a chain. 'Day nurseries' are usually privately run and offer early education and care for all or part of the working day.
- *Independent setting:* a nursery which is part of an independent school
- *Childminder:* a provider who looks after children in their own home. Childminders are usually self-employed.
- *PVI (private, voluntary and independent) sector:* all types of early years providers apart from maintained settings.

2: Review of the research literature

This chapter outlines the current literature relating to looked after children (LAC) under the age of five, and how their needs for care and education might be met. Given the lack of specific research relating to young LAC, it draws also on the broader literatures relating to disadvantaged children and LAC of school age. Literature was identified using search databases and through consultation with the study advisory group and other early childhood experts nationally and internationally. It therefore represents a purposive rather than a systematic evidence review. The chapter outlines the evidence on the impact of early adversity, the potential for care and education in the home and in early years settings to make a difference, and how this might best be accomplished.

Summary

- Early adversity leads to poorer outcomes for LAC in comparison with children not in care, including a significant education attainment gap. LAC share some risk factors with other disadvantaged groups but also experience unique risk factors relating to removal from their home and potentially frequent care moves.
- The gap between LAC and children not in care begins before school and there is a strong case for early intervention in relation to attachment, socio-emotional skills, self-regulation, language development and health and physical needs. All these factors are likely to influence children's readiness for school and later educational attainment, as well as many other outcomes.
- The prime avenue for meeting these needs is through a nurturing home environment, with evidence (in relation to disadvantaged children more broadly) that this is an important factor in promoting educational as well as socio-emotional development.
- There is also a strong case for early intervention through attendance at early years settings from age two and upwards. Good quality early years provision can narrow the gap for disadvantaged children and, while there is little research relating specifically to LAC, there is reason to believe that the same is true for this group.
- However evidence also suggests that LAC – due to their unique risk profile – may be more sensitive to variation in early years provision. In particular, quality and stability may be more important for LAC than for other children.
- There is also tentative evidence that preschool attendance may support carers and reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown, and that involvement of carers in children's education and care experience is important.
- There is some evidence that LAC are less likely to attend early years settings than children not in care but not enough is known about attendance patterns and their influences. Similarly, not enough is known about LAC's experiences to determine whether they are accessing provision of high enough quality to meet their needs.
- The current study addresses some of these gaps in knowledge. However, further research is needed.

2: Review of the research literature

2.1 Early adversity leads to poorer outcomes

2.1.1 Risk of poorer outcomes

As a group, LAC face significant challenges in their life trajectories and there is powerful evidence that many do not reach their full potential. Throughout their lives, children in care are at risk of emotional and behavioural problems, neuro-physiological dysregulation and mental health problems (Bruce et al., 2009; Clausen et al., 1998; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Landverk & Garland, 1999; Pears et al., 2010). They also – as a result of these difficulties and other factors – experience lower academic achievement, adjustment difficulties and exclusion from school, and have higher rates of special educational need (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Geenen & Powers, 2006; Mitic & Rimer, 2002; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Pears et al., 2010; 2015; Smithgall et al., 2004; Zima et al., 2000). Later in life, they are more likely to be unemployed, have poorer health outcomes, mental health problems and higher rates of drug and alcohol use; and to experience prison, psychiatric institutions or homelessness at some point in their lives (Centre for Social Justice, 2015; Williams et al., 2014; Homeless Link, 2015).

In this study, we focus particularly on the key role played by educational attainment in the life chances of LAC. In England, national data show that LAC are already markedly behind their non-looked-after peers in national tests by age seven, with a gap of between 20 and 25 per cent for reading, writing and maths attainment (DfE, 2015a, 2016c). Although outcomes at seven for all children have been rising, the gap between looked after and non-looked after children has remained largely constant over recent years (DfE 2016c), and it widens in secondary school. Only 18 per cent of LAC gained five GCSEs at grade C or higher in 2015 compared to 64 per cent of children not in care (DfE, 2016c). A recent study in England showed that young people in and leaving care were nine times more likely to have been permanently excluded from school, and four times more likely to have had a fixed term exclusion, than children as a whole (Dixon et al, 2015). Beyond compulsory education, just seven per cent of care-leavers in England progressed to higher education[7] in 2014 compared to more than 50% of the general population[8] (DfE, 2014a). LAC are also four times more likely to have a special educational need than children within the general population, and almost ten times more likely to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan (DfE, 2016e). Similar trends are identified in other countries within the UK (Mannay et al., CASCADE Research Briefing, 2016; The Scottish Government, 2015) and internationally (Dill et al., 2012; Pecor et al., 2012).

7 Higher education is conceptualised by the DfE as studies 'beyond A-Level'.

8 The figure relates to former children in care age 21 or younger, who were enrolled in higher education in 2014. It does not include those who attend university in later life.

A member of our advisory panel also noted the official figures may underestimate attendance at higher education, since it relies on individuals ticking a box on their University application form to indicate that they are care leavers and therefore entitled to additional financial support. It is possible that many will not wish to identify themselves as care leavers.

2: Review of the research literature

2.1.2 Factors leading to poorer outcomes

In England, a child may become looked after for a variety of reasons, primarily because the adult/s with parental responsibility are unable to provide appropriate care, for example due to living in extreme poverty or a chaotic home environment, or because of maltreatment (Children Act, 1989: III, IV and V). Government statistics show that 60 per cent of the LAC registered at the annual 2016 census date had been taken into care as a result of abuse or neglect. A further 16 per cent had entered care following family dysfunction, 9 per cent following acute family stress and 7 per cent due to absent parenting (DfE, 2016b). A recent systematic review of the demographic risks associated with children entering care identified a number of family-level factors including low socio-economic status, maternal age at birth, health problems such as parental alcohol/substance abuse or mental illness, learning difficulties, membership of an ethnic minority group and single parenthood (Simkiss et al., 2013). Experiencing such adversity in the early stages of life can significantly affect children's later development. Some of the adversities (e.g. abuse or neglect) are shared with other groups of at-risk children, while others are specific to LAC, for example removal from the family home and potentially frequent moves between care placements. We discuss each of these in turn.

Looking first at **demographic risks**, many of the family characteristics associated with entry to care are also predictors of poorer developmental outcomes. For example the EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-school Education) 3-7 study in England identified maternal age at birth, low socio-economic status, poverty and single parenthood as risk factors for delayed language, literacy, independence, concentration and self-regulations skills (Sylva et al., 2004), with the presence of multiple risk factors associated with increased risk of delay. Chaotic home environments during the early years have also been associated with poorer cognitive and social outcomes at age five (Berry et al., 2016). This can partly be explained by the effects on parent's abilities to respond to children's needs within such an environment, and research has shown that children growing up in chaotic environments tend to experience fewer and lower quality interactions with their carers in the home (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2012), and that families might be less involved with their children's education (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). There are strong links between parenting practices and children's later outcomes, with lack of parental interactions, lower parental sensitivity and poor or harsh behaviour management linked to lower attachment security and higher levels of anti-social behaviour (De Wolff & van Ijzendoorn, 1997; Scott et al.,2010), while positive parenting is associated with higher social and academic competence, lower levels of anti-social behaviour and reduced risk of later substance abuse (Kumpfer & Bluth, 2004; Byford, Kuh & Richards, 2012).

There is also considerable evidence of the negative effects of **abuse and neglect**, both for children at-risk generally (Anthonsamy & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007; Veltman & Brown, 2001) and for LAC (Pears, 2010). For babies and young children, disruptions to the security of parent-child attachment relationships are considered a key means through which neglectful or abusive home environments can lead to developmental problems (James, 1994) and many primary

2: Review of the research literature

school-aged LAC are indeed known to have attachment difficulties (Cameron et al., 2015; Lang et al., 2016). Jane Barlow and Mitch Blair, writing in the 2012 annual report of the Chief Medical Officer, describe attachment as *"a significant bio-behavioural feedback mechanism that evolves during the first and second years of life in response to early parenting, and plays a key role in the development of emotional regulation both during the early years (Sroufe, 2005) and across the life span (Fraley, 2002)".* It is difficult to disentangle the extent to which attachment difficulties result from poor or abusive parenting or from the removal of the child from the birth family, but the end result is that children in care have a unique risk of developing attachment problems (Morton & Browne, 1998). Children with insecure or disorganised attachments are less likely to form positive and trusting relationships, tend to do less well at school and are more likely to show signs of serious mental illness (Steele & Siever, 2010). In addition to attachment difficulties, the stress of experiencing abuse and neglect in and of itself can have a significant negative impact on children's neurological development, health and wellbeing (Shonkoff et al., 2012; Barlow, 2012). Fantuzzo & Perlman (2007) identified maltreatment and homelessness as significant mediators of associations between being in care and children's educational well-being.

In addition to the influences already outlined, which LAC share with other at-risk groups, the **disruption of being removed from their birth home and potential instability of frequent care moves** is unique to this group of children and can compound the developmental risks (Vig et al., 2005; Lewis, Dozier et al., 2007, Ward, 2009). One English study reported a median length of placement of only four months in foster care (Ward, 2009) and research in the US has reported an average of 3.5 transitions for maltreated foster children in their pre-school years (Pears & Fisher, 2005). As described above, frequent placement transitions risk further disruption to attachment relationships for LAC (Lewis, Dozier et al., 2007; Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000; Wulczyn, Kogan & Harden, 2003) and have also been linked to poorer inhibitory control (Lewis, Dozier et al., 2007; Pears, Bruce et al., 2010). Moves between care placements often also lead to moves between schools, and school mobility is identified as a further factor contributing to poorer outcomes (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Pears et al., 2015; Grigg, 2012) both in terms of educational progress and difficulties forming positive and trusting relationships with teachers and peers (Pears et al., 2015). They also make it more challenging for carers to become involved in children's educational settings (Pears et al., 2010).

2.1.3 The case for early intervention

Taken as a whole, LAC are at risk of myriad early adversities likely to have a negative impact on their development, educational attainment and life chances. Although the focus is often on outcomes during LAC's school careers and beyond, cracks in the foundations of learning emerge early. Fostered children are already behind in their language, psycho-social and neuro-psychological functioning during the pre-school years (Klee, Kronstadt & Zlotnick, 1997; Pears & Fisher, 2005; Stahmer et al., 2005) and have poorer academic and socio-emotional competence on entry to school (Pears et al., 2010). For example, a recent study which

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identified gaps in pre-reading skills found that more than half of fostered children in the sample fell below the 23rd percentile for phonological awareness on entry to kindergarten (reception) (Pears et al., 2011). There is considerable evidence that outcomes at entry to school predict later school achievement, psychosocial adjustment and life outcomes in the wider population (Campbell et al., 2008; Duncan et al., 2007; Fothergill et al., 2008; McClelland et al., 2013; Morgan et al., 2015; Lesaux, Rupp & Siegel, 2007; Nagin & Tremblay, 2001; Sylva et al., 2010; Sweinhart et al., 2005). Early intervention is therefore essential and, in order to determine the most effective means of intervention, it is important to understand the mechanisms through which early adversity leads to poorer outcomes. We need to identify the precursors of school difficulty, to aid decision-making and develop appropriate interventions for LAC. In which domains do they fall behind, and what can be done to help them catch up with their peers? Research in this area is notably sparse, but we discuss the evidence currently available.

As noted above, children in care are at significant risk of developing **attachment** disorders, and the collected research literature makes a powerful case for ensuring that young LAC have access to consistent and stable caregiving in environments where they can begin to trust adults, and form consistent, secure and loving relationships to support their emotional and social development (Cameron et al., 2015; Lang et al., 2016). Securely attached children do better than children with attachment difficulties across a wide range of domains, including emotional, social and behavioural development, peer acceptance, academic achievement and physical development (Sroufe, 2005; Green & Goldwyn, 2002).

Children need **social and emotional** skills to access the opportunities which school has to offer, including pro-social skills and the ability to regulate emotions and behaviour (Blair, 2002, Raver, 2002). Children also require **inhibitory control**, a cognitive process which involves the ability to self-regulate attention or behaviours and overlaps with self-regulation. As discussed above, inhibitory control is negatively influenced by caregiver disruption, harsh parenting and maltreatment (see Pears et al., 2010, 2013 for a summary) and has been identified as one of the factors mediating associations between family environment, early maltreatment and foster care placement, and academic and socio-emotional competence on entry to kindergarten (Pears et al., 2010; NICHD ECCRN, 2003). That is, early adversity results in poorer inhibitory control, which in turn affects LAC's school-readiness (see also Blair & Razza, 2007; NICHD ECCRN 2003).

Language skills are also a critical factor. We know that LAC have poorer language and pre-reading skills on entry to school (Pears et al., 2011) and there is also a wide literature documenting the gaps in language development between disadvantaged children more broadly and their more advantaged peers (e.g. Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2011). In the general population, early language skills even as early as two years predict literacy and behavioural skills at five, which in turn predict achievement into secondary schooling (Morgan et al., 2015; Duncan et al., 2007); and strong early language skills can act as a protective factor against other risk factors that might influence school success (Burchinal, Roberts, Zeisel,

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Hennon & Hooper, 2006). In contrast, early delays are compounded because basic skills are needed to access later learning (Dickinson, Freiberg & Barnes, 2011) and, once disadvantaged children have fallen behind, they are unlikely to catch up with their peers (Save the Children, 2015).

Finally, many LAC enter care in a poor state of **health**, reflecting the effects of maltreatment, poverty, poor prenatal care, prenatal infection, parental substance abuse and mental illness (Simms, Dubowitz & Szilagyi, 2000; Astley et al., 2002). Common problems for children include physical health issues such as acute infections, skin disorders or respiratory tract disorders, as well as psychological problems (Simms et al., 2000). Such problems can act as barriers to development in other areas, and to accessing education (Berridge, 2006).

The case for early intervention is powerful. LAC are already falling behind children not in care well before statutory school age, with many identified as having special educational needs in the first few years of school (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). In order to promote their educational (and wider) development LAC need early years environments which enable them to develop secure attachments, help them to develop their socio-emotional skills, inhibitory control and language skills, and attend to their health and psychological needs. The social mobility literature identifies education as a key driver of social justice (Crawford, MacMillan & Vignoles, 2014) and, as Cameron and colleagues (2015) argue, the learning opportunities lost for these young children may never be recovered if they do not have access to educational experiences of the highest quality.

The two primary contexts for meeting these needs are the home environment, via foster and kinship care, and early education and care settings (known as 'early years settings' in England). We consider each in turn, reflecting on their potential to act as a protective buffer in the lives of LAC.

2.2 Care and education in the home environment

Children experiencing care during their early years are most frequently placed either with a foster carer or with a member of their own family who has assumed legal parental responsibility (kinship care). Although research evidence relating to young LAC is limited (and that relating to kinship care even more so) we know that a carer's role in providing a nurturing, sensitive and stable environment is a crucial factor in ensuring that LAC reach their potential and overcome early adversity. Dozier et al. (2001) highlighted the importance of the carer's 'maternal state of mind' in facilitating an infant's adjustment to the behaviour of the new carer and their subsequent ability to form attachment security, and found that children were capable of making a successful transition to a new person, even when their care had been disrupted within the first year and a half of life. Studies in Germany have confirmed the significance of the foster carer's role in promoting attachment security (Lang et al., 2016) and research has also shown that children who experience a lack of environmental stress during early

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childhood foster care experiences have better emotional adjustment and better adjustment to school (Healey and Phillips, 2011). In England, research from the Rees Centre exploring the education outcomes of LAC suggests that care generally provides a protective factor, with early admission being associated with consistently better outcomes but not fully reversing the damage that may have been done (Sebba et al., 2015).

Cameron et al. (2015) make a strong case for LAC's home environments supporting learning as well as socio-emotional wellbeing, noting the influence which fosters carers' interest in books and the world, and their teaching practices towards the child, can have on their emotional and educational development. This position is further supported by general population studies such as the EPPSE (Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education) 3-14 research in England, showing a strong relationship between the home learning environment and educational outcomes. The quality of the home learning environment was found to be a stronger predictor of children's developmental progress than either preschool or school quality (Sylva et al., 2010). Aspects of the home learning environment assessed included the extent to which parents read with children, sang songs or rhymes at home and took children to the library. Thus, foster and kinship carers have a significant opportunity to make a difference to the educational development of the children they care for.

