



Department  
for Education

# **Family Routes: the educational outcomes for children in long-term foster care**

## **Research report**

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Government  
Social Research

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## Key findings

The analysis presented in this summary is part of a wider Department for Education (DfE) funded study, *'Family Routes: Growing up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families.'* The research aims to explore the longer-term outcomes of children in different types of permanence arrangements. The report focuses on children who were in long-term permanent foster care, as legally defined in the regulations, who entered care under 8 and had grown up in care. Using linked data from the Department for Education's social care and education administrative data, the children's outcomes considered were a) stability of the long-term foster placement and b) educational outcomes by age 24.

Data analysis showed that:

- 51% of the young people with a long-term, permanent fostering plan had remained in their placements until at least 16 years of age. Of the 49% of children with placement instability, more than a third (35%) had 2-4 placement changes, and 14% had five or more placement moves after having a long-term permanence decision
- The gap in educational attainment between children in long-term foster care and their peers was evident at KS1 (age 6/7) and became particularly marked at KS4 (age 15/16). By the end of KS4, 17% of the children in long-term foster care had attained Level 2 (5 or more GCSEs including English and maths grades 9-4), compared with 55% of all pupils
- 53% of the long-term fostered children had an identified SEN, compared with 56% of children in care and 14% of all pupils
- Most (74%) of the long-term fostered children did not reach the expected Level 2 threshold (5 or more GCSEs at grades 9-4 or equivalent) by the age of 15 or 16, and few (26%) attained a grade 9-4 in English and maths. However, young people continued to study and completed their Level 2 qualifications at older ages than their peers and in FE institutions rather than mainstream schools. By age 24, 50% had a Level 2 qualification and 31% had English and maths (GCSE grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications)
- Attainment at KS2 was the strongest predictor of KS4 attainment for both children with and without SEN in long-term foster care. Persistent absence during the KS4 years and placement changes (especially 5 or more) were strong negative factors that reduced expected attainment levels at KS2 and KS4. Being a girl and non-White ethnicity were positive predictors of attainment at the expected Level 2 threshold for long-term fostered children

## Executive summary

The analysis presented in this summary is part of a wider Department for Education (DfE) funded study, *'Family Routes: Growing up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families.'* The research aims to explore the longer-term outcomes of children in different types of permanence arrangements. The report focuses on children who were in long-term permanent foster care, as defined by the regulations, who entered care under 8 and had grown up in care. The outcomes considered were a) stability of the long-term foster placement and b) educational outcomes by age 24.

The findings reported here used the Department for Education's social care and education administrative data, which were linked and analysed within the Office for National Statistics' Secure Research Service.<sup>1</sup> The children's educational outcomes were analysed using their attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1), Key Stage 2 (KS2), Key Stage 4 (KS4) and post-16 and, where possible, were compared with those of all pupils and children looked after.

The sample of children (n=1,170) in long-term foster care was selected based on the following criteria:<sup>2</sup>

- Completed Key Stage 4 between 2015/16 and 2018/19
- The children had entered care under 8 years of age, and the local authority had decided that the plan for permanence was that the child would have a stable, permanent placement in long-term foster care. Since 2015, long-term foster care has been a legally defined permanence option
- The children had grown up in care and had never been adopted or left care through a child arrangement, residence order, or to live with a special guardian

The 1,170 children in long-term foster care were born between 1999 and 2003:

- 43% had a summer (May-September) birthday, making them the youngest in their school year group
- Most (57%) were boys, as is the case for all looked after children<sup>3</sup>
- 81% of the long-term foster care sample were of White ethnicity: a larger proportion compared to the ethnicity of all White children in care (74%) between 2006 and 2008<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Using data from the ONS and other owners does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners

<sup>2</sup> The criteria were also selected to enable comparison with children who left care on an adoption order or to live with a special guardian (report to follow)

<sup>3</sup> DfE *Children looked after in England, including adoptions. National Tables SFR23/2008*

## **Educational Attainment at Key Stage 1 (age 6 or 7) 2005/06-2010/11**

At Key Stage 1, 53% of the long-term fostered children in the sample attained the expected or higher standard compared to 56% of children in care and 90% of all pupils.<sup>4</sup>

Long-term fostered children (47%) who fell behind at Key Stage 1 (KS1) were more likely to have a special educational need (SEN), were aged between 3 and 7 when they entered care, had a summer birthday, and were of White ethnicity. These children started school at a significant disadvantage.

## **Educational Attainment at Key Stage 2 (KS2) (age 10 or 11) 2010/11-2013/14**

At Key Stage 2, 55% of long-term fostered children in the sample reached the expected standard in English and maths, compared to 48% of children in care,<sup>5</sup> and 75% of all pupils.<sup>6</sup> The English reading and writing teacher assessments showed the widest attainment gap between long-term fostered children and all pupils.

At KS2, the type of educational provision had a large statistical effect on the probability of meeting the expected standards. Children in long-term foster care who were not in mainstream education (26%) or those with a SEN (68%) were less likely to reach the expected standards. Additionally, the likelihood of achieving the expected KS2 standards was lower for boys than for girls and for those with a summer birthday.

20% of children in long-term foster care who had not met the expected standard at Key Stage 1 reached the expected level by Key Stage 2. However, 23% of children who met the expected level at KS1 had fallen behind by KS2.

## **Educational Attainment at Key Stage 4 (KS4) 2015/16-2018/19**

**Attainment in English and maths (grade 9-5):** 11% of children in long-term foster care attained grades 9-5 in English and maths, compared to 43% of pupils in state-funded schools<sup>8</sup> and 7% of children in care.<sup>7</sup>

**Attainment 8** measures a student's achievement across 8 qualifications, including English and maths (which are double-weighted), three EBacc subjects, and three other approved qualifications.

- In 2018/19, the maximum Attainment 8 score was 90, and the average score for children in long-term foster care was 29.6 without a SEN and 19.1 with an

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<sup>4</sup> [Statistics: key stage 1 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-1-statistics) SFR38/2010 results for all pupils and looked after children have been averaged between 2006-2011

<sup>5</sup> DfE *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England as at 31 March 2014* SFR 49/2014

<sup>6</sup> DfE *National curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 in England, 2014 (revised)* SFR 50/2014

<sup>7</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-of-children-in-need-including-looked-after-children/2018-19>

identified SEN. Pupils without a SEN had an average score of 49.9, and pupils with an identified SEN 27.6

- *Children without a SEN.* The Attainment 8 gap for children in long-term foster care was -20.3 points compared to pupils without a SEN.<sup>8</sup> A similar gap as reported for children in care (-19.1)<sup>9</sup>
- *Children with a SEN.* The Attainment 8 gap for children in long-term foster care was narrower, at -8.5 points.<sup>8</sup> The Attainment gap for children in care with a SEN was wider at -14.6<sup>9</sup>
- *Attainment gap by sex:* There was a wider Attainment 8 gap between girls and boys in long-term foster care (- 8 point difference for boys) compared to the gap between girls and boys for all pupils (- 5 point difference for boys)
- *Attainment gap by SEN:* There was a narrower Attainment 8 gap among the children in long-term foster care who had or did not have a SEN (-11 points with a SEN) compared to all pupils with and without a SEN (-22 points for pupils with a SEN)

**Progress between KS2 and KS4:** Children are expected to make two levels of progress. On average, the long-term foster children *without* a SEN made the same progress as all pupils *with* a SEN.<sup>15</sup> Progress scores in English had fallen further behind progress scores in maths for young people in long-term foster care. Many long-term fostered children (77%) who had reached the expected KS2 level did not reach the expected level at KS4.

### **Risk and protective factors at Key Stage 4 (age 15 or 16) 2015/16-2018/19**

The linked social care and education administrative data were used to examine some known risk and protective factors associated with educational attainment at Key Stage 4, when young people were aged 15 or 16. Data were available on special educational needs, mental health, placement changes, school moves, suspensions, and persistent absenteeism (missing more than 15% of teaching sessions).

### **Special educational needs (SEN) at KS4 age 15 or 16:**

- 53% of the long-term fostered children had an identified SEN, compared to 56% of children in care and 14% of all pupils<sup>10</sup>
- 27% of the long-term fostered children had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), compared to 26% of children in care<sup>9</sup> and 3% of all pupils<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> DfE *Key Stage 4 performance 2019 (revised)*

<sup>9</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2019 National Tables Table 5b*

<sup>10</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England (2018/19) and*  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/sen-analysis-and-summary-of-data-sources>  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2018>

- Boys in the long-term foster care sample more frequently had a SEN (60%) than girls (43%). A higher proportion of boys with a SEN is also recorded for children in care and for all pupils<sup>8</sup>

**Mental health:** The carer-completed ‘Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)<sup>11</sup> showed that 29% of long-term fostered children had a high SDQ score at age 15 or 16, suggesting a concerning mental health problem. In 2018/19, a higher percentage (36%) of concerning scores were reported for children looked after aged 15 or 16.<sup>12</sup> A much smaller percentage (15%) of high scores was observed among children aged 11-16 in the general population.<sup>13</sup>

**Placement changes:** A stable, permanent placement had been found for 51% of the young people. They remained with the same long-term foster carer until at least 16 years of age. 47% were still with their carer at age 19.

Placement instability (two or more placement changes) was a feature for nearly half (49%) of the children with a long-term, permanent fostering plan.<sup>14</sup> In this sample, 1 in 6 who entered care under age 2 had five or more different caregivers after their placement was designated permanent.<sup>15</sup> Multiple placements (five or more) were not statistically associated with the child’s SEN status, but with a longer length of time in care.

**School stability:** Children in long-term foster care experienced greater school stability than all children in care. 5% of long-term fostered children had started a new school in the two years before their KS4 exams. While not an exact comparison, between 2017 and 2019, approximately 31% of children in care had changed schools in the previous two years, and 12% of all young people in care (aged 12-15) experienced mid-year school changes (Children’s Commissioner 2020).

**Persistently absent (missing 15% of sessions):** Before entering secondary school, 12% of the long-term fostered children had been persistently absent during their primary

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<sup>11</sup> A brief behavioural screening questionnaire <https://www.sdqinfo.org/a0.html>

<sup>12</sup> DfE *Children looked after in England 2019 National Tables* Table 15a

<sup>13</sup> Public Health England (2019) *Mental health and wellbeing: JSNA toolkit. 5: Children and young people*. Wellington House: Public Health England

<sup>14</sup> Due to uncertainty as to whether the placement, at the time of the ‘long-term foster care permanent decision’, was intended to be the child’s long-term placement, one further move was allowed before counting the number of placement changes. Children with one placement move after the long-term foster care decision were categorised into the ‘stable placement’ group.

<sup>15</sup>The number of placements calculated did not include placement changes before the long-term foster care permanence decision.

school years, increasing to 17% while in secondary school. In comparison, 13% of children in care in secondary schools were persistently absent, as were 5% in mainstream secondary schools in the academic year 2014/15.<sup>16</sup>

**School suspensions:** 16% of children in long-term foster care had been suspended during their primary school years, and 27% had been suspended at least once during their secondary school years.

One in five of the long-term fostered children had been both persistently absent and suspended between 2015/16 and 2018/19.

### **Predicting attainment at KS4: regression analysis**

The prior results of long-term fostered children at KS2 and having an identified SEN had the most substantial statistical effect on the probability of KS4 attainment. Positive predictors of successful attainment were being female or of minority ethnicity.

Key Stage 2 attainment at the expected or higher levels was consistently the strongest predictor of success at KS4 for both children with and without SENs across various attainment levels. The very high probabilities of achievement (91-99%) indicated that KS2 attainment was a highly effective predictor of later success, with its significance increasing at higher attainment levels.

Persistent absence during the KS4 years was a consistently strong negative factor, reducing the chances of successful attainment.

Placement changes negatively affected attainment at both Level 2 and Level 3, especially among young people without special educational needs (SEN), significantly reducing their chances of achieving higher qualifications. Those who experienced five or more placement moves after their long-term foster care decision had only a 14%–19% likelihood of attaining Level 2, and just a 7% chance of reaching Level 3.

Residential placements were associated with lower probabilities of attainment for children without a SEN, but were not a statistically significant factor for the attainment of children with a SEN. Neither age at entry to care, age at the time of the permanence decision, nor the reason for entry to care or summer birthdays were statistically associated with attainment at KS4.

### **Post-16 social care placements**

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<sup>16</sup> DfE Pupil Absence in schools in England 2014-2015 Main Tables SFR10\_2016  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2014-to-2015>

Before leaving care, the last social care placement recorded was a long-term foster placement for 67% of the young people (51% had remained with the same long-term foster carer throughout most of their childhood), 11% were in a residential institution, 9% in independent living, 7% in short-term foster care, and 6% were placed with parents. On leaving care at age 18, 63% were living with a foster carer in a 'Staying Put' placement.<sup>17</sup>

### **Post-16 Education**

Following Key Stage 4 and between 2016/17 and 2022/23:

- 85% of long-term fostered young people chose to enrol in further education (FE) institutions, and 8% remained in their maintained school sixth forms following A-level courses or repeated KS4 exams. The majority (67%) of the young people who enrolled in FE did so after a period of unemployment or employment. In comparison, in 2020, 45% of young people in the population (age 16-17) were studying in schools and 40% in FE <sup>18</sup>
- More than one in five (22%) of the long-term fostered young people who enrolled in FE had an Education and Health Care plan, compared to about 6% of 16-19-year-olds who registered at FE colleges in 2023<sup>19</sup>
- Most (66%) of the young people in long-term foster care who enrolled in FE had not yet achieved a Level 2 qualification (5+GCSEs or equivalent qualifications, grades 9-4)
- About half (54%) of the young people in FE planned to study full-time, while the others opted for distance or online learning. The latter is often preferred by those combining employment with study or those with childcare responsibilities (Averill et al., 2019)

### **Attainment by August 31st 2023**

At the end of the available data (August 31, 2023), 44% of the long-term fostered young people were 20-21 years old, 46% were 22-23 years old, and 10% were 24 years old.

