# Best Practice Network school improvement library

## To strengthen and develop the processes of support and intervention for Children in Care, in order to maximise progress and achievement and so facilitate their educational, personal and social development

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Tags: Secondary, children in care, PSED

### The issue

* The volume of children being placed into care is increasing
* Need to strengthen the processes of support available to this vulnerable group of students and standardise the sharing of progress and concerns, with external groups such as social workers, medical experts, intervention specialists and the Virtual School for each Local Authority
* Need to improve communication between the teaching staff, Year Leaders, Social Workers and carers

### The solution

* review of and amendments to the school policy for CiC
* termly subject specific progress meetings for each child
* annual report to governors informed by pupil experience survey
* progress support meetings with Senior and Middle Leaders after each formal assessment window
* awareness raising session for whole school of CIC issues
* support for staff for curriculum reform to meet CiC needs
* programme of data and evidence informed CPD
* data and evidence informed CiC intervention strategy
* CiC as a priority in the school's strategic development plan
* programme of learning walks and book scrutinies
* use of external tutor support organisation
* additional support sessions for Maths and English
* structured programme of support for transitions for CiC

Prior to designing this project, existing processes for Children in Care (CiC) at my school centred upon termly contact with teaching staff by the Designated Teacher (DT), to establish their progress. Working with the Virtual School for each Local Authority (LA), if it was deemed appropriate to source external support (predominately emotional / social support), the DT would arrange this with consent of carers. In designing the plan for this project, it was my intention to increase lines of communication between teaching staff, Year Leaders, Social Workers and carers. Opening termly meetings with subject specific positives for each child informed the generation of SMART targets aimed at improving progress and attainment. In order to gain the commitment from all stakeholders, I shared my expectations and began to deliver much more structured termly meetings, referencing specific feedback and setting realistic, short term targets. Despite dealing with three separate LAs and Virtual Schools, my project has achieved parity in how each CiC is supported which in turn, has been noted and commended by each Virtual School.

 The raw data for my project was collated and analysed each term prior to generating each Personal Education Plan (PEP) for each CiC. Alongside this, I raised awareness of this group of students in discussions at Progress Support meetings with Senior and Middle Leaders (after each formal assessment window). Variation in progress across the group was considered and internal and external interventions arranged to address areas for development. For example, I negotiated with Subject Leaders to offer additional support for Maths / English during registration time (small, targeted groups, led by experienced subject staff). I also instigated negotiations for a new contract with an external tutoring company (TeacherActive) to provide one to one subject specific support. In order to draw comparisons between the performance of pupil premium students in similar settings, I analysed the benchmarking data from EEF.

Completion of communication, partnership and change management toolbox plans supported my review of, and amendments to the school policy for CiC. This formalised specific accountability for the project focus. Research into leadership behaviours to implement successful change ensured a considered approach was taken in gaining commitment from key stake-holders, for example, in negotiating a bespoke service level agreement with the external tutoring company, I shared my expectations for improved performance indicators and next steps communication, amongst teaching staff. This led to a process of teaching staff openly communicating specific topic areas which required intervention, directly with the external tutor; a combined approach to improving attainment.

In order to evaluate the quality of teaching across the school, I participated in the scheduled programme of whole school ‘Learning Walks’ observing the learning environment of a range of students (incorporating those within the project focus). Discussion with Senior and Middle Leadership colleagues followed via dissemination of recommendations for the quality of teaching according to the whole-school Strategic Plan, which verified on-going implementation. I considered the learning experience of a range of students across the whole school and applied the findings to my project in terms of recommending further professional development.

Engagement with and recognition of models of leadership and strategies to achieve change, led my project focus of improving student progress, attainment and behaviour. I instigated collaboration with a range of stake-holders to secure their commitment to implementing intervention (academic staff, attendance staff, health and education support workers) and I built into the design of the plan scheduled time to evaluate on a termly basis, the impact of such intervention. My research into international education systems (Poland and Canada) where reforms have seen gaps in attainment narrowed by addressing how achievement is for all, and not just for more able students made me consider my own context and how perhaps giving greater autonomy of content taught in international schools is in direct contrast with the situation now common practice in the UK. Research into developing curriculum design and recognition of strategies to create flourishing cultures, predominately focused on teaching and learning excellence. In particular, encouraging staff to try varied strategies to engage students, such as regular recall of key facts, also enhanced the design of the project.

