



BECOME.

THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

TEACHERS WHO CARE

How to help teachers and schools support looked after children

*“You are a vital person in that child’s life
and can make a transformational
difference – so make it a positive one.”*



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Executive Summary

Teachers Who Care reports on our findings from a survey of teachers about their experiences teaching children in care. We asked them about training they've received, their experiences in the classroom, and their perspectives on their colleagues and their school overall. This follows on from our 2017 research report [Perceptions of Care](#), which asked young people how they felt society, including teachers, perceived children in care and care leavers.

In our research, we found many disparities among teachers' experiences. Some received good quality training in this area before they qualified, but the majority did not. They meet their students and feel unprepared to fully support those who are looked after, whether that is through meeting the statutory requirements of the Personal Education Plan and working with the Virtual School, or through understanding the experiences of these students by having a good level of knowledge about the care system and children's services. Without this background, teachers are struggling to meet the needs of some of their most vulnerable students and find themselves rushing to catch up.

We also found that harmful generalisations about children in care are heard far too often in schools. This confirms the fears of the young people we spoke to in *Perceptions of Care*, who were concerned that teachers don't understand what life in care is like, and the impact that can have on their education.

Getting the right support from their teachers can make a big difference to children in care. For teachers to provide this support, they need to be well supported themselves, with the right training, good contact with children's services, and a supportive school environment where everyone understands best practice for meeting the education and pastoral needs of the children in care in their school.

In this report, we recommend that more training, more communication, and more sharing of resources and knowledge can go a long way to giving teachers the tools they need to give all of their students the best possible opportunity to reach their goals in school and beyond.

Key Findings

Lack of Training

- 87% of respondents received no training about looked after children before they qualified as a teacher.
- 75% of teachers who qualified post-2010 received no training pre-qualification.
- 26% of respondents received no training about looked after children before or after they qualified.

Working Together

- 31% of respondents said 'not enough support from children's services' was their biggest challenge in working with children in care.

Knowledge, Attitudes and Stigma

- 87% of respondents had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care, and 31% of respondents had heard such views often.
- Teachers were generally positive about the overall level of knowledge and support for looked after children in their schools, with 60% of respondents rating their school a 7 out of 10 or higher. The median rating was 8 out of 10.

Recommendations

1. All routes into teaching should include information about children in care, including trauma and attachment aware behaviour management, what being in care is like, and key concepts such as the Virtual School, Designated Teacher, and Personal Education Plan. This should apply to university and school-led training and qualifications.
2. All schools should provide whole staff training on supporting children in care, in order to address any gaps in knowledge for new starters as well as refresh and update all staff awareness and improve collaboration between the Designated Teacher and their colleagues.
3. Virtual schools, children's services and schools should have clear, joined-up communication and information services that promote best practice while protecting children's right to privacy. Key professionals in each organisation should keep in touch regularly in order to ensure that children and young people receive consistent support.
4. Each virtual school should have resources available to teachers to inform them of what services are available and how they can get support when needed. This could be as straightforward as promoting the resources created by organisations such as the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) or developing something more tailored to local circumstances if appropriate.
5. Schools should invite social workers to meet with staff to explain their work, to create opportunities for closer collaboration and information sharing.
6. School senior leadership should work with the Designated Teacher to identify any stereotypes and prejudice among school staff and deliver training and resources to provide better insight into the care system and the experiences of children in care.
7. Whole school assemblies should be delivered, discussing care in a positive way for the benefit of both staff and students.
8. The care system should be discussed in relevant classes such as PSHE so that all pupils have a better understanding of what some of their peers are experiencing and help to reduce any bullying or isolation that some looked after children experience.
9. Professionals across the sector should consider their use of language and how it influences attitudes and be prepared to constructively challenge colleagues when they come across harmful generalisations.

Introduction

School is a key part of children's lives. As well as providing an education, it also provides stability for children and young people. For looked after children, this is not always true.

Depending upon their experiences before entering care, they may not have attended school regularly or had good levels of support with homework and school activities. Once they're living in a children's home or with a foster family, this is likely to improve (Rees Centre, 2015). However, they may face additional disruption through having to change schools, sometimes frequently, and they can miss up to a term in their education before a new school place is found (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018).

Children in care experience many things that most of their peers don't have to go through – separation from their birth family, uncertainty about their future, and the many different adult professionals who come in and out of their lives to make life-changing decisions about them. Many looked after children have experienced trauma, whether through abuse and neglect, family dysfunction, or serious illness or death of a loved one. These experiences will continue to affect a child's wellbeing even when they are in a loving, stable placement.

The instability that many looked after children experience can have a significant impact on their ability to focus on their education. It can be hard to pay attention in a class if you know your social worker is arriving in half an hour to take you to spend time with your birth family, and it might be a challenge to reach your academic potential if you've had to change school mid-year, which 10% of looked after children did in the 2016/17 academic year (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018).

These difficulties cannot all be solved in a classroom. However, school is an important opportunity for these children and young people to feel normal. Without the right support from their teachers, however, many of these children may find themselves struggling.