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<sup>17</sup> [Staying Put: arrangements for care leavers aged 18 years and above - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>18</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2022-23>

<sup>19</sup> <https://natspec.org.uk/key-facts-2025-data-and-trends-for-send-in-fe/>

**Table 1: Attainment by age 19: long-term fostered young people and all students**

|  | <b>Long-term fostered</b> | <b>All students</b> | <b>Students with a SEN<sup>18</sup></b> |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Level 2 qualifications (5+ GCSEs grade 9-4)              | 48%                       | 87%                 | 54%                                     |
| English and maths grade 9-4                              | 30%                       | 76%                 | 41%                                     |
| Level 3 qualification (2 or more A levels or equivalent) | 22%                       | 61%                 | 29%                                     |

- By age 19, 14% of young people who had been in long-term foster care entered a Higher Education Institution.<sup>20</sup> In comparison, by age 19, 14% of young people who had been continuously looked after for more than a year and 45% of all other pupils progressed to HE after reaching the end of the 16-18 study.<sup>21</sup> Most long-term fostered young people self-identified as care leavers on their UCAS entry forms, but 16% did not
- About half of all the young people had not attained a Level 2 qualification, and 69% did not have English and maths (grade 9-4). A few long-term fostered young people achieved Level 2 English and maths (+ 1%) or a Level 3 qualification (+ 3%) at older ages (age 20-24)

<sup>20</sup> Higher Education data were only available from 2018/19 to 2021/2022

<sup>21</sup> [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2019/20 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

## Background

The analysis of linked administrative data that underpins this report is part of a broader Department for Education (DfE) funded study, *'Family Routes: Growing up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families'*. The research set out to understand more about the longer-term outcomes for children who left care on an adoption order, children who left care to live with a special guardian or children who remained in care placed with a long-term foster carer. All three options are intended to provide permanence for children. The study includes surveys of and interviews with adoptive and special guardianship families and analyses of linked administrative datasets for adopted, special guardianship and long-term fostered children.

When children are looked after and are unable to return to live safely with their birth parents, the local authority is required to consider how best to meet the child's needs for permanence. Planning for permanence is an integral part of care planning and is outlined in the regulations.<sup>22</sup> All children in care should have a permanence plan in place by the second review (4 months after entering care). Planning for permanence is defined as:

... the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging. - Department for Education, 2015: 22-23, s2.3

Permanence (Palacios et al., 2019) includes legal, placement stability, and relational elements. Research, statutory regulations, and policy<sup>23</sup> recognise the importance of children having a home where they feel they belong and with adults who will love and care for them through childhood and beyond.

## Method

This report focuses on an analysis of linked administrative data concerning the longer-term outcomes for 1,170 children, for whom the intention (as outlined in their care plan) was to achieve permanence in care through a long-term (permanent) foster care placement. The outcomes considered were (a) stability of the long-term foster placement and (b) educational achievements up to the age of 24. The findings are based on the Department for Education's social care and education administrative data (Table 2.),

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<sup>22</sup> The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 Part 2 Section 5

<sup>23</sup> [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive - GOV.UK](#)

which were linked and analysed within the Office for National Statistics' Secure Research Service.<sup>24</sup> For more information on the study aims and methodology, see (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-routes-data-analysis-methodology-and-core-sample>). The children's educational outcomes were analysed based on their attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 (ages 6-7), Key Stage 2 (ages 10-11), Key Stage 4 (ages 15-16), and their qualifications by age 24. The pupil census provided data on identified special educational needs (SEN). Data from the Individualised Learner Records, the Young People's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD), and Higher Education Statistics provided information on the routes into general further education (FE), higher education (HE), and later attainment (age 16-25).

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<sup>24</sup> Using data from the ONS and other owners does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners

**Table 2 Data requested from and supplied by the Department for Education by the collection year<sup>25</sup>**

| <b>Social Care Data</b>                                     | <b>2004/5 – 2013/14</b> | <b>2015/16- 2018/19</b> | <b>2019/20- 2022-23</b> |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Episodes (reason for entry & leaving, placements, dates)    | √                       | √                       | √                       |
| Outcomes age 5-17 yrs (SDQ, substance misuse, convictions)  | n/r                     | √                       | √                       |
| Care Leavers aged 16 years+                                 | n/r                     | √                       | √                       |
| <b>Education data</b>                                       | <b>2004/5 – 2013/14</b> | <b>2015/16- 2018/19</b> | <b>2019/20- 2022-23</b> |
| School Census (Pupil)                                       | √                       | √                       | √                       |
| Key Stage 2 (age 10/11)                                     | √                       | n/r                     | n/r                     |
| Key Stage 4 (age 15/16)                                     | n/r                     | √                       | n/r                     |
| Alternative provision, including pupil referral units       | n/r                     | √                       | n/r                     |
| Key Stage 5 (age 16-18)                                     | n/r                     | √                       | √                       |
| Exclusions  | √                       | √                       | n/r                     |
| Absences  | √                       | √                       | n/r                     |
| Individualised Learner Records                              | n/r                     | √                       | √                       |
| National Client Caseload Information System (age 16 years+) | n/r                     | √                       | √                       |
| Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD)       | n/r                     | n/r                     | √                       |
| Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) <sup>26</sup>  | n/r                     | n/r                     | √                       |

√= provided n/r = not requested Source ONS.

## Analysis

The analysis of the educational attainment of a sample of long-term fostered young people covers the academic years 2006/7 to 2022/23. During this period, the way attainment was measured changed. The main changes and a description of the national measures of educational attainment are in the Appendix.

The analyses were conducted within the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics. Statistical disclosure policies were applied to maintain data confidentiality and prevent identification, resulting in tables that did not always sum to 100%.

- Counts lower than 10 were suppressed and replaced with the letter *c*
- If the percentage was less than one but not zero and the count was greater than ten, the letter *k* replaces the percentage
- All numbers were rounded to the nearest 10, and percentages have no decimal points. Numbers were rounded down from 5

The analysis benefited from a large sample. However, when analysing large datasets, a statistical test will almost always show a statistically significant difference between groups. For example, a *p-value* of  $<.001$  indicates a significant difference, but it does not predict the size or strength of the effect between groups. The effect may be so small as to be almost insignificant (Sullivan et al., 2012). Common effect size measures in chi-square tests are Phi (2x2 tables) and Cramer's V for larger tables (Cohen, 1988). In both measures, the coefficient ranges from 0 (no association) to 1 (perfect association). Where means of continuous variables were compared, *t*-tests were used, and the effect size measure was Cohen's *d*.

The analysis was conducted in SPSS v27, and Bonferroni corrections were applied using the PADAJUST extension in SPSS for multiple comparisons. The study employed descriptive statistics, chi-squares, and *t*-tests to examine the characteristics of the long-term foster care children, and to summarise the data. Building on the descriptive statistics, three different types of regression were used in the analysis.

- 1) Binary Logistic: Examined the factors that affected a binary outcome, such as whether or not the child had passed English and Maths at KS4 (Yes/No). The assumption of linearity was tested through the Box-Tidwell test and scatterplots. A histogram was used to examine whether the residuals of the regression line were normally distributed. Outliers were examined but retained as they did not unduly influence the models

- 2) Multiple regression was used when outcomes were a continuous variable, such as Attainment 8 scores. Linearity was assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values. There was independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of around 2. There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardised predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no studentised deleted residuals greater than  $\pm 3$  standard deviations, no leverage values greater than 0.2, and values for Cook's distance above 1.

## Comparison data

Using the national measures of educational attainment, this report compares, where possible, the educational attainment of children in long-term foster care with that of all children who have been looked after for more than a year and all pupils. The relevant data for comparison can be found by selecting the appropriate year through 'previous releases' on these web pages.

Children looked after: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england>

Post-16 destinations for looked after children <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/271af2fd-b022-402a-076f-08db29e96c41>

For all pupils Key Stage 1: [Statistics: key stage 1 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/statistics/key-stage-1)

For all pupils Key Stage 2: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment/>

For all pupils Key Stage 4: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance>

For pupils aged 16-19: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-attainment-at-19-years>

Pupils Level 2 and 3 attainment, age 16 to 25: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2022-23>

Absenteeism: DfE Pupil Absence in Schools in England 2014 to 2015 SFR 10/2016 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a815ebec5274a2e87dbd42d/SFR10\\_2016\\_text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a815ebec5274a2e87dbd42d/SFR10_2016_text.pdf)

## Limitations

Understanding the stability of placements proved challenging. Although long-term foster care has been an option for many years, it was only legally defined in 2015 with a specific set of criteria outlined in the regulations.<sup>27</sup> The requirements are that the child's plan for long-term foster care has been recorded in the child's case file, that the foster carer has agreed to act as the child's carer until the child leaves care, and that the responsible local authority has confirmed this arrangement with the parent, carer, and child. The independent reviewing officer must also be consulted on the long-term foster care plan as part of their role in care planning. Once these requirements are met, the local authority should add a new code to the administrative datasets to indicate that the placement is a permanent long-term foster placement.

However, the use of the new codes has been inconsistent. Previous analysis and research (DfE, 2020; Schofield et al., 2024) revealed significant and unlikely variation among local authorities in the proportion of foster placements categorised as long-term. The inconsistent use of these codes hindered the analysis of delays or success in finding a long-term carer, as well as the understanding of whether the designated long-term foster placement was new or one in which the child had already lived for some time. Therefore, to assess placement stability, we decided to allow one additional placement change after the foster placement was designated as long-term, before counting the number of placement changes.

Social care and education data depend on the provision of accurate and timely information. Some data allows the local authority to choose a category called 'Other'. The data showed that the 'Other' option was frequently selected for two social care variables. These were: a) reasons why the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire had not been completed for an eligible child, and b) the type of placement when young people were older than 16. Similarly, in the education datasets, 'Other' was used to explain why young people had been suspended or had not completed their post-16 qualifications. Relying on the 'Other' option hindered the analysis and understanding of the children's needs and experiences at these points.

The following sections outline children's educational achievement from Key Stage 1 in primary school, when the children in long-term foster care were 6 or 7 years old, and their subsequent academic progress into secondary school and beyond, including post-16 education.

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<sup>27</sup> Department for Education, 2015a:1, s3 *The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations*, London: Department for Education. *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review* (Department for Education, 2015b and revised in 2021)

## The sample of children in long-term foster care

The sample of children (n=1,170) in long-term foster care was selected based on the following criteria:<sup>28</sup>

- They had entered care under 8 years of age, and the local authority had made a decision that their foster placement was to be permanent
- Completed Key Stage 4 between 2015/16 and 2018/19
- They had grown up in care and had never been adopted, had a child arrangement or residence order or left care to live with a special guardian

The 1,170 children were born between 1999 and 2003 and entered care between 2000 and 2008. Of these, 43% had a summer birthday (May-September), which typically makes them the youngest in their school year group.

The children had entered care when 12% were aged 0-2, 41% were aged 3-4 and 47% were aged 5-7. Three-quarters had a permanent long-term foster care decision made before they reached six, and all before the age of 8.

Most (57%) of the children were boys, which is typical for all looked-after children.<sup>29</sup> Children of White ethnicity made up a larger percentage (81%) of this long-term foster care sample (Table 3) compared to the 74% of all White children who entered care between 2000 and 2008.<sup>29</sup> Similar to all children in care, about three-quarters (74%) of the long-term fostered children entered care due to abuse or neglect, 17% because of family dysfunction or acute stress, 5% due to parental illness or disability, and 4% because of their own disability.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The age criteria and KS4 completion years were selected to enable a comparison with children who left care for adoption or to live with a special guardian.

<sup>29</sup> DfE *Children looked after in England, including adoptions*. National Tables SFR23/2008

**Table 3 Children in long-term foster care: sex and ethnicity (2015/16-2018/19)**

|       | <b>Boys<br/>n %</b> | <b>Girls<br/>n %</b> | <b>Total<br/>n (%)</b> |
|-------|---------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| White | 540 (81%)           | 410 (82%)            | 950 (81%)              |
| Mixed | 60 (9%)             | 50 (10%)             | 110 (9%)               |
| Black | 50 (6%)             | 20 (4%)              | 70 (6%)                |
| Asian | 20 (3%)             | 10 (2%)              | 30 (3%)                |
| Other | 10 (1%)             | 10 (2%)              | 20 (1%)                |
| Total | 670 (100%)          | 500 (100%)           | 1,170 (100%)           |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS

The following section uses the available data to consider the children's attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 (age 6 or 7) and Key Stage 2 (age 10 or 11).

## The primary years (Key Stages 1 and 2)

### Summary: KS1 and KS2 attainment

At KS1, 53% of long-term foster children met the expected standards in English and maths compared to 90% of all pupils. The children who had fallen behind more frequently had a special educational need (SEN), had entered care aged between 3 and 7, had a summer birthday (making them the youngest children in their year group) and were of White ethnicity. At KS1, the child's sex was not associated with the attainment of long-term fostered children.

At KS2, 55% of long-term fostered children, compared to 48% of children in care and 75% of all pupils, reached the expected standard in English reading, writing (teacher assessment) and maths. The long-term fostered children's attainment in English had the widest attainment gap with all pupils. Girls compared with boys and minority ethnic children compared with White children in long-term foster care more frequently met or exceeded the expected KS2 standard.

One in five of the long-term foster care children who had not met the expected KS1 standard were able to reach or exceed the expected level at Key Stage 2. However, 23% of children who had reached the expected level at Key Stage 1 had fallen behind at Key Stage 2.

At KS2, the type of educational provision had a large statistical effect on the probability of meeting the expected standards. Children in long-term foster care who were not in mainstream education or those with a SEN were very unlikely to be able to reach the expected standards. Also reducing the probabilities of achieving the expected standards were having a summer birthday and being a boy.

### Key Stage 1

By the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1), children in maintained primary schools are required to be assessed by teachers against the National Curriculum in reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, and science.

- By age 7, over half (53%) of the children in long-term foster care were working at either the expected level or working at greater depth in reading, writing, and maths, compared with 56% of all children in care and 90% of all pupils in state-funded schools in 2010/11 (Table 4)<sup>30</sup>

**Table 4 Attainment bands at Key Stage 1: children in long-term foster care (2005/6-2010/11), children in care (2009/10) and all pupils (2009/2010)**

| <b>Key Stage 1</b>   | <b>Long-term foster care<br/>%</b> | <b>All looked after children<br/>%</b> | <b>All pupils<sup>30</sup><br/>%</b> |
|--|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Working below the expected level (<12 points)                            | 47%                                | 44%                                    | 10%                                  |
| Working at the expected level or working at greater depth (12-21 points) | 53%                                | 56%                                    | 90%                                  |

Children in long-term foster care, base n=1,060. Missing data on 10 children who were in alternative provision. All other pupils, base n=576,000, Source ONS.

To understand which factors predicted KS1 average point scores at this young age, the following variables were entered into a multiple regression model: ethnicity, sex, summer birthday, reason for entry into care, age at entry into care, and special educational needs (SEN).<sup>31</sup> The six variables (factors) selected were those that chi-square tests indicated were associated with the KS1 attainment bands. The child's sex and reason for entry to care were not statistically significant predictors of KS1 average point scores (Additional Table 20).