An objective of my design phase was to secure the processes to achieve improvements to the provision for CiC by developing the existing school policy, seeking commitment from a variety of internal and external stake-holders, and deploying strategies across the school to secure progress and attainment. The design of the plan was supported by developing my Action and Communications Plans, collation and regular analysis of performance data and proposals for a range of strategies to support intervention.

My regular discussions with my Sponsor on the design and implementation plans for the project demonstrated commitment to fostering professional engagement with how to lead, motivate and influence staff, students, carers, and external partners. The opportunity to present to whole staff and advise on the most proactive and productive methods by which to foster improvements in outcomes was delivered by myself in a staff briefing, in early October 2017. Moving forward, the opportunity to present to whole staff will become an annual event.

In working towards the school’s strategic goals of collaboration to prepare students for new linear GCSEs by developing the knowledge, skills and resilience to fulfil their potential, I have been able to identify professional development opportunities within my project. One aspect of this has been evidencing the delivery of engaging and productive learning experiences in order to maximise progress and attainment for all (CiC) students in the project.

Initially, I made revisions to the school’s policy for CiC to bring together key staff involved with CiC, making clear the expectations of them and the timescales for delivery for sharing attainment data and next steps guidance. The revisions to the policy were considered as strengthening the best practice promoted by the Virtual School for CiC, and the suggestions were intended to define the type of progress data required (current grade, what the student was doing well, and what could be ‘even better’). Similarly, establishing a range of intervention strategies available to CiC provided support to the project’s overall aim for student development, attainment and progress. Being aware of some of the challenges posed by the change project (the delay of receipt of current assessment data and predictions from subject staff, which is imperative in order for progress to be reviewed and SMART targets established) inclusion of specific timescales for return of information, supported by Subject Leader interjection should the data not be received on time, was brought together in an overall service level agreement. This demonstrated my leadership behaviours of commitment, personal drive and resilience.

Challenge was also anticipated from students who were reluctant to engage with proposals to support progress and attainment, and I had to be aware of this. I approached this by making workable compromises with short term goals to incentivise students, for example, participation in additional tutoring for one term, and if improvement seen, removing the provision. Most incentives required consultation with the Virtual School / carers to agree costings; this in itself posed potential challenge with allocation of Pupil Premium Plus funding being tightened. To over-come this particular challenge, I ensured that any intervention showed a direct link to academic progress.

Sadly, volumes of children placed into care are increasing and despite a variety of support mechanisms in place, CiC often have far lesser attainment aspirations and goals for themselves, than their peers. In implementing this project, I felt it essential to devise a positive structure to the support offered to CiC in my school, and not one which stopped at knowing that this group of students are ‘vulnerable.’ Rather, I wanted to focus on students’ strengths, gain their views, gain their trust and commitment that in working together, a range of teaching staff and leaders were working together, to help them succeed. Prior to taking control of the project, just once a term, each CiC would share their wishes and feelings with an Education Support Worker (ESW). I felt this contact needed to be increased if trust and respect was to be gained. Therefore I implemented a programme of more frequent meetings to open a regular dialogue for sharing thoughts and feelings on school, placement, friendships and any other pressing issues. I also met regularly with both ESWs to ‘check in’ on any issues or concerns being raised. Enhancing this awareness was essential to gain a full picture of how each CiC was feeling. Gathering academic progress data from subject staff, together with the picture of the child’s wishes and feelings enabled me to generate SMART targets for consideration at each termly PEP. Implementation of this process has been of significant impact and certainly enabled me, as DT, to gain a holistic view of each child in care.

In addition, I engaged with the whole-school programme of Year Leader Learning Walks, which observed the quality of teaching and learning taking place across the school. I initiated a ‘student voice’ exercise, to gain feedback from all CiC on aspects of their learning which included how THEY felt they learned best, the type of feedback they preferred, how they felt they progressed best and the support they found valuable. My findings were fed back to my Sponsor and appear in my annual report to the Governors, proving that students are aware of the impact of the curriculum design and quality teaching and learning.

