

More than a piece of paper?

Personal Education Plans and 'Looked After' Children In England

Carol Hayden, ICJS, University of Portsmouth

Resubmitted to *Child & Family Social Work*

Contact:

Dr Carol Hayden, ICJS (Institute of Criminal Justice Studies), University of Portsmouth, St. George's Building, 141, High Street, PORTSMOUTH. PO1 2HY.

Tel: 02392 845554

Email: carol.hayden@port.ac.uk

Word count: 7,039 (whole document)

Date of resubmission: 17.1.2005

More than a piece of paper?

Personal Education Plans and Looked After Children in England

Abstract

This article reports on research into Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for 'looked after' children in one large county local authority in England. PEPs were introduced by guidance from the DfEE and DoH in 2000. The fieldwork for this research began two years after this guidance was published. The research findings show that although social services staff and teachers are critical of specific aspects of PEPs, they have helped to raise the profile of the educational needs of looked after children in the case study local authority. They have provided a forum for social work and education professionals to meet in the interests of particular children. Key problems relate to practical issues: ensuring social workers and teachers feel able to fulfil their expected roles in relation to the education of looked after children; making the system focus on meeting the needs of children as well as practitioners; difficulty in meeting specified timescales; more meaningful, constructive and sensitive involvement of children in the process of producing and reviewing PEPs. The broader issue however is about the ability to plan the education of looked after children. Additional barriers to planning were particularly apparent in residential care and specifically within secure accommodation.

Key words: looked after children, personal education plans

Educating ‘looked after’ children

Disruption, uncertainty and abuse are likely to affect the achievements of anybody. A lack of understanding, support and planning for the education of looked after children in these circumstances can compound existing problems and miss an opportunity to help improve the self-esteem and future prospects of vulnerable children. Yet the poor educational outcomes of looked after children has been noted for decades (Ferguson 1966; Jackson 1987). Similar patterns are found elsewhere in the world (Hestbaek 1999; Avery 2004; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2004; Hayden and Blaya forthcoming) with different legislative and service structures. The difficulties in improving educational outcomes for looked after children should not be underestimated (Gallagher *et al.* 2004).

The main reasons for poor educational outcomes have been well debated and documented and are inter-connected with many of the problems associated with leaving care (Mendes and Moselhuddin 2004). Reasons include: inadequate corporate parenting; the care environment; a failure to prioritise education; inappropriate expectations; placement instability and disrupted schooling as well as pre-care experiences (*see for example* Harker *et al.* 2004). Martin and Jackson (2002) have researched care leavers who are high achievers and what they can tell us about improving the care system so that it is more supportive of children’s educational needs. They have noted the importance of supportive carers, of stability in home and school placement, and of the opportunities and facilities (such as a desk and books at home) to develop interests and benefit from education. Many of these factors could be summarised as what the ‘good parent’ would want to provide for their child. Research by Harker *et al.* (2004) suggests other ways of improving the system and

highlights the value of a ‘champion’ to co-ordinate the education of looked after children in a local authority (a role that was funded in the three local authorities in their study). Practical schemes are noted, such as the provision of computers to support the learning of looked after children. Teachers in this study feature strongly as individuals who can help to make a difference to young people’s progress (p.247). Gallagher *et al.* (2004) focus on residential care and conclude that practical and pragmatic support from social services is needed to keep children in school, as well as a better qualified and supported residential care workforce.

Looked after children in England number around 60,000 at any one time (Harker *et al.* 2004) although the total number of children who pass through the care system in a year is higher (94,300 in 2002-03) (DfES 2004a). A smaller number are looked after for at least a year (44,900) and about three-quarters of this latter group are of school age (35,100) (DfES 2004a). Looked after children of school age are a tiny minority of all school children. Many secondary schools will have only a handful of looked after children within their population, some primary schools will not have looked after children at all. These small numbers highlight one of the difficulties that social workers have in working with schools, as well as those apparent between education and social services departments. Ensuring that all schools and teachers know about, understand and have the capacity to respond to any additional educational needs of looked after children is a big task.