- SEN status had the most significant negative impact on Key Stage 1 scores: children with an identified SEN were predicted to score 5.4 points lower than those without a SEN
- Summer birthdays were also associated with lower scores (1.1 lower) than those who were born between October and April
- Children who entered care between 3 and 7 years old had slightly lower scores (0.8 lower) than those who entered care aged 0-2 years
- Minority ethnic children were predicted to have slightly higher scores (0.8 higher) than White children

<sup>30</sup> [Statistics: Key Stage 1 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk) SFR22/2011 results for all pupils. DfE *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at 31 March 2013* SFR 50/2013

<sup>31</sup> The information on SEN was taken from the Key Stage 2 data, as information on SEN at age 7 was not requested. There is an assumption that SEN identified by age 10/11 was present at age 6/7

## Key Stage 2

Attainment for children in state-maintained schools is next measured at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2), when children are aged 10 or 11. The long-term fostered children in the sample completed KS2 between 2010/11 and 2013/14. They had the following characteristics:

- One in ten (10%) of the long-term fostered children had recently joined the school, entering the school one or two years before their KS2 tests
- 87% of the long-term fostered children attended a maintained mainstream school, and 13% a special school at KS2
- 12% of long-term fostered children had been persistently absent (missing more than 15% of sessions) at least once during any of their primary school terms
- 16% had been suspended at least once during their primary years. In comparison, about 9% of all pupils were persistently absent in state-funded primary schools in 2011/12<sup>32</sup>
- 68% of the children had an identified SEN (Table 5): a similar proportion to that reported for all children in care (66%) but a considerably higher percentage than the 17%-20% of all pupils with a SEN in state-funded primary schools between 2010/11 and 2013/14<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> DfE *Statistical First Release Pupil absence in schools in England, including pupil characteristics 2011/12*

<sup>33</sup> DfE *Special Educational Needs National Tables SFR 30/2013 Table 1C*

**Table 5 Children in long-term foster care and SEN provision at KS2 (2010-2014)**

| Type                                   | Description of support   | Number | Percentage |
|--|--|--------|------------|
| No provision                           |  | 380    | 32%        |
| School action                          | Extra help should be provided beyond that offered as part of the school's usual curriculum.  | 160    | 14%        |
| Action plus or Statement <sup>34</sup> | Action plus: the class teacher and the SEN Coordinator should receive advice or support from outside specialists<br>Statement: A formal assessment has been made. A legal document setting out the child's needs and the extra help they should receive was in place | 630    | 54%        |
| Total                                  |  | 1,170  | 100%       |

Base 1,170 Source ONS.

## Attainment at KS2

The children in long-term foster care sat their Key Stage 2 assessments between 2010/11 and 2013/14. From 2011/12, changes were made to the English tests, with the writing component of English attainment shifting from an externally marked test to teacher assessment of a year's work. Additionally, from 2012, the DfE definition of children in care changed from including all children who had been in care for six months or longer to only those who could be matched to the national pupil database (NPD) and had been looked after for 12 months or more. Between 2010/11 and 2013/14, the percentage of looked after children and non-looked after children achieving the expected level at Key Stage 2 increased. Due to these changes, any comparisons made at KS2 are between children in care and all pupils for the academic year 2012/13.

### The long-term fostered children's attainment in maths

- 57% of children in long-term foster care met (Level 4) or exceeded (Level 5) the expected standard in maths at KS2 (Table 6), a similar percentage to other looked after children (59%),<sup>35</sup> but fewer than 85% of all pupils in state-funded schools who completed KS2 between 2012 and 2013<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Statements were replaced by Education and Health Care Plans in 2014

<sup>35</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* SFR 50/2013

<sup>36</sup> DfE *National Curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 (2013 revised)* SFR 51/2013.

**Table 6 Children in long-term foster care: National Curriculum KS2 maths (2010-2014)**

| Maths KS2 Level age 10/11yrs       | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Did not achieve any level          | 30     | 2%         |
| Achieved Level 2                   | 10     | k%         |
| Achieved Level 3                   | 240    | 21%        |
| Achieved Expected Level 4          | 500    | 43%        |
| Achieved Higher Level 5 or 6       | 170    | 14%        |
| Working at a level below the tests | 220    | 19%        |
| Total                              | 1,160  | 100%       |

k%= <1%. Base n=1,160. Source ONS.

- 60% of girls and 54% of boys in long-term foster care met or exceeded the expected KS2 Level 4 in maths; 15% of boys and 13% of girls attained the higher Levels (Additional Table 21). In the academic year 2012/13, there was no difference by sex in achieving Level 4 maths for girls and boys in care<sup>37</sup> or among all pupils<sup>38</sup>
- 64% of minority ethnic children and 54% of White children in long-term foster care achieved or exceeded Level 4 in maths, compared to 85% of White, Asian, and mixed ethnicity pupils and 82% of Black pupils.<sup>38</sup> There are no published data on the KS2 attainment by ethnicity of children in care in 2012/13

### **The long-term fostered children's attainment in English Reading (test)**

- 64% of long-term fostered children met (Level 4) or exceeded (Level 5) the standard in English reading, a similar proportion to other looked after children (63%)<sup>37</sup> but fewer than 86% of all pupils in state-funded schools (Table 7)<sup>38</sup>
- 70% of girls and 58% of boys in long-term foster care achieved Level 4 or above in English reading tests (Additional Table 22). The percentage difference is a gender gap of -12 points: a larger gender gap than that reported for all pupils in state-funded schools (boys had a - 5 points gap with girls)<sup>38</sup>
- 70% of minority ethnic children in long-term foster care attained Level 4 or above in English reading compared to 62% of White children in long-term foster care

<sup>37</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* SFR 50/2013

<sup>38</sup> DfE *National Curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 (2013 revised)* SFR 51/2013.

**Table 7 Children in long-term foster care: KS2 English Reading test attainment (2010-2014)**

|                                    | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Did not achieve any level          | 60     | 5%         |
| Achieved Level 2                   | 0      | 0%         |
| Achieved Level 3                   | 140    | 12%        |
| Achieved Expected Level 4          | 470    | 41%        |
| Achieved Higher Level 5            | 260    | 23%        |
| Working at a level below the tests | 220    | 19%        |
| Total                              | 1,160  | 100%       |

Base n=1,160 Source ONS

### The long-term fostered children's attainment in English writing

Before 2012, the English writing test required pupils to write an extended story or description and a shorter piece, such as a letter or report. Pieces were externally marked and awarded for composition, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting (Additional Table 23). After 2012, English writing was teacher-assessed (Table 8)

- Writing tests – 40% of long-term fostered children achieved or exceeded the expected level
- Writing teacher assessments – 45% of long-term fostered children (56% of boys and 67% of girls) achieved or exceeded the expected level compared to 55% of children in care<sup>39</sup> and 83% of all pupils in state funded schools in 2012/13<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup>DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* SFR 50/2013

<sup>40</sup> DfE *National Curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 (2013 revised)* SFR 51/2013

**Table 8 Children in long-term foster care: KS2 English Writing attainment (2010-2014) by tests and teacher assessments**

|                                    | <b>Writing Tests<br/>2010-2011</b> | <b>Teacher assessments<sup>41</sup><br/>2011/12- 2013/14</b> |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Did not achieve any level          | 10 (6%)                            | 0 (0%)   |
| Achieved Level 1                   | 0 (0%)                             | 30 (3%)  |
| Achieved Level 2                   | 0 (0%)                             | 80 (7%)  |
| Achieved Level 3                   | 70 (30%)                           | 220 (19%)  |
| Achieved Expected Level 4          | 80 (34%)                           | 430 (37%)  |
| Achieved Higher Level 5            | 10 (6%)                            | 90 (8%)  |
| Working at a level below the tests | 60 (24%)                           | 20 (7%)  |
| <b>Total</b>                       | <b>230</b>                         | <b>850</b>   |

Base n=1,160 Source ONS.

### **Children in long-term foster care who were working below the level of the KS2 tests**

Some children were unable to sit KS2 tests due to their special educational needs, and/or were working below Level 1 of the National Curriculum. For these children, attainment was teacher-assessed using P Levels,<sup>42</sup> split into eight levels and used as descriptors of progress (P1 was the lowest level and P8 the highest).<sup>43</sup> Eighty (7%) of the long-term fostered children had at least one P Level. Nationally, a small proportion of pupils (about 0.5% of all pupils) had a P level recorded at Key Stage 2 (KS2) between 2010 and 2014.<sup>42</sup>

### **Progress of the long-term fostered children between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2**

Pupils are expected to make at least two levels of progress in English (reading and writing) and maths between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Expected progress in English was made by 70% of the long-term foster children, compared with 77% of all children in care<sup>44</sup> and 88% of all pupils in 2012/13.<sup>45</sup> In maths, 74% of long-term foster children

<sup>41</sup> Although teacher assessment of English writing was not brought in formally until 2012, it was extensively piloted during 2011/12 in 91 schools across 15 local authorities

<sup>42</sup> P levels were replaced in 2021 by the Engagement Model [The engagement model - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk) DfE Quality and methodology information: Attainment in primary schools in England SFR34/2014

<sup>43</sup> For details of the performance descriptors see [Stat guidance template](#)

<sup>44</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by Local Authorities in England as at 31 March 2013* SFR 50/2013 National Tables Table 2

<sup>45</sup> DfE *National curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 in England, 2013 (revised)* SFR 51/2013

made the expected progress compared to 71% of children in care<sup>47</sup> and 88% of all pupils in 2012/13.<sup>48</sup>

- Girls (77%) more frequently than boys (68%) and minority ethnic children (82%) more frequently than White children (65%) in long-term fostering made the expected two levels of progress
- 20% of the long-term foster care children who had not reached the expected level at KS1 met the expected KS2 level
- 23% of the long-term fostered children who had reached the expected KS1 level did not meet the expected KS2 level

### Overall KS2 Attainment for the children in long-term foster care

- 55% of the long-term fostered children reached or exceeded the expected KS2 Level in English reading, writing (teacher assessments) and maths, compared to 48% of children in care<sup>46</sup> and 75% of pupils in state-funded schools<sup>47</sup>
- 170 (15%) children in long-term foster care were high attainers (Level 5 or 6) in KS2 English reading, writing (teacher assessment) and maths compared to 21% of all pupils<sup>47</sup>
- Comparing the difference in the percentage of long-term fostered and all pupils attaining by subject and in progress between KS1 and KS2, the widest attainment gap was in English test results

A multiple regression model was run to predict the long-term fostered children's KS2 average point score from 11 variables: ethnicity, sex, summer birthday, the reason for entry to care (abuse or neglect compared to any other reason), age at first entry to care (under 2yrs, 2-4yrs, 5-8yrs), SEN identified at KS2, persistent KS2 absenteeism,<sup>48</sup> joined the school in the previous two years, suspended in primary school, number of placement changes (0-1 compared to more than 2), and type of school (mainstream compared to not mainstream). Seven of the 11 variables were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), and the model explained 61% of the variance: a strong fit for social science data. The variables that contributed to the prediction were ethnicity, sex, summer birthdays, SEN, suspensions, number of placement changes, and school type (Additional Table 24).

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<sup>46</sup> DfE *Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England as at 31 March 2014* SFR 49/2014

<sup>47</sup> DfE *National curriculum assessments at Key Stage 2 in England, 2014 (revised)* SFR 50/2014

<sup>48</sup> Missed 15% of available sessions

Having an identified SEN and not attending a mainstream school were the strongest negative predictors. Showing a slightly positive association with attainment, and contrary to expectations, were children who had been suspended or had placement changes after the permanence decision. It is possible that confounding factors were not captured in the administrative data, as these children may have been receiving targeted interventions and additional support. These children may also have been academically able but had behavioural problems that resulted in suspensions and changes of placement.

Between 2010 and 2014, the KS2 average point score for all pupils ranged from 3 (the lowest) to 39 (the highest).<sup>49</sup> Holding all other independent variables constant, the predicted KS2 average point score for the long-term fostered children was:

- A long-term fostered child of minority ethnicity, female, not born in the summer, with no identified SEN, not persistently absent or suspended in primary school, had a predicted KS2 average point score of 27.5
- A long-term fostered child not attending a mainstream school had a predicted score of 13.3, indicating a strong negative association
- A long-term fostered child with an identified SEN had a predicted score of 21.9, showing a substantial academic disadvantage
- A long-term fostered boy had a predicted score of 26.9, indicating a modest negative effect on attainment compared to girls
- A long-term fostered child with a summer birthday had a predicted score of 26.8, consistent with developmental disadvantages at school entry
- A long-term fostered minority ethnic child had a predicted score of 28.5: a positive association with attainment
- A long-term fostered child with more than one placement change after the permanence decision had a predicted score of 27.7, suggesting a slight positive association
- A long-term fostered child who had been suspended in primary school had a predicted score of 28.7, a slight positive association with attainment

The next point at which exams (e.g., GCSEs) and tests are undertaken is at the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4), when young people are 15 or 16. The following section considers the long-term fostered children's attainment at KS4 and compares their attainment with that of other young people in care and all pupils.

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<sup>49</sup> DfE Quality and methodology information: Attainment in primary schools in England SFR34/2014 page 9

## Key Stage 4

### Summary: Key Stage 4 (KS4) 2015/16-2017/18

Placement instability was a feature for many (49%) children, but few (5%) had started at a new school in their KS4 exam years. Placement moves were statistically associated with length of time in care, and not with special educational needs (SEN).

53% of the long-term fostered children had an identified SEN, and 27% an EHCP. The most common recorded primary SEN type was cognitive and learning needs. The proportions of children with a SEN were similar to those of other children in care (56% with a SEN and 27% with an EHCP) and higher than in all pupils in secondary schools (14% with a SEN and 3% with an EHCP).

29% of the long-term fostered children had a high SDQ score, suggesting a concerning mental health problem compared to 36% of children in care and 15% of 11-16 year olds in the general population.

Overall, 17% of long-term fostered children attained Level 2 by the end of KS4 (5 or more GCSEs including English and maths at grades 9-4 or equivalent), compared to 55% of all pupils. A larger proportion of long-term fostered young people (11%) passed English and maths grade 9-5 compared to children in care (7%); fewer than all pupils (43%).

There was a wider Attainment 8 gap between girls and boys in long-term foster care (-8 points for boys) than for all pupils (-5 points for boys).

There was a narrower Attainment 8 gap between children in long-term foster care with and without a SEN (-11 points with a SEN) than between all pupils with and without a SEN (-22 points with a SEN).

Children in long-term foster care made less progress than all pupils who had the same starting point at KS2. In 2018/19, long-term fostered children *without* a SEN had a Progress 8 score similar to that of all pupils *with* a SEN.

KS2 attainment at the expected or higher levels was consistently the strongest predictor of success at KS4 and had increasing predictive power for higher attainment thresholds.