Schools have a responsibility to make sure that their students who are in care are given the support and the resources that they need. Every teacher should understand what it means to be in care and how they can support the looked after children in their classrooms.

"I didn't find out that one of the children in my class was in foster care until Mother's Day. I asked the children to design thank you cards for a special woman in their life and she got so upset that she began throwing chairs and kicking tables. I had to restrain her to stop her further hurting herself and others. After some time she told me she was in foster care.

I was so upset that no one had told me this before. I had been involved in numerous meetings about this student's behaviour and no one had told me about her family set up. She had been my student since September and she had been in the school for two years prior to joining my class in year 6. I was very disappointed in the lack of support and acknowledgement from the school."

Our Research

Perceptions of Care

In 2017, in partnership with Voices from Care Cymru, Become published [‘Perceptions of Care’](#), the findings of our research with children in care and care leavers about their perceptions of others’ attitudes towards them. The key findings included:

- 50% of children in care and 51% of care leavers agreed that ‘People think that it is children’s fault that they are in care.’
- 39% of children in care and 43% of care leavers agreed with the statement ‘Other children’s parents treat children in care differently to other children.’
- 30% of children in care and 42% of care leavers agreed with the statement that ‘Where I live, people would not like it if someone opened a children’s home.’

We asked care-experienced young people specifically about how they felt they were perceived in school and some of the responses we received were troubling.

Some young people said that at their schools, teachers who didn’t need to know knew that they were in care, and those who should have known didn’t. Young people told us that given teachers’ professional role, they have a responsibility to know what it means to be looked after and how to act when they know or are told someone is in care, and that they should be able to be non-judgemental.

Some young people felt that many teachers didn’t know what being in care was like and that they need better training. Only 24% of young people thought that teachers understood what being in care means.

This shows that three quarters of care-experienced young people don’t have confidence in their teachers’ understanding of their situation and any additional help or support that they might need.

We undertook this new research because we wanted to understand the situation from the perspective of teachers and to see what could make things better for looked after children in the future. This is an important issue for the young people we work with, and that makes it important to us. School can have a profound effect on young people’s wellbeing and future life chances, and it’s vitally important that we get it right for looked after children, who have particular need of stability, support, and positive relationships.

Surveying Teachers

We surveyed teachers from across England and Wales and asked them about their experiences of working with children in care.

We wanted to find out about how teachers are trained and supported to work with looked after children. We know that the right support at school can make all the difference to children in care, and that for staff to provide that they need the right support themselves.

We also wanted to know to what extent teachers themselves had come across the negative attitudes experienced by children that we found in our previous research.

Questions included:

- What could be done to improve your confidence [supporting children in care academically or pastorally]?
- What is your biggest challenge working with children in care?
- What is the best way for you get support to work with children in care?
- How would you rate the overall level of knowledge and support in your school around working with children in care?
- What negative stereotypes have you heard in your sector about children in care?

The majority of the 447 respondents were those with responsibility for children in care in their schools, whether as a Designated Teacher or special educational needs (SEN) coordinator, working in a virtual school, or as part of the senior management team (SMT).

Three major themes in their comments were:

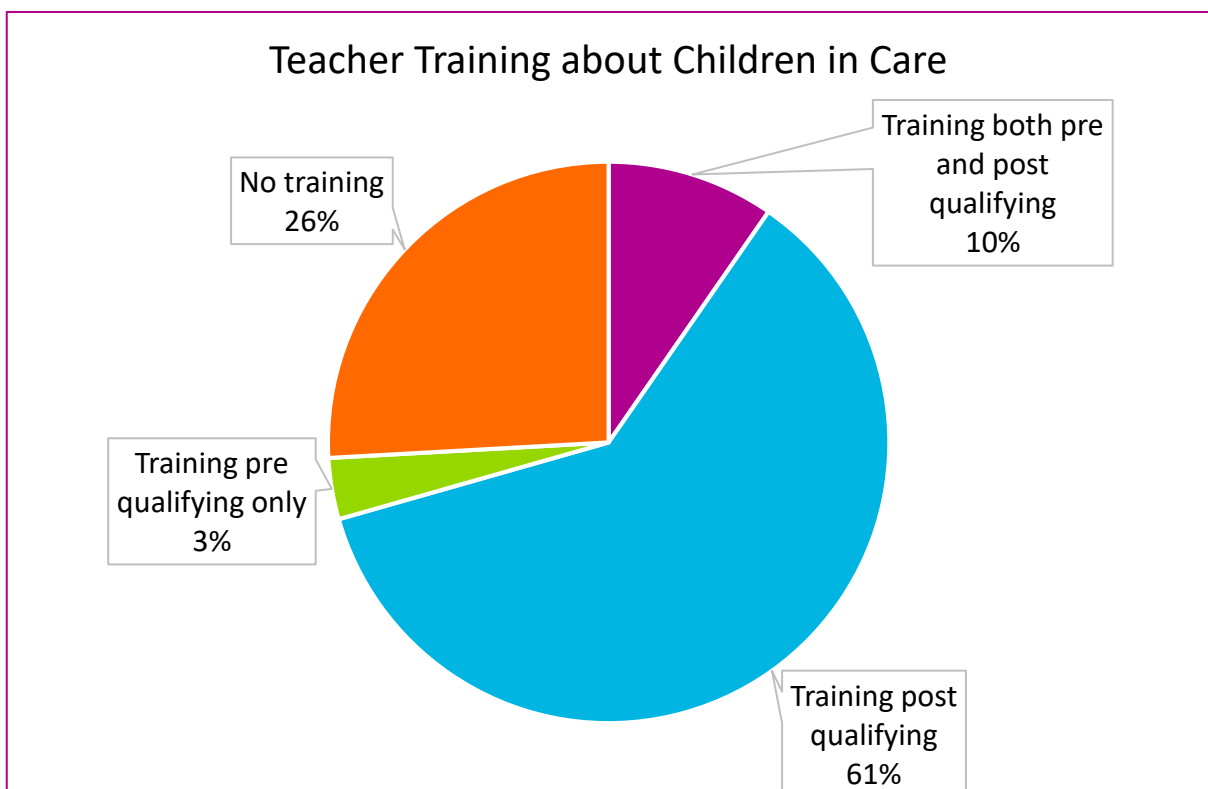
- There is not enough training available for or taken up by teachers about children in care.
- Schools and children's services do not work together closely enough.
- Many teachers do not know enough about the care system and its impact on children, and some express negative stereotypes about children in care.