Looked after children live in different types of environment; most live in foster care (68%) but one in ten (11%) are in children’s homes, secure units and hostels. The rest are placed with parents (10%), placed for adoption (6%) or in a variety of other settings, including residential schools and lodgings (DfES 2004b). Many children and

young people will spend less than a year looked after and many will change where and with whom they live in a school year. The need for an additional focus on education will vary enormously across these different situations, as it will with particular individuals and specific circumstances. Looked after children share many things in common with other young people but some, because of their experiences and circumstances, may also have additional and specific needs for support within the education system (Berridge and Brodie 1998).

INSERT TABLE 1 about here

It is only relatively recently (April 1999) that national monitoring data has been available in England, so that we can really compare and track the progress of looked after children compared with the whole school population. Some very gradual improvement is detectable since national data became available (Martin and Jackson 2002; DfES 2004b). However, when the achievements of children looked after for more than a year are compared with the whole school population, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a great deal more needs to be done. Table 1 compares educational outcome indicators for the whole school population with those for looked after children. Much lower academic achievement at GCSE/GNVQ¹ is evident (8.7% of looked after children achieved five or more GCSE/GNVQ A*-C, compared with 53% of the whole school population in 2003). More than four in ten (43%) looked after children leave school with no equivalent qualifications, compared with only 5% of the whole school population. Much higher levels of formal assessment for and recognition ('statementing') of special educational needs are apparent (27% compared

¹ GCSE/GNVQ=General Certificate of Secondary Education/ General National Vocational Qualification. These are the national qualifications taken at age 16 in England. Five or more higher grades (A*-C) are the benchmark for achievement and entry to most academic courses after the age of 16.

with 3%) and more looked after young people are excluded from school (1.1% compared with 0.1%). One in eight (12.4%) miss 25 days or more school in a year and fewer looked after children stay on in full-time education after the age of 16, (57% compared with 72%). Nearly a quarter (23%) of children leaving care go on to be unemployed immediately after leaving school (compared with 7% of the general school population).

A focus on the education of looked after children can be seen as part of broader and inter-locking New Labour programmes designed to tackle social exclusion and educational failure. Programmes of relevance to looked after children are well summarised in Harker *et al.* (2004), so we will not debate them further here. Of key relevance to the current paper is the most recent guidance on this subject, entitled *Education of Children and Young People in Public Care* (DfEE/DoH 2000). This guidance has begun to bring about structures that are designed to raise the profile of the education of looked after children across departments nationally. The guidance promotes better planning mechanisms, because the evidence suggests that help and support in the school system for looked after children has been a matter of chance, rather than design. Existing planning mechanisms in social services, such as care plans and statutory reviews have not sufficiently promoted and prioritised education (DfEE/DoH 2000, p.28). Improving the education of looked after children is also part of the *Quality Protects* programme in social services (DoH 1998).

PEPs within the system of planning for looked after children

Part of the way that educational experiences might be improved for looked after children is through better planning; an increased focus on their educational needs and

better 'corporate parenting.' To this end all looked after children (except those in respite care) are required to have a Personal Education Plan or 'PEP' (DfEE/DoH 2000). PEPs are part of the planning process for looked after children and (according to the official guidance) should be an integral part of the Care Plan. They should also reflect any existing education plans.

According to the official guidance, PEPs are supposed to be triggered by a social worker and should be completed with the designated teacher in school in a meeting that includes the child. The 'designated teacher' role is one created by the guidance. The PEP should be agreed as soon as possible and within 20 school days of entering care or of joining a new school. Thus the PEP should be prepared in time for the first review (at 28 days after entering care). Thereafter, PEPs will normally be reviewed concurrently with Care Plans, at three and six months after entering care and subsequent reviews. The guidance acknowledges that the logistics of these intervals may not suit school term times. The point of emphasising that reviews of PEPs should occur in line with Care Plan reviews is to highlight the link between these plans. The guidance envisaged that PEPs would initially be a separate document but would ultimately become a subset of the Looking After Children records. The guidance also suggests that a 'PEP Dowry Fund' might be set up in local authorities in order to meet the needs identified through these plans (DfEE/DoH 2000).