Persistent absence during the KS4 years was a consistent factor producing low odds ratios across all levels of attainment, confirming its strong negative impact.

Placement changes, especially five or more after the long-term foster care decision, were particularly detrimental for children who did not have a SEN and the children's probability of attainment at Level 2.

Residential placements were associated with lower attainment probabilities for children without a SEN and were not a significant factor for children with a SEN.

Being a girl and non-White ethnicity were positive predictors of attainment at the Level 2 threshold (65% and 67% respectively met the threshold) for long-term fostered children, but slightly less so for children with a SEN.

A criterion for sample selection was that the long-term foster care children reached the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4) between the 2015/16 and 2018/19 academic years (Table 9).<sup>50</sup> All (except 20 children who completed a year later) had completed KS4 in the expected year based on their dates of birth.

**Table 9 The academic year that KS4 was completed (2015/16-2018/19)**

| Academic year | Number of children in long-term foster care | Percentage |
|---------------|---|------------|
| 2015/16       | 230   | 20%        |
| 2016/17       | 290   | 25%        |
| 2017/18       | 300   | 26%        |
| 2018/19       | 350   | 30%        |
| Total         | 1,170                                       | 100%       |

Base n=1,170. Source ONS.

Most (74%) long-term fostered children were in mainstream secondary schools (85% of those without an identified SEN and 64% with a SEN). Virtually all the long-term fostered children in special schools had a SEN. Twenty children (age 16) without a SEN in the 'Other' category sat their KS4 exams in further education or city technology colleges (Table 10).

<sup>50</sup> Students are identified as at the end of KS4 if they were on roll and in year 11 at the time of the January school census. The exams during the 2015/16-2018/19, were unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 10 Children in long-term foster care: type of school attended at KS4 (2015/16-2018/19)**

| Type of school      | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| Mainstream school   | 870    | 74%        |
| Special school      | 190    | 16%        |
| Other               | 90     | 8%         |
| Pupil Referral Unit | 20     | 2%         |
| Total               | 1,170  | 1,170      |

Base 1,170 Source ONS

## **Risks and protective factors at KS4 for children in long-term foster care:**

The linked social care and education administrative data were used to consider the known risk and protective factors associated with educational attainment (e.g., O’Higgins et al., 2017). The available information was limited because administrative data does not collect data on protective factors such as support and interventions, and it lacks information on certain socio-economic factors known to influence educational outcomes. For instance, some research (e.g., Ilie et al., 2017) indicates that parental occupational status and parental education are the strongest predictors of pupils’ attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4).

However, there was data on specific risks to educational achievement. These risks included special educational needs, mental health, placement changes, school moves, suspensions, and absenteeism. Protective factors had to be conceptualised as the absence of risk, although this approach prevents consideration of protective factors as distinct entities that can both influence problem and prosocial behaviours and mitigate risk factors.

## **Special education needs and mental health at KS4 (2015/16-2018/19)**

Nationally, at every Key Stage, pupils with an identified Special Educational Need (SEN) achieve significantly lower attainment compared to children without a SEN. Pupils with a SEN are also more frequently persistently absent and excluded from school than other pupils.<sup>51</sup> Comparisons in this section are made with all pupils in state-funded secondary schools (excluding special schools) and with children looked after. However, the available SEN data for children looked after do not separate by age or school type, and

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-special-educational-needs-sen>

they are not an exact comparison. The percentage of children with a SEN among all pupils is higher in primary school than in secondary school.<sup>52</sup>

For many years, it has been known that children in care have higher SEN rates compared to all pupils (e.g., Warnock Report, 1978). In this sample of children in long-term foster care, during the academic years 2015/16-2018/19, when they completed KS4:

- 53% of the long-term fostered children had an identified SEN, which was a similar percentage to children in care (56%)<sup>53</sup> and significantly higher than the 14% of all pupils in state-funded secondary schools with a SEN in 2018/19<sup>54</sup>
- 27% of the long-term fostered children had an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) compared with 27% of looked after children<sup>55</sup> and 3% of all pupils with an EHCP<sup>53</sup>
- Boys in the long-term foster care sample more frequently had an identified SEN (60%) compared to 43% of the girls, and more boys had an EHCP (22%) compared to 10% of the girls. The higher proportion of boys with a SEN and EHCPs is also observed among children in care<sup>56</sup> and all pupils<sup>57</sup>
- There was no statistical association between a long-term fostered child having an identified SEN and the child's ethnicity
- The most frequently recorded primary type of SEN identified for children in long-term foster care was cognitive and learning needs (39%), closely followed by social, emotional and mental health needs (36%) (Table 11 and Additional Table 25). The most common type of SEN for all pupils (2015/16-2018/19) was also cognitive and learning needs.<sup>58</sup> Social, emotional, and mental health needs (46%) were more frequently the primary SEN type recorded for all children looked after<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> DfE *Special Educational Needs in England* January 2019

<sup>53</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* 31 March 2019

<sup>54</sup> DfE *Special Educational Needs in England* January 2019

<sup>55</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* 31 March 2019

<sup>56</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* 31 March 2019

<sup>57</sup> DfE (2019) *Special Educational Needs in England* January 2019

<sup>58</sup> DfE (2019) *Special Educational Needs in England* January 2019

<sup>59</sup> DfE (2019) *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England* 31 March 2019

**Table 11 Children in long-term foster care with a SEN: primary type of special educational needs at KS4 (2015/16-2018/19)**

| Type of SEN                               | Number | Percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| Cognitive and learning needs              | 240    | 39%        |
| Social, emotional and mental health       | 220    | 36%        |
| Autistic Spectrum Disorder                | 50     | 8%         |
| Speech, language and communication        | 40     | 6%         |
| Other                                     | 40     | 6%         |
| Physical disability                       | 20     | 3%         |
| SEN support, but no specialist assessment | 10     | 2%         |
| Total                                     | 620    | 100%       |

Base n= 620. Source ONS.

In addition to the types of SEN recorded in the education dataset, the social care dataset included information on the child’s total score from the carer-completed Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2001).<sup>60</sup> Data on the SDQ scores were requested and provided for the years 2015/16-2018/19, which are the years when children in long-term foster care completed their KS4 exams.

- 29% of the long-term fostered children had a high or very high SDQ score, suggesting a concerning mental health problem compared to 36% of looked after children aged 15-16 with high or very high scores in 2018/19.<sup>61</sup> The rate for children aged 11-16 in the general population in 2019 was 15% (Public Health England, 2019)

Local Authorities (LAs) use the results of a child’s SDQ in a variety of ways. The SDQ score can be used as a basis for referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and consultations with the GP, and it should inform the statutory health assessments carried out by the NHS for children in care.<sup>62</sup> Scores can also be shared with the virtual head, designated teachers and during the review of personal education plans. However, previous research (e.g., Pritchett et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2019; Cummings and Shelton, 2024) raised concerns about the accuracy and quality of the carer-completed SDQ, and its use as the sole measure of looked after children’s mental health. In this sample of long-term fostered children, not all with an identified SEN had

<sup>60</sup> The SDQ total score is used to screen for potential behavioural and emotional problems in children and adolescents. The short form is used by local authorities for children aged between 4-17yrs who have been looked after for at least 12 months. Norms available at <https://www.sdqinfo.org/norms/UKSchoolNorm.html>

<sup>61</sup> DfE *Children looked after in England including adoptions 2018-2019* National Tables Table 15a

<sup>62</sup> <https://proceduresonline.com>

concerning SDQ scores, and vice versa, not all those with a raised SDQ score had a SEN recorded (Table 12).

**Table 12 Children in long-term foster care: SDQ bands and identified SEN at KS4 (2015/16-2018/19)**

| SDQ Band                     | No SEN<br>n% | Identified SEN at<br>KS4<br>n% | Total<br>n   |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Close to average<br>(0-13)   | 350 (57%)    | 260 (43%)                      | 610 (100%)   |
| Raised<br>(14-16)            | 50 (42%)     | 70 (58%)                       | 120 (100%)   |
| High or very high<br>(17-40) | 90 (30%)     | 210 (70%)                      | 300 (100%)   |
| Total                        | 490          | 540                            | 1,030 (100%) |

Base n=1,030. The SDQ had not been completed for 140 (12%) of long-term fostered children in years 10 or 11. Source ONS.

It is possible that children in this sample of long-term foster care with an identified SEN would not have elevated SDQ scores, as SEN encompasses a broad spectrum of learning needs. Further analysis of the data revealed that the 260 children with 'close to average' SDQ scores but with an identified SEN had diverse needs: 41% had cognitive and learning needs, 34% social, emotional, and mental health needs, 6% had autistic spectrum disorders, 5% physical disabilities, 4% speech and language needs, and 10% had other needs.

Ninety children had social, emotional, and mental health needs recorded as their primary type of SEN but scored close to average on the SDQ. While these children may have received SEN support in school, they may not have received any treatment for their behavioural and mental health issues. The unresolved mental health needs of looked-after children have been identified as a key factor contributing to a range of poor outcomes during childhood and adulthood (Jones et al., 2011).

## Placement changes

Placement stability helps children develop secure and trusting relationships with their carers, enhancing their sense of safety and belonging, and providing opportunities to recover from earlier trauma. Extensive research (e.g., Asif et al., 2024; Maguire et al., 2024) shows that children who experience multiple placements are more likely to face emotional and behavioural problems, physical and mental health issues, and academic

challenges than those with stable placements. However, it may also be the case that placement breakdowns occur because of the child's emotional and behavioural issues and mental health needs. Improving placement stability for children in care remains a significant challenge. The Children's Commissioner (2020) reported that between 2016 and 2019, one in ten children in care experienced two or more placement moves each year, and this rate remained unchanged up to 2024.<sup>63</sup>

Calculating placement changes for children in long-term foster care was complex. Uncertainty about whether the data indicated that the placement at the time of the 'long-term foster care decision' was meant to be the child's permanent placement or if a different placement was to be sought meant that one additional move was permitted before counting the number of changes. Consequently, children with one placement move after the long-term foster care decision were included in a 'stable permanent placement' group. A stable permanent placement was identified for 600 (51%) of the young people, as they had remained with the same long-term foster carer until at least 16 years of age.<sup>64</sup>

Placement instability remained a significant issue for many children even after the decision was made for them to remain in long-term foster care:

- 35% of children experienced 2–4 placement changes
- 14% experienced five or more placement moves

Having five or more placements was not statistically linked to a child's Special Educational Needs (SEN) status. Instead, it was associated with the age at which the child entered care:

- 17% of children who entered care before age 2 had five or more placements.
- 15% of those who entered care at ages 2–3 experienced five or more placements.
- 11% of children who entered care at ages 4–5 had five or more placements.
- 8% of children who entered care at ages 6–7 experienced five or more placements<sup>65</sup>

## School stability

Placement changes can also lead to school changes, disrupting education, friendships, and support networks within the school (Ellis and Johnston, 2024). The children in long-

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<sup>63</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/stability-measures-for-children-looked-after-in-england/2024>

<sup>64</sup> The number of placements calculated did not include placement changes before the long-term foster care permanence decision.

<sup>65</sup> Allowing for one placement move before counting placement changes

term foster care experienced greater school stability than all children in care, as 5% of long-term fostered children had joined a school or college in the two years before their KS4 exams. Although not an exact comparison, between 2017 and 2019, approximately 31% of children in care had changed schools in the previous two years, and 12% of all young people in care (aged 12-15) experienced mid-year changes (Children's Commissioner 2020).

## School absences and suspensions

A link has been established between poor school attendance and low academic achievement.<sup>66</sup> Much of the work children miss when they are out of school is never made up, leaving those pupils at a considerable disadvantage for the remainder of their school career.<sup>67</sup> In this study, 'persistently absent' was defined as a young person who missed 15% or more of their possible school sessions, which is approximately one day absent every two weeks of school.<sup>68</sup>

### Persistently absent (missing 15% of sessions)

Before entering secondary school, 12% of the long-term fostered children had been persistently absent during the primary school years, and this increased to 17% while in secondary school. In comparison, 13% of children looked after in state-funded secondary schools, 5% of pupils in state-funded secondary schools and 15% of pupils in special schools had been persistently absent in the academic year 2014/15.<sup>69</sup>

### Suspensions

Few long-term fostered children had been permanently excluded, but suspensions were more common. A suspension refers to a pupil being excluded from school for a specified period. The suspension can involve a part of the school day, and a pupil can be suspended for one or more fixed periods up to a maximum of 45 school days in a single academic year. The rate of suspension increases for all children as they age, with 14 as the peak age.<sup>70</sup>

- 16% of children in long-term foster care had been suspended at least once during their primary school years, and 27% during secondary school. National Tables of

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<sup>66</sup> [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4, Academic year 2018/19 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2018-to-2019>

<sup>68</sup>

In 2015/16, the definition of persistent absenteeism was changed from missing 15% to missing 10% of sessions. 15% remained the criterion for this study to report absences consistently before 2016. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-2014-and-spring-2015>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-2014-to-2015>

<sup>70</sup> DfE *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England 2018/19*

suspensions offer some comparison, but the statistics are annual and do not reflect a child's entire school career. In 2019, 17% of children looked after attending a secondary school experienced one or more suspensions during the year<sup>71</sup> as did 10% of pupils<sup>72</sup>

- One in five of the long-term fostered children had been both persistently absent and suspended between 2015/16 and 2018/19
- The main reason that pupils in state schools and long-term fostered children were suspended during KS4 was persistent disruptive behaviour.<sup>73</sup> Table 13 presents the main reasons why long-term fostered children were suspended. Some children had been suspended more than once; therefore, Table 13 does not total

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<sup>71</sup> DfE *Outcomes for looked after children and children in need* National Tables 2019 Table 8

<sup>72</sup> DfE *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England 2018/19*

<sup>73</sup> DfE *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England 2018/19*

**Table 13: Children in long-term foster care: primary reason for school suspensions at KS4 (2015/16-2018/19)**

| Reason for exclusions             | Number of times recorded as the primary reason for exclusion |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Persistent disruptive behaviour   | 150  |
| Physically assaulted a pupil      | 130  |
| Verbal abuse/threatening an adult | 110  |
| Other reason                      | 110  |
| Physically assaulted an adult     | 80   |
| Damage                            | 30   |
| Verbal abuse/threatening a pupil  | 30   |
| Drugs                             | 20   |
| Bullying                          | 10   |
| Racial abuse                      | 10   |
| Sexual misconduct                 | 10   |
| Theft                             | 10   |

Base n=310 Source ONS.

The 'other' reason was recorded 110 times. Examples of when 'other reason' might be recorded are inappropriate use of social media and technology, alcohol use, repeated truancy and misbehaviour outside school when in uniform.