“Often the children I teach have had very negative experiences in school. Some have moved placements a lot and therefore have not settled in school. I've noticed a lot need to come to alternative provision because they can't find a place in a mainstream school. Often they are very bright and willing with the right support but often don't receive that support. I think schools need to have a better understanding of the difficulties children in care face and how best to support them.”

Training

- 87% of respondents received no training about looked after children before they qualified as a teacher.
- 26% of respondents had no training about looked after children before or after qualifying.
- Of the 74% who did receive training, only 3% received training pre-qualification, and 61% only received training post-qualification, with 10% received training both pre- and post-qualification.
- 75% of teachers who qualified since 2010 had no pre-qualification training about looked after children.

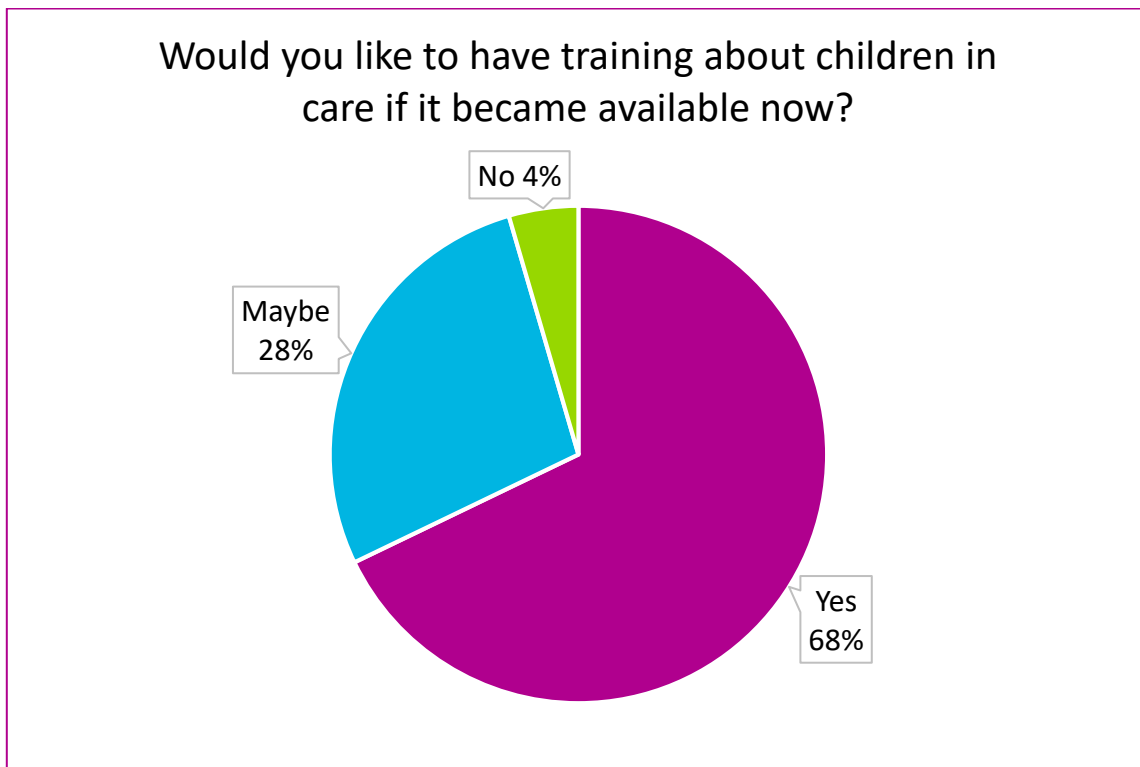
“Education for LAC feels like an add-on. When I suddenly found myself fully responsible for the care of these very vulnerable children, I had to start from scratch, independently researching and finding out what I should/could/might do. I think it needs to be more prominently embedded in all training.”