An important problem in relation to prioritising PEPs is the numerous overlapping planning mechanisms (and supporting documentation) in both education and social services departments. The National Curriculum and other tests, expected attainment levels at key stages, the common system of setting individual targets and reporting to

parents and carers all contribute towards the overall planning of a child's education. Furthermore, for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are well established. In addition some schools have developed Individual Behaviour Plans (IBPs) for pupils whose behaviour is viewed as particularly problematic. These existing educational plans are of particular relevance for looked after children, since we have already established high levels of SEN in this group (see Table 1). Furthermore, the enhanced risk of behaviour problems in school and exclusion for looked after children means that IBPs and Pastoral Support Plans (see DfEE 1999) are also likely.

Planning for children is an important part of the social work task, although it is common to find evidence that there are major gaps in plans in social work departments. For example, an examination of social work files in 27 Social Services Departments found that care plans were not there in some cases (only 9 of 27 Departments had care plans in all files) and that many lacked detail or were out of date (SSI 1998, p.34). All Social Services Departments referred to in this latter report faced problems because of a lack of placements of all types and only a few were able to base placements on an assessment of need which clearly considered safety and risk, both for the child and those looking after them (p.37). In other words planning was hampered by the reality of placement availability. The ability to plan care placements is crucial in planning a child's education.

There is thus something of a reality gap in care planning in social work, between theory, guidance and practice. The concept of care planning is now based on a core assessment that sets out the objectives for children's care and the strategy for

achieving them (DoH 2000). However, Cooper and Webb (1999) remind us of the difficulty in planning in the complex and unpredictable situations that often surround children being looked after. They found that some care plans in their study simply seemed unrealistic in that they did not take account of significant conflict and disagreement. They argued that there was a failure in some cases to develop a realistic care plan, that either encompassed the wishes of various parties or had strategies to deal with conflict.

National research by Fletcher-Campbell *et al.* (2003) found that there were difficulties in ensuring that all looked after children actually had a PEP and some difficulties in separating out the advice and support in various other educational plans (such as IEPs). Some interviewees in this latter study felt that PEPs could be just a paper exercise. However, the study was positive about the designated teacher role and found that: *'schools which had highly developed structures to identify and meet individual needs in a range of ways had little additional to do to meet the needs of children in public care'* (p.1). Another perspective is provided by Harker *et al.* (2004) who report that only 42% of the young people in their study had heard of PEPs, and not all of this latter proportion actually had one. They conclude from their interviews with young people that PEPs are devalued because of the lack of young people's involvement in the process. At the same time they note the tension in this statement in that not all young people welcomed something that singled them out as 'different' in school.

Research context and design

The research reported upon in this article was conducted in a large county authority in a relatively affluent area of England. The county had (at the time of the research) a well-established educational support service for looked after children. There were over 600 looked after children of school age during the year in which the research was conducted. Local authority data showed that looked after children in this county had better outcomes in some respects than nationally. Better academic results were achieved: 11% obtained 5 or more GCSE/GVNQ A*-C and 62% achieved 1 or more GCSE/GVNQ. More looked after children stayed on in education after year 11 (63%) and attendance levels were better (8% missed 25 days or more school). However, levels of statementing for SEN were higher (28%) as was the rate of permanent exclusion (2%). It was reported by the performance management department at the start of the research that 90% of looked after children had PEPs. The local authority felt they had been successful in getting the documentation completed but wanted to know more about the quality of PEPs – specifically whether they were ‘more than a piece of paper’ and how they could be improved in the future.

The research began in autumn 2002 as a multi-method exploratory design and was completed in 2003. It set out to investigate the quality of PEPs for looked after children, via perceptions from key actors and through an assessment of the content and quality of the actual document within a case file in selected cases. The research included three main sources of data: a questionnaire survey of all designated teachers (148 responses, 43% of all designated teachers at the time); interviews with key groups of staff in the social services (n=35) and education (n=24) departments and with young people who were in care or had recently left care (n=10). This paper does

not draw on the findings from young people. In addition, a case file audit was carried out with a senior member of social services staff in the authority. This involved investigating further the PEPs and case files of 27 young people in the seven areas of the local authority. The case file audit particularly related to the quality indicators specified in the official guidance (some of which are shown in Table 2). In each area office we aimed to review four files, one from each of the four key stages in the education service (Key Stages 1 and 2 correspond to primary level, 3 and 4 correspond to secondary level education). There were no Key Stage one children who were ‘looked after’ in one area office.