## Attainment at Key Stage 4 (2015/16-2017/18) for children in long-term foster care

- 82% of the long-term fostered young people were entered for at least one GCSE or an equivalent qualification at KS4 (Additional Tables: Figure 7) compared with 93% of children in care and 98% of all pupils in 2018/19<sup>74</sup>
- 7% of the long-term fostered children were entered for three sciences (chemistry, physics, biology, or computer science) compared with 27% of all pupils<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup>DfE Key Stage 4 Performance (for years 2017-2019) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised>

Table 14 presents the attainment of the 1,170 long-term fostered children at the end of KS4 and compares their attainment with that of children in care and all pupils<sup>75</sup>

**Table 14 Attainment at the end of KS4: long-term fostered children (2015/16-2018/19), children in care and all pupils (2018/19)**

| Qualifications by the end of KS4   | All long-term fostered children | Children in care 2018/19 <sup>76</sup> | All pupils 2018/19 <sup>77</sup> |
|--|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| One pass in any subject or a vocational qualification                                  | 82%                             | n/a                                    | 96%                              |
| Level 1 threshold (5 or more GCSEs, grades 3-1 or equivalent qualifications)           | 71%                             | n/a                                    | 60%                              |
| Level 2 threshold (5 or more GCSEs at grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications)         | 26%                             | n/a                                    | 67%                              |
| Level 2 (5 or more GCSEs including English and maths grades 9-4, GCSE only or applied) | 17%                             | n/a                                    | 55%                              |
| English and maths grades 9-4 standard pass (2016/17-2018/19) <sup>78</sup>             | 26%                             | 18%                                    | 60%                              |
| English and maths grades 9-5 strong pass (2016/17-2018/19) <sup>79</sup>               | 11%                             | 7%                                     | 43%                              |
| EBacc average point score (2018/19 only) <sup>79</sup>                                 | 1.98                            | 1.52                                   | 4.07                             |

n/a = not available.

Long-term foster care, Base n=1,150 (2015/16-2018/19). Base n=930 (2016/17-2018/19). Base n=350 (2018/19). Source ONS. Children looked after n=5,430. All pupils n=604,910 Source DFE

## Children in long-term foster care: attainment by characteristics

- More girls (31%) than boys (21%)<sup>80</sup> and more minority ethnic children (36%) than White children (22%)<sup>81</sup> attained the Level 2 threshold: statistically significant differences by sex and ethnicity.

<sup>75</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-catalogue/data-set/18346d06-d139-4d98-9d80-11768b7e4d42>

<sup>76</sup> DfE Outcomes for children looked after 2019

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-and-training-statistics-for-the-uk-2019>

- Children without an identified SEN: 16% of long-term fostered children compared to 48% of pupils in state-funded schools attained English and maths grade 9-5. In 2018/19, children in long-term foster care had an average EBacc score of 2.40, compared to pupils whose average score was 4.39
- Children with an identified SEN: 4% of long-term fostered children attained English and maths (grade 9-5) compared to 14% of pupils. Long-term fostered children with a SEN had an average score of 1.52 compared to a score of 2.24 of all pupils with a SEN<sup>82</sup>

### Children in long-term foster care: Entry Levels

Entry-level courses are designed to help learners, especially those with special educational needs, develop skills in basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills. Entry Level 1 corresponds with the expected level of attainment at Key Stage 1 (age 6/7 years). Entry Level 2 is linked to expected attainment in school years 3 and 4 (age 7/8 years), and Entry Level 3 is the expected level of attainment for school years 4 and 5 (age 8/9 years)

- 270 (23%) of the children in long-term foster care had gained an Entry Level qualification (200 with an identified SEN and 70 children without a SEN)
- 14% of children in long-term foster care achieved an Entry Level 1 qualification in maths, and 10% achieved Entry Level 1 in English, aged 16 or younger; however, Entry Levels ( Levels 1-3) were also attained by young people up to the age of 22 (Additional Tables 26 and 27)

### Attainment 8

Attainment 8 measures a student's achievement across 8 qualifications, including English and maths (which are double-weighted), three EBacc subjects, and three other approved qualifications. The maximum Attainment 8 score has changed over the years. In 2015/16, the maximum was 80; in 2017/18, 87; and in 2018/19, 90. Consequently, Figure 1 shows the average Attainment 8 score by academic year.

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<sup>78</sup> New variables on GCSE English and maths attainment were added to the National Pupil Database from 2016. In 2017/18, English and maths grades 9-4 were the comparison measure for children in care. In 2018/19, the comparative measure became English and maths grades 9-5.

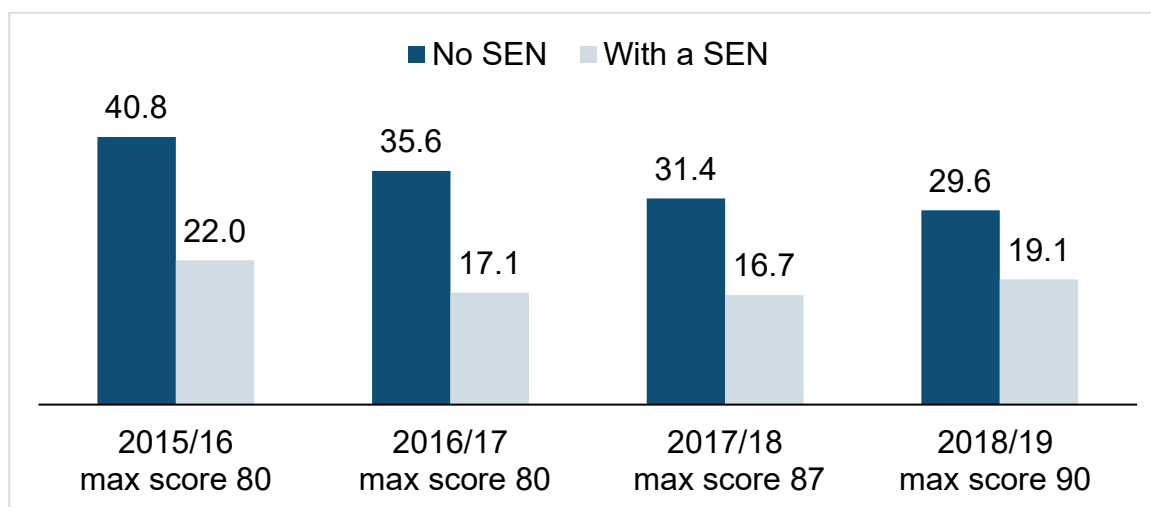
<sup>79</sup> Due to changes in the calculations for EBacc, results before 2018 cannot be compared with those after 2018

<sup>80</sup>  $\chi^2 = 15.710$  df 1,  $p < .001$  phi .12 small effect size

<sup>81</sup>  $\chi^2 = 18.784$  df 1,  $p < .001$  phi .13 small effect size

<sup>82</sup> DfE *Key Stage 4 performance, 2019 (revised)*

**Figure 1: Long-term fostered children: Attainment 8 point score by academic year and by SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**



Base n=1,150 Source ONS

In 2018/19 the average score for children in long-term foster care was 29.6 without a SEN and 19.1 with an identified SEN. Pupils without a SEN had an average score of 49.9, and pupils with an identified SEN 27.6.

### Attainment gaps in 2018/19

The Attainment 8 gap for children without a SEN: children in long-term foster care had an average Attainment 8 score of 29.6, compared with the average of 49.9 for all pupils — an attainment gap of -20.3 points.<sup>83</sup> The Attainment 8 gap for children in care without a SEN, compared to all pupils, was similar at -19.1.<sup>84</sup>

The Attainment 8 gap for children with a SEN: the Attainment 8 gap for long-term fostered children with a SEN compared with pupils with a SEN was - 8.5.<sup>85</sup> The Attainment gap for children in care with a SEN with pupils with a SEN was wider at - 14.6.<sup>84</sup>

Attainment gap by sex: There was a wider Attainment 8 gap between girls and boys in long-term foster care (- 8 point difference for boys) compared to the gap between girls and boys for all pupils (- 5 point difference for boys).<sup>83</sup>

Attainment gap by SEN: There was a narrower Attainment 8 gap among the long-term fostered children with a SEN and without a SEN (-11 points with a SEN) compared to all pupils with and without a SEN (-22 points with a SEN).<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> DfE *Key Stage 4 performance 2019 (revised)*

<sup>84</sup> DfE *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2019 National Tables Table 5b*

## Progress between KS2 and KS4

Children are expected to make two levels of progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. A Progress 8 score is a measure used in England to assess the progress that pupils make between the end of primary school (Key Stage 2) and the end of secondary school (Key Stage 4). Progress 8 scores vary from year to year, and Figure 2 presents the average scores for 2018/19.<sup>85</sup> A negative score indicates below expected progress, while a zero or above indicates that the rate of progress aligns with the national average for pupils with the same starting point at Key Stage 2 (KS2).

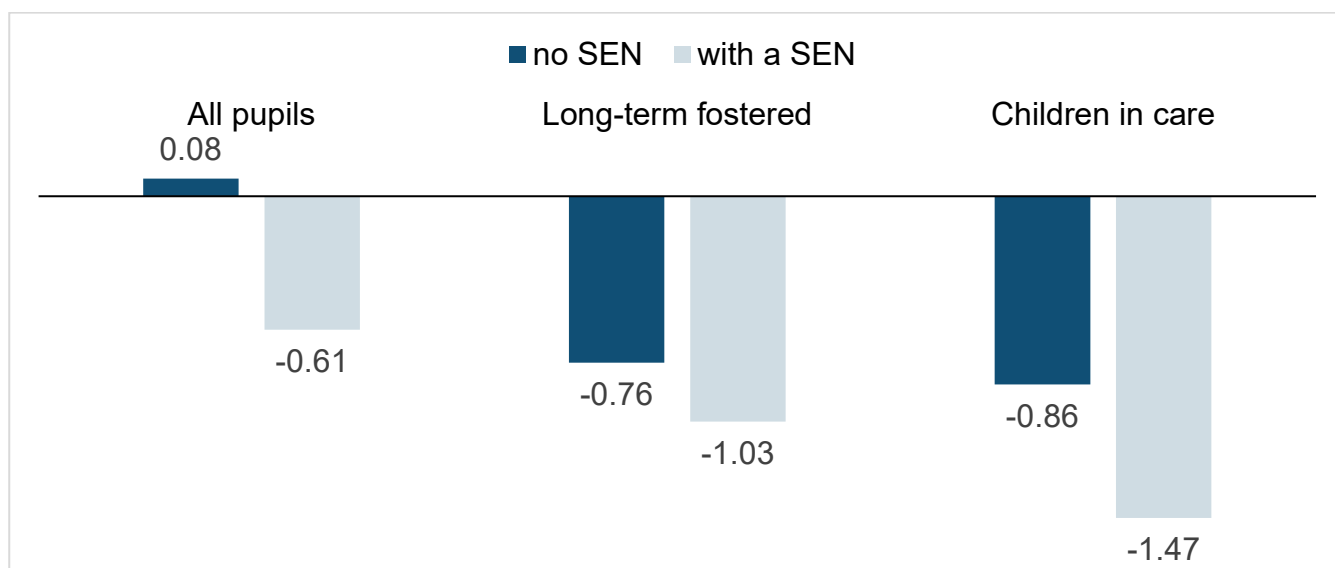
- None of the long-term fostered children who were below the expected level at Key Stage 2 were able to reach the expected level at Key Stage 4
- 77% of long-term fostered children who had reached, and 22% who had exceeded the expected KS2 level, did not attain the expected level at KS4
- Children in long-term foster care made less progress than all pupils who started with the same baseline at KS2. The average Progress 8 score for children in long-term foster care was -0.76, suggesting that if a child was expected to achieve a grade 4 in a subject based on their KS2 results, they were actually closer to a grade 3
- In 2018/19, long-term fostered children without a SEN had a similar Progress 8 score (-0.76) to all pupils with a SEN (-0.61). However, their average Progress 8 score was higher than that of children who had been continuously looked after for over a year (Figure 2)<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> DfE Key Stage 4 Performance revised (2019)

<sup>86</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-catalogue/data-set/72013ab8-d99e-4254-baf9-9a2a7ef5b69c> CLA Outcomes National Tables 2018/19

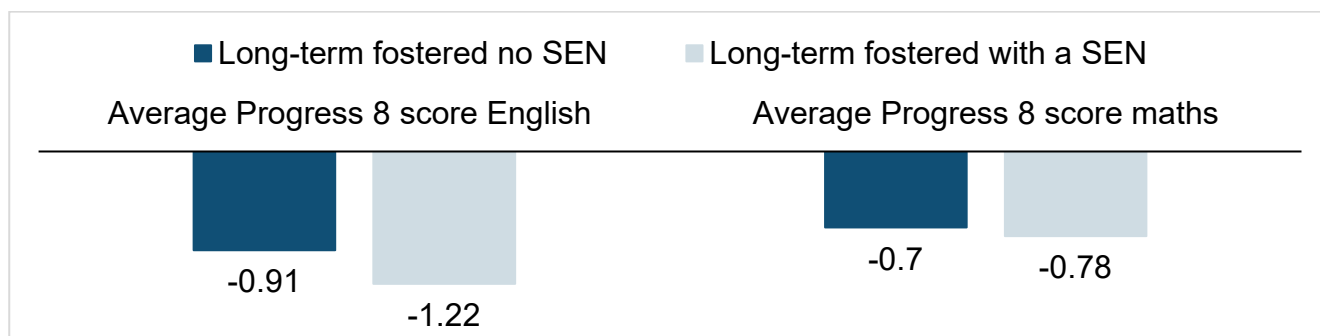
**Figure 2: Average (mean) Progress 8 scores for all pupils, children in long-term foster care and children in care by SEN (2018/19)**



Long-term foster children, base n=350. Source ONS Children in care n=5,430 All pupils, base n=542,570. Source DfE.

The Progress 8 scores in English for children in long-term foster care lagged most behind the Progress 8 scores in maths in 2018/19 (Figure 3). The same pattern of lower Progress 8 English scores was observed every year from 2015/16 to 2018/19.

**Figure 3: The long-term fostered children: average Progress 8 score in English and maths 2018/19 by SEN**



Long-term foster children, base n=350. Source ONS.

## Predicting attainment at KS4: the regression models

Regression models were developed to examine the factors present in the administrative datasets that predicted the long-term educational attainment of foster care children at KS4. Some known risks to academic achievement, such as criminal convictions and misuse of drugs or alcohol, had minimal frequencies and could not be used. Initial

regression models found that some of the variables (child's age at entry to care, age at the long-term foster care decision, reason for entry to care) in the social care datasets were not associated with attainment at KS4 and were not included in the final models.