The evidence – both on the needs of LAC and the potential of carers to meet those needs - highlights the importance of carers being well prepared for their role, and aware of the need to support learning as well as caring for children. There has been some debate about to what extent this should involve formal qualifications. In Germany, Lang et al. (2016) found that the professional background of foster carers predicted early attachment formation in children aged from one to six years of age. Cameron and colleagues (2015) discuss the need for foster carers to be as well educated as possible but acknowledge that this is not always easily achieved. McDermid et al. (2012) found that, while a large proportion of foster carers are educated to GCSE level, many have no educational qualifications at all. However, with demand for foster carers increasing due to greater numbers of children entering care and a reduction in available fostering households (Ofsted, 2015), the prospect of tightening qualification requirements is a double-edged sword. The need for carers to be formally educated remains somewhat controversial, with continued debates over whether their role is as 'parent' or 'professional'. Qualitative data suggest that the educational encouragement provided by foster carers is as important as their educational qualifications per se (Sebba et al., 2015), a view supported by evidence from the EPPSE study which shows that, although parental educational is important, the quality of the home learning environments they provide is a more powerful predictor of children's progress.

As noted earlier, placement stability is also an important factor, with moves between care placements linked to poorer attachment outcomes and inhibitory control (Lang et al., 2016; Lewis et al., 2007; Pears, Bruce et al., 2010; Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000; Wulczyn, Kogan & Harden, 2003), as well as to a number of longer term outcomes such as unemployment, mental health outcomes, behavioural problems and risk-taking behaviours (Jones et al., 2011).

2: Review of the research literature

2.3 Early education as an intervention for LAC

We move on now to consider early years care and education settings. The benefits of good quality early childhood education and care for children's development are well-established. A recent review (Melhuish et al., 2015) confirmed that high quality provision benefits children's cognitive, language and social development in the short and the long term, including school success, employment and social integration. There is almost a complete absence of research on the effects of early education for children in care, with just one study identified suggesting that enrolment of young foster children in accredited early years settings predicts better cognitive outcomes in primary school (Kaiser et al., 2011).

However, there is good evidence that it can be effective for children facing similar kinds of experiences, for example those from families facing socio-economic risk factors (Sylva et al., 2010; Burchinal et al., 2002; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Vandell et al., 2010). In fact, the effects of good quality early childhood provision have been found to be *stronger* for disadvantaged children, acting as a protective buffer against the detrimental effects of poor home environments (Berry et al., 2016). This is the case for children facing poverty and other demographic risks (Sylva et al., 2004; Burchinal et al, 1995; Caughty, DiPietro & Strobine, 1994; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; MCartney et al., 2007) and for children with special educational needs and other biologically-based risk factors (Phillips & Meloy, 2012; USDHHS, 2009, 2010; Phillips et al., 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2009; 2010). A number of researchers have argued that these studies provide good initial evidence of the potential of early years provision to act as a protective intervention for LAC (Meloy & Phillips, 2012).

However, more evidence is needed on patterns of attendance, as well as on the differential effects of early years provision. Evidence for the wider population suggests that a number of factors influence the likely impact, including quality, intensity and stability of provision. These are discussed in turn.

2.3.1. Quality

The quality of early years provision has been identified as a critical factor, with low quality provision often resulting in no – or even negative - effects and representing a dual risk for disadvantaged children with an already higher likelihood of developmental delay (Melhuish et al., 2015; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). The fact that quality effects are stronger for children facing disadvantage and special educational needs suggests that LAC may be particularly sensitive to variations in quality.

The question of what quality 'looks like' for children in care is a challenging one to answer, with very little specific evidence available. Studies for the general population, and for disadvantaged children, identify features such as sensitive and responsive interactions with carers and opportunities to form secure attachments, a focus on play-based activities, support for communication and language, and opportunities to move and be physically active (Mathers

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et al., 2014). Predictors of quality include knowledgeable and capable practitioners supported by strong leaders, a stable staff team with a low turnover, favourable adult-child ratios, secure yet stimulating physical environments and engaged and involved families (Mathers et al., 2014). These features are drawn from a review of the research literature relating to quality early years provision for children under the age of three which, given the likelihood of developmental delay among LAC, may be more appropriate than the literature relating to older pre-school children.

While there is little specific evidence for LAC, the needs of this group (see section 2.1.3) alongside qualitative evidence on the features of effective early years provision for LAC (Cameron et al., 2015; DCSF, 2009) indicate that these characteristics are highly relevant and, if anything, more important for LAC than for other children. Two reports from England identifying effective characteristics of early years settings catering for LAC under five suggest that they should 'do the things they do for all children but more so' (DfE, 2009a), with a particular focus on nurture, stability, meeting individual and additional needs, inclusive practices, careful monitoring of progress, linking with other professionals and working closely with foster and kinship carers. The skills and knowledge of practitioners in meeting a potentially wide range of individual needs, and in understanding the potential effects of early adversity, were also highlighted. In their chapter on this topic, Cameron and colleagues (2015) also make a strong case for supporting learning as well as care needs, and suggest that good quality settings are committed to the progress of the LAC's development, as well as being understanding of - and able to manage - potential emotional or behavioural issues.

There is also some evidence of educational settings employing specific interventions to meet the needs of LAC. For example, a 2008 report by Ofsted identifying good practice for LAC in schools highlighted the value of nurture groups for preschool-age children to support them in developing the language and understanding to express their feelings[9].

2.3.2 Timing

The benefits of early childhood provision tend to be strongest from the age of two and upwards. Attendance within the first two years has generally fewer cognitive and socio-emotional benefits and has in some cases been associated with attachment difficulties where quality of care of low (see Melhuish et al., 2015 for a summary). This research relates to attachment to parents and is not therefore directly applicable to LAC. However given that children in care are more likely to have insecure attachments to their parents and – on entry to care – will need to form a bond with their carer, there is reason to be somewhat more cautious about attendance at early education within the first year, and potentially two years, of a child's life. Further research is required.

9 Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups designed for children showing signs of behavioural, social or emotional difficulties. They aim to provide a predictable environment in which children can build trusting relationships with adults and gain the skills they need to learn in larger classes. They usually emphasise systematic teaching of behavioural and social skills, learning through play and the sharing of 'family-type' experiences such as eating together (Ofsted, 2011, Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviour Through a Nurture Group Approach).

2: Review of the research literature

Some studies have also found that long hours spent in early years provision can result in higher levels of externalising behaviour problems (NICHD ECCRN 2003a, 2005; Vandell et al., 2010), although this is mitigated to a large degree by higher quality (McCartney et al., 2010; Yamauchi & Leigh, 2011). Some studies have also shown that these effects are less evident for disadvantaged children, for whom provision is acting as a foil for potentially impoverished or chaotic home environments (Love et al., 2003; Côté et al., 2008; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). These findings may be less relevant for LAC, given that they are no longer within their potentially negative family environments and potentially (although we do not know) less likely to be attending very long hours. However, they are noted here for completeness.

2.3.3 Continuity of early years experience and carer involvement

The stability of early care experiences is potentially an important factor for LAC. In general, children are more likely to maintain secure and stable attachments to early years providers if those providers do not change (Ahnert, Pinquart & Lamb, 2006; Howes & Hamilton, 1992), and Meloy and Phillips (2012) suggest it is reasonable to assume that children in care who are able to form a secure bond with practitioners may be less vulnerable to the negative outcomes associated with attachment disorders later in life. Pears and Fisher (2005) also found that foster children aged 3 to 6 years who moved their education placement more often had poorer socio-emotional competence. For children who began kindergarten with poorer outcomes, this frequency of movement mediated the effect of maltreatment and foster placement on later socio-emotional competence – that is, changing education settings was one of the drivers for children's poorer outcomes. This indicates that moves between education and care settings should be minimised where possible, and highlights a need for children to be supported in any transitions which do take place.

2.3.4 Support for and involvement of carers and involvement

Research has highlighted the importance of involvement of carers in LAC's educational setting, with one study finding that carer involvement mediated the effect of maltreatment and foster placement on later socio-emotional competence (Pears et al., 2010). Children with carers who were more involved with their kindergarten education had better socio-emotional outcomes. This is an important area for attention, since the study also found that foster carers were in general less involved in children's schooling than the birth parents of non-fostered children.

In addition, there is some evidence that children's attendance at free early education can bring benefits for carers, and reduce the risk of placement breakdown during the preschool years (Meloy & Phillips, 2012).

2: Review of the research literature

2.3.5 Summary

In summary, there is good evidence that early years education and care can provide a potentially powerful intervention for improving the educational attainment of LAC and may also bring benefits for carers. However, while the evidence indicates that attendance could disproportionately benefit LAC, it also suggests that they are particularly sensitive to variations in quality, stability and timing. It is vital that the early years experiences of LAC reflect high quality and continuity, in order to buffer rather than compound the effects of early adversity. Alongside this, more research is needed to establish the effects of variations in early years experiences on LAC as a specific group, in order to support decision-making about services for LAC based on empirical data (Lipscomb & Pears, 2011) and maximise the beneficial effects.

2.4 The evidence on access and quality

There is little specific evidence on take-up of early education by LAC. Evidence for disadvantaged families more broadly suggests that they are less likely to take up places for their children than more advantaged families (Speight, Smith, Coshall & Lloyd, 2010). The most recent Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England (Brind et al., 2014) shows take-up rates of 78 and 80 per cent for workless and low-income households respectively, as compared with rates of 94 per cent or higher for wealthy households and those where both parents work. Similar trends are reported in many other European countries and globally, with lower income, parental employment and parental education all associated with lower rates of take-up (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Huston, Chang & Gennetian, 2002; Kim & Fram, 2009; NICHD, 2005). Reasons include lack of awareness of the availability and quality of local providers and/or of the free early education entitlement in England (Speight, Smith, Coshall & Lloyd, 2010) as well as practical issues such as access, cost and flexibility of provision (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014).

Although foster or kinship care families might not necessarily themselves be disadvantaged, some will be, and the children they care for are likely to be those most at risk. The realities of fostering can also make access to early years' provision difficult. Foster carers in England will often need to attend contact sessions with the birth family, as well as numerous appointments relating to the child's needs. Younger children will often move between foster, kinship and family care, or into adoption, making continuity of attendance difficult; and kinship carers may experience their own challenges in managing the practicalities of meeting children's needs. Many of the factors identified as barriers to access for disadvantaged families are therefore also likely to apply to families caring for LAC. Given the high incidence of special education needs among LAC, statistics on take-up for children with additional needs are also relevant. Findings are mixed, with some reports in England suggesting a shortage of early years places for children with special educational needs and disabilities (Dickens, Wollny & Ireland, 2012) and others reporting that take-up rates do not vary by whether a child has a long-standing

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illness, disability or special educational need (Speight et al., 2010). Further work is needed to identify whether additional needs present a barrier to early education for LAC, particularly given that many will have behavioural rather than physical needs and are thus less likely to require additional equipment or adaptations to support physical access.

Evidence from the few English local authorities which currently publish such data suggest that take-up of free early education places by LAC is in fact lower than the almost-universal attendance seen nationally. In Kirklees, for example, just 37 per cent[10] of looked after three- and four-year-olds took up free early education in 2010 compared with an average for all children of 92 per cent. Even more interesting is the fact that, having identified this attendance gap, Kirklees Council made moves to address it and had increased attendance by LAC to 95 per cent by 2013 (Kirklees Council, 2010, 2013). This indicates that better data on take-up of early education by LAC may lead to increased attendance in the many local authorities which do not currently gather and publish such figures. A small number of local authority childcare sufficiency reports (audits required by the Childcare Act 2006) make a mention of looked after children, but this practice is rare. Overall, there are few easily obtainable figures on the number of LAC accessing early education in England, or on the types of settings they attend. In addition to overall take-up rates, it will also be important to establish how the characteristics of children and carers relate to use of early years provision. For example, there is some evidence that type of care (kinship vs non-kinship) predicts use of provision, with kinship carers having higher take-up rates than foster carers (Burns et al., 2004; Ringeisen et al., 2009) and there may be distinct groups within the LAC demographic with their own distinct usage patterns, predicted by both child and carer characteristics (Lipscomb & Pears, 2011). Understanding how these characteristics relate to usage will be important in understanding the impacts of early childhood provision on LAC and their families.

The second key question is whether LAC – when they *do* attend early education settings - experience comparable quality provision to their non-looked-after peers. International research presents a mixed picture, with disadvantaged children in some countries receiving lower quality than their more advantaged peers, while the picture is reversed in other countries (CARE, 2014). In England, while data from the regulatory body Ofsted show that early years settings and schools in disadvantaged areas receive lower inspection grades (Ofsted, 2015) research evidence reveals a more nuanced picture. A study using systematic observational rating scales to compare quality within early years settings concluded that the disparity was greatest for non-graduate-led settings within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (Mathers & Smees, 2014). Among these settings, quality was lower in settings serving disadvantaged areas and populations than in settings serving the more advantaged. The quality gap was less distinct for graduate-led settings and was not present at all within local authority maintained settings (i.e. nursery schools and nursery classes within primary schools), which offered comparable quality to all children. Given that all classes within maintained

10 % of 54 looked after children eligible to take up places

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provision are graduate-led, the authors hypothesised that having graduate-level staff enabled settings to rise to the challenge of meeting the broader range of needs likely to be present within disadvantaged populations. Within the PVI sector, only 59 per cent of full day care settings employ a graduate and only 48 per cent of sessional providers (Brind et al, 2014).

These findings indicate that quality is closely associated with provider type. Having a better qualified staff team has long been associated with quality (Sylva et al., 2010) and, in England, maintained early years providers are consistently identified as being of better quality than settings within the PVI sector (Sylva et al; 2004; Mathers, Sylva & Joshi, 2007). From the age of three years, the majority of disadvantaged children in England experience their early education provision within local authority-maintained provision, either a nursery school or a nursery class in a primary school (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel, 2013). As a result they are more likely than advantaged children to experience graduate-led provision (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel, 2013) and thus, better quality. However, this is not the case for disadvantaged children attending PVI settings. This will be the case for many two-year olds, since the majority of the free early education places for disadvantaged two-year-old children (see Chapter 3) are provided within the PVI sector.

In conclusion, there is some evidence that disadvantaged children in England are more likely to receive good quality early education than more advantaged children, but this is not necessarily true for all disadvantaged children. In addition, no national data are available on the early education accessed by LAC specifically. This is an important area for attention, both in relation to national data and research knowledge. Without detailed information about the type and quality of early education experienced by LAC, informed decisions cannot be made to improve their experiences.

2.5 Specific interventions

One specific intervention was identified in relation to LAC. Kids in Transition to School (Pears et al., 2013) was designed to enhance the school-readiness of children in care in the US. It targeted early literacy, pro-social and self-regulatory skills during the summer before entering kindergarten (reception) and during the first two months of kindergarten. It involved 24 twice-weekly group sessions both for children, and 8 sessions for foster carers focusing on promoting their involvement in early literacy and school. The intervention was effective in improving children's literacy and self-regulation skills, with effect sizes of .26 and .18 respectively. Although these effect sizes are moderate, considering the length of the intervention, this study can be considered to provide positive evidence for the potential of early intervention to make a difference for LAC.

3: English policy relating to early education for LAC

This chapter summarises current policy in England relating to early education for LAC and measures to ensure their educational attainment.

Summary

- Policy in England (including the regulatory framework) prioritises the rights of LAC to access good quality early education and emphasises their learning needs. Relevant initiatives include free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the Early Years Pupil Premium for disadvantaged children, the role of local authority 'virtual school' heads in monitoring and tracking the progress of LAC, and the requirement for every school-age LAC to have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) as part of their care plan.
- Recent amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill mean that local authorities, maintained nurseries and schools will be required to promote the educational attainment of *previously* looked after children who are subject to a child arrangements order, special guardianship order or adoption order. This could have significant implications for the number of early years children being supported by virtual schools, particularly as children are far more likely to be adopted from care in the first few years of their life. In light of this, the need for more information about how young LAC should be – and are being – supported in their learning is ever more vital.

3.1 Education of LAC

Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities are required to safeguard and promote the welfare of all LAC. The 2004 Children Act also places an explicit duty on local authorities to promote the educational attainment of all children in their care. In carrying out this duty, local authorities are expected to give particular attention to the educational implications of any decisions regarding the welfare of LAC.

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a requirement for every local authority in England to appoint a 'virtual school head'. This officer has a statutory responsibility to promote the educational achievement of LAC, monitoring and tracking their progress as if they were attending a single school. The role was originally envisaged in a 2007 White Paper, defined as a 'senior individual working across education and social care agencies to develop a coordinated system of support' (DfES, 2007).

Statutory guidance for local authorities, *Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children*, now also states that a high priority should be assigned to creating a culture of high aspirations for all LAC and to closing the attainment gap between them and their non-looked-after peers (DCSF, 2010). Virtual school heads are expected to act as a source of expertise, to champion the educational needs of children in care and to broker arrangements to improve outcomes. This involves liaising with social workers, independent reviewing officers,

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school admission officers and special educational needs teams to ensure that – except in an emergency – appropriate education provision for a child is arranged at the same time as a care placement (DCSF, 2010). Virtual heads are expected to work closely with schools to make them aware of their role, gathering information about the requirements of their children and putting in place mechanisms to give voice to children in care.