This paper focuses upon four aspects of the findings from this research: key quality indicators about the production of PEPs; whether PEPs were considered to be ‘more than a piece of paper’; planning the education of looked after children and what needs to change.

Findings

Producing a PEP – quality indicators

Expectations about how and when PEPs should be developed are clear in the official guidance, as noted earlier. These expectations were used as ‘quality’ indicators in individual cases asked about in the postal survey and reported upon in Table 2. Several of these indicators relate to participation in a meeting held to help develop and agree the PEP. Table 2 presents the findings from a review of 75 PEPs using key ‘quality indicators’ (there are more indicators in the full research report). A review of these cases illustrates that there were difficulties in meeting some of the expectations in government guidance. The greatest difficulties were: keeping to the advised

timescale (within 20 days after a new school or care placement); involving children and particularly birth parents in the meeting, and, finally setting a review date once a PEP was produced. In a third of the 75 cases analysed from the survey, social workers did not ‘trigger’ the PEP. In such cases it was usually designated teachers who did so.

A similar pattern to that reported upon in Table 2 was also found in the case file audit (27 cases). For example, only 7 (26%) of the PEPs were produced within 20 days. Further important details emerged in this audit; for example, there was evidence in only three in ten cases (8 of 27 cases) that the PEP featured in statutory reviews. That is there was little evidence to suggest that the PEP was actually part of the overall process of case review, as is intended in the guidance.

INSERT TABLE 2 about here

Are PEPs more than a piece of paper?

In the concluding part of the interviews held with professionals working with looked after children, interviewees were asked to reflect on the utility of PEPs and finally to judge whether the PEPs in which they had been involve were ‘more than a piece of paper.’ Viewpoints on this final question were very divided across professionals interviewed. Although a general antipathy to more paperwork could be seen in all groups, there were always individuals in every group who believed very strongly that PEPs were more than a piece of paper. A key issue for those directly involved in developing PEPs was the need to recognise that children were individuals and being looked after did not mean they would necessarily have difficulties in school. Both

social workers and teachers quoted instances where they felt that a PEP was either not needed or inappropriate. They also quoted instances where children and young people did not want to be involved in another planning meeting and particularly did not want their social worker in school.

Social work teams

Both social work teams visited (17 social workers in all) contained agency workers and both teams contained people who had never completed a PEP. One team had less than half its full staff complement even including agency workers, a situation which severely limited the value of training in the use of PEPs, the build-up of expertise and the possibility of meaningful reviews. In both teams, there was a sense from some social workers that they felt uncomfortable and over-stretched in their role in relation to the production of PEPs; feeling that they did not have the necessary time, knowledge and skills or power to influence how schools responded to the needs of looked after children. These views were also reflected by Team Managers, who particularly acknowledged how staff turnover, experience and confidence influenced social workers' views about the value of PEPs.

On balance, both teams thought that PEPs could be worthwhile. Whether or not they were depended on whether the child was attending school in the first place and whether there was any capacity on the part of the school and social worker to follow the PEP up and review it. Even without a review or follow up there was some appreciation of and support for the idea that PEPs did help highlight the issue of education for looked after children; which, in and of itself, was seen as useful. For

several social workers, the PEP was said to give them a reason to go into a child's school, see them in this setting and meet their teachers.