Factors included in the regression models were the known risks previously described (SEN, placement changes, persistent absenteeism, suspensions) and other factors (sex, ethnicity, type of school attended, residential placements, going missing from placement, KS2 attainment) that have also been associated with attainment.

**Sex:** In the general population, boys perform worse than girls on most major educational indicators throughout their school years. Compared to girls, boys are more likely to have an identified SEN, be suspended, and less likely to meet the expected standards at KS2 or KS4.<sup>87</sup>

**Ethnicity:** On average, a larger proportion of minority ethnic groups than White pupils achieve five or more GCSEs.<sup>88</sup>

**Type of school attended:** At Key Stage 4, approximately one-third (34%) of the long-term fostered children attended a converter academy. National data showed that between 2015/16 and 2018/19, converter academies had, on average, higher Attainment 8 scores compared with other mainstream settings. It has been suggested that these schools were already high-performing and chose to convert early.<sup>89</sup> Data were not available on schools' OFSTED ratings.

**Residential placements:** Residential placements are used when young people cannot be, or refuse to be, cared for in a family-based setting, or when they have special needs for which residential care is more appropriate. 80 (7%) of the young people who initially had a long-term foster placement had a residential placement (ranging from 1 to 8) before the end of Key Stage 4.

**Going missing from placement** is an indicator of young people's emotional and psychological distress and increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and gangs.<sup>90</sup> Ninety (8%) of the long-term fostered children had been reported missing on three or more occasions.

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<sup>87</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2024-0043/>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/>

<sup>89</sup> DfE *Key Stage 4 including Multi-academy Trust performance 2018 (revised)* Jan page 35

<sup>90</sup> [Children who run away or go missing from home or care - GOV.UK](#)

## The regression models

Binary logistic regressions were conducted separately for long-term fostered children with (53%) and without a SEN (47%) to ascertain the effects of the selected variables on the likelihood of:

- 1) Attaining any pass at KS4<sup>91</sup>
- 2) Attaining Level 2: five or more GCSEs or equivalent qualifications, grades 9-4
- 3) Attaining Level 2: five or more GCSEs, grades 9-4, including English and maths (GCSE and applied only)

**The full results of the regression models are available in Additional Tables 28-33 .**

- Overall, KS2 attainment at the expected or higher levels consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of success for all children at KS4. The very high probabilities (91-99%) demonstrated that KS2 results were a powerful indicator of later achievement. The odds ratios increased as the KS4 attainment level rose from any pass to Level 2, including English and maths, indicating that KS2 attainment had increasing predictive power for the higher KS4 achievement thresholds
- Persistent absence during the KS4 years was also a consistent factor producing low odds ratios across all levels of attainment, confirming its strong negative impact
- Placement changes, especially five or more after the long-term foster care decision, were particularly detrimental for children without a SEN and the children's probability of attainment at Level 2
- Residential placements were linked to lower probabilities of attainment for children without a SEN and were not a statistically significant factor for children with a SEN
- Being a girl and non-White ethnicity were positive predictors of attainment at the Level 2 threshold (65%-67%) for all the long-term fostered children, but slightly less so for children with a SEN
- Attending an academy converter was only a predictor of success at the lowest levels of attainment (achieving any pass at KS4). Summer birthdays were not a statistically significant factor in any of the regression models, perhaps because their impact was already accounted for in the KS2 results

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<sup>91</sup> Any pass at all in GCSE or equivalents (including S96, WOLF, first Entry and vocational qualifications capping)

Table 15 summarises the findings from Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.

**Table 15 Summary of factors predicting academic attainment from KS1 to KS4  
(2006/07-2018/19)**

| <b>Factors increasing the odds of attainment</b>          | <b>KS1<br/>Average point score</b> | <b>KS2<br/>Average point score</b> | <b>KS4<br/>No SEN<br/>Any pass</b> | <b>KS4<br/>SEN<br/>Any pass</b> | <b>KS4<br/>No SEN<br/>Level 2 threshold</b> | <b>KS4<br/>SEN<br/>Level 2 threshold</b> |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Attained the expected Level at the earlier Key Stage      | n/a                                | √                                  | √                                  | √                               | √   | √  |
| Born October-April  | √                                  | √                                  | n/s                                | n/s                             | n/s   | n/s                                      |
| Female  | n/s                                | √                                  | √                                  | n/s                             | √   | n/s                                      |
| Minority ethnicity  | √                                  | √                                  | √                                  | n/s                             | √   | n/s                                      |
| Entered care 0-2yrs                                       | √                                  | n/s                                | n/s                                | n/s                             | n/s   | n/s                                      |
| None or one change of placement after permanence decision | n/a                                | √                                  | √                                  | n/s                             | √   | √  |
| Not going missing from placement                          | n/a                                | n/a                                | n/s                                | √                               | n/s   | n/s                                      |
| No suspensions  | n/a                                | √                                  | n/s                                | n/s                             | n/s   | n/s                                      |
| Good school attendance                                    | n/a                                | n/s                                | n/s                                | √                               | √   | √  |
| Attending an academy converter                            | n/a                                | n/a                                | √                                  | √                               | n/s   | n/s                                      |
| No residential placements                                 | n/a                                | n/a                                | √                                  | √                               | n/s   | n/s                                      |

√ = statistically associated with attainment. N/A =Not applicable or available and not entered into regression models. N/S = not statistically significant. Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

## Last social care placements

Table 16 shows the final placement type for young people in long-term foster care before they left care. Although 67% of these young people had their last placement in long-term foster care, 16% of these placements occurred during adolescence and were with a different foster carer than the original carer. 10% were in residential care, and 9% had left their placements before turning 18 to live independently.

The concept of permanence includes young people having support throughout childhood *and beyond*. The transition into adulthood is a particularly vulnerable time when support from trusted adults is needed.<sup>92</sup> The administrative data does not record information on whether young people remain connected to their carers. Of the 790 young people in long-term foster care at age 17, 63% of those placements became Staying Put placements when the young people left care at age 18.

**Table 16 Young people in long-term foster care: last placement (2018- 2021)**

| Type of placement   | Number | %    |
|---|--------|------|
| Long-term unrelated foster care   | 600    | 51%  |
| Long-term foster care with relatives  | 190    | 16%  |
| Independent living  | 110    | 9%   |
| Children's homes unregulated  | 90     | 7%   |
| Foster care   | 80     | 7%   |
| Placed with parents   | 50     | 6%   |
| Children's homes regulated  | 30     | 3%   |
| Residential including NHS medical or nursing/mother and baby units/ residential schools | 10     | k%   |
| Other institutions, including youth offending   | 10     | k%   |
| Total   | 1,170  | 100% |

k =<1% Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

As indicated above, by the end of Key Stage 4, most (74%) long-term fostered children had not attained Level 2 English and maths (grade 9-4), and therefore their post-16 options were constrained.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Care-Leaver-Rapid-Review-24.10.17-final-proof-2.pdf>

<sup>93</sup> [Maths and English provision in post-16 education - GOV.UK](#) In 2025, the government changed the conditions for some apprenticeships [10,000 more apprentices as government slashes red tape to boost growth - GOV.UK](#)

Between 2016/17 and 2022/23, following Key Stage 4, 8% of young people remained in their maintained school sixth forms after A-levels or repeated their KS4 exams, while the majority entered an FE institution. The following section reports the young people's attainment post-16 up to 2023, when the available data ended.

## Education post-16 years

### Summary: post 16 attainment

Following Key Stage 4 and between 2016/17 and 2022/23:

85% of long-term fostered young people chose to enrol in further education institutions, and 8% remained in their maintained school sixth forms following A-level courses or repeating their KS4 exams. In comparison, 45% of young people in the population (age 16-17) were studying in schools and 40% in FE institutions in 2020.

22% of long-term fostered young people in FE had an Education and Health Care Plan, compared with approximately 6% of all 16- to 19-year-olds enrolled in FE in 2023.

Most (67%) of the long-term fostered young people did not begin their learning in FE directly from full-time education, but after a period of unemployment or employment.

Most (66%) of those entering FE had not achieved Level 2 (5 or more GCSEs, Grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications).

By age 19, a Level 2 qualification had been achieved by: 48% of all the long-term fostered young people, 55% of all pupils with a SEN, 66% of those eligible for free school meals and 85% of pupils.

By age 19, 30% of the long-term fostered young people had attained English and maths, grade 9-4, compared to 41% of pupils with a SEN and 76% of all pupils.

By age 19, 22% had attained a Level 3 qualification compared to 29% of all pupils with a SEN and 61% of all pupils.

By age 22, 10% of the long-term fostered young people had passed 8-14 GCSEs grades 9-4.

Placement changes had a noticeable adverse effect on the probability of attaining any academic level by age 19. 56% of long-term fostered young people with none or one placement move after their permanence decision attained a Level 2 qualification, compared to 22% of young people with 5 or more placement moves.

By 2021, 190 (16%) of the 1,170 long-term fostered young people had entered Higher Education.

Young people's post-16 education was analysed by linking the data from Key Stage 4 (ages 15-16) and Key Stage 5 (ages 16-18) from the National Pupil Database with the National Client Caseload System, and the Individualised Learner Records (ILR). The ILR includes data on young people studying in the Further Education and Skills sector (FE) from age 16, provided by Further Education Colleges, former External Institutions, Sixth Form Colleges, Training Organisations, Local Authorities, Academies, and Voluntary and Community Organisations.

## Long-term fostered young people and entry to General Further Education

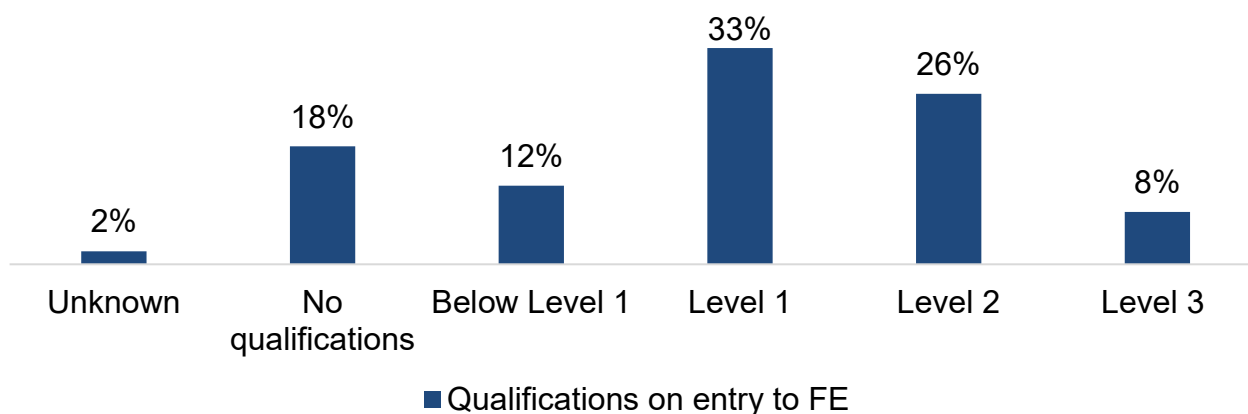
- Unlike their peers, 990 (85%) young people in long-term foster care chose to study post-16 in further education institutions rather than in school sixth forms. In 2020, 45% of all young people in the population aged 16-17 were studying in schools, 40% in further education (FE) or sixth form colleges, and 15% were not in further education<sup>94</sup>
- 22% of long-term fostered young people in FE had an Education and Health Care Plan, compared to approximately 6% of 16 to 19-year-olds who enrolled in FE in 2023<sup>95</sup>
- 33% entered FE directly from full-time education. Most (67%) of the long-term fostered young people did not begin their learning in FE directly from full-time education, but after a period of unemployment or employment
- Most (63%) of those entering FE had not achieved Level 2 (5 or more GCSEs, Grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications (Figure 4)

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<sup>94</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2020>

<sup>95</sup> <https://natspec.org.uk/key-facts-2025-data-and-trends-for-send-in-fe/>

**Figure 4: Highest prior education level before entering the FE sector: young people who had been in long-term foster care (2016/17-2022/23)**



Base n=990 Source ONS.

## Mode of study, courses and subjects in FE

- Just over half (54%) of the long-term fostered young people in FE planned to study full-time. Others (46%) planned to study through distance and online learning, often combining learning with employment <sup>96</sup>
- 47% of the long-term fostered young people who enrolled in FE had registered for a Preparation for Life and Work course (Table 17). These courses aim to equip learners with basic skills (literacy, numeracy, and ICT), employability skills (e.g., interview techniques and CV writing), and personal and social development (e.g., confidence-building, teamwork, and problem-solving). The courses are often designed for those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or learning difficulties and serve as a pre-vocational qualification to support progression to further learning, including GCSEs. Most of those registering for Preparation for Life and Work courses were developing essential skills in literacy and numeracy, and 38% were undertaking courses aimed at improving English and maths skills up to Level 2 (GCSE grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications). Preparation for Life and Work, along with Health, Public Services, and Care, are the most frequently chosen subjects for all young people (age 19-25) entering FE<sup>97</sup>
- 38% of the long-term fostered young people were studying for a vocational qualification leading to employment opportunities
- 16% of the long-term fostered young people were taking Level 3 subjects that could lead to university entrance

<sup>96</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/data-guidance>. This dataset covers age 16-25 in 2023

**Table 17 Long-term foster care young people: subject of the learning programme in a FE institution (2016/17-2022/23)**

| Subject   | Number | Percentage |
|---|--------|------------|
| Preparation for life and work                   | 450    | 47%        |
| Health, public services and care                | 90     | 9%         |
| Languages, literature and culture               | 90     | 9%         |
| Science and maths                               | 70     | 8%         |
| Retail and commercial                           | 50     | 5%         |
| Arts, media, and publishing                     | 40     | 4%         |
| Engineering and manufacturing                   | 30     | 3%         |
| Construction planning and the built environment | 30     | 3%         |
| Business, administration and law                | 30     | 3%         |
| Leisure, travel and tourism                     | 20     | 2%         |
| Agriculture, horticulture and animal care       | 20     | 2%         |
| Social sciences                                 | 10     | 1%         |
| Information and communication technology        | 10     | 1%         |
| Education and training                          | C      | C%         |
| History, philosophy, theology                   | C      | C%         |
| Total   | 990    | 100%       |

. C is less than 10 and is suppressed Base n=990 Source ONS

## Young people who withdrew from the FE learning aim

By 2023, when the available data ended, 150 (15%) long-term fostered young people had withdrawn from their FE learning aim. Most of these young people had been enrolled on a Preparation for Life and Work course. The reasons for withdrawal were mainly related to the young person's behaviour (n=90), such as exclusion, non-attendance, or failure to submit coursework. Twenty young people withdrew due to personal reasons (injury/illness and financial difficulties), and 40 withdrew from their course because they transferred to a different provider or moved to a new learning aim.