Educational needs must be assessed regardless of the child's age and, where a need for a pre-school place has been identified, local authorities must give carers 'maximum support' to access it. All LAC must also have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) as part of their care plan, which should be reviewed termly and overseen by an independent reviewing officer. Children under 5 must have a pre-school PEP, but the age this should start is not defined in the guidance. Since September 2009, maintained schools and nurseries have been obliged to appoint a designated teacher to promote the educational attainment of all LAC on the school roll and lead on the development and review of PEPs (DCSF, 2009).

Where LAC are in out-of-authority placements, local authorities retain the same statutory duties and virtual school heads remain responsible for ensuring arrangements are in place to promote their educational attainment. Statutory guidance states that the provision of appropriate and specific arrangements for sharing reliable data should be in place and that this is 'particularly important in relation to the tracking and monitoring of attainment data and notifications of where children, including those placed out-of-authority, are being educated' (DfE, 2014a, p.9). It also suggests that there should be appropriate consultation with virtual school heads from other local authorities where out-of-authority placements are being arranged.

Most recently, in March 2016, the government published a white paper setting out its ambitions for providing more effective support to care leavers (DfE, 2016a). Its key themes have been incorporated into the Children and Social Work Bill, under which local authorities will be required to promote the educational attainment of previously looked after children who are subject to a child arrangements order, special guardianship order or adoption order. In practice, this would mean that local authorities and maintained schools and nurseries are required to extend the support they currently offer for LAC to those designated as previously looked after. This could have significant implications for the number of young children being supported by virtual schools, particularly as children are far more likely to be adopted from care in the first few years of their life[11].

3.2 Access to early education

Recent developments in policy on the early education of LAC reflect an increased interest over the past 20 years in early intervention. Early years policy has been characterised by a

11 Of children adopted from care in 2014-15, 75 per cent were aged 4 years or under (DfE, 2016b)

3: English policy relating to early education for LAC

growing awareness of the importance of early education in supporting child development and facilitating parental employment. Successive governments have combined measures to increase the quality, affordability and supply of childcare with an offer of free early education for young children. Since September 2010, all three- and four-year-old children have been entitled to 15 hours per week, or 570 hours per year. From September 2017, an additional 15 hours of free provision will be available to working parents of 3 and 4 year olds who meet specific income and eligibility criteria. Places can be accessed in government-maintained nursery schools, primary schools with nursery classes, centre-based early years settings within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector or with a registered childminder offering home-based provision. From the September following their fourth birthday, all children in England are entitled to a full-time place in a primary school reception class.

The government has also extended the free early education entitlement to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, meaning that families who meet eligibility criteria are able to access the 15-hour offer from the term after the child's second birthday. Children are automatically eligible if they are: looked after by the local authority or have been adopted from care under a special guardianship, adoption or child arrangements order; if they are entitled to free school meals; if they have a statement of special educational needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan; or if they receive a Disability Living Allowance. The two-year-old entitlement is seen as playing a vital role in supporting the cognitive and social development of disadvantaged children and in helping them to catch up with their more advantaged peers.

Since 1998, schools and maintained nurseries have been obliged to give the highest priority to looked after children (and all previously looked after children) in their admissions criteria (DfE, 2014b). There are currently no similar requirements for early years settings within the PVI sector.

3.3 Ensuring quality for LAC[12]

A number of measures are in place to ensure that the quality of provision experienced by LAC, and by disadvantaged children more broadly, is of sufficient quality to support their development. Local authorities are required to ensure that, as far as possible, early education for two year olds is delivered by providers who have achieved an overall rating of 'good' or 'outstanding' in their most recent Ofsted inspection (DfE, 2014b). Additional funding has also been made available for disadvantaged children attending early years settings (including LAC) through the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) introduced in 2015. Providers are required to identify children who may be eligible for the EYPP so that the local authority can check their eligibility and allocate the funding. The funding rate currently stands at 53p per hour for eligible children, or approximately £300 per year for a child accessing their full 570 hours, and providers must be able to account for how the payment is used to address the needs of the child.

12 In addition to documentary analysis, this section draws on the interviews conducted with national government and Ofsted representatives

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Virtual schools are responsible for managing the EYPP for LAC, including encouraging take up, streamlining payment processes and monitoring outcomes. Virtual schools are able to retain some EYPP funding centrally and can also withhold payments in instances where a PEP has not been completed, has been judged not to be of satisfactory quality or where providers are unable to account for their use of the funding. There has also been an explicit move through the design of the EYPP to ensure that the virtual school, as part of its responsibility to promote LAC's educational attainment, is provided with the resources and opportunity to engage with early years settings.

The national regulatory body (Ofsted) is responsible for monitoring and assuring the quality of early education settings in England. Ofsted inspection frameworks, for both early years settings and local authority children's services, include measures to monitor support for LAC's educational attainment. During an inspection of children's services, local authorities are required to demonstrate that children under their care are attending appropriate and high-quality educational provision, that accurate and timely assessments of their needs are conducted and that they are receiving sufficient and effective support (Ofsted, 2016). In addition, Ofsted monitors whether accurate and up-to-date information is held about how LAC are progressing at school, including the quality of PEPs being produced, and that action is taken where children are not achieving well. Prior to an inspection of children's services, Ofsted will request information from a local authority, including data on the educational progress of LAC, which should cover both access to provision and the quality of education being accessed. Inspectors tend to have a greater focus on school-age children, which is likely to reflect the presence of more extensive statutory guidance in this area. Nonetheless, the Ofsted inspection process will monitor the progress of children in the early years.

4: Attitudes and access to early education for young LAC

This section builds on the review of international research and English policy to consider the current situation for LAC in England. We first consider the views of interviewees on the education of LAC and the role of early years provision within that. We then use data from the survey of local authorities to explore what is known about LAC's access to early years provision and the quality of that provision in England. Finally, we consider potential barriers to accessing early education for LAC and those caring for them.

Summary

- There was a strong consensus among academic, professionals and policy-makers that the learning needs of young LAC should be prioritised alongside their care needs, and that LAC have a right to access to early education provision. However interviewees also acknowledged that attendance patterns for LAC may need to look slightly different to those of children not in care, and that delayed entry may be appropriate for some. Decision-making was understood to be complex, and require consideration on a case-by-case basis.
- Attendance at early years provision was considered to provide valuable early intervention in terms of opportunities to mix with peers; support with speech and language, learning and personal care routines; and early identification of potential delays.
- Our data suggest that take-up of free early education for two-, three- and four-year-olds at least 14 per cent lower than that seen nationally, with considerable variation between local authorities.
- A number of barriers to access were identified, included the relative priority given to attendance at high quality early education by social workers and foster carers, alongside a number of practical barriers.
- Our data suggest that, of those LAC accessing early education provision, the proportion attending settings rated by Ofsted as 'good' or 'outstanding' (89 per cent) is broadly the same as for children not in care.
- A lack of accessible national data on take-up, on the quality of settings attended and on educational attainment prior to statutory school age makes the exploration of LAC's early years experiences in England considerably more challenging. This is a significant barrier to monitoring the educational experience and progress of LAC under five years.
- At local level, while the majority of local authorities hold data on take up of the free early education entitlement amongst LAC, and on the Ofsted grade of settings attended, this was not the case for all. This was particularly found in relation to LAC attending care placements outside the local authority area. Improving the collation and consistency of local data monitoring procedures would improve the ease with which the early education experiences of LAC can be tracked and – as a result – improved.

4: Attitudes and access to early education for young LAC

4.1 Is it important that LAC have access to early education provision?

Interviewees across the academic, professional and policy sectors were united in their view that the learning needs of young LAC should be supported alongside other needs, and that LAC have a right to access to good quality early education provision. A strong theme of early intervention emerged, with interviewees emphasising the role of early years provision in narrowing the gap between LAC and their non-looked-after peers:

> *"It's vital …. they have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, they're vulnerable, they have attachment difficulties, they have suffered neglect. If we don't have early years provision for this group of children the gap will widen more between them and other children"*
> **Dr Renu Jainer, Consultant Community Paediatrician and Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health lead for LAC**

> *"They're very young… there really aren't a lot of interventions we can deploy. So the interventions are about promoting an environment which stimulates development. … I usually do it with early years provision. There's something magic about nursery in particular around speech and language development"*
> **Dr Doug Simkiss, Consultant Paediatrician and Designated Doctor for LAC in Birmingham**

> *"If you look at the testimonies of young people who've been in care and have the most dreadful time during childhood but have still managed to achieve an education for themselves…you look back and you think, well their lives could have been a lot easier if more attention had been paid to their educational lives"*
> **Claire Cameron, Professor of Social Pedagogy, UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit**

Early years provision was considered to add value over and above children's care experiences in the home in a number of ways, including opportunities to mix with peers and support with speech and language, learning (including 'learning how to learn') and personal care routines such as toileting and healthy eating behaviours. The need for children to experience social and structured play was particularly highlighted by foster carers, to enable LAC to access the learning opportunities available to them:

> *"I think it's really important because they've often missed out on so much at home, a lot of them have been neglected as well as other kinds of trauma, so I think it's very important that they get a good wide variety of input from various sources. Foster carers, we can give input but I think you get a different perspective in a pre-school because it helps with their social skills, which a lot of them don't have. So I think it's really beneficial for them in terms of their social skills and just learning by observing other children how to play, even. So they learn how to play, they learn how to interact with other children, and the other stuff comes out of that. When the emotional and the social skills develop and they become more secure and settled, then the academic stuff comes too. And then they're … getting to feel like they are normal kids and not different."*
> **Foster carer, Hampshire**

4: Attitudes and access to early education for young LAC

[Talking about the benefits of pre-school for a particular LAC]
"Emotionally and intelligentially he could have knocked the socks off his peers at that time but getting him …into that routine, it was tricky. But he did and he's doing very well at school now, and he's happily adopted. Structured play and learning is important until they learn to do it on their own."
Foster carer, York

These opportunities were seen as particularly important preparation for helping LAC get ready for school, both in terms of understanding how education settings work and being able to move up with some children that they already know.

The opportunity for early years practitioners to identify developmental delays was also noted by a number of interviewees. For example, one local authority respondent reported seeing many children (not in early years provision) whose need for speech and language therapy had been missed as a result of frequent care moves or missed appointments with professionals. Early years settings were also seen as a valuable source of stability, reliability and predictability for LAC experiencing frequent care placement moves, and as a potential source of support for carers themselves, offering respite and helping them to meet children's needs. Interviewees emphasised the shared responsibility of early education settings and foster carers in providing holistic support to achieve a balance across educational, personal, social and emotional outcomes. Within early education settings, this was thought to require a greater focus than currently on personal, social and emotional aspects to complement their role in educational attainment. For foster carers, this was thought to require a greater focus on education and learning alongside the current concerns for personal, social and emotional welfare.

Whilst recognising the importance of access to early education, a number of interviewees noted the need for decisions on attendance, timings and provision type to be made individually to suit each child. This might involve delaying attendance until bonds have been formed with the carer (particularly in the case of severe trauma), attending fewer hours than the fifteen hour entitlement, or even recognising that a mainstream formal early education setting may not be suitable for some LAC, unless the setting has the specific knowledge and expertise to meet their needs. There was also a recognition that different decisions may be made for LAC in their first two years and for older children:

"I think it depends on a case by case basis. Some looked after children are suffering severe developmental trauma and forming a secure attachment with their primary care giver, usually their foster carer, is probably more important than them accessing early years provision. When that is secure and they are stable then I think getting into early years provision is absolutely paramount"
Sarah Clarke, Virtual Head for Looked After Children and Young People, York City Council

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"For the very young ones I would say the best place is probably at home with a carer. For [others] it's good for them to be mixing with other children, for their social development and speech and language."
Local authority staff, Virtual School Early Education Lead

"[For us early education is] part of a package of support, providing that it is of good quality and delivered by staff sensitive to the needs of the child."
Joy Barter, Early Years and Childcare Group Manager, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

The Department of Education representatives emphasised the commitment of the government and the priority given to the education of LAC and their education in English policy (see Chapter 3) noting that, as corporate parents, local authorities are expected to have high aspirations for the children under their care and take steps to ensure that they have the best start in life, including access to early education.

4.2 Do LAC currently access good quality early years provision in England, and how do we know?

4.2.1 National data

Exploring LAC's experiences of early years provision in England is made considerably more challenging by the lack of accessible national data on take-up, on the quality of settings attended, or on educational attainment prior to statutory school age. This is a significant barrier to monitoring the educational experience and progress of LAC under five years.

The National Pupil Database (NPD) provides child-level data for all schools in England, including school characteristics, children's attainment in national tests, exclusions and attendance. Within the NPD, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) dataset contains information on attainment at five, including communication and language, personal, social and emotional development, physical development, literacy and maths. The School Census dataset contains information on school characteristics and further child-level data such as special educational needs and ethnic group. Both datasets use a unique pupil number (UPN) which allows data to be matched between them. Children are allocated a UPN on entry to school, which means that children receiving their free early education in a primary school nursery class or a nursery school receive theirs at age three. There is also an equivalent Early Years Census for settings in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, containing information on provider characteristics such as qualifications and child-level data, similar to that held within the School Census. However children within this dataset do not have a UPN. Finally, the Children Looked After in England (CLA) dataset contains data on children in care, and is based on annual returns submitted by local authorities. It includes details on length of time in care, type of placement, reasons for entering care and basic demographic data. It also includes UPNs for school-age children.

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Previous studies have used the UPN to link the NPD and CLA datasets and explore relationships between educational outcomes, care histories and child characteristics for school-age children (see Sebba et al. 2015). Linking these two datasets on a more permanent basis would enable regular monitoring of trends and allow take-up of early education within primary and nursery schools, and attainment at age five, to be monitored for LAC. Links between the Early Years Census and the CLA database are made more difficult by the lack of a UPN, but there are pupil references within each dataset which offer potential for matching. Facilitating links between these datasets would extend monitoring possibilities to take-up of early education by LAC within the PVI sector and some quality characteristics (e.g. whether settings are graduate led). We propose this as an area for urgent attention to enable the educational experiences and progress of LAC under the age of five years to be monitored at national level.

4.2.2 Local authority data

In the absence of national-level data we sought to investigate the extent of information gathered by local authorities on take-up, and on the quality of early years settings attended, by two-, three- and four-year-old LAC accessing the free early education entitlement[13]. This section is based on responses from the 136 (of 152) English local authorities which responded to the survey of virtual school heads. Fewer than 50 responses were received in the initial wave of data collection, following which Freedom of Information requests were issued to the remaining local authorities. For further details on the survey methodology, see Appendix 1.

Local authorities were first asked whether they hold data on the uptake of early education by LAC, children subject to child arrangements and special guardianship orders. A clear majority (89 per cent) of responding local authorities held data on the take up of the free entitlement by LAC (Table 1). However, only 32 per cent reported keeping data on take up for children subject to child arrangements orders, and 31 per cent for children subject to special guardianship orders.

13 Although it is possible that there are children only accessing early education outside of the free entitlement, the numbers are likely to be very small. Take up of the offer is near universal for three- and four-year old children in England and foster carers and social workers are encouraged to ensure that LAC access the offer.

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Table 1. The number and proportion of English local authorities which hold data on take-up of free early education places by LAC, children subject to child care arrangement orders and children subject to special guardianship orders

	Number and proportion of local authorities holding data on.....					
	...looked after children		..children subject to child arrangements orders		...children subject to special guardianship orders	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Data held for all children	109	89	40	32	39	31
Data held for some children	5	4	7	6	5	4
No data held	8	7	78	62	81	65
Total	**122**	**100**	**125**	**100**	**125**	**100**

A similar majority (85 per cent) of authorities held records on the quality of early education settings attended by LAC, largely the grade awarded by the national regulator Ofsted.

Of the authorities which did not hold complete records on take-up (11 per cent) or quality (15 per cent), seven per cent in each case held no data at all. The remainder held data only for certain groups of children, for example those aged three and above, accessing the two-year-old offer or in receipt of the Early Years Pupil Premium, or accessing early education within the local authority area (i.e. no data held on children in out-of-borough care placements, attending early years settings in another area). In a small number of cases, local authorities claimed exemption from the Freedom of Information request on the grounds that data were not collated or held centrally in an accessible format. The need to issue FoI requests in the first place suggests that improvements could be made to the accessibility of data at local level. Improving the collation and consistency of data monitoring procedures within local authorities would significantly improve the ease with which the early education experiences of LAC can be tracked and – as a result – improved.