Children's home managers

For the eight children's home managers interviewed, PEPs were undermined by the availability and location of homes across a large county authority. Problems about access to schools were said to be particularly evident in affluent areas of the county. The general view was that '*the LEA [Local Education Authority] has very little influence over schools*'. These situations were seen to '*undermine the purpose or possibility of a PEP*.' A snapshot survey of the eight residential children's homes represented at interview revealed that 35 children were resident, of whom 20 (57%) had an educational placement on arrival and 23 (66%) had a placement by the date of the interview. Twenty-one children had PEPs (91% of those with an educational placement; 70% of those who were of compulsory school age). Getting and keeping a school or educational placement was a high priority for managers. Managers were divided about whether PEPs were more than a piece of paper.

Social Services Reviewing Managers

There were thirteen children's reviewing manager posts in the local authority at the time of the research, two of which were vacant at the time of interview. The dominant view from the eight people available for interview was initially fairly critical. An opening comment about PEPs from one reviewing manager encapsulates the general view: '*It's difficult to get enthusiastic*.' None of the managers interviewed could remember being involved in training to do with the purpose of PEPs and they believed that there had been '*no dialogue or consultation*' from the local authority. Crucially,

reviewing managers were not really convinced that PEPs (as they were operating at the time of the research) necessarily helped to improve the educational experience of looked after children. The overall assessment was that: *'PEPs are really a mirror, they show what is already going well.... they are not necessarily improving things.'*

Education Support Service (ESS)

The seven teachers who made up the education support service were more positive about PEPs than their colleagues in other parts of social services, all staff made themselves available for interview. They had a central role in training and supporting staff in social work teams in the development of PEPs. Not surprisingly, they had a very clear understanding of their purpose and were much more confident about suggesting how they could be improved, both as documents and as a process. The practicalities of their workload, however, are highlighted in the quote below:

'There are just too many children...I have over 100...you can't even go to the first meeting, let alone the reviews. So I'm very conscious of trying to do up to date training and empowering of social workers. That's an absolute headache because as everybody knows the turnover is incredibly high. We have so many unallocated cases.....so where is the responsibility...the duty social worker? That is just a nonsense. It is a real problem.'

In some cases ESS teachers were the ones to go to a meeting to produce a PEP, as they often knew the child better than the social worker. The ESS reported that social workers more often trigger a PEP now than they used to, but there was more

opposition amongst social workers working with children with disabilities. More generally, it was said:

'One of the battles for us is trying to convince social workers and [school] teachers that it isn't just another piece of paper.....they have so many pieces of paper to fill in.'

A typical response to the question about whether the ESS thought PEPs were more than a piece of paper was: *'the majority, yes.'*

Designated teachers

The initial overall view of designated teachers in schools was that PEPs were not particularly useful as they stand. It is worth noting however that many designated teachers had relatively limited experience of the PEPs process: indeed the postal questionnaire showed that over half had never completed a PEP at all. Part of this was due to changes in work role and the recently acquired responsibility of 'designated teacher.' Teachers were critical of the specific design and content of the PEP, which was not viewed as useful for its practical purpose in schools. Nevertheless, the ten designated teachers who were interviewed were interested in supporting looked after children; they wanted to make a difference and welcomed the chance to focus on an individual child. However, several of the secondary school teachers had simply found 'designated teacher' on their job description. Primary head teachers interviewed said that they could not always delegate the task, as there was no time or other resources for a class teacher to do the work. None of the ten schools represented at interview had more than eight looked after children (the latter was a secondary school) and two

of the primary schools had had no looked after children attending in recent years. None of the ten teachers interviewed got any identified time to undertake the role of designated teacher or any additional allowance, the role was reported to be '*a matter of prioritising tasks*'

A key issue for schools was the practicalities of competing priorities and the capacity to attend meetings about individual children. Schools were more able to accommodate a small number of looked after children but a problem quickly emerged if there were more than a handful of children. That is given the nature of teachers' responsibilities (and the reality of staff shortages in some schools) it could be particularly difficult to release staff from classroom duties, or expect them to go to more than a few meetings in their own time. Primary schools had more difficulties in this respect than secondary schools. Amongst teachers, there was a general attitude of compliance about completing PEPs '*they have to be done, so we do it*', whether or not the document was useful.