## Level 2 and Level 3 attainment age 16-25

Information on the outcomes of young people's post-16 studies can be found in the ILR, the Key Stage 5 datasets, and the Young Person's Matched Administrative Dataset (YPMAD). The attainment data reported here mainly derive from the YPMAD, as this dataset links results across multiple datasets. The YPMAD dataset primarily focuses on attainment by age 19, as this is when most young people in the general population have achieved Level 2 and 3 but does include attainment up to age 25.<sup>97</sup> The YPMAD contains 'headline' measures of Level 2 attainment (5 or more GCSEs or equivalent qualifications) and Level 3 attainment (2 or more A levels or equivalent qualifications) for the entire population of young people, including those educated in independent schools.

The YPMAD also includes additional information on attainment at Level 2 in both English and maths for pupils educated in state-funded schools when aged 15, and on attainment by pupil characteristics for those in Year 11 (age 15 or 16). Therefore, due to differences in sampling, the YPMAD attainment data by pupil characteristics or by English and maths cannot be compared with the YPMAD 'headline' measures, as the latter include pupils from all types of schools. The comparison data used in this section on all students is available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2022-23>

The COVID-19 pandemic did not affect the KS4 results of fostered young people but did affect exams and assessments in 2020 and 2021, when alternative processes were used to award grades. For this group of young people in long-term foster care, their post-16 studies were also affected (e.g., A-levels, vocational qualifications).

By 2022/23, all the long-term fostered young people (n=1,170) were over 19. As of 31 August 2023 (end of available data): 44% were aged 20-21, 46% were aged 22-23, and 10% were aged 24.

Data from all types of post-16 learning institutions were used to summarise educational attainment, noting that some young people had not yet completed their studies and were still in FE or other settings.

### Level 3 qualification (2+ A levels or equivalent qualifications) (2017/18-2022/23)

- By age 19, 22% of all the long-term fostered young people had attained a Level 3 qualification, compared to 29% of all students with a SEN, 37% of those eligible for free school meals, and 61% of all students<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/level-2-and-3-attainment-by-young-people-aged-19/2022-23>. Comparison data used the academic year 2022-23

- By age 24, 25% of all the long-term fostered young people had a Level 3 qualification: 14% had been awarded Level 3 Vocationally Recognised Qualifications (VRQ) and/or National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ),<sup>98</sup> (8%) attained two or more A levels, 2% had been awarded Level 3 through Foundations and work-based learning, and 2% had achieved a Level 3 modern apprenticeship<sup>99</sup>

### **Level 2 qualification**

- By age 19, a Level 2 qualification had been achieved by: 48% of the long-term fostered young people, 55% of all pupils with a SEN, 66% of those eligible for free school meals and 85% of pupils.
- By age 24, 50% of the long-term fostered young people held a Level 2 qualification.
- 26% of the long-term fostered young people obtained a Level 2 qualification through an academic route in schools, 21% through an FE qualification, and 3% through work-based learning. Of the 53% of long-term fostered young people with an identified SEN, 12% achieved their Level 2 qualification by the end of KS4 (age 16), increasing to 35% by age 24.
- By age 19, 30% of the long-term fostered young people had attained Level 2 English and maths, compared with 41% of pupils with a SEN and 76% of all pupils. By age 24, a further 1% of the long-term fostered young people had passed English and maths
- 10% of the long-term fostered young people had passed 8-14 GCSEs grades 9-4 by age 22 (Additional Table 34)

### **Level 1 qualification**

- By age 19, 73% of the long-term fostered young people had achieved Level 1, 70% through academic qualifications, and 3% by other routes
- 56% of the long-term fostered young people had at least one GCSE

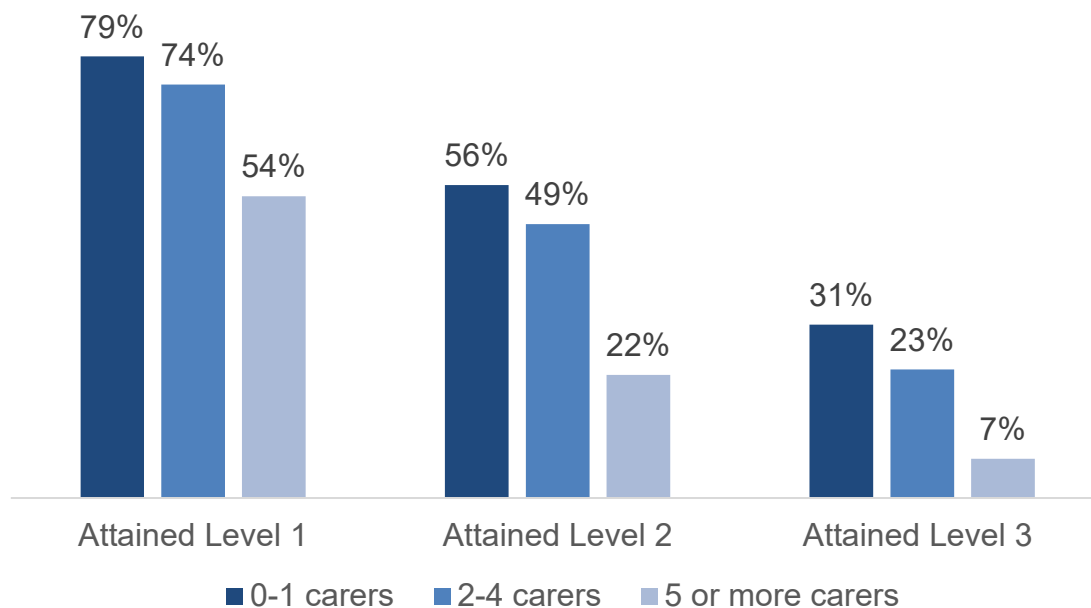
Placement changes reduced the likelihood of reaching any academic level by age 19 (Figure 5). By age 19, 56% of long-term fostered young people with none or only one placement change after their permanence decision achieved a Level 2 qualification, compared to 22% of those with five or more placement moves.

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<sup>98</sup> VRQs are more study based and involve tests, while NVQs are work-based and assessed through practical assignments

<sup>99</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/271af2fd-b022-402a-076f-08db29e96c41>

**Figure 5: Attainment of long-term fostered young people by age 19 and placement changes (2004/5-2020/21)**



Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

## Routes to Level 2 and 3 qualifications

Previous research has indicated that children in care are less likely to remain in school and, if they are in education after 16, are more likely to be in the FE sector compared to their peers of the same age (Nelson and Anderson, 2020; Espinoza et al., 2020; Civitas, 2023; Feinstein et al., 2025). At the end of KS4, 26% of long-term fostered children had achieved a Level 2 qualification, and a further 24% had gained one by age 24 through study in the FE sector. Of all the young people (n=290) who achieved a Level 3 qualification, 200 did so in the Further Education (FE) sector (Table 18).

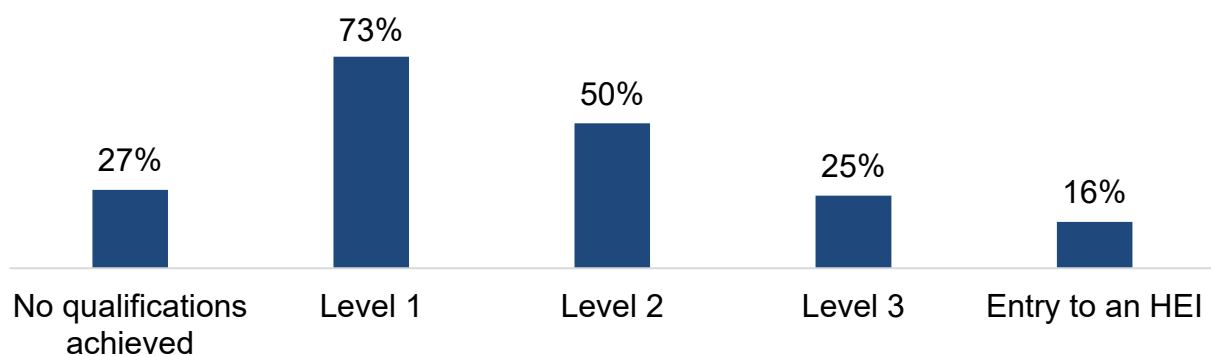
**Table 18 Long-term fostered young people: type of provision where Level 2 and Level 3 were achieved by age 24 (2015/16-2022/23)**

|  | <b>Level 2</b> | <b>Level 3</b> |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Converter academy at KS4 or 6 <sup>th</sup> form   | 130 (11%)      | 50 (4%)        |
| Maintained school at KS4 or 6 <sup>th</sup> form   | 90 (8%)        | 20 (2%)        |
| Sponsored academy at KS4 or 6 <sup>th</sup> form   | 60 (5%)        | 10 (k%)        |
| Other provisions, e.g., CTCs, independent schools, free schools, special schools at KS4 or 6 <sup>th</sup> forms | 20 (2%)        | 10 (k%)        |
| FE colleges post-16  | 220 (19%)      | 140 (12%)      |
| Work-based learning post-16  | 30 (3%)        | 20 (2%)        |
| Sixth form colleges post-16  | 20 (2%)        | 30 (3%)        |
| Other FE provision post-16   | c (c%)         | 10 (k%)        |
| No qualification   | 590 (50%)      | 880 (75%)      |
| Total  | 1,170 (100%)   | 1,170 (100%)   |

K= <1%; c= suppressed as < 10; Base n=1,170; Source: ONS

Figure 6 summarises the young people’s attainment. Additional Table 35 shows the ages at which Levels 2 and 3 were obtained.

**Figure 6: Long-term fostered young people: attainment by age 24 (2015/16-2022/23)**



Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

## Higher Education

A range of policy and practice interventions have been implemented to increase the number of previously looked after young people entering higher education (HE). Yet the numbers entering remain low. In 2019-20, when this sample of long-term fostered young

people were aged 18 or older, 14% per cent of young people who had been looked after for more than a year were in HE by age 19, as were 27% of pupils receiving free school meals and 45% of all other school students.<sup>100</sup> The national statistics present a time frame of entering HE by age 19 (allowing for a gap year or retaken exams), but are likely to underestimate the numbers of care-experienced students entering, as previous research (e.g., Harrison, 2019) has shown that they often enter HE at age 20 or older.

Research has highlighted the educational challenges that care-experienced young people face, including disruptions in education due to placement and school changes, high levels of special educational needs, and a lack of support and guidance from caregivers or professionals.<sup>101 102</sup>

For the young people in this sample, there were additional challenges at higher education institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the 2019/20 pandemic, University courses moved online, and many care-experienced young people found themselves isolated on campuses, as other students had returned home to live with their parents. Campus IT support and library services were closed, and their employment ceased. In 2021, only 40% of universities and colleges offered accommodation assistance, and just under a third provided year-round accommodation.<sup>103</sup>

## Progressing to a Higher Education Institution (HEI)

The HESA data available covered the years 2018/19-2020/21 (i.e. a year behind the rest of the educational data).

By 2021, 190 (16%) of the long-term fostered young people had entered Higher Education (170 with a Level 3 qualification and 20 young people with other qualifications): 14% by age 19 and a further 2% by age 24.

- 54% were females and 45% were males
- 64% were of White ethnicity, 15% Mixed/Other ethnicity, 11% Black Caribbean/African, and 8% of Asian ethnicity
- 22% had an identified SEN at KS4
- 84% of the young people who had been in long-term foster care self-identified as being a care leaver/care experienced on their UCAS entry form, but 16% did not

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<sup>100</sup> [Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2021/22 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>101</sup> <https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/pathwaysproject/home>  
<https://www.beds.ac.uk/goldbergcentre/goldberg-current-research/cctc/>

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/news-and-insights/ucas-reports/next-steps-what-experience-students-care-background-education-report>

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consistency-needed-care-experienced-students-and-higher-education/>

The data provided did not contain information on whether the 120 young people (39% of those with Level 3 qualifications) who did not progress to a HEI preferred to enter employment, or whether the closure of campuses due to the pandemic or concerns about finances acted as a deterrent.

### **The subjects studied**

Between 2019/20 and 2022/23, most of the long-term fostered young people were studying for their first degree; 7% of those who were in HE already had an undergraduate degree and were continuing their studies on a higher degree programme (research or taught) or were enrolled on a postgraduate education course. The young people had chosen to study various subjects (Table 19). Those studying for a social sciences degree were reading sociology, politics or economics, and a few were on social work degree programmes. Young people on courses categorised as allied to medicine were primarily pursuing nursing degrees or programmes. The most popular subject group for all young people in HE in the UK in 2017/18 was Business and Administration studies.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> DfE 2018/19 Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom 2019

**Table 19 Long-term fostered young people: subjects studied in Higher Education (2018/19-2021/22)**

|  | Long-term fostered n (%) |
|--|--------------------------|
| Social studies/social sciences                       | 30 (15%)                 |
| Business and administration studies                  | 20 (13%)                 |
| Biological and sports sciences                       | 20 (13%)                 |
| Creative arts, performing arts, music, dance, design | 20 (13%)                 |
| Subjects allied to medicine                          | 10 (5%)                  |
| Computer sciences                                    | 10 (5%)                  |
| Law  | 10 (5%)                  |
| Education and teaching                               | 10 (5%)                  |
| Media, journalism, communication                     | 10 (5%)                  |
| Psychology   | 10 (4%)                  |
| Engineering and technology                           | 10(4%)                   |
| Languages and area studies                           | 10 (3%)                  |
| Historical, philosophical and religious studies      | 10 (3%)                  |
| Agriculture, food and related subjects               | c (c%)                   |
| Medicine   | c (c%)                   |
| Mathematical sciences                                | c (c%)                   |
| Physical sciences (physics, chemistry)               | c (c%)                   |
| Architecture and planning                            | c (c%)                   |
| Geography, earth sciences                            | c (c%)                   |
| General and combined studies                         | c (c%)                   |
| Total  | 190 (100%)               |

c=suppressed count as less than ten. Base n=190.Source ONS.

### Discontinuity

Fifty (26%) of the 190 long-term fostered young people did not complete their course and withdrew from it. The main reasons for non-completion were personal, including health issues and financial constraints. Ten young people failed to complete their studies due to academic failure or were excluded due to their behaviour. Discontinuity rates for this sample of young people were higher than previously reported for care-experienced young people (Feinstein et al., 2025; Office for Students, 2020). The impact of lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic is known to have disproportionately affected certain

groups of young people, including those who were care-experienced (London School of Economics, 2021). Loss of income from part-time employment in hospitality and retail, the loss of accommodation and support in HE as University accommodation, libraries, and IT facilities closed, and loss of academic and emotional support are all likely to have led to more young people withdrawing from HE.