4.2.3 Take up and quality of early education

Responses to the survey by those local authorities which do collate data on the take up of free early education indicate that 71 per cent of two-, three- and four-year-old LAC are accessing the entitlement (n=91)[14], with rates for local authorities with at least 20 LAC in the relevant age-group varying between 40 and 100 per cent (n=74). National rates of take-up are 68 per cent for eligible two-year-olds, 93 per cent for three-year-olds and 97 per cent for four-year olds15 (DfE, 2016a). Unfortunately we were not able to gather data on LAC's take-up by age in order to make direct comparisons. However, if LAC were accessing their free entitlement at the same rate as children not in care, we would expect around 85 per cent of them to be in early

14 Includes early education places in an early years setting, nursery class or school, and places in school reception classes. The number of local authorities (n=91) is lower than the number of local authorities which reported collecting data on take-up of early education by LAC (n=109) because a significant minority of respondents did not provide data in a useable format.
15 All three and four-year olds are eligible, but only the 40 per cent most disadvantaged two-year-olds.

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education[16]. This suggests that take-up by LAC is approximately 14 per cent lower than that seen in the wider population. However, given that these calculations are (necessarily) based on data reported by local authorities which hold full data on take-up, it is possible that we have underestimated the true gap. Data reported earlier from Kirklees, showing a large increase in take-up following the reporting of access figures (see section 2.4), indicates that awareness may lead to any potential barriers to access being addressed. If take-up by LAC is lower within local authorities which do not publish such data, the rate would be lower than the 71 per cent indicated by our survey. Further research would be valuable to generate a more accurate figure.

Turning now to the quality of early education accessed, survey responses from local authorities which collate such data suggest that 89 per cent of LAC are accessing early education in settings graded as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted (n=97). There was considerable variation, with rates ranging from 44 to 100 per cent among local authorities with at least 20 LAC in the relevant age-group. Just over half of authorities reported 90 per cent of LAC or more attending settings graded as 'good' or higher (n=78).

In England, 88 per cent of early years providers hold a rating of 'good' or higher from Ofsted (DfE 2016b). This suggests that LAC are experiencing comparable quality to children not in care. However, while Ofsted ratings give an overall indication of whether a setting is able to meet children's needs, it provides a relatively broad brush measure of 'quality'. Studies have shown that, when compared with more robust observational research measures of quality, Ofsted ratings show only a moderate correlation with the ratings of an external assessor (Mathers, Singler & Karemaker, 2012). Neither do Ofsted ratings provide a sense of the individual experiences of LAC accessing early education, or the extent to which providers are meeting their needs. These issues are explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

4.3 What are the barriers to access?

As noted above, take-up of early education by LAC in England is estimated to be at least 14 per cent lower than in the general population of eligible children. Given previous discussions on the need for decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis (Section 4.1), it is likely that some of the lower take-up is due to sensitive and informed decisions being made to delay entry to early education in the best interest of the child:

> *"The local authority does not expect every 2 year-old who is a LAC, to take up free early-years provision. Many of our children are in stable home environments for the first time and the focus is on building an attachment with the main carer and/or being prepared for an adoptive placement. "*
>
> **Local authority, Freedom of Information response**

16 This has been weighted against the age structure of looked after children in our survey but not against the geographical distribution of the cohort or the proportion who have special educational needs.

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However, findings from the interviews also indicate a number of barriers to take-up. If, as suggested above, the true take-up rate by LAC is lower than that indicated by our survey, awareness of these barriers may be important in ensuring that LAC have the same opportunities as their non-looked-after peers.

4.3.1 Awareness and attitudes

Early education was recognised by all interviewees as having positive benefits for LAC. However, our data demonstrate the complexities of balancing care and education needs and suggest that the priority given to early education varies considerably in practice, particularly for younger children. The attitudes of social workers and of foster carers were seen to be the most relevant in determining take-up of early years provision, with social workers retaining the ultimate responsibility for any decisions made.

A number of interviewees highlighted differing views among social workers about the value and importance of early years education:

> *"There's an enduring ideology amongst social workers, and that trickles down, that you need to attend to the emotions before you attend to the learning....There are lots of things you can do to soften the edges between care and education (educating foster carers and making settings more flexible and welcoming for young children) but it's a false dichotomy in my view to say that you can't be in a formal setting and learning until your emotions are sorted out."*
>
> **Claire Cameron, Professor of Social Pedagogy, UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit**

One interviewee reported anecdotal evidence of social workers making different decisions about prioritisation, depending on the characteristics of the carers. For example, early education might be promoted for LAC in kinship care due to concerns that the home-care environment might reflect some of the less positive characteristics of the birth family environment which led to the child being taken in to care (i.e. using early education as a protective buffer).

Many foster carers – including the two we interviewed – were seen to value and prioritise children's take-up of the early education entitlement, with one health sector interviewee reporting that *'lots of foster carers are very good at working out when to go to early years provision'*. However interviewees also reported that some foster carers and social workers prioritised the need for emotional support and relationship-building within the home environment above skills development and school readiness, and that this resulted in children missing out on early education opportunities which would have been appropriate for them. Some cited instances of foster carers believing that their role was to care for LAC at home, and that this would make them less likely to explore opportunities for early education provision within a formal setting.

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Other barriers included a lack of awareness of the opportunities and local resources that might be available to the child, and foster carer's confidence in engaging with the education system, particularly when it came to challenging the quality of provision within a setting, and particularly when their own education experience had not been a positive one or where English was not their first language.

Previous positive experiences with early education may be an influential factor for foster carers. Both of the carers we interviewed had built up strong relationships with particular settings which they trusted, and which they felt offered the necessarily flexibility and support for the children they cared for. Similarly, a number of the early years providers interviewed indicated that they had ongoing links with local foster carers, who would contact them in the early stages of a new placement to make arrangements for early education and care provision.

Overall, interviewees reported that the foster carers most likely to prioritise early education provision for LAC were those who were proactive, and had a good knowledge of the entitlements for young children, access to good local services and previous experience of early education or existing connections with local providers:

> *"Foster care varies so enormously. There are foster carers who are absolutely devoted to making sure that the child gets the best and to finding out where the best local resources are. There are other foster carers who live in situations where those services are patchy and difficult to get access to, or you have to work really hard or don't feel confident, or you're too preoccupied with other kinds of things"*
>
> **John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research & Development, CoramBAAF**

Several interviewees also reported a lack of awareness among some foster carers and social workers about the importance of high quality provision for LAC, resulting in some decisions being made on the basis of convenience and accessibility rather than quality (although they did also acknowledge the additional cost of travelling to a setting further away from home).

Interviewees emphasised the importance of raising awareness among both foster carers and social workers about the benefits of good quality early education, and of the characteristics of quality in order that they might make informed choices. This was felt to be particularly important for carers without recent experience of formal early years provision, more often the case for kinship carers who tend to be older family members (e.g. grandparents). Health professionals also emphasised the importance of encouraging foster carers to address problems with physical needs (e.g. toilet training, co-ordination disorders) or learning and attention needs (e.g. speech and language delays, attention disorders) at an early stage, to reduce the likelihood that they form a barrier to children accessing education experiences.

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4.3.2 Practical barriers

Time pressures on social workers were cited as an influence on the extent to which educational needs are prioritised in care planning. A number of interviewees suggested that there is often little time for social workers to address issues beyond the immediate concerns of safeguarding and stability of placement. The long-term importance of early education can therefore be superseded by urgent or short-term concerns. The high turnover of social work staff was also cited as a barrier, making it more difficult for good practice for the early years to be embedded in the workforce.

Interviewees described the uncertainty and mobility which is so often a characteristic of children's care journeys as being a further disincentive to arranging early years provision. This is more likely to be true where there is an expectation of short-term placements, as is common for younger looked after children. Interviewees highlighted a danger that opportunities to provide more extensive educational support are being delayed with the expectation that these needs can be addressed once children take up a school place.

Finally, the need to attend frequent appointments and the high prevalence of physical health problems requiring professional intervention can make it more difficult for foster carers to access provision. In particular, interviewees often highlighted contact sessions with birth families as being an important part of a looked after child's experience:

> *"Sometimes with younger ones I can be doing five days a week contact with birth parents and that is then really tricky to fit anything else, Monday to Friday…and often there are health issues and you tend to have a lot of appointments here and there"*
> **Foster carer, York**

One interviewee also highlighted the number of children being cared for as a factor, suggesting that decisions on whether a carer has capacity for another child do not always give due consideration to what carers might need the time and space to do, in order to meet children's needs most effectively.

4.3.3 Difficulties in finding settings able to cater for additional needs

As identified in the literature review, take-up of early education tends to be lower for children with special educational needs or disabilities. This issue was also highlighted by interviewees, with both local authority and health professionals citing it as a potential barrier for LAC. This was thought to influence both decision-making by foster carers (i.e. concern that settings may not be able to address needs effectively) and provider attitudes (i.e. some providers being less willing to take children with significant additional needs). It highlights a need for workforce preparation, to ensure additional needs can be met and do not present a barrier to access.

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4.3.4 Out-of-borough placements

Finally, many interviewees reported that LAC in out-of-borough care placements may experience greater difficulty in accessing good quality early education, largely due to the logistics of negotiating with the local authority where the child lives, meaning that any negotiation or action needed relies on a confident foster carer or the team around the foster carer. This issue is discussed in greater depth in Section 6.6

In conclusion, a number of barriers to access were identified by interviewees which may result in LAC experiencing restricted access to early education provision. Some of these were barriers shared with other at-risk groups (e.g. children with special educational needs or disabilities) but many related specifically to the unique context of children in care:

> *"Early years education couldn't be more important. The problem about it is that for looked after children the preoccupation is often with prioritising other sorts of things, safety, safeguarding, the long-term plan, the uncertainties that plan involves, questions about whether the child should return home, whether they should be in an alternative permanent placement, the recovery from early adversity, the identification of the child's developmental status. While I would absolutely prioritise preventative early interventions to support and promote the child's development, I know that it can so easily get lost because of the uncertainty about what are we doing here."*
>
> **John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research & Development, CoramBAAF**

A number of potential solutions are implied, including greater attention to awareness-raising among foster carers and social workers of the benefits of early years attendance. Such measures are required to ensure that decisions regarding attendance are made on the basis of a fully informed discussion between all parties responsible for the welfare and education of the child, including foster carers, social workers and health professionals. Examples of the ways in which English local authorities have addressed some of these challenges are presented in Chapter 5.

In addition, there is a significant need for better data on the ways in which patterns of early education use are associated with child or carer characteristics, in order to identify potential barriers to use and inform decision-making, practice and policy.

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

Given the greater need for LAC – when they do experience early years provision – to attend settings of high quality, we turn now to consider the preparedness of providers in England to meet their needs effectively. The findings in this chapter are based on interview data, including five interviews with early years providers in the maintained, private and voluntary sectors, as well as representatives from local authorities, the health sector and fostering providers. We explore the features of high quality provision for LAC and how this might be achieved (including support and barriers) and consider interviewee views on the preparedness of early years providers in England to meet the needs of LAC.

Summary

- In terms of what LAC need from early years settings, interviewees echoed the conclusion of the literature review that providers should 'do the same as for all children but more so', not stigmatising or separating children but recognising that they have greater needs in a number of areas. Regular and monitoring of progress and close work with foster and kinship carers were also considered to be central components of quality for LAC.
- Delivering high quality care for LAC requires good levels of staffing from qualified and experienced practitioners, with access to appropriate support and supervision to help them meet any challenges. It also requires an awareness of specific role and responsibilities in relation to LAC. While we report several examples of excellent practice, findings suggest that many providers do not have the knowledge and expertise required to meet LAC's needs effectively.
- Interviewees who were specific about which providers were best placed to meet young LAC's needs generally identified maintained sector providers, and nursery schools in particular. While the excellent work and commitment of many private and voluntary sector providers was noted, so also were the challenges they face in terms of lower qualification levels, more limited specialist training and access to multi-disciplinary services, and more limited capacity for the additional work involved in catering for LAC.
- The additional time required to meet the additional needs of LAC, liaise with and support carers, complete paperwork and attend meetings was cited as a significant challenge for providers. LACs attract extra funding through the Early Years Pupil Premium. Although it provides a good start in terms of meeting children's needs, this was not considered sufficient to cover the additional support, staff time and training, and potentially specialist intervention services needed.

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

5.1 What does good early years provision for LAC look like?

5.1.1 What do LAC need?

In terms of what young LAC need from their early years settings, interviewees confirmed the conclusion of the literature review that providers should 'do the same as for all children but more so': not stigmatising or separating LAC but recognising that they have greater needs in a number of areas. These include intensive personal, social and emotional support as well as additional time and attention for their individual needs, which may be challenging or difficult to manage. It was also recognised that LAC may have specific learning or health needs (e.g. speech and language delay, attention disorders, toileting issues) and may need extra support to engage them in learning:

> *"[LAC] can be children who are followers, they stand back, they watch, their language development is delayed…there needs to be much more direct intervention …with those children than children who have not had that trauma in their lives, and not had that abuse and neglect."*
> **Maggie Smith, Early Years Support, Virtual School for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, Oxfordshire County Council**

> *"Settings that are well structured and have clear goals, all the things you would expect them to do anyway for any child, have a good chance of meetings the needs of LAC"*
> **Harvey Gallagher, Chief Executive, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers**

Many interviewees also noted the importance of a personalised approach based on developmental stage and need, rather than chronological age. A strong key worker system was considered to be central to this: someone who knows the child well, can build a strong relationship with them to provide much-needed stability and consistency, and be a strong advocate for them. One early years setting used family groupings based on developmental stage and need, rather than grouping children by age, in order to meet individual needs effectively. Interviewees spoke of being 'tuned in' to children, understanding the complexity of their situations but also being aware that settings provide stability for that child. Interviewees described a number of ways in which small but powerful adjustments were made for their LAC:

> *"We had a little boy who was in a pre-school setting. They had already realised that emotionally he needed a little bit of extra support…when it came to going to contact sessions to go and see his mother…it was not always the same worker that comes to pick him up…the nursery staff are finding that quite difficult… putting him in a car with somebody that they'd never seen before, so why should he be happy to go…So what they did is get the contact team to phone through to the nursery first to let them know which worker was coming, and give their name, so that they could say to the little boy 'oh so and so is coming to pick you up today'. So that would just help to help to reassure him before he left. It's things like that, just trying to think from a child's point of view as to how that child is feeling"*
> **Local authority staff, Virtual School Early Education Lead**

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

A number of interviewees highlighted the vulnerability of LAC at times of transition and the importance of making these as smooth as possible and, as described in the quote above, gave examples of the ways in which settings had managed potentially difficult transitions for children, such as pick-up and drop-off times. One foster carer noted how effectively her local early years setting had supported placement transitions for her LAC, for example attending meetings with potential adoptive parents, and arranging times for parents to visit the nursery and get to know the child through conversation with his or her key worker. Two interviewees also gave examples of supporting a child's transition to school, noting the roles which can be played by early years settings (see box below) and by the virtual school in providing a consistent link, to ensure information about the child's past experiences are not lost and that their needs continue to be met effectively.

At Pen Green Centre for Children and Families.....

....staff recognise the importance of supporting children in the transition to school. For the last two years the nursery school has run events over the summer holidays for their LAC and children at risk of social exclusion, giving them an opportunity to meet and mix with reception class children. Where possible, they also involve the reception class teachers towards the end of the summer period.

For one child expected to have a very difficult transition, additional supports were put in place. Nursery staff worked with the reception class teacher for the first six weeks of term to carry out joint observations and assessments. The child settled well and made good progress, but lost their teacher at Christmas. At this point, nursery staff continued to work with and visit the school, providing a stable and consistent contact for the child while they were adjusting to their new teacher.

As well as meeting children's needs on a day-to-day basis, interviewees also highlighted the need for specialist support and intervention when necessary, including access to specialist multi-agency support services such as psychologists, speech and language, occupational or play therapists, sensory support services and health services.

The representatives we interviewed from early years settings reported a number of specific interventions, the most common of which were Time-In or Nurture Group sessions. Time-In sessions involve an hour of one-to-one time several times per week, dedicated to a specific child. Nurture Groups generally involve a small group of children and are run by one or two members of staff. They are intended as a short-term intervention, and focus on enabling a child to gain the most from their education setting. Often, the focus is on social and emotional development or communication and language:

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> *"The aim [of Nurture Groups] is to show children that they are important, help them to learn basic social skills and build attachment with their key person…[as a result] children are calmer, more able to describe and recognise emotions, recognise when they have strong feeling or outbursts coming on, and maybe come out of these a little quicker".*
> **Karen James, Headteacher, Ludwick Nursery School**

Support for carers and families

All the early years settings we interviewed cited support for carers and families as a central part of their role. In many cases support was very practical, ranging from impromptu meetings and discussions with carers or cover for one-off events such as court appearances, to increasing the number of sessions available when carers were having difficulty or even – in one local authority – offering free full-time places to support carers. One foster carer we interviewed particularly appreciated the flexibility of her local setting, explaining that they did their best to keep a place open when she was waiting on a child, waived their standard six-week notice period for any changes, and were willing to give their own time to attend review meetings, and meetings with prospective adoptive parents.