The evidence clearly shows that there is an unmet need among teachers, many of whom do not feel adequately prepared to meet the needs of children in care. Although more teachers have received pre-qualification training on working with children in care in recent years, most of them are still going into classrooms without any understanding of children in care's needs or entitlements.

Those who have received training have benefitted from it, and also say that they would like to see their colleagues receive training.

- When asked if they would like to have training about children in care if it became available now, 68% said yes and a further 28% said maybe.
- 58% said it would be the most helpful way to improve their confidence.
- 30% said it was their preferred way to get support in meeting a child in care's pastoral and academic needs.



Specifically, in written responses, teachers who had received training about working with children in care spoke very highly of content about attachment theory and its relevance to looked after children and said they would like to see more schools receive this kind of training.

Teachers who had received training told us that they would find it helpful for that training to be made available to their colleagues for better whole school awareness.

Elements of statutory regulation for the education of looked after children apply to all teachers, such as the Personal Education Plan (PEP), Pupil Premium Plus, and working with the Virtual School and the Designated Teacher or LAC Coordinator. Teachers will benefit from learning about these basic elements as early as possible, as well as being offered training on what it's like to be in care, how local authority children's services operate, or managing behaviour in the context of trauma and attachment difficulties.

“As Designated Teacher, I have had lots of training - it would be good to have the time to share with other staff or for other staff to have the same level of training.”

It is also crucial that school staff are enabled to approach these issues with sensitivity and confidentiality. Although information sharing between professionals is beneficial, we hear too many stories from children and young people who find their care status suddenly revealed to their peers due to staff carelessness, such as publicly informing a student that their social worker has arrived.

All bodies that design or provide teacher training, whether that is the Department for Education or individual schools, must ensure that each teacher is given the necessary information and resources to support the looked after children that they will teach. The welfare and wellbeing of these children and young people is a collective responsibility as defined by the 'corporate parenting' that applies to children who are unable to live with their birth parents.



Recommendations:

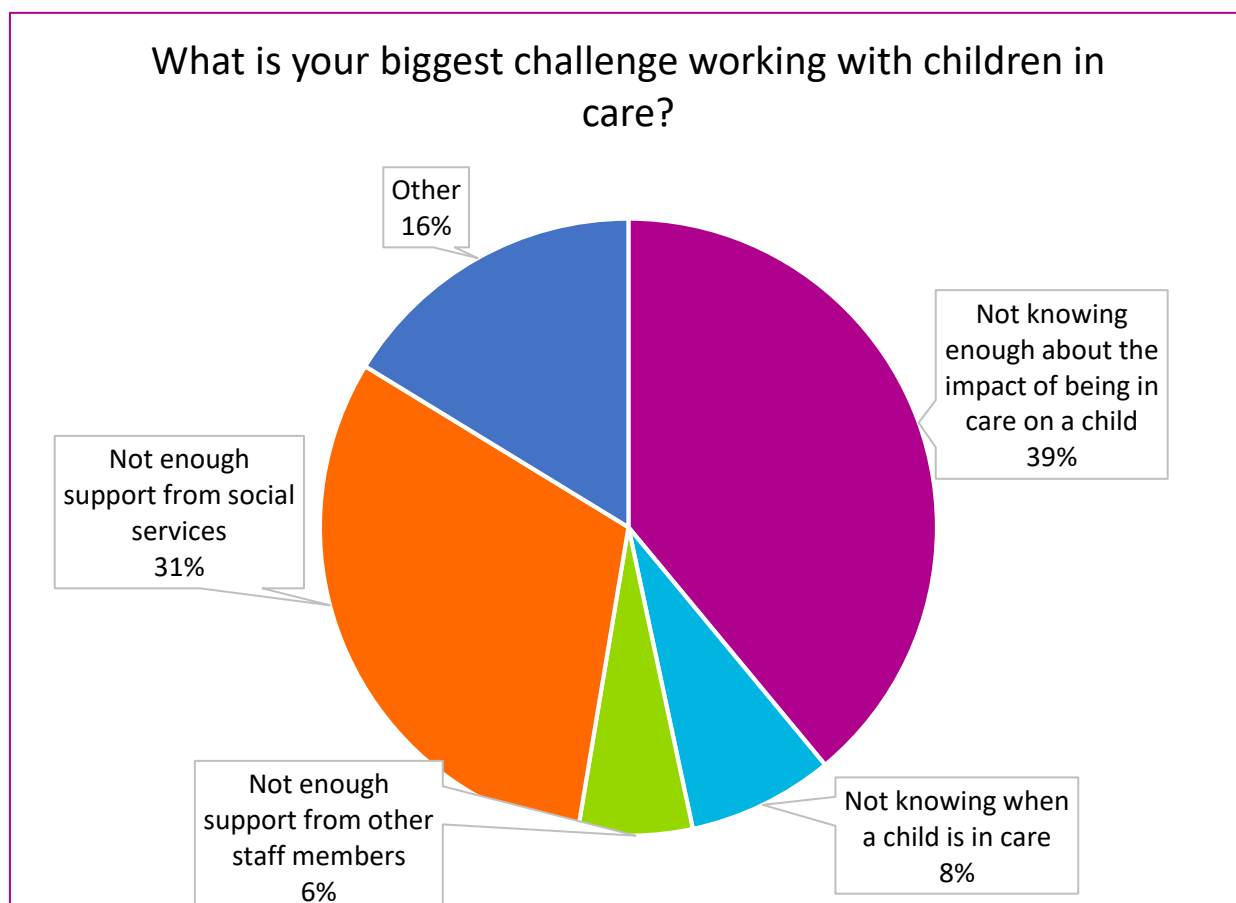
1. All routes into teaching should include information about children in care, including trauma and attachment aware behaviour management, what being in care is like, and key concepts such as the Virtual School, Designated Teacher, and Personal Education Plan. This should apply to university and school-led training and qualifications.
2. All schools should provide whole staff training on supporting children in care, in order to address any gaps in knowledge for new starters as well as refresh and update all staff awareness and improve collaboration between the Designated Teacher and their colleagues.

