

Rapid reviews of evidence in children's social care: Call for proposals

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) is funding a series of rapid reviews. We are seeking proposals from research teams with expertise in undertaking rapid systematic reviews, and with knowledge of the sector.

These reviews will be used to help build the evidence base in children's social care, and inform decisions about the research and projects that we fund and conduct.

This call for rapid reviews is on: School attendance for children with a social worker

We are particularly interested in proposals which consider the following questions:

1. What is the scope of the issue, and how does it differ between Child in Need (CIN), Child Protection Plans (CP), and Children Looked After (CLA) plans?
2. Where the evidence base allows it, what is the effectiveness of targeted interventions to improve school attendance for children with a social worker?
3. What risk factors are associated with having a social worker and school attendance?
4. What are the primary drivers of attendance issues within different child protection categories?

While this is our broad area of interest, we welcome proposals that suggest variations to the above questions and/or which focus on a subset of these. We would also particularly welcome applications that use and/or seek to make use of advisory/steering groups and we would be happy to support applicants in setting up and facilitating these groups.

Background

Scope of the issue

In June 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) announced £16 million to support young people with a social worker in school and college to improve their educational outcomes, and among those, in particular, attendance outcomes. The 2019 DfE Children in Need (CIN) review identified that children who have had a social worker are three times more likely to have missed 10% or more of school and 25% of children who have had a social worker were persistently absent, compared to 9% of their peers.¹ Looking at specific subcategories of children with a social worker, the disparities are even greater. Current national data on attendance shows that children with a social worker have worse school attendance compared to their peers, but this

¹ Department for Education. (2019). *Children in need of help and protection CIN review: final data and analysis*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-in-need-of-help-and-protection-data-and-analysis>



greatly varies by child protection category². Where overall pupils in England had a 5% absence rate, children looked after had a 5.5% absence rate, children in need had a 12.1% absence rate, children looked after for less than 12 months had a 13.2% rate, and children on a child protection plan had a 15.2% rate. Absences are particularly higher among pupils with a social worker attending state-funded primary school compared to their peers. Persistent absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of possible school sessions, also demonstrates concerning numbers. Where 15% of overall pupils in the UK had a persistent absence rate of 10% or more, 12.5% of children looked after for more than 12 months, 34.2% of children in need, 33.4% of children looked after of less than 12 months, and 41.9% of children on a child protection plan had an absentee rate of 10% or more missed sessions.

Risk factors for absenteeism

The risk factors for absenteeism look at the problem from a variety of perspectives and population groups. There is some research that focuses on children involved in foster care. For example, research in the United States found that foster care placement instability, where children are not able to achieve a secure and stable placement within 45 days or longer, is a significant risk factor for absenteeism.³

Other research focused on the general population has established that experiencing neighbourhood violence, bullying, sexual and physical violence, and witnessing parental domestic violence, along with higher cumulative amounts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are significant risk factors in chronic absenteeism.⁴⁵ Family risk factors, many which coincide with some of the most predominant factors children enter care in England, may also drive attendance issues. A study that took place in Australia found that families that had difficulty with parenting, parental mental health issues, child social and emotional problems, and economic hardships were eight times more likely to miss school compared to their peers without these combinations of issues.⁶ However, this research does not explicitly address these issues from a social care system perspective, and have also not been applied to England.

² Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Reporting year 2020. Department for Education. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2020>

³ Zorc, C. S., O'Reilly, A. L. R., Matone, M., Long, J., Watts, C. L., & Rubin, D. (2013). The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school-aged children in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(5), 826–833. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.02.006>

⁴ Fry, D., Fang, X., Elliott, S., Casey, T., Zheng, X., Li, J., Florian, L., & McCluskey, G. (2018). The relationships between violence in childhood and educational outcomes: A global systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 75, 6–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.021>

⁵ Stempel, H., Cox-Martin, M., Bronsert, M., Dickinson, L. M., & Allison, M. A. (2017). Chronic School Absenteeism and the Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences. *Academic Pediatrics*, 17(8), 837–843. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2017.09.013>

⁶ Hancock, K. J., Mitrou, F., Taylor, C. L., & Zubrick, S. R. (2018). The Diverse Risk Profiles of Persistently Absent Primary Students: Implications for Attendance Policies in Australia. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 23(1–2), 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1433536>



There is emerging literature on the consequences of absenteeism for children with a social worker. For children in care, poor attendance is an important contributor to exam scores in secondary school, and increased attendance predicts better reading and math marks for children in care, though there is some mixed evidence in this area which can also suggest that children in care's attendance did not predict grade level achievements. While there is consensus that children in care experience more attendance problems than their peers, there is mixed evidence as to whether this has an association with test scores.⁷ There seems to be little to no evidence available for other child protection categories despite the higher absence statistics for children in need and children with a child protection plan.

Interventions in education and children's social work

Educational interventions for children with a social worker focus on a range of outcomes, but very few focus explicitly on absenteeism. A recent systematic review that gathered evidence on educational interventions for looked after children found only three interventions explicitly aimed at improving attendance⁸. Of those three included interventions, there were mixed results, with potentially important impact differences within age and gender subgroups. In addition to the sparse literature base, the majority of studies were conducted in North America, with potentially limited generalisability for England. Specific to England, Virtual Schools for looked after children have demonstrated some promising results across academic outcomes in a preliminary evaluation, though statistically robust evidence is only now in progress.⁹ To our knowledge, there has been no systematic collection of interventions targeted towards other subgroups of children with a social worker, particularly those on CiN and CPPs, even though recent DfE statistics demonstrate mostly higher rates of absenteeism.