Many settings also spoke of close involvement with carers, and considered themselves to be working as closely with families as with the children, priding themselves on the strong and supportive relationships developed. The nursery schools all considered home visits to be a central part of their support for LAC and their families, and Charnwood Nursery School also provides a support group for families. Others offered support in developing the home learning environment, gave time and attention to two-way communication about children's needs and progress and actively facilitated relationships between, for example, fostering and adoptive families.

Effective communication, collaboration and monitoring

Many interviewees identified the gathering and sharing of data as being vital to effective support. Regular and detailed monitoring of progress in different aspects of development was considered to be essential for meeting the needs of LAC, ensuring that they make progress and that potential delays are identified and addressed. This was achieved through use of Personal Education Plans (PEPs), as well as setting's own systems for observing and tracking children's progress. Examples of ways in which local authorities support settings to complete the PEP are provided in Chapter 6.

Effective communication between professionals (e.g. settings, social workers, foster carers, schools) was also considered to be essential. Settings need information about the child on arrival, and two-way communication once the child was attending was also valued. The integrated review at age two was noted as a valuable opportunity for health visitors and early years settings to share information about the child. One nursery school gave an example of initiating an early health assessment for a child where concerns had been raised. This

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

was chaired by nursery school staff and involved the parents, family workers, a health visitor and HomeStart (a charity which supports families with children under 5). The outcome was practical support offered to the family by HomeStart, as well as a referral to speech and language therapists.

At Pollyanna's Day Nursery .....

...staff receive a 'fact file' on each new LAC, facilitated by their local authority and completed by the social worker and foster carer. This confidential document contains information about the child's background, interests, needs and potential trigger points. Staff members reported finding the files invaluable in providing information which helps them to meet children's needs, but which they may previously not have felt able to ask about.

5.1.2 What are the drivers of quality for LAC?

Interviewees were unequivocal in their identification of well qualified and experienced staff team as the cornerstone of quality for LAC. In particular, practitioners working with LAC were considered to need:

- a deep understanding of attachment and the consequences of early trauma/neglect;
- an understanding of the potentially challenging behaviours children may exhibit, and the ability to manage these in a positive way, modelling positive attitudes and techniques to families and building stable and supportive relationships with children;
- experience of working with young LAC;
- knowledge/skills in relation to meeting a range of special educational/health needs;
- an understanding of the system surrounding LAC and experience in how to negotiate this to best meet the needs of the child.

The benefits of employing staff with a social work background were noted by a number of providers, in order to provide effective support for families as well as children. More than half of the settings highlighted the need for a *team* of knowledgeable and capable professionals, including senior leaders, able to support children. Thorough and regular staff support and supervision was also recognised as an important factor in ensuring that teams are able to effectively cope with the potential challenges of providing for LAC:

> *"It also has to be a team effort. There can be incidents where the child's behaviour will impact on other children in the setting, and practitioners need to be responsible for them as well."*
> **Elaine McKeer, Early Years Teacher, Kingswood Early Years Centre**

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"It is hard looking after LAC. First there is the time, but also the emotional aspects. We have staff whose faces have been torn by angry children, they have the distress of having to separate siblings on a Friday night and take them to different foster parents, cope with the emotions of the mother who has lost her child haunting the centre weeks, years later and wanting to keep a supportive reciprocal relationship with her because she has those rights and children have a need to know their birth parents….all of that stuff.

We have a child psychiatrist who comes in who allows staff to talk and work through it all. They also get good monthly supervision on a social work basis, not just assessment and record keeping, they have a chance to talk things through and what it means to them. They also have access to…peer supervision sessions…and we have team-around-the-child and team-around-the-family meetings…..All staff have the opportunity to do a piece of professional development called 'emotional roots of learning', which is …. about developing reflexive practice, so that staff can talk to each other.

…If you haven't got all that good core stuff then you are much more likely to have your LAC very isolated and marginalised in your setting. Most people are almost scared of the complexity of that work, but our staff relish the complexity…because they have the support structures in place. "

Margy Whalley, Director of Research, Development and Training and Katie Greaves, Head of Safeguarding and Family Support, Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families

At Charnwood Nursery School…..

….the nursery school has invested considerable funding and resource in training on wellbeing and emotional health. The senior leadership team have been trained alongside other staff within the setting, and all staff training has been centred around this area for one year. The investment at senior level means that training can be offered to any new staff members who join the setting, allowing continuity of the approach, and the focus on wellbeing and emotional health will continue to be a key part of Charnwood's development plan on an ongoing basis. The whole-team approach also means that support for children is consistent among staff members, and that the team is more consistently able to model positive relationships to families.

A clear understanding of roles and responsibilities was thought to be important by some. Maintained nursery classes and nursery schools are subject to the same requirements as schools to have a designated teacher to promote the educational achievement of looked after children, but there is no such obligation for private, voluntary or independent settings.

However in York, *all* early years settings are required to identify a designated LAC co-ordinator in order to formalise this responsibility. At Pollyanna's Day Nursery in York the team – led by their LAC co-ordinator - has also developed a specific LAC policy to make their aims and commitments explicit to foster carers.

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Flexibility in staffing – and ratios comfortable enough to allow for this – were noted as beneficial by more than half of the early years providers, in order to give children space when needed, provide individual support and attention and allow time for staff to attend meetings with parents, carers and other professionals:

"…foster carers are getting to know the child and their needs in the early stages of a placement. Small interactions every day can be very meaningful so that they can share information and experiences to help both parties understand the child. This means having the flexibility in staffing to be able to get cover when having those conversations."
Elaine McKeer, Early Years Teacher, Kingswood Early Years Centre

5.2 How prepared are early years settings to meet the needs of young LAC?

As described, interviewees considered the task of meeting LAC's needs in early years settings to be complex and multi-layered, requiring highly skilled staff with strong support structures and supervision, able to meet the potentially varying needs of children in a positive, sensitive, individual and often specialist manner, and to work with families as well as children.

There was a general consensus that early years settings and schools in England *could* meet young LAC's needs effectively with the right funding, staffing, supervision and support but that in practice, levels of preparedness vary enormously. Some interviewees cited Ofsted ratings of 'good' and 'outstanding' as evidence that LAC were attending good quality provision, while others argued that *"just because a setting is outstanding does not mean that it will be able to meet the needs of LAC"*. Whilst some excellent examples of good practice have been gathered here, and can no doubt be found elsewhere, interviewees reported that the practices described in the previous section are not happening consistently for the majority of LAC.

In general, interviewees who were specific about which providers were best placed to meet young LAC's needs identified maintained sector providers, and nursery schools in particular. Factors included their experience in providing for disadvantaged children, highly qualified staff teams (many with social work experience) and access to specialist services such as educational psychologists. Other factors were less directly related to sector, and included the extent to which settings had specific experience of working with LAC and whether they had an active and knowledgeable Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO).

Interviewees recognised the excellent work and commitment of many private and voluntary sector providers but also noted the challenges they faced in terms of generally lower levels of staff qualifications; more limited specialist training (e.g. in attachment, early trauma, special educational needs, managing challenging behaviours); lack of funding to provide such training and offer the flexibility in staffing needed to respond to the needs of LAC/carers and cope with extra paperwork, meetings and responsibilities; and more limited access to specialist multi-

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disciplinary services. It was felt that, while some great models of practice could be found, this was not consistent across the private and voluntary sector.

Charnwood Nursery School provides a particularly relevant perspective here, being a voluntary provider with access to additional funding, support and specialist services (e.g. psychological services) by virtue of taking local authority special needs referrals. The nursery school felt very strongly that their access to these resources was what enabled them to meet LAC's needs effectively but that the vast majority of private and voluntary sector providers could not – without the same resources – provide a similarly individual service.

Primary schools were recognised as facing challenges in different ways. Although they have access to greater resources than the PVI sector, one nursery school noted that few schools employ staff trained in social work or invest in the specialist training necessary to meet the needs of LAC[17].

5.3 What supports are there in place to enable settings to meet the needs of LAC?

5.3.1 Early Years Pupil Premium

Additional financial support is offered to settings catering for disadvantaged children (including LAC) via the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) at a rate of £300 per child per year. The settings we interviewed had used their pupil premium money to fund:

- staff development (e.g. attachment training, speech and language assessment);
- staff time to attend events or meetings (e.g. child protection conferences, transition meetings or visits), communicate with and support carers or complete planning;
- additional support for children, including one-to-one support, therapy or time-in sessions;
- resources specific to a child's developmental stage or need;
- additional time for children to attend longer days (e.g. breakfast club, after-school club) or to prepare them for the transition to school;
- the development of a relevant professional library.

Some local authorities have provided workshops or information for settings on how to use their pupil premium to best effect, including pooling resources with other settings and schools to buy in services collectively.

17 At the time of writing, a research-led knowledge exchange project, to support teachers and virtual schools, is available from the Institute of Education at University College London. The PALAC (Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children) programme provides an evidence-based audit tool for schools to assess their current practice for LAC and helps facilitate follow up projects to support settings initiate, manage and sustain change.

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5.3.2 Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

The PEP is now a statutory requirement for pre-school LAC, although the age at which this should start is not defined in the guidance. It is completed by the early years setting attended by the LAC and should be reviewed termly and overseen by an independent reviewing officer (Section 3.1). A number of local authority interviewees noted that PEPs have given status to the learning needs of LAC and increased awareness interventions which may not otherwise have been initiated. Electronic PEPs, or e-Peps had also been introduced in a number of local authorities, with positive feedback in terms of ease and quality of completion, and their contribution to tracking progress.

5.3.3 Local authority and peer support

The local authorities involved in our research offered support to early years providers in a number of ways. These are described in further detail in Chapter 6. Several positive examples of peer support were highlighted by interviewees (see examples below).

In York……

…the local authority facilitates peer support via a 'community partnership' model. The manager at **Pollyanna's Day Nursery** reported meeting each term with local schools and early years providers, including childminders. She is the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) for the partnership group, and a regular provider of support and information on LAC to other schools and settings with less experience in this area. She also liaises with a local foster carer to ensure that the documentation developed by the partnership is foster-carer friendly.

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

At Pen Green Centre for Children and Families....

...the nursery school operates a locality approach to supporting LAC and their families. Pen Green offers training and support for 19 private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector settings within a local network. This includes training and advice surgeries, which have been very well attended. Training has also been provided for foster carers, adopters and special guardians.

The Centre is also currently running a specific project – the SHINE project – designed to support primary, secondary and nursery schools and PVI settings across Corby to meet the needs of LAC and their families. It is a collaboration between Pen Green and two other Teaching Schools[18] in Corby (Maplefields 5-19yrs and Brooke Weston 11-19yrs) which collectively have received £45,000 in funding from the local authority.

The project aims to improve outcomes for LAC through:

- group supervision for teachers and learning support assistants with a qualified social worker (fostering and adoption specialist) from Pen Green;
- access to qualified social worker via phone or email, with visits as needed;
- training and support for school staff;
- support groups for carers once a month, plus a closed Facebook page;
- focused support and help for LAC and their families across the summer holidays;
- offering the same level of support for adoptive families and special guardians as for foster carers;
- improving relationships between schools, settings and the virtual school.

Relationships between schools and the virtual school have improved greatly since the project's inception, and schools are now able and willing to contact the virtual school when they need support.

5.4 What are the barriers to meeting the needs of young LAC?

A number of barriers to meeting the needs of LAC were noted by interviewees. The most commonly cited were the additional time and workload involved in providing for LAC, staff knowledge and expertise, funding, and issues relating to communication and information. We discuss each of these in turn.

18 Launched in 2011, there are now almost 700 Teaching Schools across the country, officially designated by the government. Their role is to work with other schools and early years provider to provide high-quality training and support for improvement in their local area.

www.gov.uk/government/collections/teaching-schools-and-system-leadership-how-you-can-get-involved

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

5.4.1 Time and capacity

Although it was given willingly by staff in all settings interviewed, the additional time required to meet the additional needs of LAC, liaise with and support carers and potential adoptive parents, complete paperwork, and attend review meetings and child protection conferences was highlighted as a significant challenge. Given that staffing costs are the most significant element of any early years provider's budget, the funding available to support these additional requirements was felt to be lacking. For most providers, the only additional funding available was via the EYPP which, at £300 per child per year, was not considered sufficient. This is discussed in further detail below.

5.4.2 Staff knowledge and expertise

The second major barrier identified was staff knowledge and expertise. Two issues are relevant here: availability of training and support and funding to access it. Many of the local authorities we interviewed offered excellent examples of training and support for their early years providers (see Chapter 6). However findings from the interviews suggest that this is not consistent across local authorities and that many settings, particularly within the PVI sector, lack sufficient knowledge to effectively meet the needs of LAC.

Challenges relating to sustainability of knowledge were also noted, with staff turnover sometimes making it more difficult to embed training into practice on a long-term basis. Levels of staff supervision and support were also noted as a challenge, again most often in relation to the PVI sector but also – by one interviewee – in relation to schools. This was seen to limit the value of much of the professional development offered at local authority level:

> *"It's fabulous that schools seem to be now doing a lot more attachment training and our local authority is reaching out this term on attachment and trauma training…[but] it's unlikely to result in better practice because it's "one-off" training. If there is not the infrastructure in school, then in the past I have seen brilliant training have nil impact long-term because it's not built in…..It will just be a very superficial experience because people will not be able to go deeply into what has been raised for them…. It's blowing into the wind because if you don't have the ongoing support and supervision around those issues then you can't actually tackle them"*
>
> **Margy Whalley, Director of Research, Development and Training and Katie Greaves, Head of Safeguarding and Family Support, Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families**

5.4.3 Funding

Funding was regarded as being a significant factor underlying many of the challenges relating to staff time/capacity and to the accessibility of training opportunities. Although providers can access the EYPP to support them in meeting the needs of LAC, they receive only £300 per year per child taking up the full free entitlement, which they must use to fund all the extra

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staff time, training and any specialist interventions required. In general, the EYPP was not considered sufficient even to cover the additional staff time required on a day-to-day basis for the additional paperwork, meetings and responsibilities involved in caring for a LAC. This was considered to act as a limiting factor on the effectiveness of providers to meet the needs of LAC, particularly those with significant emotional or behavioural concerns and low attainment, and particularly where providers are catering for only one child (and thus have access to only £300 per year in total).

One local authority interviewee noted that additional resources are sometimes available at local authority level to meet additional needs but that these can be difficult to access. Whereas for school-age children, funding can be drawn down via a health and education plan, options for under-fives were seen as being more limited. Another early years sector interviewee noted the very real costs of offering flexibility to foster carers to ensure a place remains open for a LAC:

> *"..... and for a provider, if they are going to make a place available, there is a cost to being flexible and keeping that place open....You don't want the foster family to be a position where they are thinking 'well we have to go all 15 hours for next week take it or leave it', you'd want something that was more flexible to a child's needs. But the place needs to be made available and funded, often the local authority have funding provided on the initial uptake of places so if children aren't in their places and there's a level of absence, there would be a claw-back from the provider in terms of the funding they've received. I think it needs ..... recognition that if you want flexibility, you need to think about how the local authority would support that."*
>
> **Clare Schofield, Director of Membership, Policy and Communications, National Day Nurseries Association**

Reducing levels of local authority funding and support were also a concern for interviewees. A number reported that local authorities only have the capacity to support settings graded as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' by Ofsted, whereas many settings with a 'good' or 'outstanding' grade may still need significant help in effectively meeting LAC's needs. Others cited a reduced capacity for referring children to services such as psychologists, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and speech and language specialists. Although the local authorities we interviewed presented some excellent examples of support for settings (see Chapter 6) our findings indicate that this may not be the case in many other areas. Although our contact with local authorities other than those involved in the research was limited, interviewees from early years settings and/or with access to a more national view reported that support from virtual schools was patchy, and often primarily focused on school-age children rather than the early years.

5: Meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

Issues relating to funding were most frequently cited in relation to the PVI sector, and were seen to impact negatively on possibilities for staff development and training, and on the flexibility in staffing required to meet the needs of LAC and their families in a responsive way. One interviewee cited examples of PVI settings self-limiting the number of places they could offer to disadvantaged children (e.g. as part of the two-year-old entitlement) because they did not have the resources to offer level of quality they would like. Funding challenges were also recognised in relation to the maintained sector, however, particularly in relation to access to specialist multi-disciplinary services.

The implications of proposed changes to the ways in which the free education entitlement is funded (via the single funding formula) were also noted by our advisory group as a potential future limiting factor on maintained sector budgets.