Despite school frequently being the one ‘stable’ environment in their lives, CiC often walk in the school building each morning having encountered a range of emotional difficulties which may prove a barrier to their approach to their learning and behaviour. The above measures therefore, together with regular analysis of progress data and securing additional intervention, gives evidence of how the project focused over time, on ways of supporting a reduction in the variation in progress and attainment for CiC.

As my project centred upon strengthening the processes of support for CiC, the aspect of the curriculum for growth and development concerned the evaluation of the techniques used to provide excellent teaching and learning, ensuring high expectations were being adhered to, and specific curriculum design followed. A key aspect of exploiting opportunities to develop and grow the curriculum therefore centred upon my participation in the programme of Learning Walk. As Year Leader for Year 11, I devised a series of lesson observations over two distinct phases throughout the year, to gain an insight into the learning experience of students in my year. To ensure impact across the whole school however, I analysed the Learning Walk observations across all 5 years groups, pulling together the areas of strength, such as evidence of regular recall and interleaving, and recommendations on how practice could be sharpened. For example, supporting students with the organisation of their resources to aid revision now that all subject areas are content and knowledge heavy. I delivered my reflections through a series of meetings with the other Year Leaders and combined any suggestions into my strategic evaluation plan for presentation to SL.

A SWOT exercise gave me the opportunity to consider three specific actions I would undertake to develop teaching and learning excellence further. These actions centred upon sharing best practice amongst curriculum areas and supporting experienced staff who were perhaps less likely to adopt more effective teaching styles. Similarly, research into how to create a flourishing culture and application of some of the EEF’s Assessment and Monitoring Pupil Progress techniques, such as drilling down performance data to identify specific areas for students to focus their ‘even better if’ next steps, helped reduced variation. Gathering this depth of detail for each CiC ensured their targets were specific, realistic, measurable and timely. This process was integral to the success of the project and embedded fully by its completion.

I presented the revision to processes for CiC to all staff in early October 2017. Not only did this presentation identify the CiC, but it reminded staff of the background to the issues which can often lead a child to be in care. Recognition of how some of their obstacles in life will be brought into school on a daily basis, potentially affecting behaviour and personal drive proved impactful. In sharing strategies on how to overcome such barriers, it was my intention to motivate and influence all classroom practitioners with their ability to have a positive influence upon these students.

Another aspect of continuing to lead and motivate staff in their approach towards CiC evolved from the termly PEP preparation and the need to discuss with classroom teachers and Subject Leaders the ‘next steps’ advice to secure progress. Over the course of the project, the extended dialogues with all stakeholders, ensured the ‘presence’ of the project was at the forefront of employing specific strategies for support. An example of this surrounds a KS4 student who was experiencing issues with a group of peers, which in turn, was having a detrimental effect on work rate and engagement in a particular subject. I spoke at length with the student, class teacher, Year Leader and Subject Leader, and offered a range of classroom management strategies to support engagement, which eventually succeeded.

Collaborative coaching amongst peers across curriculum areas can motivate and influence others, empowering staff to have the freedom to experiment with a range of tried and tested strategies, known to engage vulnerable students. Following discussions with my Sponsor, and awareness of the strategic plans for the school, I was able to generate a professional development plan which encompassed how to motivate and influence others across the school.

The Communications Plan devised and implemented in the Design Phase covered the life span of my project, and proved a valuable tool in terms of communicating with the 9 key stake holders the expectations for the project. For example, Governors and SLT were confident that provision of support for CiC was comprehensive according to the needs of each CiC; the Virtual School had confidence that their expectations were to be adhered to; all stakeholders for the project were clear on the support required from them, to support the plan for business change. Similarly, the standards expected by the Virtual Schools were to be adhered to. Particularly prudent to the project was the collaboration with partners and external agencies (Social Care, Virtual School, Health, Young People’s Services, Primary and Post 16 partners etc), all reinforced through the plan as shared expectations were clearly defined.