What is a Rapid Review?

A rapid review is a tool for collating the available research evidence on a certain topic / issue, as comprehensively as possible, within the constraints of a given timetable. This is done by setting parameters around the review to ensure the amount of evidence reviewed is manageable within the timeline.

WWCSC's approach is for rapid reviews to be systematic but focussed, and include consideration of quality.

⁷ O'Higgins, A., Sebba, J., & Gardner, F. (2017). What are the factors associated with educational achievement for children in kinship or foster care: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 198–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.06.004>

⁸ Evans, R., Brown, R., Rees, G., & Smith, P. (2017). Systematic review of educational interventions for looked-after children and young people: Recommendations for intervention development and evaluation. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), 68–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3252>

⁹ Ofsted. (2012). *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children*.



- **Systematic:** Following a clear and replicable method identify evidence on a given topic that is as comprehensive / exhaustive as possible within your specified parameters – i.e. specifying in advance your research question, search terms, sources/databases to search and inclusion/exclusion criteria.
- **Focussed:** The rapid element involves using clear and focussed parameters to ensure the amount of evidence you identify and include is manageable e.g. using a narrow research question, searching a narrow set of dates or sources, using a narrow set of inclusion / exclusion criteria (e.g. location of research, type or quality of study)
- **Quality:** Systematic and rapid reviews should always include assessment of the quality of the evidence you are reviewing

Expectations

Conducting a rapid review under this funding stream will involve:

- Agreeing the scope of the review and the proposed research question(s) with the WWCS research team;
- Submitting and publishing a protocol for the methods used in the rapid review;
- Submitting a rapid review report that will be peer reviewed independently, and reviewed internally by the WWCS research team;
- Incorporating comments from WWCS and peer reviewers to ensure the review is of high quality and robust, and meets WWCS's expectations;
- Final report to be published on the WWCS website.

Budget

The total budget for this rapid review should not exceed **£40,000**, and value for money will be taken into account when assessing applications.

Evaluations will be awarded as grants, so VAT is not applicable. Please note that we will not cover the full economic costing (FEC) cost for higher education institutions (HEIs) and indirect costs for these organisations should not be included in your budget. We will fund overhead costs for non-HEIs, but we do not expect overheads to exceed 60% as a proportion of salaries.

Timelines

We expect reviews to be submitted to WWCS for peer review within 6 months of the grant being issued, and would expect work to begin by 1 April 2022. Please see below for indicative timelines:

Activity	Due date
Call live	Wednesday 2nd March
Submission deadline	Monday 14th March, 10:00 (GMT)



Successful applicant notified	w/c 14th March
Grant agreement finalised and signed	21st March
Work to commence	1st April
Protocol submitted to WWCS for review and approval	w/c 25 April
Rapid review submitted for peer review and WWCS internal review	Late August/Early September
Final review ready for publication	Late September/Early October

Application

To apply, please submit a proposal to programmes@whatworks-csc.org.uk by **10am Monday 14th March 2022**, although we would encourage you to submit proposals sooner, if possible.

Your proposal should total **no more than 4 sides of A4** and include the following:

1. Proposed research question and title for your review, making reference to the participants, interventions, comparators and outcomes (PICO).
2. Background and rationale for your proposed review.
3. A brief outline of your proposed methodology to conducting the rapid review, including:
 - a. Study selection criteria (inclusion/exclusion), report characteristics, study characteristics, and limits (e.g. including study type, timeframe of existing research, geographical region, language etc);
 - b. Study outcomes;
 - c. Proposed search strategy (i.e. selection of databases);
 - d. Proposed analytical approach.
4. An overview of your core team's relevant skills and experience, as well as knowledge and understanding of the area.
5. Your proposed timeline for the work.
6. A suggested budget, including a detailed breakdown of these costs, stating the number of days or % FTE allocated to each staff member per research activity, and the costs associated.

Assessment criteria

WWCS will assess applications on a rolling basis. Applications will be assessed by the WWCS's internal research and programmes teams, according to the following criteria.

Research questions and rationale:

- Clearly specified research questions that will be addressed by the review. These should reference the participants, interventions, comparators and outcomes (PICO).



- Clear rationale for the proposed research questions.

Proposed methodology and approach includes:

- Suitable and clearly defined approach/methods, which can appropriately answer the specified research questions. This should refer to the proposed search strategy and study selection criteria.
- Consideration of the scope of the review. This includes considering key limits/constraints of conducting this rapid review, and articulates what it will and will not be able to look at within this review.
- Inclusion of a proposed analytical approach.
- Outlined approach adheres to methodological standards for rapid reviews.

Project team:

- Expertise and experience of the suggested core project team:
 - Evidence of undertaking previous rapid/systematic reviews or similar work;
 - Knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, and of key issues in this research area.

Budget and timelines:

- The proposal represents good value for money;
- Timelines are achievable, and meet the necessary criteria (a final draft should be available to WWCS for peer review within 6 months of the grant being issued).