5.4.4 Information and communication

Several interviews also noted issues relating to accessing information about LAC. Social work and health visiting teams were widely acknowledged to be overstretched, with some interviewees citing regular use of agency staff and/or frequent changes within the team. Communication and information-sharing did not always happen, resulting in valuable information about LAC not being passed on (e.g. on arrival to a setting, or feedback following LAC review meetings). Several interviewees noted issues relating to providers knowing which children were eligible for the EYPP and/or that children they provide for are in care. Working with – and gaining information from – local authorities in the case of out-of-borough placements was also recognised by several settings as being particularly challenging.

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

In this chapter we consider the role of local authorities in supporting LAC to access early years provision, and in ensuring the quality and stability of that provision, focusing primarily on the free early education entitlement for children aged two, three and four years. Findings are primarily based on seven interviews with staff from local authority virtual schools and early years teams and consultation with the National Quality Improvement Network (which brings together members of early years teams from across the UK), but also draws on interviews with early years providers, academics, fostering and health professionals (see Appendix 1 for details)[19]. We explore the barriers to access and to quality, highlighting examples of good practice within the local authorities we interviewed and considering areas for improvement within local authority practice across England.

Summary

- Virtual schools within local authorities play a key role in monitoring and ensuring the educational progress of LAC. However, our findings suggest that the extent to which they support LAC in the early years (as compared with children of statutory school age) varies considerably between authorities.
- Many local authorities had in place a range of strategies to support accessibility, quality and continuity of early years experiences for LAC. However practices are not consistent and improvements could be made in many areas.
- There can be a tension between the dual needs of LAC for quality and stability in early years experiences, particularly where a child is already attending a setting on entry to care which may be of less than sufficient quality.
- Most virtual schools hold data on whether LAC are accessing early education, with early years personal education plans (EYPEPs) beginning to develop as a tool for tracking progress.
- The quality of relationships between virtual schools, early years, social care and health teams is a key factor in effective decision-making regarding access to early years provision for LAC, and in ensuring their needs are met once they begin attending.

Out-of-borough care placements present a significant challenge in terms of ensuring access to high quality early years provision for LAC.

19 Unfortunately we were unable to arrange interviews with a local authority children's social care team, so the views of social workers are not reflected in this report.

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

6.1 The role of the virtual school

Within many of the local authorities involved in the study, virtual schools have been increasing their focus on early education in recent years, and adapting procedures designed for schools and for school-age children to meet the needs of young children and early years providers. Supporting the early education of younger LAC was a recognised area for development, a key group being children accessing the 15-hour-a-week free offer for disadvantaged two year olds (for which all LAC are eligible). Alongside the introduction of the two-year-old entitlement, other factors driving the increased focus on the early years included a wider policy focus on the importance of early years provision and the introduction of the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) for three and four year olds in April 2015, and responsibilities of the virtual school in implementing this funding[20].

Several local authorities had designated a specific early years representative within the virtual school, responsible for supporting early years settings and overseeing the meeting of young LAC's educational needs. Roles included:

- promoting the free early education entitlement among foster carers and social workers;
- identifying LAC aged under five years, contacting designated social workers and liaising with other local authority services to arrange suitable early years provision;
- observing each LAC prior to the first Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting;
- convening and chairing initial PEP meetings, and working alongside social workers to facilitate communication between carers and the setting (e.g. ensuring carers are aware of what the setting can and should provide, and that the setting has the information needed to support the child's needs effectively);
- working closely with the local authority early years team and others to flag up any issues experienced by LAC and ensure that settings receive the relevant support;
- overseeing any funding provided to top up the EYPP in cases of high need;
- monitoring progress, and supporting settings to complete effective PEPs, monitor progress effectively and act on information to meet children's needs;
- tracking changes in placement and acting on this where necessary.

Findings from the survey suggest that at least 15 of the responding local authorities have a designated early years lead, either within the virtual school or as part of their early years team. However, our survey and qualitative data suggest that the support offered by virtual schools to LAC in the early years – and to the settings providing for them - varies considerably across local authorities. Some monitor progress and offer support from birth or from the point that

20 It is also possible for the virtual school to withhold payment of the EYPP in instances where a PEP has not been completed or has been judged not to be of satisfactory quality. Interviews suggest that this has created more opportunities for virtual school staff to engage with providers and assess how they are meeting the needs of looked after children.

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children first become eligible for the free entitlement at age two, while others begin support at three once children are eligible for the universal early education entitlement. Interviewees also reported that some authorities consider the responsibility of the virtual school to begin once children reach compulsory school age, or approach transition into primary school. The lack of specific statutory responsibilities for LAC prior to school-age was considered to act as disincentive to local authorities prioritising support for this age-group. Several local authority representatives felt that directives and expectations were much clearer for school-age children than for children under five, and indicated that a stronger statutory framework would be beneficial in ensuring the needs of young children were prioritised.

In the following sections, we explore in greater detail the ways in which the local authorities involved in the study support young LAC's access to early years provision, work to ensure the quality of that provision, and monitor the progress of LAC.

6.2 Supporting access to early education provision

Local authority interviewees reported many examples of work to promote the free early education entitlement among carers and social work teams and to raise awareness of the benefits of early education for disadvantaged children, particularly as part of a wider drive to increase take-up of the two year old offer. This work was being carried out by different local authority teams including the virtual school, Family Information Services, childcare brokerage teams and early years teams.

Typically, contact is made with social workers or foster/kinship carers for children who are approaching or have just passed their second birthday to make them aware of the child's entitlement to an early education place, either through distribution of leaflets or through direct contact. The entitlement is also promoted more widely to professionals who have regular contact with LAC and their carers, such as health visitors, early years practitioners and staff in children's centres. One local authority reported using opportunities at fostering panel meetings, which bring together foster parents and social workers, to discuss opportunities for early education. In this authority, barriers to early education have also been broken down by offering to accompany foster carers to early years settings to talk with practitioners, or to facilitate a settling-in session for the child.

Where virtual schools are co-located with social care teams, or where there are strong working relationships, our findings suggest that social workers tend to be more aware of the early education offer and where to go for support, resulting in a more joined-up service. However, some interviewees reported that rapid turnover in social care teams could make it harder to build these relationships. Finally, a number of interviewees noted that health teams will sometimes recommend early years provision for a child as part of their health care plan, highlighting the importance of links between education, social care and health teams from an early stage.

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Many of local authorities involved in the study also provide support, education and training to foster carers, for example on the importance of early years education, how to find and identify a high quality setting, and how to provide an effective home learning environment. Interviewees also reported examples of social care and early years teams collaborating to develop and provide training for foster carers. Examples of early years training for social workers were also reported, for example the virtual school attending social work team meetings to provide briefings. However, several interviewees suggested that further work is needed raise the profile of early education among social workers within some local authorities.

One local authority reported specific strategies to reduce barriers to access for children with special educational needs, including training for providers and an additional hourly rate to enable them to accommodate more generous staff-to-child ratios. However, interviews with health representatives indicate that such practices are not consistent and that children with additional needs still face many barriers. The inclusion of both health and education input within training for foster carers was felt to be important in this regard, to raise awareness of the importance of addressing problems at an early stage, to avoid them becoming a barrier to access.

In general, our findings (from the survey and interviews) suggest that take-up of early education by LAC varies from area to area, and that the good practices described within this section could be promoted more widely.

6.3 Ensuring that LAC access high quality early years provision

Local authorities can support LAC's access to high quality provision in two ways: through supporting carers and social workers to identify and choose high quality providers for LAC, and by supporting early years providers to meet children's needs effectively.

As noted above, some local authorities provide training for foster carers on how to identify a high quality early years setting. However our findings suggest that such practices are not widespread and that further improvements could be made to support carers and social workers to choose high-quality early years provision. Ofsted grades are the most accessible means of identifying the quality of an early years setting, and are publicly available for all. However, as discussed earlier, inspections are relatively broad-brush and infrequent, and may not provide a full assessment of how prepared a setting is to meet the needs of a child in care. Ensuring that children are in settings graded as 'good' or higher by Ofsted would be a good beginning but may not guarantee quality for LAC. In addition, not all local authorities collect information about the quality of early years provision being accessed by LAC (see Chapter 4).

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Where there was a strong early years lead within the virtual school, this provided a mechanism for discussions around quality and a means of guiding choice of provider, particularly where the virtual school also had strong links with the local authority early years services. Where there were active early years teams with ongoing provider contact, these teams could offer up-to-date knowledge about quality and pre-existing relationships with local practitioners. By consulting with these teams, virtual school staff were able to consult on the best options available in different localities and gather information on how well the needs of LAC were being met. By the same token, where the virtual school visited children in early years settings, they were able to provide early years teams with information about the quality of provision, raise any concerns, and request that providers be offered support where necessary.

A small number of authorities reported that their early years teams worked directly with foster carers to find appropriate provision, provide guidance on what to look for and, in some instances, accompany carers and children on visits to early years providers, either to assess whether the setting is right for the child, or to assess the educational needs of a child already attending and the standard of provision they are receiving. In some cases, carers received similar support via Children's Centres. However, interviews also suggested that early years providers are on occasion being chosen on the basis of convenience rather than quality.

Finally, the importance of links with health professionals – at the early stages of decision-making and throughout the child's education – was highlighted by interviewees. Health visitors can provide information on many needs likely to influence educational development, for example delays in attention or language, health needs or psychological disorders. The integrated review at age two was considered to provide a good opportunity for integrated working and sharing of information at an early age.

Most local authorities we interviewed had procedures in place to improve the quality of early years provision being accessed by LAC, although it is unclear how widespread these practices are in other areas. Much of the work is being carried out by early years teams, often in partnership with the virtual school. Within some authorities, procedures were in place to monitor quality within settings catering for LAC and provide additional support where required (see box).

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

In Hertfordshire...

...the virtual school is working to support schools and settings to raise the achievement of all children looked after. There are over a thousand children in the care of the local authority in Hertfordshire, including more than one hundred within the birth to five age bracket. Early years became a priority area for the virtual school as a result of a broader awareness of evidence on the role of early education in improving attainment and narrowing the gap between the most vulnerable children and their peers.

The virtual school has established a service level agreement with the local authority early years team, which it has commissioned to visit and report back on all settings with a child looked after in attendance. This allows them to oversee the quality of provision being accessed by the child, monitor educational progress and attendance, and offer support to the setting when required. The early years team inform the virtual school when they judge that providers would benefit from guidance specifically around the needs of LAC, so that the virtual school education advisory team can offer support and expertise.

A number of authorities also offered specific training to support early years providers in meeting the needs of LAC, including training on attachment and the impact of trauma, and on tracking the development of vulnerable groups (see box). Others signpost settings catering for LAC to relevant but more generic training, for example on supporting communication and language development, or attend existing network meetings for early years practitioners and managers to make links, provide information and promote good practice. There are also designated teacher forums in some local authorities, which provide opportunities to share information and good practice. However, our findings (from interviews and the survey) suggest that some local authorities do not yet have any systematic approaches in place for developing quality in settings attended by LAC. One of the primary challenges in relation to workforce preparation was considered to be the relative infrequency with which most early years settings will be provide for a LAC. What level of preparation is appropriate and how can this best be managed in a way which balances preparedness with cost-effectiveness?

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In York....

....following the introduction of the designated LAC co-ordinator role within early years settings, bespoke training was provided by the local authority to prepare practitioners. This included a two-hour session on the neuroscience of developmental trauma and attachment, as well as familiarising participants with basic strategies to implement in order to support LAC (e.g. positive behaviour management). The training was initially accessed by setting managers and then cascaded to other staff. It is now offered as part of a rolling programme, so that multiple staff within each setting can access the training. In addition to supporting a whole-team approach this helps to 'institutionalise' the expertise in the event of staff turnover. At Pollyanna's Nursery, three members of staff have now been trained. Refresher training is also offered. Now that the majority of settings have attended the basic programme, extended training will be developed and offered to increase the skill-set further. Settings have also had access to training on PEP completion, and to training relating to vulnerable children more broadly (e.g. Tuning in to Children, provided by a clinical psychologist). The aim is to ensure that each early years setting has at least one staff member with appropriate knowledge about the needs of LAC and how to meet them.

The local authority also provides access to resources, including packs of books and appropriate literature which settings can provide to foster families.

6.4 Ensuring stability for LAC

Both the literature review and the interviews highlighted the importance of stability for LAC. While many of the risks children face (e.g. poverty, neglect) are shared with other at-risk groups, the experience of being removed from their home and potentially undergoing many care placements represents a unique challenge for LAC, and means that they have a greater need for stability and continuity than many other children. Providing stability within early years settings (e.g. through the key worker system) is addressed in Chapter 5. Stability *between* settings is also important, and the evidence suggests that LAC should experience as few moves as possible.

Several local authority interviewees highlighted the challenges of balancing LAC's need for high quality provision with the need for stability. In some cases, children are already attending a setting when they come into care. If the local authority team consider the setting to be of poor quality, a decision then needs to be made as to whether to move to the child (in the interests of quality) or continue with the placement but support the provider to better meet the child's needs (in the interests of stability). No easy solution was proposed, and interviewees noted that decisions need to be made carefully and take into account all the needs of the individual child in question.

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

One nursery school also noted and valued support from their local social work team, reporting that they actively prioritised early education attendance and, where a child has moved placement, would work to ensure that s/he returns as quickly as possible to their early education setting to minimise disruption.

6.5 Monitoring take-up, attendance and progress

This section supplements the findings reported in Section 4.2.2 regarding the monitoring of early education take-up by local authorities. Interview and survey findings suggest that local authorities are using existing data sources to generate a record of the educational status of early years LAC, supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by manual collection of information by social care, early years or virtual school staff.

Monitoring take up of early education is generally achieved by generating a database of children in the early years who are accessing the free entitlement. Virtual schools are regularly provided with an updated record of children looked after by the local authority, including those who have recently moved into or out of local authority care. This will often include information on the kind of provision being accessed by each child. The list can then be cross referenced with data gathered through administration of the free early education entitlement to provide details for children who have previously accessed a funded place and to highlight those who have not. The regularity with which these databases are updated varies across different local authorities. Survey findings indicate that, while some teams receive a weekly list of children moving into care and revise their records accordingly, others perform this check on a monthly or termly basis. Given that children in care can experience frequent changes in placement, the accuracy of databases using information gathered in this way is not guaranteed.

Such large-scale data capture is therefore often supplemented by the manual collection of information on an individual basis, through contact with the designated social worker. Survey findings suggest that this is primarily carried out for LAC who have been identified as not currently accessing the free entitlement, although some virtual schools reported that they make contact with social workers for all early years children when they move into local authority care. As well as collecting information on the educational status of the individual child, this contact allows virtual school or early years teams to offer support in accessing appropriate provision or services. In instances where it has been decided that formal provision is not currently in the best interests of the child, a small number of local authorities also reported that they would record the reason for not taking up the entitlement so this can be followed up at a later date where appropriate. Although a number of respondents flagged the importance of consistent attendance rather than simply enrolment at an early years settings, this was not in general formally monitored and is represents an area for future attention.

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

Interviews suggest that the quality of the relationships between the virtual school and the early years and social care teams has an impact on the extent and accuracy of the information held for each LAC. In instances where the virtual school has developed good multi-agency partnerships, this has helped to raise their profile and improve information sharing practices. Virtual school staff have been able to clearly establish their role as the primary contact for matters relating to the early education of LAC and increase the frequency with which they are updated regarding any changes in the child's life which may affect their education. This can also have the effect of raising the profile of early education within the social care arena, making it more likely that social workers will approach the virtual school for support in this area.

In Hertfordshire...

The virtual school has made an active commitment to ensuring that LAC have the best possible educational opportunities in the early years. One of the areas in which the local authority has been working to improve practice relates to the collection and management of data in the early years. As the number of children taking up their entitlement to free early education increases, particularly amongst disadvantaged children who are eligible for the two-year-old entitlement, it has become increasingly important that the virtual school has robust systems in place to monitor outcomes for LAC and support effective interventions.

The local authority has been exploring methods of improving tracking and analysis of educational achievement within early years cohorts. At present, the local authority:

- generates a database of early years children, combining data from social care teams with information on the uptake of the free early education entitlement;
- uses NHS numbers to identify and track children across different providers;
- is developing an electronic Personal Education Plan (E-PEP) for children in the early years;
- identifies LAC under five years of age, banded into five cohort categories with birthdates between 1st September and 31st August, so that attention can be paid to the educational needs of each group;
- has included a data field for LAC as part of the early years headcount, in order to ensure that they are visible in termly returns.

As a result of these measures, LAC aged between one and two years of age can be proactively identified to social workers as needing to access a two-year-old funded place at a local setting. The amended headcount will also alert the local authority when a LAC takes up a place in an early years setting and this information can be used to ensure payment of the EYPP.