Having assessed other Communication Plans from other schools my plan began to evolve over the period of the project. The final version is the product of a series of reflections on the impact of processes, during the Implementation Phase. An example of this was in the frequency of one to one meetings between each CiC and their identified ESW. Initially, contact was scheduled prior to each PEP, yet on reflection, I felt this could be increased to strengthen relationships, building trust, commitment and respect. Each CiC now has at least one session with their ESW every four weeks, the outcomes of which are shared with me to ensure any barriers to their progress (including social and emotional barriers) are addressed as early as possible.

I identified a total of 6 potential risks surrounding my project. One particular aspect of risk centred upon the range of stakeholders involved in my project, particularly external partners where it was less likely that the expectations for my project would be rigorously adhered to.

Similarly, the most pressing risk posed to the project surrounded contingency plans should I, as DT for the school, be unable to fulfil my role. After discussions with SL, the SENDCo was selected to support my role and on 4th December 2017, I delivered thorough training to her. Moving forward, responsibilities for the CiC are shared between the DT and SENDCo, with myself retaining overall responsibility and accountability. The preparation, facilitation and responsibility for this aspect of the project was also written into my personal Performance Management for the year. Taking this action had a significant impact on reducing risk associated with the project.

I felt that to fulfil the requirement to consider specific risks to the project, a separate policy document was required. Opting to generate the plan made provision for regular review of any risks: guaranteeing compliance with the statutory guidelines directed by the DfE; commitment to partnership information sharing; succession planning; spending risks and validation of current school policy. I felt that having such a record of impact and probability of risk, alongside a schedule of review, would ensure best practice was adhered to.

During the implementation phase of the project, I arranged to attend the North West annual Conference for Designated Teachers on 7th March. Led by representatives from the DfE greater clarity was received on forthcoming amendments to the CiC statutory guidance. Following this conference, an additional risk factor was added to the plan: compliance with DfE guidelines, and amendments were written into the CiC policy in order to encompass children adopted from care, from September 2018.

Overall, generating a Risk Management Plan which records impact and probability of risk, alongside a schedule of review, has ensured that best practice is adhered to and policy kept up to date with statutory guidance.

The key area of focus for effective professional development and talent management for my project surrounds the sharing of good practice to ensure exceptional quality of teaching and learning. All staff will (at some point) teach all CiC, and I wanted to ensure that my project could have a positive impact on exemplary teaching and learning across the curriculum. I researched the Fylde Coast Teaching School Alliance where an emphasis was being placed upon collaborative coaching and the GROW coaching model (grow, reality, options, will) developed in 2003 by John Whitmore 2003. I was interested in how the usual formal performance indicators of lesson observations, management reviews and student results were not allowed to be used; rather the emphasis on ‘coaching’ resulted in individuals being guided in terms of self-directed learning and thus maximising their influence. In respect of the features of this case study, it represented both bespoke CPD (the nature of the coaching being one to one and so gained greater buy-in from the participants) and JPD; sharing of good practice from different settings, the impact of this on staff and students. Fortunately, my school also follow a similar form of professional development. However, awareness of this research gave me further insight into how to overcome certain challenges, such as the reluctance of established staff who can be loathed to accept support or attempt innovative pedagogies. This case study demonstrated how staff were empowered by the freedom to try new strategies (as they were not being judged). Similarly, student feedback was positive: the learning had become more fun, engaging and structured.

Through the implementation of my project, I wanted to promote my research into Sue Kelly’s concept, that professional development can occur in less structured formats: a shared idea from Twitter; reading an article from TES etc. I have prompted sharing of Kelly’s ideas at Subject Leader, Year Leader and Senior Leader meetings. It would be an aspiration of my project to encourage staff, through the Professional Development Plan to determine their own agendas (in our chosen format of small, cross curricular cluster groups) for the areas of CPD that they would find most beneficial, and thus managing the talent of the workforce.

When looking at data collection in particular, some subject areas analyse the data to identify specific areas of support required for a CiC to progress. For example in English, this may be to explain ideas in more detail using key evidence from the text (GCSE Assessment Objective 2). When in discussion with classroom teachers prior to the CiC termly PEPs, I have requested that this type of analysis be undertaken in order for me to generate specific subject targets. This process initially encountered some resistance, but has now become an expectation which definitely has a positive impact.