CASE STUDY

Beth is a secondary school headteacher. In her area, it's difficult to identify who is in care, as they aren't always informed by the local authority. Once they do know, staff are discreetly made aware, and she's happy with the level of support that her school provides. They've had whole school training on psychological issues, and the needs of children in care are fully supported by SMT as part of their vulnerable learner strategy. As well as support within the school, Beth also works with other schools to share good practice and to let children in care at different schools meet each other.

Working Together

Many teachers would like the option to have more contact with children’s services, and to know more about what is available to enable them to signpost and refer children and their carers. They pointed out that they see children every day and know a lot about them, but don’t always have opportunities to make links with the other professionals in a child’s life.

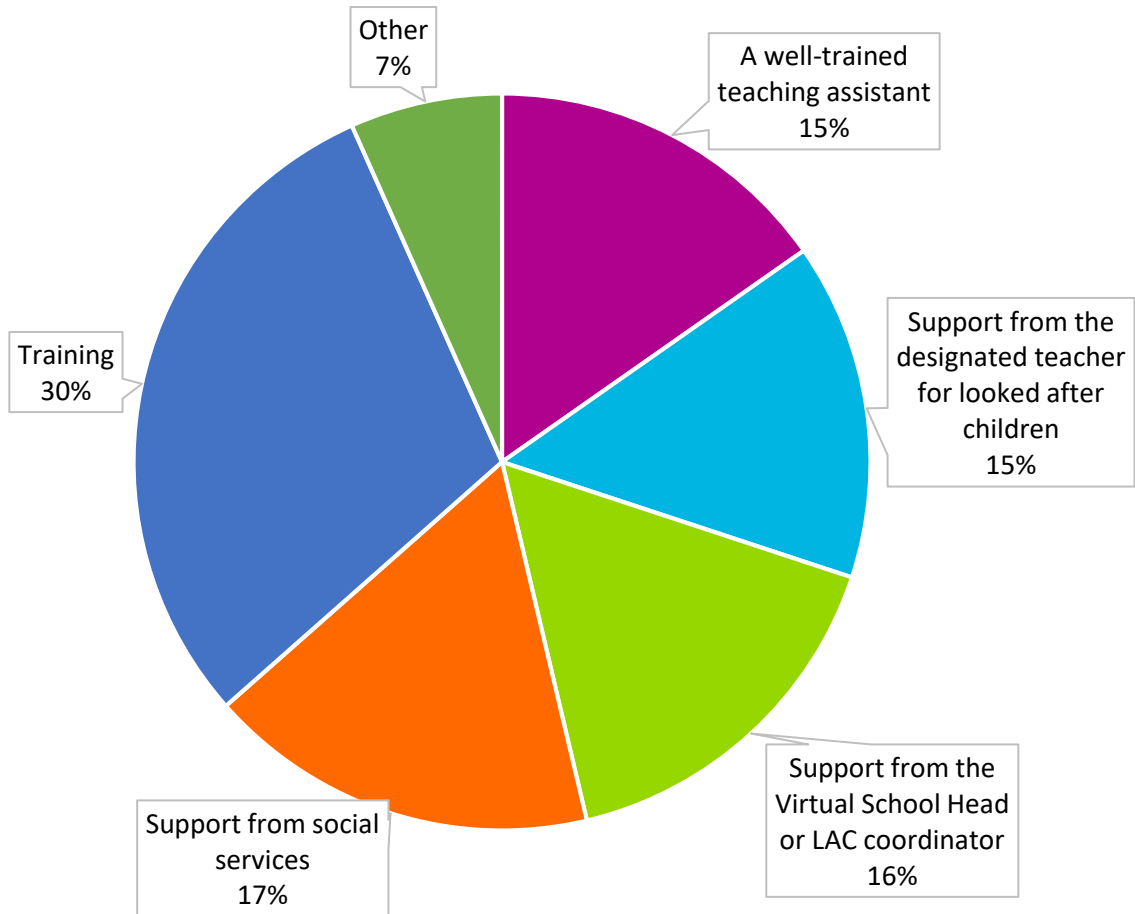


“Our biggest hurdle to supporting our LAC children has been accessing support/advice/information from Social Services.”

Teachers find themselves spending a lot of time on certain requirements, such as Personal Education Plans (PEP) without necessarily understanding the broader work of children’s services. They would like to know more about what services are available so that they can signpost when needed.

We know that there are cases of local authorities working well with schools, such as a respondent who noted that they had received “very good training” from their local council.

What would be your preferred way to get support to work with children in care?



Young people often tell us about their frustrations in having to tell their stories, often having to relive trauma over and over again and explain themselves to different professionals. Although it's important to keep their confidentiality when appropriate, sharing information between appropriate adults can help to minimise delays and create stability and consistency. When appropriate, young people should be involved in deciding who in their school is aware of their situation, or at least kept informed. When a young person changes foster carer, social worker, or both, their school might be the only thing that stays the same.