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

The next steps for Hertfordshire are to:

- trial collection of attendance information for a sample cohort of LAC under 5 with a view to expanding this to all LAC under 5;
- enrich collection of attainment and progress data for all LAC accessing the free entitlement.

Finally, we consider local authority systems for tracking the progress of LAC. Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are the primary means by which education progress is monitored, though our findings suggest that the extent to which local authorities are implementing PEPs for children in the early years is variable. Some interviewees reported that PEPs are a requirement for all children from the age of three, while other local authorities operate PEPs for children accessing the free education entitlement from age two or even – in some cases - from birth, as a means of documenting early development in preparation for entering early years provision.

A number of authorities were in the process of introducing Early Years PEPs (EYPEPs), adapting the primary-stage PEP so that it better reflected developmental goals in the early years. The format and content of EYPEPs appeared to differ significantly across areas and the quality of completion was reported to be inconsistent. Some local authorities have introduced an electronic PEP (ePEP) in the early years, which allows social workers and designated teachers to access and edit the plan at any time.

In general, we found little evidence of systematic approaches to collating and analysing the information gathered through PEPs, although some local authorities reported recent initiatives or existing objectives which seek to use PEP data to inform policy design. For example, one local authority uses a tracking tool to examine data collected through PEPs in order to better understand the progress of LAC in early education. Through this process, communication and language has been identified as a key area in which LAC in local provision typically under-achieve as they approach statutory school age. As a result, the local authority has prioritised this area, and is encouraging providers to focus on supporting language and communication development for LAC.

6.6 Out of area placements

Virtual schools retain a responsibility for LAC who live in their area and attend early education or school elsewhere. They can request help from other authorities to achieve this, but cannot transfer their responsibility. Approximately 39 per cent of all LAC are in placements outside of the local authority boundary (DfE, 2015). Proportions range from 11 per cent to 81 per cent across different local authorities, with inner London boroughs and other urban areas more likely to have a high proportion in out-of-area placements. The proportion also varies according to placement type: 63 per cent of foster placements are within the home local authority

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

compared to 48 per cent of secure unit, children's homes and hostel placements. Although figures for the number of LAC in the early years placed outside of their home local authority are not readily accessible, the proportion is likely to be lower than that for all children, given that they are predominantly in foster placements.

Our findings suggest a number of challenges associated with supporting the education of children accessing early years provision outside of the local authority. Processes for overseeing the educational needs and the quality of early education being accessed by LAC can be more challenging when children are placed at a significant distance from their home local authority. Differences in policy across local authorities can make it difficult for virtual schools to negotiate and arrange access to services or additional resources for children in out-of-area placements. Good data sharing agreements between local authorities are necessary so that the progress and attainment of young children can be monitored.

Challenges in supporting the early education for LAC are exacerbated by a lack of accurate information. Our findings indicate significant disparities between the data collected for LAC within the local authority area and those who are in placements or attending provision in another local authority. A small proportion of local authorities do not hold information on the take up of early education, on or the quality of provision being accessed, when a child is placed out-of-area (see Chapter 4). As noted above, much of the information held on the educational status of LAC is collected through early years teams and the early years census. As this process only captures children attending provision located within the local authority area, it is usually necessary for the virtual school to collect details for children in out-of-area placements on an individual basis. Survey responses demonstrate that not all local authorities are recording this information.

Processes for overseeing the quality of provision being accessed by LAC can be complicated by the necessity to build new relationships with out-of-area providers and the barriers posed by the distance at which children are placed. While virtual schools often make use of early years team's knowledge of and connections with local providers, this is not always possible for providers located in other local authorities. Similarly, it is easier for concerns about the standard of provision being accessed by LAC to be communicated to, and acted upon by, early years teams if the provider is within the local authority area. Where children are placed at a distance from their home local authority, this also constitutes a barrier to social workers or virtual school staff being able to conduct visits to assess the educational needs of LAC.

> *"I think on the whole local authorities are quite well organised at giving priority to those children. The difficulty can come when our providers have a child placed with them who are from a neighbouring local authority. The logistics of getting the local authority where the child lives to agree something with the home local authority can be very tricky. So then you can be relying on a confident foster carer or the team around the foster carer to negotiate and lobby and push for things."*
>
> **Harvey Gallagher, Chief Executive, Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers**

6: Local authority support for meeting the needs of LAC in early education settings

Our findings suggest that differences in approach and policy across local authorities can make negotiating and arranging access to services and additional resources more difficult for children in out-of-area placements. This is a particular issue in the case of local authorities that provide a comparatively low level of educational support for children under statutory school age. Settings which are accustomed to receiving services and resources from their own local authority may have greater difficulty accessing the same degree of support for children who are under the care of a different local authority. In addition, interviews suggest that the line of responsibility for the funding of the free early education entitlement for looked after children is not always clear for those accessing provision outside of their home local authority.

In summary, our findings suggest that out-of-borough placements requiring liaison between local authorities create a significant barrier to LAC's access to high quality early education, and urgent attention is required in this regard.

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The research evidence is conclusive on the link between early adversity and poorer outcomes. Looked after children – 60 per cent of whom enter care as result of abuse or neglect in England – are at risk of poorer cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes and almost ten times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. In England, the starkest differences are seen towards the end of schooling, with only 18 per cent of LAC achieving five GSCEs at grade C or above compared to 64 per cent of children not in care, and only seven per cent of LAC and care leavers aged 17-to-30 progressing to higher education compared to the national average of 50 per cent. However, research suggests that the gap between LAC and their non-looked-after peers emerges well before school-age.

Education is a key driver of social mobility, and both the literature review and interviews confirmed the potential of early education as a powerful means of early intervention, alongside strong support in the home. The foster carers we spoke with highlighted the need for young LAC to 'learn how to be learners' by engaging in social and structured play, so that they could access the learning opportunities available to them throughout their lives. Preschool also offers support for language development, early diagnosis of possible delays, an additional source of stability in children's lives, and support for health needs and habits. Our review also confirmed the importance of the home learning environment, as well as benefits to LAC of carer involvement with their early education setting. Carers and early years settings must work together to support the care and learning needs of young LAC.

There has been an increasing recent focus in England on the educational attainment of LAC, with high-profile research by the Universities of Oxford and Bristol, and a number of significant moves at policy level. Recent legislation places an obligation on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of LAC, and to appoint a virtual school head responsible for monitoring their progress. All preschool children must have a Personal Education Plan (PEP). LAC are also entitled to receive the free early education entitlement for deprived two-year-olds (alongside the universal entitlement for three- and four-year-olds) and the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) provides a source of additional funding for settings and schools catering for disadvantaged children, including LAC.

We found some excellent examples of practice within the local authorities and early years settings we interviewed, putting these policy commitments successfully into action. However, while many local authorities are effectively promoting the educational needs of school-age LAC, we found that practice is not yet consistent for LAC under the age of five, and that a considerable gap may exist between government aspiration and on-the-ground experiences for LAC. Indeed, the vast majority of documents we reviewed setting out priorities for LAC referred *only* to children of school-age and older. Given the powerful research evidence on the potential of early years provision to narrow the gap for disadvantaged children, we now need to

21 All references for the points made in this brief are included in the literature review

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build on the clear commitment at government level, and the good work already being done at local level, to ensure early intervention for the learning needs of LAC.

In this final chapter we summarise our findings on access to high quality early education for LAC and discuss potential implications for policy and practice.

Access to early years education

Our review of the research literature review confirmed that the government is following strong evidence in offering free early education to disadvantaged children from the age of two. However, our evidence suggests that not all children in care are benefitting from the offer. Evidence from the survey of local authorities indicates that take-up of the free early education entitlement for two, three and four-year-old LAC is at least 14 per cent lower than take-up in the general population; and given that these data are drawn only from local authorities which keep accessible records on take-up, we estimate that the true gap may be larger. A number of interviewees noted that traumatised LAC may need time to bond with carers before attending group provision, and reported that LAC may attend fewer than the free entitlement hours or even – in some cases – not attend formal provision at all. However, our findings suggest that the lower take-up is not solely due to sensitive and informed decisions being made regarding LAC's needs, and that work is needed to inform foster carers and social workers of the potential benefits of early years provision.

Our local authorities provided several examples of good practice in this regard, including training for foster carers and working with the social care team and foster carers to organise access to suitable provision. However these practices were by no means universal, largely because the majority of local authorities do not yet have a designated early years lead within the virtual school. This is an obvious target for improving future practice and would be supported by a strengthening of local authority statutory responsibilities to explicitly include the education attainment of LAC younger than school-age. In times of restricted budgets, this would ensure appropriate weight is given to children's progress prior to school age, and to the potential of early education provision to act as an early intervention.

Practical barriers to access included the large number of meetings foster carers need to attend in relation to their LAC, and the often short-term and unpredictable nature of placements. Early years settings involved in our research worked with foster carers to provide cover for meetings, and to hold places open for children while care placements were being set up. Local authorities could support this latter point through flexibility in funding arrangements, since models based on initial uptake may disadvantage providers holding a place open for a LAC.

Issues of continuity in relation to short-term care placements are also worth noting. Interviewees highlighted the important role played by early years settings in providing continuity and stability for LAC moving between placements, and research confirms the negative impact of frequent moves between education providers. Where possible, efforts should be made

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to ensure continuity in provision, and to support a child in returning to their early education provider after a placement move. Some tensions were noted, however, in balancing the need for quality and stability where a child is already attending a setting considered to be of insufficient quality.

The high rates of special needs among LAC can also prove a challenge in terms of finding an appropriate setting, and ensuring that practitioners are prepared to meet those needs. Again, the virtual school has a key role to play here in terms of accessing appropriate provision and supporting settings in meeting children's needs.

Finally, our research indicates that monitoring of early education take-up by LAC is an important area for attention. The most significant feature of the data we received in response to our local authority survey was the difficulty in accessing it. Following Freedom of Information requests, responses were gathered from 136 local authorities but were returned in widely varying formats and levels of detail. Some local authorities kept no data at all. A common framework and expectation on local authorities to track uptake and attendance in a format which can be submitted for collation at national level would greatly increase the possibilities for monitoring access.

In relation to LAC's access to early years provision, our findings indicate that:

- **virtual schools and early years teams should continue efforts to work closely with social care teams in ensuring that social workers, kinship and foster carers are aware of the benefits of early education, and where and how provision can be accessed;**
- **there may be benefits in extending the remit of virtual schools to include explicit responsibility for monitoring and supporting the educational progress of LAC prior to school age. It would also be valuable to extend the practice of designating a specific early years lead within local authority virtual schools more widely**. The early years leads we interviewed carried out important work in overseeing the experiences and progress of LAC prior to statutory school age, and worked closely with early years teams to facilitate links between carers, social workers, settings and health teams, raise awareness and reduce barriers to access, support early years providers to meet LAC's needs and monitor and supporting their progress via the PEP;
- **decisions made regarding early years provision for LAC must necessarily balance the need for children to attend high quality provision with the need for stability and continuity in their early education experience**.

(Implications relating to data monitoring are addressed further in the following section).

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Quality of early years education

It was clear from both the literature review and interviewee responses that LAC have a greater need to experience high quality provision than their peers. They are more likely to be delayed in their development and to have special educational needs; many will have suffered neglect or trauma, and have greater need for support with social and emotional development and self-regulation.

- A skilled and knowledgeable staff team is a key requirement for high quality provision. Our findings suggest that practitioners working with young LAC require;
- knowledge of attachment and the potential consequences of early trauma;
- the ability to support the additional needs likely to result from such early adversity (including emotional and behavioural difficulties, speech and language delay and health needs) and to collaborate with carers in meeting these needs;
- experience with the system surrounding LAC, and negotiation skills with the various relevant agencies.

These requirements were not considered to be unique to LAC – settings which are good for LAC will be good for all children - but to be more *important* for this group. Flexibility in staffing was also required to meet children's needs when problems arose, provide individual support and allow time for staff to attend meetings with carers and other professionals. Strong partnership with other professionals (e.g. speech and language therapists, psychologists, health professionals) was considered critical, particularly in relation to identifying and addressing potential delays. Early years providers reported that many LAC require intervention over and above day-to-day support within the setting, such as nurture groups, access to psychological support services and relevant therapies. Close monitoring of progress in all aspects of development was also considered essential.

So what level of quality do LAC currently receive, and how do we know? The survey suggested that 89 per cent of LAC receiving the free entitlement do so in a setting graded as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, which is broadly comparable to national trends. During Ofsted inspections, both local authorities and settings are required to demonstrate that LAC are receiving high-quality educational provision, that accurate and timely assessments of their needs are conducted and that they are receiving sufficient and effective support. However, given the greater need for LAC to access high quality provision, there are still significant improvements which could be made. Eleven per cent of LAC attend settings graded as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' and, given the broad brush nature of Ofsted inspections and the specific needs of LAC it seems clear that a higher quality bar, and additional support for settings in meeting children's needs, are required.

While we found excellent examples of the good practices described above in our study settings, interviewees reported that this is not happening consistently for all LAC in all settings.

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Maintained sector providers – nursery schools in particular – were considered to be particularly suited to meeting the needs of young LAC. Factors included experience with children at risk of developmental delay and their families, the qualifications and experience of staff and access to specialist services. Interviewees recognised the excellent work and commitment of many private and voluntary sector providers but noted the challenges faced in many of these areas, particularly in relation to staff qualifications and training. This is consistent with previous research showing that quality is highest in the maintained sector, and that disadvantaged children attending private and voluntary sector settings are less likely to experience good quality than their more advantaged peers.

An obvious conclusion is that all LAC should attend a setting graded as 'good' or higher by Ofsted and/or receive their early education within the maintained sector (disadvantaged children are in fact already disproportionately represented within maintained provision). The reality, however, may not be so straightforward. Some areas have little maintained provision, particularly for two-year-olds, where the free entitlement is primarily offered by private and voluntary sector settings. Although maintained provision is of higher quality overall, there is variation within all sectors and we found excellent examples of practice within settings of different kinds. Families may express a preference for a specific setting and retain the final decision. Lastly, as noted earlier, several interviewees noted the need to take continuity into account where a child is already attending early years provision on entry to care and/or where a setting is downgraded from 'good' to a lower inspection grade. We know from research that moves between educational settings can be damaging. Therefore, although efforts should be made to place children in settings already known to offer excellent practice for LAC, further effort is also needed to ensure wider workforce preparation.

The local authorities involved in our research provided good practice examples in this regard, largely led by designated early years representatives within virtual schools in partnership with local authority early years teams. Examples included bespoke training on attachment and trauma, and virtual school early years leads providing a bridge between carers, social workers and settings to support choice of appropriate providers, clarify roles and responsibilities, support settings in meeting children's needs and monitor progress through the use of PEPs. As noted above, the designation of an early years lead within each virtual school – supported by the strengthening of statutory responsibilities – would enable the good practices highlighted in this report to become more widespread.

The second key area for attention is that of funding, required by early years providers to pay for extra training, staff replacements to allow time off for training and to attend meetings, and any specialist interventions required to meet the needs of LAC. Although the EYPP is available for every LAC, the rate of £300 per year for a child accessing their full entitlement was not considered by interviewees to be sufficient, particularly for settings with only one LAC, or children attending fewer than 15 hours. LAC of statutory school-age attract £1900 per year of 'Pupil Premium Plus', set at a higher rate in recognition of the enduring impact of trauma in

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the lives of LAC. Adopting the same model for early education would enable providers to offer more effective early intervention.

In addition to being affordable, suitable training for early years practitioners also needs to be *available*. Here we face the challenge of identifying who needs to know what. We identified some excellent examples of LAC-specific training for practitioners, for example in York where several staff from each setting have received bespoke professional development. Given that many settings will rarely or never provide for a child who is looked after, what level of specialist preparation is appropriate? Training is expensive and can be wasted without an opportunity to put knowledge into practice relatively soon after taking part. We propose identifying a basic level of knowledge which all practitioners need in order to be part of a team catering for LAC (as identified above), and ensuring high quality training to ensure this knowledge. Such training would also be of great benefit to foster and kinship carers, helping them to provide an effective home learning environment and raising awareness of the importance of high quality early years provision, and could be extended to social workers for similar reasons. In York, for example, foster carers are routinely included in the planning for early years training. Such training would improve outcomes for all disadvantaged children (and indeed, all children) and increased knowledge of the benefits of early education could help professionals, including foster carers, to prioritise access for LAC. Including the basic components of child development training in initial practitioner qualification is also essential.

In addition to foundation training for all, practitioners catering for LAC need access to specialist knowledge, and appropriate supervision and support structures when providing for LAC. Models for providing this will vary from authority to authority, and a number of different possibilities were identified within this report. Some maintained and voluntary nursery schools had in-house teams with specialist knowledge, including staff with a background in social work and strong supervisory and support structures. A number of peer support models were also evident, including a nursery school funded by the local authority to support local schools and settings, and a community partnership model facilitated by the local authority which enabled settings to access expertise from others with LAC experience. Given increasing moves towards a sector-led improvement model, policy makers at national and local level could consider how existing expertise and networks can be built upon to provide access to specialist knowledge and supervision for settings catering for LAC.