Teaching staff – secure unit

Seven teaching staff in a secure unit (local authority secure children's home) were also interviewed. They had a unique position in the local authority with some of the most vulnerable children. There was a real sense that these staff and indeed the residential unit were outside the rest of the education and social services department in the local authority. None of the seven teaching staff in the secure unit had any formal training in the purpose of PEPs and initially they were unsure about what they were. There were twelve young people resident at the unit at the time of interview. None of these young people had a PEP.

One of a number of issues for teaching staff in the secure unit was the very short-term welfare placements, which could be for only a matter of weeks. Educational planning was not a key feature of such placements, yet the young people still had to be educated. The picture presented was one where young people arrived at the secure unit with no information about their educational history or capabilities, and staff were expected to provide full-time education straight away. The initial focus for staff was on assessing young people's capabilities and then providing an individual programme to address the needs and capabilities identified. The inability to ensure progress made in the secure unit could be built upon in educational provision outside the secure setting was very frustrating for staff.

Planning the education of looked after children

Children's home unit managers and teachers in the secure unit had a great deal more to say on the issue of planning the education of looked after children, than they did on PEPs specifically. The first priority for managers of children's homes in many cases was getting an educational placement in the first place. As one manager said: *no placement, no PEP, no ability to plan for education.* Another manager raised the issue of the power of head teachers and individual schools: which he saw as *'very powerful....there is blocking by some schools who have no looked after children...the inclusion agenda then falls apart.'*

Managers also wanted better and quicker provision of support for looked after children in mainstream schools. Managers recounted the practical difficulties of a child needing a support worker in a mainstream school, who could not be recruited

quickly enough to ensure a child could attend school. Managers also wanted better provision outside mainstream schools and felt that the reduction in special educational provision and in pupil referral units in the county had specifically impacted on the needed options for looked after children who could not cope with mainstream schooling. They noted a growth in part-time attendance and 'distance learning' for looked after children (and others) excluded from school, although local education authorities are expected to provide full time and appropriate schooling for children out of school for more than fifteen days.

The limited availability of care placements was highlighted as part of the circumstances that made planning the education of looked after children particularly difficult: *'finding a bed is the priority, education falls off the agenda.'* This situation was compared with the role of the 'good' parent, where education is often a high priority. Stability and thus fewer placement moves (in both care and education) were said to be key priorities, before real planning could happen. Children's home managers believed that some educational moves were clearly about finance (for example, transport costs) rather than children's needs.

In the secure unit full-time education was provided on site as soon as a child was placed there; thus there were different problems in this setting. Provision of information and some form of plan at the start of a placement was the key issue for teaching staff, often they simply did not have the educational and other information needed to begin constructive work with a young person. Proper planning about what happens after young people have spent time in the secure unit was also a major concern. The situation for many on release was described in the following way:

'young people go back to chaos in their home or community and often, with no educational provision on discharge. hopes are raised that can't be met.'

A further concern for these teachers was the way some reviews were conducted with children present, but without (in their view) due consideration about how to do this sensitively. Examples were cited where young people were thoughtlessly included in planning meetings in a way that only emphasised the lack of options or the inability of professionals to plan their return to the community. Overall, the biggest frustration was that: *'nothing is ever done quickly enough'*, undermining any gains made in their educational progress whilst in secure accommodation and adding to young people's feelings of uncertainty.

Improving the use of PEPs, what needs to change?

Recording systems

Social workers and teachers were in agreement that PEPs should be constructed as a useful working document.

A key request from ESS teachers was that PEPs should be:

'A record of meetings with action in mind...an action agenda which helps tracking through the school...[includes] a comprehensive educational history...with a copy held at social services and in the school....and is for the children.'