“Sometimes school is the only consistent thing in the children’s lives and yet decisions can be made without consultation of those that know them best.”

Recommendations:

3. Virtual schools, children's services and schools should have clear, joined-up communication and information services that promote best practice while protecting children's right to privacy. Key professionals in each organisation should keep in touch regularly in order to ensure that children and young people receive consistent support.
4. Each virtual school should have resources available to teachers to inform them of what services are available and how they can get support when needed. This could be as straightforward as promoting the resources created by organisations like the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) or developing something more tailored to local circumstances if appropriate.
5. Schools should invite social workers to meet with staff to explain their work, to create opportunities for closer collaboration and information sharing.

CASE STUDY

Dawn teaches in an area with a high population of looked after children. Her school has recently received training on attachment theory, which has been helpful. She understands the issues but knows a lot of her colleagues don't know as much. In many cases, the teaching assistants are more aware of the support needs of children in care. Sometimes there's a sense that now these children are in care they no longer need additional support.

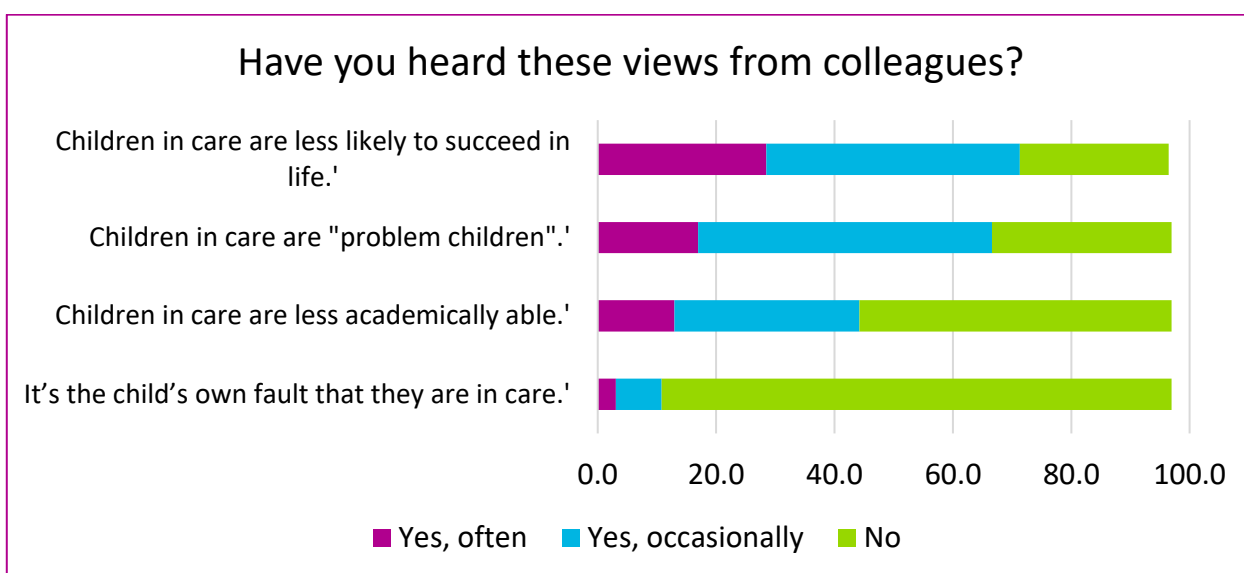
She has personally had to put in a lot of time to get referrals to support services for children in care in her school. She would like to be able to get meaningful feedback from looked after child reviews – she feeds in information but hears nothing back, and there is not a lot of interaction between children's services and most staff. Budget cuts have resulted in losing much-needed support for vulnerable children in her school.