Finally, significant gaps were identified in relation to monitoring the quality of provision experienced by LAC and their educational progress. As discussed above, no systems exist for monitoring these trends at central level, and there is inconsistency in how local authorities gather and respond to this information. Steps are urgently required to improve data collection and monitoring at both central and local levels, in order that the government's vision for supporting the educational attainment of LAC can be enacted with consistency and for every child looked after.

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In relation to the quality of early years provision accessed by LAC, our findings indicate that:

1. **virtual schools and early years teams should continue to work closely with social care teams to ensure that social workers, kinship and foster carers are aware of the importance of the quality of early years education and know how to identify a high quality setting**. Alongside this, valuable work can also be carried out by years settings and local authorities in supporting foster carers to offer a rich home learning environment;
2. **attention is needed to ensure that early years providers have adequate funds to meet the potentially significant needs of LAC**. This could be achieved through the introduction of an Early Years Pupil Premium 'Plus' for early years settings catering for LAC, mirroring that for school-age children (currently £1,900 per child) and bringing support for early years LAC in the in line with that for older children[22]. Early years providers in all sectors also require adequate funding to meet the costs of delivering high quality care and education, particularly in relation to staffing;
3. **local authorities can help to ensure that early years providers are prepared for meeting the needs of LAC and other children at risk by**:
   - ensuring that all early years practitioners have the basic knowledge needed to be part of a team providing for LAC;
   - implementing effective models for ensuring access to specialist knowledge and appropriate supervision, either in-house or via local authority or peer support;
   - ensuring that settings have access to appropriate specialist interventions where needed, including psychological and speech and language support.

   The government's upcoming workforce strategy represents an excellent opportunity for considering the need for early years settings to be prepared for working with high-risk and potentially high-need groups such as LAC;

22 Such funding may need to be provided pro-rata to reflect the hours attended by LAC.

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4. **there are significant improvements which could be made in data collection and monitoring, both nationally and locally, to support LAC's access to early education provision.** Potential areas for attention include:
   - ensuring that central government systems support national monitoring of LAC's take-up of early education, on the quality of provision experienced and on educational attainment at age five. Although this is more difficult in relation to LAC in the PVI sector, the unique pupil number (UPN) available for children attending maintained sector provision offers an excellent starting point for exploring initial possibilities. In addition to consideration of national trends, local authorities would greatly benefit from detailed data to support decision-making, including patterns of attendance by child and carer characteristic, and the features of settings attended (sector, Ofsted grade, staff qualifications).
   - improving the consistency of data collection at local level, to feed into national data collection and inform local decision-making;
   - ensuring that Personal Education Plans are appropriate for the early years, and are being used consistently and effectively to monitor and support the educational progress of LAC accessing the free entitlement.

Joined-up working

Our findings confirm the importance of multi-disciplinary working in meeting the needs of LAC. Universal health visiting services have a key role to play throughout the lives of LAC, and the integrated review at two years provides an effective means of sharing information on health needs with both foster carers and early years settings. Virtual schools are well-placed to promote professional collaboration between local authority early years and social care teams, foster carers, health professionals and early education settings. Our advisory board also highlighted the importance of collaboration on decision-making at commissioning level. Decisions should take into account the needs of the child across all areas of development, and balance the twin requirements of high quality and stability in early years provision for LAC.

Finally, out-of-borough placements requiring liaison between local authorities were found to create a significant barrier to LAC's access to high quality early education. Currently many boroughs are not aware of LAC that have been placed in their borough, and the placing borough may not be aware of the best settings and available support services to support the child's early education.

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In relation to joined-up working, our findings indicate that:

1. **local authorities should work to ensure that decisions regarding the access of LAC to early years provision are made in a manner which is informed by all the relevant agencies (i.e. education, social care and health).**
2. **urgent attention is required to ensure that LAC attending placements out-of-area do not fall through the gaps in terms of their access to high quality early education provision**. This issue would benefit from further clarity from central government regarding responsibilities, and the way in which information is shared for LAC placed out-of-borough in relation to early education.

Our research has addressed an important gap in knowledge relating to the early years experiences of children in care. We have explored the issues, and considered the implications for practice and policy in England. However our findings and conclusions are necessarily limited by the fact that this was a relatively small and exploratory research study. Further work is required in this important area to establish a more robust evidence-base in relation to early years provision and LAC. Meloy & Phillips (2012) identify three clear stages for future work:

- describing patterns of use, including timing, amount and type of provision;
- identifying the predictors of take-up and use (including both child and carer characteristics);
- exploring the effects of early years provision on LAC in different aspects of development, including variation in effects according to provision type, amount, stability and quality.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

A1. Research and policy review

We conducted an international research review to assess the available evidence on the educational needs and outcomes of looked after children. Given the lack of specific research relating to young LAC, it draws also on the broader literatures relating to disadvantaged children and LAC of school age. Literature was identified using search databases and through consultation with the study advisory group and other early childhood experts nationally and internationally. It therefore represents a purposive rather than a systematic evidence review. The chapter outlines the evidence on the impact of early adversity, the potential for care and education in the home and early years settings to make a difference, and how that might best be accomplished.

We conducted a review of policy relating to looked after children to provide context for our primary research and recommendations. Although some aspects of policy and practice for LAC are similar across the UK, our policy review and findings relate only to England.

A2. Key informant interviews

We interviewed a range of professionals involved in the care and education of looked after children in England, and academics working in the field. In all, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and August 2016, either in person or by telephone. Respondents' views are their own and not necessarily those of their organisations. Foster carers have been kept anonymous to protect the privacy of children they care for. Where a response from another professional referred to a specific child or children, that particular quote has been kept anonymous to avoid the risk of a child being inadvertently identified where there are small numbers of LAC in the local area.

Local authority

- London Borough of Barking and Dagenham: *Joy Barter (Integrated Family Services Early Years and Childcare Group Manager)*
- Oxfordshire County Council: *Maggie Smith (Early Years Support, Virtual School for LAC and Care Leavers)*
- Buckinghamshire County Council: *Theresa Hancock (Virtual School Head)*
- Hertfordshire County Council: *Early Years Consultant (Hertfordshire Virtual School)*
- Stoke on Trent Council: *Rob Vernon (Service Manager)*
- Lewisham Council: *Patrick Ward (Virtual School Head)*
- York City Council: *Sarah Clarke (Virtual School Head), Maxine Benson (EY Advisor), Anne Cooper (Early Learning Leader)*
- Focus group discussion at meeting of the National Quality Improvement Network (NQIN), with a range of local authorities and early years sector organisations represented

Appendix 1: Methodology

Central government/ Ofsted

- Department for Education: *Michael Allured (Team Leader Education and Health of LAC), Patrick Flack (EY Pupil Premium Team)*
- Ofsted: *Matthew Brazier (Specialist Advisor for Children Looked After)*

Academic

- UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit: *Prof Claire Cameron (Professor of Social Pedagogy)*

Foster carers/providers and organisations representing them

- Early years foster carer in York
- Early years foster carer in Hampshire
- Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers: *Harvey Gallagher (Chief Executive)*
- Coram BAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy: *John Simmonds (Director)*

Early years sector

- Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families: *Margy Whalley (Director of Research) and Katy Greaves (Social Worker Consultant)*
- Kingswood Early Years Centre: *Bernice Jackson (Head Teacher), Elaine McKeer (Designated Teacher)*
- Ludwick Nursery School: *Karen James (Head Teacher)*
- Charnwood Nursery and Family Centre: *Cath Deed (Education Manager)*
- National Day Nurseries Association: *Claire Schofield (Director of Membership, Policy and Communications)*
- Pollyanna's Nursery, York : *Helen Horner (Manager)*

Health sector

- Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Trust: *Dr Doug Simkiss (Consultant Paediatrician and Designated Doctor for LAC)*
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health: *Dr Renu Jainer (Consultant Community Paediatrician and Lead for Looked After Children)*

Appendix 1: Methodology

A3. Survey of local authorities

We sent an online survey to virtual school heads or individuals in equivalent roles for all 152 local authorities in England in early 2016. Freedom of Information (FoI) requests were then submitted for all local authorities who did not respond to the survey in spring 2016. Responses were gathered from a total of 136 local authorities, a response rate of 89%.

The survey aimed to build an understanding of what kind of data are held at a local authority level, and an indication of the quality and take up of early years provision for LAC. Local authorities were asked to provide information on the number of LAC in their care, the number accessing early education, how many LAC were placed in settings rated by Ofsted as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' and details of any strategies or policies aimed at encouraging take up or improving early education provision for LAC.

It should be noted that the care population is fluid, particularly when children are at a young age and are more likely to be adopted from care. The snapshot view provided by survey data is therefore unlikely to be a complete measure of performance at the local authority level.

Valid responses from local authorities have been collated to provide an indication of the overall picture of provision across England. The cohort of LAC in the early years is relatively small, though numbers vary significantly across different local authorities. Figures provided for LAC aged between two and four years old in each local authority ranged from fewer than five to a total of 210 children, the highest figure given. Those local authorities with fewer than 20 children aged 2-4 are excluded from local authority level calculations, but included in calculations of totals.

Local authorities were also asked to provide figures for the number of two-, three- and four-year-old children under their care accessing their entitlement to early education or attending a primary school reception class, in addition to the total number of LAC in their care by age group. These data were used to calculate the percentage of two-, three- and four-year old children in local authority care who are accessing early education. It should be noted that, whilst looked after children become eligible for free early education when they turn two, they are often only able to take up a place at the beginning of the term following their second birthday. Consequently, the percentage of children not accessing the entitlement is likely to include some two-year-olds who are not yet able to take up a place in early education.

Finally, the survey asked local authorities to provide figures for the number of looked after children under five years old who were attending childcare settings rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. These were compared with the total number of looked children accessing the free entitlement or attending a primary school reception class in each local authority, in order to estimate the overall percentage accessing early education in provision of good quality. In some responses, the information given suggested that the figures provided did not include children attending a primary reception class in schools rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding'. These responses were excluded from the calculation of the overall number of children in high quality settings.

Appendix 1: Methodology

A4. Freedom of Information questions sent to local authorities

Freedom of Information Act 2000 Request

The Family and Childcare Trust, together with the Department of Education at the University of Oxford is undertaking a research project on the experiences of looked after children in early education. As part of this research we have been surveying local authority practice. As your local authority has not completed a voluntary survey, we are submitting a Freedom of Information Act request to gather the data.

Please could I have the following information.

Jill Rutter, Head of Policy and Research

1. How many looked after children are there in your local authority as of 4 April 2016?
2. How many looked after children fall into the following age bands?

0-2 years	
2-3 years	
3-4 years	
Over 5 years old	

3. Do you keep data about the uptake of free early education for looked after children?
4. Do you keep data about the uptake of free early education for children subject to special guardianship orders?
5. Of looked after children aged 2,3 and 4 years , how many are currently accessing their entitlement to early year's education or are attending a primary school reception class?
6. How many looked after children under five are attending childcare settings rated good or outstanding by Ofsted?
7. What systems are in place in your local authority to make sure that looked after children take up free early education?
8. Has your local authority done any work to improve early education provision for looked after children? For example, this might include work to improve the take up of provision, or work with providers. If you have undertaken such work, please summarise it and include any relevant minutes or policy documents.

Appendix 1: Methodology

A5. Topic guide for expert interviews

Study Summary

Children in care have poorer educational outcomes than their peers. While we know that good quality early years provision can help narrow this gap for disadvantaged children, little is known about whether looked after children are accessing available provision and (if so) whether it is of sufficient quality to reduce risks of developmental delay. Recent moves to introduce free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds and the early years pupil premium for disadvantaged children offer potential to improve outcomes for looked after children, but at present too little is known to ensure these benefits are realised.

This exploratory study is addressing an urgent need for information on children looked after (CLA)'s access to and experiences of early years provision. We aim to establish what data are currently available, identify existing systems this for encouraging take-up, supporting families choosing provision and ensuring that children attend good quality settings, and identify existing good practice in the UK and internationally. We aim to make recommendations for policy and data management locally and nationally, and also to consider the feasibility of a follow-up study to explore the wider – but ultimately more important - question of whether looked after children *actually* access good quality early years provision and what their experiences are.

How are we defining CLA?

We are focusing on the needs of children not in parental care, including children in foster and kinship care. Although we are not specifically focusing on the wider group of children in need (CiN), or on children subject to special guardianship orders, many of our findings will be relevant to this group and have implications for improving practice in relation to meeting their needs.

Defining good practice in meeting the needs of CLA

We recognise that CLA have wide-ranging needs, and that access to early education must be considered alongside other needs as part of an integrated and individual assessment. In carrying out this study we do not suggest that early education is *more* important than a child's need to form strong attachments with their family, or to have their physical and mental health needs. However, all children have a right to good early years education, including CLA. Our aim is to help ensure that looked after children have the same rights of *access* as other children, and that the appropriate systems and supports exist to enable this.

Similarly, we do not aim to define best practice in terms of meeting the needs of CLA through early education provision. Our primary interest is in the systems which support decision-making around meeting the needs of CLA and enable them to have the same rights as other children in terms of access to good quality early years provision.

Interview guide

An important element of our research is to talk to the individuals and organisations who can help us to understand the most important issues in relation to children looked after (CLA)'s access to and experiences of early education, and how the support systems can be improved.

I very much appreciate you giving your time to talk to me. This topic guide sets out some of the key questions that I would like to address. Since we have a very broad range of interviewees, some questions will be more relevant to you than others. I will carry out the interview quite flexibly, and will be guided by you as to which areas will be most productive to discuss.

Before we begin, I would like to make sure that you understand the nature of the interview and give what we called 'informed consent' to take part. Please take a few minutes to read the consent form, let me know if you have any questions, and sign to confirm if you are happy for us to go ahead.

.....

Would you be happy for me to tape record the interview to save me taking notes? ☐

Introductory questions

1. Can you briefly outline your role (job title, description) and area of knowledge/expertise in relation to CLA?

   .....

   .....

   - **(Local authority interviewees)** Could you also tell me about a bit about the area in which you work (e.g. demographics, number of CLA under 5)?

     .....

     .....

2. How important do you think it is that CLA have access to good quality early years provision?

   .....

   Why?

   .....

Interview guide

Access to early years education

3. To what extent do you think that CLA currently access early years provision, including the free early education entitlement? Do you think that they have access to good quality provision?

   What do you think are the reasons for this?

4. Do you think that foster/kinship carers understand and prioritise early education provision for the children they look after? What do you think are the reasons for this?

Local authorities

5. To what extent do you think that local authority teams should prioritise early education as part of their support for CLA? To what extent do you think that (yours/they) currently do so?

6. Do you think that (your) local authority systems currently:

   a. support foster/kinship caring families to understand the importance of early education, both in the home and the contribution that early years settings can make?

   b. help foster/kinship caring families to access good quality early education provision for the children they look after?

   c. communicate and share information, and use data systems effectively, to monitor and support CLA's access to good quality early education provision?

   d. ensure that decisions about early education are made part of a wider assessment of the needs of CLA?

   e. support early years settings to meet the needs of CLA?

   f. ensure that the education/learning needs of CLA are met as well as their care needs?

Interview guide

7. What steps could be taken to improve the systems to support CLA's access to good quality early education provision?

.....

.....

8. Do you know of any specific examples of good practice (in the UK or internationally) that you think we should be including within our study?

.....

.....

Early years settings

9. To what extent to do you think early years settings are aware of and support the needs of looked after children, and feel prepared to do so?

.....

- **(Early years settings)** how able do you feel to meet the needs of CLA? How do you do so?

.....

10. How do you think that the needs of CLA can best be met by early education settings? Does effective provision look the same as effective provision for non-CLA?

.....

.....

11. What steps could be taken to improve the ways in which early settings meet the needs of CLA?

.....

.....

12. Do you know of any specific examples of good practice that you think we should be including within our study?

.....

.....

Interview guide

Government systems

13. To what extent do you think that central government systems:

- support CLA's access to early education provision in settings of good quality?

.....

- use data and data systems effectively to monitor and support CLA's access to good quality early education provision?

.....

- ensure that decisions about early education are made part of a wider assessment of the needs of CLA?

.....

14. What steps could be taken to improve the systems to support CLA's access to good quality early education provision?

.....

.....

Concluding questions

15. Are there any issues you would like to raise which we have not yet covered?

.....

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16. Are there any specific examples of good practice (in the UK or internationally) that you think we should be including within our study?

.....

.....

17. Are there any other individuals or organisations you think we should be interviewing?

.....

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