A further suggestion from classroom teachers was that the document should be age-appropriate (primary and secondary) rather than generic; some teachers felt that certain questions on the form were '*frankly embarrassing*' to complete with older secondary age pupils. It was acknowledged that the PEP form '*is a document for lots of different people*' but that this needed to be thought through in terms of images and illustrations on the form and in the way questions were asked. A key question in relation to the form itself was: '*who is it meant for, the child or professionals?*'

Participation and initial meetings

In relation to children, it was emphasised by both social workers and teachers that their *participation* in the construction of PEPs was important, but that this would not always mean a meeting. That is for some children and young people giving their views on a form would be more appropriate. It was noted in several interviews with social services staff that certain head teachers would not let young children be '*subjected to a meeting*' which they saw as '*an arduous experience,*' although '*very young ones quite like filling in their form....what they are good at....what they enjoy.*'

Reviews

The review process was reported to be in need of change. It was questioned whether a separate meeting to review the PEP was actually needed in most cases. The general view was: '*in most cases a review could probably be done between the child and teachers/child and social worker, either in two pairs communicating or in a threesome.*' Practical and pragmatic responses were emphasised, rather than pushing the idea of completing the form or holding review meetings for their own sake. Teachers and social workers believed that they should focus on having review

meetings in the cases where this was judged to be necessary, rather than as a matter of course.

Information to inform response in school

Designated teachers were clear that comprehensive and up-to-date information on children was what they needed most in order to develop appropriate strategies and responses in school. They particularly wanted to know how to respond to distress and how to console a child who was looked after, in a way that would not evoke other experiences or compound difficulties. (Information that would not be included in a PEP). Designated teachers also wanted clear information about practical specifics – who to send reports to, invite to parents evenings, contact in an emergency, who could give permission for school trips and so on, as well as ongoing information about changes in circumstances.

Social Services staff – confidence and staff turnover

For social workers, a key issue was the need to increase their confidence in dealing with the education system. Social workers often reported feeling at a disadvantage in schools. Several mentioned difficulties in simply not knowing enough about what they could reasonably expect schools to do. However, most social workers interviewed had the advantage of doing their first PEP accompanied by a member of the ESS team, who were viewed as expert in this area. They expressed concern that this level of support was about to go, as the role of the seven ESS staff was going to change with most staff moving to a new 'Inclusion' section within the education department. Staff turnover in social services teams meant that there was a need for

ongoing training and support in the use of PEPs, if social workers were to be equipped to fulfil their role.

Ability to plan – residential care and secure accommodation

For children's home managers and the secure unit teachers, there were unresolved issues about their ability to plan education. This was especially apparent for the very small group of children leaving secure accommodation. At the time of the field research, PEPs had not made any impact at all on education in the secure setting. The situation was better in children's homes but managers clearly felt frustrated by the perceived resistance of some schools to looked after children, as well as issues such as disputes between social services and education departments over the cost of transport to particular schools.

Conclusion

Inevitably social workers and teachers in this research had some specific differences of opinion about PEPs, but there are some common themes. There was criticism of the way PEPs operated in practice in this local authority but there was also recognition from most groups interviewed that they do have value in some cases. Importantly, PEPs provided a mechanism through which social services and education staff had a focus to meet and co-operate in the planning of the education of looked after children. A key problem was the perceived inflexibility of the system and type of recording required. There was a tendency in all groups to feel that they had to stick to a system that wasn't useful in all cases and that practical help and advice on how to go about things was not readily available. In some cases this meant that PEPs were simply a form-filling exercise.

The research revealed that there are problems in social work teams in taking on their expected role in respect of PEPs. Lack of confidence in dealing with the education system is compounded by staff turnover and pressure of work when teams do not have their full complement of staff. The practicality of conducting reviews emerged as a problem. In contrast, designated teachers clearly welcomed contact with social workers in relation to addressing the needs of an individual child; in particular, they wanted information that could help them to understand and respond appropriately to a child's needs in school.

A key area of practice development is how to involve children in the development of a PEP in a meaningful way that is also a comfortable experience for them. Another important practice issue is how to make PEPs a document useful to those working directly with a child. With the most confident social services staff and schools this was already happening. They were confident enough to interpret and use the framework provided by PEPs in a way that was useful in individual cases.

The research highlights some of the particular barriers to planning the education of the minority of looked after children in residential care and, specifically those children in secure units. There was a lack of full-time and appropriate educational provision for some children whilst in residential care and for many of those leaving secure units. These barriers to planning tended to make PEPs less relevant to the staff most in contact with these groups. However, it is these groups who are most costly and problematic for any local authority: they are arguably the most in need of realistic and well-planned educational provision.