Knowledge, Attitudes and Stigma

“I was in care. These were all the views I experienced. I taught for two years. Found the system very frustrating.”

Most respondents had heard negative stereotypes and generalisations about children in care from colleagues in schools. Based on concerns that young people told us about, we asked about four negative attitudes:

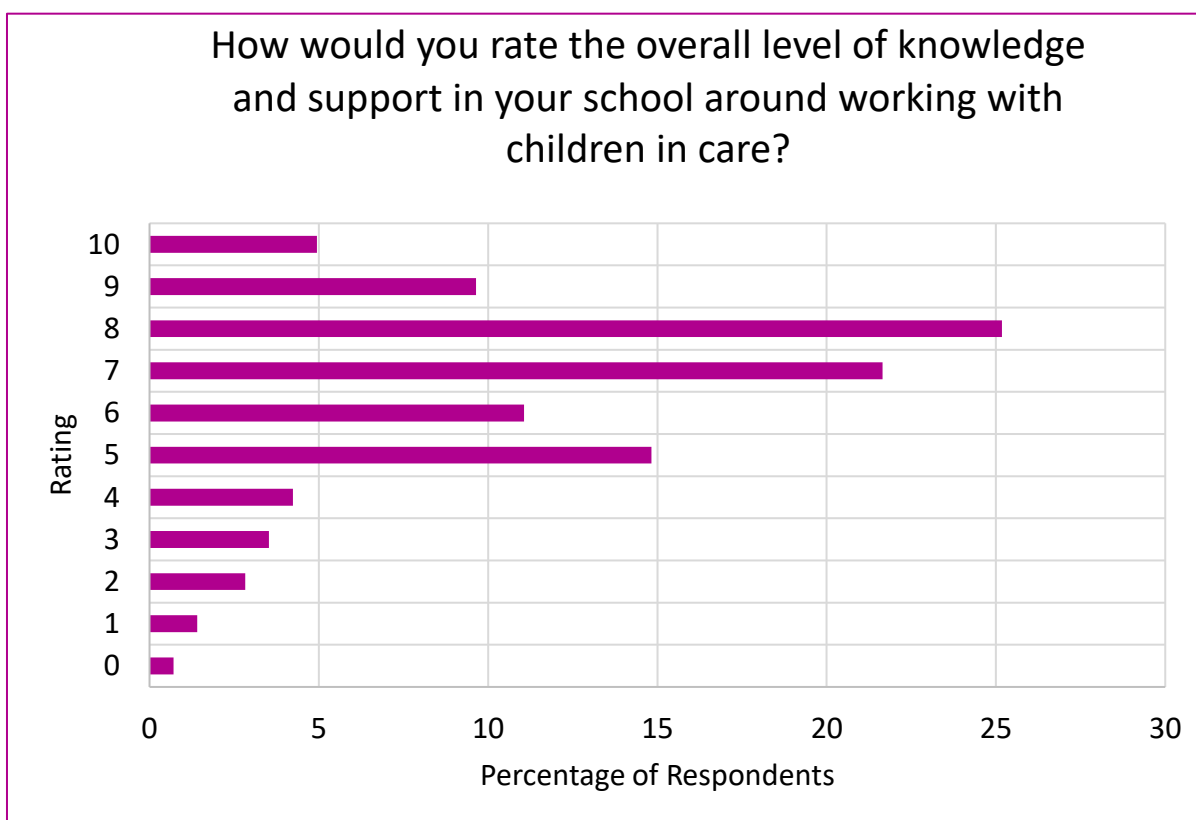
- Children in care are less likely to succeed in life. (75% had heard this view.)
- Children in care are ‘problem children’. (70% had heard this view.)
- Children in care are less academically able. (47% had heard this view.)
- It’s the child’s own fault that they are in care. (13% had heard this view.)



As charities who work with young people in care every day, we know that looked after children worry about what their teachers think of them, and fear being written off as ‘difficult’ or unlikely to succeed in life. Children in care can struggle at school because of their circumstances, whether that be pre-care trauma, or the disruption and instability of placement moves, and they know that sometimes teachers do not understand what they’re going through.

Teachers therefore need to be supportive and understanding, while also being ambitious for looked after children and seeing that they have inherent potential equal to their peers. The statistics about the educational attainment of looked after children should never be seen as a foregone conclusion or lead to a lack of confidence in current students.

Staff also need to be aware of the broader context and causes of any emotional and behavioural difficulties. Severe punishments and ‘zero tolerance’ policies are likely to make current problems worse, and don’t resolve underlying difficulties.



Respondents also told us about other negative attitudes towards children in care’s behaviour that they had heard, such as assumptions about their family background, bad behaviour, and being seen to be negative for the school’s exam results statistics and league table position.