Nothing in Education remains static. For a school to remain effective, strategies need to be forward-thinking, pro-active, rather than reactive and the development of staff remain integral to maximising achievements for all. In considering how provision needs to change over time, I found it useful to reflect on the current professional development processes adopted by my setting, and make recommendations for how they could be reviewed moving forward. My evaluation of current practice focused on the strengths drawn from the programme of exploring the impact of teaching and learning strategies in small, cross curricular ‘communities’ of staff, within an open discussion forum (without SLT presence) and following a specified programme of stimuli. In discussions with SL responsible for professional development, I made suggestions on how potential apathy of some experienced staff could be redressed; the intention being to re-engage them with the process and encourage such staff to challenge themselves to overcome their apparent reluctance to experiment with alternative, innovative and current teaching and learning strategies.

I have applied this to my project when supporting staff in suggesting a range of effective behaviour management strategies to engage CiC in their learning. Even the most experienced of teachers and leaders can adapt, strengthen and revise their preferred pedagogy in order to seek the best from their students.

My school is currently exploring the possibility of leading a Multi Academy Trust, and I am particularly looking forward to the opportunities this will bring to share best practice for CiC and how my existing project could continue to move forward.

### Impact

In strengthening the policy for CiC, evidencing how the strategic plans for quality of teaching and learning across the whole school have been administered (via Learning Walks, work scrutiny, student voice exercises, and ML/SL meetings) there has been positive progress and attainment for the majority (88%) of CiC (see Pupil Performance and Attainment Analysis and Evaluation commentary for detailed evidence). Unfortunately, at KS3 there is no national data to compare this progress against. However, the national 2017 Attainment 8 data for CiC at KS4 was 19.3 (source National Statistics for DfE) when compared to non CIC at 44.5. The contrast between this national attainment figure and my school’s figure at KS4 of 58.0 evidences the positive impact of this project.

The project’s aim was to strengthen the processes of support to facilitate educational progress for this vulnerable group of students. Ensuring that CiC were considered for any internal academic support (subject intervention in English, Maths, Science and Spanish) following each student tracking window, together with sourcing a new contract for supplying external intervention in conjunction with classroom learning, clearly demonstrates the positive impact of the project on overall progress.

Similarly, developing the quality of external support by directing high expectations for delivery and fostering more effective communication between class teachers and external tutors, has also been positive. In the face of resistance to intervention, a range of strategies have been offered to engage the student by considering their personal drive and commitment. For example, mutually convenient times and locations, the type of intervention, the student’s wishes and feelings, even a post GCSE exam work placement. All this has taken place alongside fostering closer communication between staff, carers and Social Care through my commitment, collaboration and personal drive, for the project.

For those children in care experiencing transition, from KS2-3, and KS4-5, an effective, structured programme of support has been impactful in ensuring students make informed choices and feel fully prepared for the next steps in their education.

My leadership skills have also developed throughout the project: greater awareness of the strategic fit of my plans; nurturing effective collaboration with the range of stakeholders affected by the project whilst maintaining integrity and respect for their discrete aims and goals; managing any risks posed by increasing capability; and leading professional development to further the impact of effective classroom managers.

Careful consideration of the range of partners I needed commitment from was vital to the impact of my project. However, gaining this commitment was not an easy task, particularly with external partners such as Social Care and the Virtual Schools. Awareness and integrity to develop successful partnerships involved respect of their discrete aims and objectives.

Gaining commitment from internal partners such as classroom teachers, Subject Leaders, ESWs, SLT and Governors, was much more straightforward, as our goals for maximising upon the life chances for CiC were shared.

In evaluating the effectiveness of internal partnerships, revisions to the CiC Policy and my presentation to all staff has resulted in a greater awareness of their impact upon the progress of CiC, high expectations for effective communication and the sharing of next steps advice.

Similarly, strengthening external partnerships has proved beneficial when supporting the social, emotional and mental health of CiC. Participation in external partnership forums has evolved more effective lines of communication. For example, sharing the impact of social care failing to inform school of placement breakdowns / parental contact issues and the detrimental effect of these significant changes on a child’s school day.

I look forward to continuing to focus on improvements to the provision for CiC in my school through further reflection and evaluation of ways to maximise progress and attainment for all.