References

- Avery, J. (2004) *Education and Children in Foster Care: Future Success or Failure?* Olympia, WA/USA, Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction Special Education.
- Berridge, D. and Brodie, I. (1998) *Children's Homes Revisited*. London, Jessica Kingsley.
- Cooper, A. and Webb, L. (1999) Out of the maze: permanency planning in a postmodern world. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, **13**(2),119-134.
- DfEE, Department for Education and Employment (1999) *Social Inclusion: Pupil Support*. Circular 10/99. London, DfEE.
- DfEE/DoH (2000) *Education of Young People in Public Care*. Guidance. May. London, DfEE/DoH.
- DoH, Department of Health (1998) *Quality Protects: Objectives for Social Services for Children*. London, DoH.
- DoH (2000) *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. London: The Stationary Office.
- DfES (2004a) *Children Looked After Year Ending 31 March-2003 England*. Volume 1: Commentary and National Tables. London, The Stationary Office.
- DfES, Department for Education and Skills (2004b). *Outcome Indicators for Looked-After Children*. Twelve months to 30 September 2004: England. SFR 13/2004. London, DfES.
- Ferguson, T. (1966) *Children in Care and After*. London: Oxford University Press.

Fletcher-Campbell, F., Archer, T. and Tomlinson, K. (2003) *The Role of the School in Supporting the Education of Children in Public Care*. Research Brief no:RB498. November. London, DfES.

Gallagher, B., Brannan, C., Jones, R. and Westwood, S. (2004) Good practice in the education of children in residential care, *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**,1133-1160.

Harker, R.M., Dobel-Ober, D., Berridge, D. and Sinclair, R. (2004) *Taking Care of Education. An evaluation of the education of looked after children*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Hayden, C. & Blaya, C. (forthcoming) Children on the margins: comparing the role of school in England and France. *Policy Studies*.

Hestbaek, A.D. (1999) Social background and placement course – the case of Denmark. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **8**, 267-276.

Jackson, S. (1987) *The Education of Children in Care*. Bristol Papers. Bristol, SAUS.

Martin, P.Y. and Jackson, S. (2002) Educational success for children in public care: advice from a group of high achievers. *Child and Family Social Work*, **7**(2), 121-130.

Mendes, P. and Moselhuddin, B. (2004) Graduating from the child welfare system: a comparison of the UK and Australian leaving care debates. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **13**, 332-339.

SSI, Social Services Inspectorate (1998) *Someone Else's Children*. Inspections of Planning and Decision Making for Children Looked After and the Safety of Children Looked After. London, The Stationary Office.

Table 1: Educational Indicators– ‘looked after’ children in comparison with whole school populations (12 months to 30.9.03)

	‘Looked after’ (for at least a year)	Whole School Population
Numbers	44, 900 (30.9.03) 35,100 eligible for full time schooling	7.6 million
Qualifications <i>No GCSE/GNVQ</i>	43%	5%
<i>1 or more GCSE/GNVQ A*-G</i>	52.9%	95%
<i>5 or more GCSEs A* - C</i>	8.7%	53%
Special Educational Need – statement	27%	3%
Permanent Exclusion	1.1%	0.1%
Missed 25 days or more school	12.4%	Not collected for all Children
Remain in full-time education after year 11	57%	72%
Unemployed (September after leaving school)	23%	7%
Number convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand during the year	9.5%	2.9%

Source: DfES (2004b) *Outcome Indicators for Looked-After Children*. Twelve months to 30 September 2004, England. SFR 13/2004. London, DfES.

Table 2: Quality indicators in the production of PEPs

Indicator	% of PEPs reported upon (n=75)
Meeting held to complete the PEP	86
<i>Of which</i> , Meeting included: designated teacher	97
Meeting included: social worker	81
Meeting included: others	65
Triggered by the social worker	64
Review date set	59
Meeting included: carer(s)	57
Meeting included: child/young person	48
PEP produced within 20 days	24
Meeting included: parent(s)	19