We see a significant difference here between students’ and teachers’ reporting of negative attitudes. In our previous research, half of children in care and care leavers believed that ‘People think that it is children’s fault that they are in care’ (Become and Voices from Care Cymru, 2017), whereas only 13% of teachers we surveyed had heard that attitude. There are many possible explanations for this. Teachers may well be less likely than the general public to hold this view due to the nature of their work and their understanding of children and social care. However, it is also true that teachers that do hold those views would be less likely to express them to a colleague, particularly one who takes a particular interest in this area (as many of our respondents did).

“I work in a school where the pastoral needs of the children are very important and thus our attitudes about the children - from all walks of life - are very positive.”

When teachers have low aspirations for their students, this can have long-lasting consequences throughout school and inform their choices and achievements through the key stages and onwards

to further and higher education. School moves and other disruption can affect a student's ability to succeed academically, but we know that teachers have a huge role to play in determining educational progress (Rees Centre, 2015).

Many respondents were positive about their current school, noting that they may have heard negative attitudes in the past but were now in a much more positive environment.

CASE STUDY

Tricia is a foster carer as well as a teacher. The school she works in now is one of the better ones that she's seen with regards to supporting pupils with complex needs. However, the additional funding the school receives sometimes only provides one hour of one-to-one support time a week, which isn't always enough. A school that she previously taught at cut funding for all their teaching assistants, with negative consequences for many pupils including children in care.

As a foster carer, Tricia knows the importance of attachment awareness, and would like to see all staff receive training on attachment theory to help them with behaviour management. She also struggles to get the information she needs from children's services and would like better communication between the school and the local authority.

She says that she sees children in care miss out on things when their circumstances aren't considered. For example, for an event such as a school trip that has limited places given on a first-come, first-served basis, children in care will often miss out because of the additional time it will take for them to get permission slips from their carers, who may have to check with a social worker.

Recommendations:

6. School senior leadership should work with the Designated Teacher to identify any stereotypes and prejudice among school staff and deliver training and resources to provide better insight into the care system and the experiences of children in care.
7. Whole school assemblies should be delivered, discussing care in a positive way for the benefit of both staff and students.
8. The care system should be discussed in relevant classes such as PSHE so that all pupils have a better understanding of what some of their peers are experiencing and help reduce any bullying or isolation that some looked after children experience.
9. Professionals across the sector should consider their use of language and how it influences attitudes and be prepared to constructively challenge colleagues when they come across harmful generalisations.

Conclusion

Our research found that teachers are not always equipped to give the best quality academic and pastoral support to looked after children in their schools. We found a lack of initial training on the subject, a lack of communication and joined up working between schools and local authority children's services, and inadequate knowledge and understanding across teaching staff as a whole.

We know that teachers, social workers and all other professionals in children's lives want what is best for them, but it is vital that this goodwill is met with the right information and support so that it can be consistently translated into good practice. When a child is taken into the care of the state and becomes looked after, all public services have a particular duty of care and parental responsibility towards them. With the proportion of children who are in care increasing (Department for Education, 2018), this will only become more important in the future.

We also know that providing better support for children in care within schools benefits other pupils. Approaches such as attachment awareness in schools can particularly benefit children in care, but will help all students and help teachers to feel empowered to meet their students' needs.

Many services and professionals are involved in the lives of children in care, and many of them hold particular responsibility for how well they do at school. We want to see foster carers, residential home staff, local authority staff, virtual schools and teachers all working closely and collaboratively together to share perspectives and expertise to ensure the best possible outcomes for each child during their journey through education, academically and beyond. Getting this right for each child from the start will make a huge difference to their experience of school and their future life chances.

In the words of one teacher who responded to our survey:

"You are a vital person in that child's life and can make a transformational difference - so make it a positive one."

Appendix: Who Took Our Survey?

- Of English and Welsh teachers who responded to the report, 81% taught in England and 19% in Wales.
- The vast majority qualified either via a teaching degree at a university (40%) or by doing a PGCE course (47%).
- Some respondents had been teaching since 1972 and others only qualified in 2018.
- Almost all (88%) of our respondents taught in primary or secondary schools, with the remainder in settings such as FE colleges or early years.
- 50% taught in community comprehensive schools, with a further 25% at academies, and the remainder working in other school types including faith schools, pupil referral units, special schools and virtual schools.
- Subjects taught ranged from English and Maths to Business and Music.
- Some respondents (18%) were the Designated Teacher for looked after children in their school, and others were the SEN coordinator. Almost a third were a headteacher or assistant/deputy headteacher.
- There was no significant correlation between type of school setting and answer to the question 'How would you rate the overall level of knowledge and support in your school around working with children in care?'.
- A small number had a personal connection to the care system, being adoptive parents or foster carers, or through being care experienced themselves.
- Almost every respondent had worked with children in care – often, in two thirds of cases. Approximately 80% felt either confident or very confident that they could support looked after children both academically and pastorally. As this survey will have attracted respondents who have an interest in this topic, we know that the reality across the teaching profession is likely to be more mixed.

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