### **Attainment and degree classification**

Sixty young people had completed their degree. Many of the degrees and programmes studied did not use the Honours classification system (10 young people had gained an upper-second and 10 a lower-second degree). The remaining 80 young people were expected to complete their degrees or programmes in 2025/6.

## Discussion

The Family Routes study aims to understand the long-term outcomes for children in various types of permanence arrangements. Using linked DfE administrative data, this report focuses on children who had a long-term (permanent) foster care decision and tracks their educational attainment from age 7 to 24. The children entered care before the age of 8 and had not left care under any permanence order; they had grown up in care.

A systematic review (O'Higgins et al. 2017) reported that a consistent research finding is that children in care tend to have lower educational outcomes than non-looked after children. However, research (e.g., Sebba et al., 2015) has also shown that children who have been looked after for longer than a year have higher attainment than children who have been looked after more recently or those receiving children in need services but not in care.

Previous research has also found that placement stability is a key condition for children to catch up educationally (Sinclair et al., 2019; Sinclair and Luke, 2020) and to experience more positive psychological outcomes (Maguire et al., 2024). The linked administrative data available for the '*Family Routes*' study enabled an analysis of placement stability regarding educational attainment. Other aspects of permanence could not be considered, as they are not captured in the data, such as the quality of relationships (e.g., feelings of trust and belonging).

Due to uncertainty about whether the placement at the time of the long-term foster care decision was intended to be the child's long-term placement or whether a different placement was to be sought, we allowed one further move before counting the number of placement changes. Half (51%) of the children had remained in the same placement until they left care, and 43% were in a Staying Put placement at age 19 to provide support during the transition to adulthood. However, the plans for permanence for nearly half the children had not been achieved.

For long-term fostered children, changes in placements negatively impacted the probability of reaching expected attainment levels at Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4), especially for those without special educational needs (SEN). More than half (56%) of children in stable placements gained a Level 2 qualification, compared to 22% of children who experienced five or more placement changes. Only 7% of young people with five or more placements attained a Level 3 qualification. The concept of early permanence—used to minimise placement moves for children being adopted—should also be applied to children in long-term foster care. The main aim of early permanence is to provide children with stability by preventing repeated moves and broken attachments. This is particularly crucial for pre-school children; in this sample, one in six children who entered care under the age of 2 experienced five or more placements after their permanence decision was made.

Policy and practice have emphasised the importance of reducing school changes to support educational achievement. Although placements changed, most children in long-term foster care did not change schools during exam years. The education data indicated that school changes were rare among this sample of long-term fostered children. At KS2, 10% and at KS4, 5% had changed schools in the two years before exams.

Over half (53%) of the long-term fostered children met or exceeded the expected attainment standard at Key Stage 1, 55% at Key Stage 2, and 25% at Key Stage 4. The gap in educational attainment between children in long-term foster care and their peers was evident at Key Stage 1 (age 6/7) and became particularly marked at Key Stage 4 (age 15/16). The low attainment in English Writing at KS2 indicates that interventions could be more specifically targeted towards those skills in primary school, as they are vital for success in KS4 exams. Attainment at KS2 was the strongest predictor of KS4 attainment, suggesting that interventions and support should be more closely focused on the primary years. Persistent absenteeism from primary school was recorded for 12% of fostered children, rising to 17% in Year 10 or 11. This raises important questions about how effectively their absenteeism had been addressed during primary school.

Children in long-term foster care with a SEN had a low probability of attaining the expected educational levels at KS4. Just 12% of the long-term fostered young people with a SEN attained Level 2 at Key Stage 4, compared to 25% of all pupils with a SEN in 2018/19. The data cannot explain why children in long-term foster care with a SEN had lower educational attainment than their peers with a SEN. Evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee on the SEN system highlighted higher rates of exclusions, suspensions, and absences, a lack of teacher training in SEN, insufficient SEN funding, and local variation in the provision of SEN support, all of which contribute to lower attainment. In addition, the Children's Commissioner (2021) emphasised that children often had multiple, overlapping special educational needs that could go unrecognised.

Most (74%) of the long-term fostered children did not reach the expected Level 2 threshold (5 or more GCSEs at grades 9-4 or equivalents) by the age of 15 or 16, and few (26%) attained a grade 9-4 in English and maths. However, young people continued to study and completed their Level 2 qualifications at older ages than their peers and in FE institutions rather than mainstream schools. By age 24, 50% had a Level 2 qualification and 31% had English and maths (GCSE grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications). The progress of the young people with an identified SEN was particularly marked. FE institutions provided sufficient support to enable more young people with a SEN to attain Level 2, as the percentage with a Level 2 qualification rose from 12% at the end of KS4 (age 15 or 16) to 35% by age 24. Previous research (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2025; Harrison et al., 2023) has also shown that care-experienced young people achieve at older ages compared to their peers.

There was also a small group of higher achievers in the long-term fostered dataset: 10% had passed 8-13 GCSEs at Grades 9-4 by age 22, and 16% had entered a higher education institution (HEI). There is far less known about the characteristics of high attainers at KS2 and KS4, as well as what may support their continued attainment. There is much to learn from those who succeed despite adversity, and this is an area that warrants further research.

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## Additional Tables and Figures

**Table 20 Multiple regression: factors predicting long-term fostered children's Key Stage 1 average point score (2005/06-2010/11)**

| Key Stage 1 Average Point score   | B     | 95% CI for B Lower | 95% CI for B Upper | SE B | $\beta$ | R <sup>2</sup> | AR <sup>2</sup> |
|---|-------|--------------------|--------------------|------|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Model   | -     | -                  | -                  | -    | -       | .324           | .319            |
| Constant  | 15.17 | 13.68              | 16.67              | .76  | -       | -              | -               |
| Ethnicity (reference category = White)                                    | .84   | .24                | 1.43               | .30  | .07***  | -              | -               |
| Sex (reference category = female)   | .40   | -.08               | .87                | .24  | .04     | -              | -               |
| Summer birthday (reference category = no)                                 | -1.13 | -1.59              | -.66               | .24  | -.12*** | -              | -               |
| Reason for entry to care (reference category = abuse or neglect)          | -.46  | -4.02              | .05                | .26  | -.04    | -              | -               |
| Age at entry to care (reference category = 0-2 years compared to age 3-7) | -.30  | -.57               | -.02               | .14  | -.05*   | -              | -               |
| SEN identified (reference category = no)                                  | -5.40 | -5.90              | -4.90              | .26  | -.53*** | -              | -               |

Base n=1,140 Source ONS. Model = Enter method in SPSS statistics, *B* = unstandardised regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *SE B* = standard error of the coefficient  $\beta$  = standardised coefficient; R<sup>2</sup> = coefficient of determination; AR<sup>2</sup> = adjusted R<sup>2</sup> \*p<.05; \*\* p<.01 \*\*\*p<.001

Four variables were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and added to the prediction. Summer birthdays, ethnicity, SEN, and age at entry to care statistically significantly predicted KS1 scores ( $F(10,1130) = 77.25$ ,  $p < .001$ , adj.  $R^2 = .319$ ). The adjusted R-squared is an estimate of the effect size, i.e., the addition of all the independent variables into the regression model explains 32% of the variance in KS1 point scores. While Key Stage 1 scores are recorded in whole numbers, the regression model estimated average differences between groups. For example, a coefficient of -0.30 for 'age at entry to care (3–7 years)' means that, on average, children who entered care later scored slightly lower than those who entered earlier. This does not imply that any individual child scored a fraction of a point lower. Instead, it reflects a group-level trend across the sample.

## Key Stage 2

**Table 21 Long-term fostered children: KS2 national curriculum awarded for Maths by sex (2010/11-2013/14)**

|                                    | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| <b>Boys</b>                        |        |            |
| Achieved Level 2                   | 10     | 1%         |
| Achieved level 3                   | 130    | 20%        |
| Achieved level 4                   | 260    | 39%        |
| Achieved level 5                   | 90     | 14%        |
| Achieved level 6                   | 10     | 1%         |
| Working at a level below the tests | 150    | 23%        |
| Did not achieve the level          | 10     | 2%         |
| Total                              | 660    | 100%       |
| <b>Girls</b>                       |        |            |
| Achieved Level 2                   | c      | c%         |
| Achieved level 3                   | 110    | 22%        |
| Achieved level 4                   | 240    | 47%        |
| Achieved level 5                   | 60     | 13%        |
| Achieved level 6                   | C      | c%         |
| Working at a level below the tests | 70     | 13%        |
| Did not achieve the level          | 10     | 3%         |
| Total                              | 500    | 100%       |

Base 1,160 Source ONS.

**Table 22 Long-term fostered children: KS2 English reading attainment by sex (2010/11-2013/14)**

|                                    | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| <b>Boys</b>                        |        |            |
| Achieved level 3                   | 80     | 12%        |
| Achieved level 4                   | 240    | 37%        |
| Achieved level 5                   | 140    | 21%        |
| Working at a level below the tests | 160    | 24%        |
| Did not achieve the level          | 40     | 6%         |
| Total                              | 660    | 100%       |
| <b>Girls</b>                       |        |            |
| Achieved level 3                   | 60     | 13%        |
| Achieved level 4                   | 230    | 46%        |
| Achieved level 5                   | 120    | 24%        |
| Working at a level below the tests | 60     | 13%        |
| Did not achieve the level          | 20     | 4%         |
| Total                              | 490    | 100%       |

Base n= 1,150 Source ONS

**Table 23 Long-term fostered children KS2 English Reading and Writing test marks (2010/11-2013/14)**

|                | English reading test.<br>Marks out of 50 | English writing test.<br>Marks out of 50<br>(2011/12 year only) |
|----------------|--|---|
| Mean           | 26                                       | 23  |
| Mode           | 29                                       | 16  |
| Std. Deviation | 10.06                                    | 7.87  |
| Minimum        | 0  | 6   |
| Maximum        | 48                                       | 43  |

Base reading marks n= 940 writing test marks n=180. Source ONS.

**Table 24: Multiple regression: factors predicting long-term fostered children's Key Stage 2 average point score (2010/11-2013/14)**

| Key Stage 2 Average Point score  | B      | 95% CI for B Lower | 95% CI for B Upper | SE B | $\beta$ | $R^2$ | $AR^2$ |
|--|--------|--------------------|--------------------|------|---------|-------|--------|
| Model  | -      | -                  | -                  | -    | -       | .608  | .603   |
| Constant   | 27.48  | 25.62              | 29.34              | .95  | -       | -     | -      |
| Ethnicity (reference category =White)                                  | 1.01   | .29                | 1.73               | .36  | .05***  | -     | -      |
| Sex (reference category =female)                                       | -.61   | -1.20              | -.02               | .30  | -.04**  | -     | -      |
| Summer birthday (reference category =no)                               | -.70   | -1.26              | -.14               | .29  | -.04**  | -     | -      |
| Reason for first entry to care (reference category = abuse or neglect) | .06    | -.57               | .70                | .32  | .00     | -     | -      |
| Age at entry to care (reference category =0-2)                         | .09    | -.24               | .427               | .17  | .01     | -     | -      |
| SEN identified at KS2 (reference category =no)                         | -5.60  | -6.24              | -4.97              | .32  | -.34*** | -     | -      |
| Suspensions in primary school (reference category =no)                 | 1.23   | .42                | 2.03               | .41  | .06**   | -     | -      |
| Joined school in year 6 or 7 (reference category = no)                 | .58    | -.36               | 1.52               | .48  | .02     | -     | -      |
| Persistent absenteeism in primary (reference category =no)             | .86    | -.38               | 2.09               | .63  | .03     | -     | -      |
| Number of placement changes (reference category=0-1)                   | .19    | .06                | .31                | .06  | .06**   | -     | -      |
| Type of school (ref =mainstream)                                       | -14.21 | -15.10             | -13.31             | .45  | -.63*** | -     | -      |

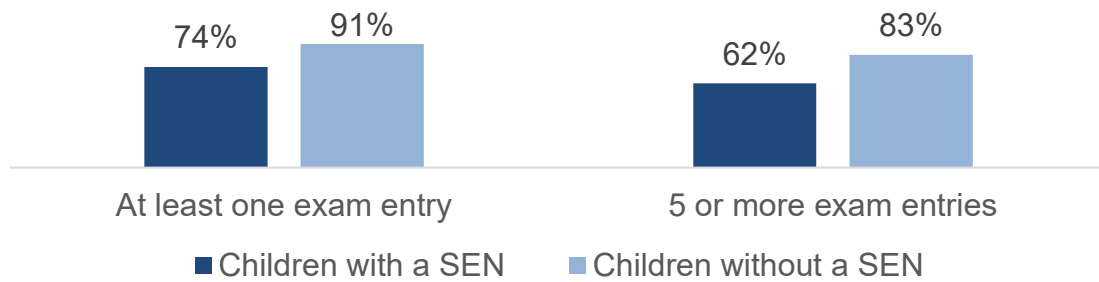
Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

Note Model = Enter method in SPSS statistics: *B* = unstandardised regression coefficient; CI= confidence interval; *SE B* =standard error of the coefficient;  $\beta$  = standardised coefficient;  $R^2$  = coefficient of determination;  $AR^2$  = adjusted  $R^2$

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$  The regression model statistically predicted KS2 scores for children ( $F(10,1150) = 148.60, p < .001, \text{adj } R^2 .603$ ). The adjusted  $R^2$  estimates the effect size (60%), indicating a large effect (Cohen 1998).

## Key Stage 4

**Figure 7: Exams entered at KS4: long-term fostered children with and without a SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**



Base children with a SEN  $n = 620$  and without a SEN  $n = 550$ . Source: ONS.

**Table 25 The primary type of SEN at KS4 for children in long-term foster care (2015/16-2018/19)**

| Types of SEN KS4 data                       | Long-term foster care |
|---|-----------------------|
| Social, emotional, and mental health        | 220 (19%)             |
| Moderate learning difficulty                | 120 (11%)             |
| Specific Learning Difficulties              | 50 (5%)               |
| Autistic spectrum disorder                  | 50 (5%)               |
| Severe learning difficulties                | 40 (4%)               |
| Speech, language and communication needs    | 30 (3%)               |
| Other SEN                                   | 30 (3%)               |
| Profound and multiple learning difficulties | 20 (1%)               |
| Physical disability                         | 10 (1%)               |
| SEN support but no specialist assessment    | 10 (1%)               |
| Multisensory impairment                     | c (c%)                |
| Hearing impairment                          | c (c%)                |
| Visual impairment                           | c (c%)                |
| <b>No SEN</b>                               | <b>550 (47%)</b>      |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

**Table 26 Children in long-term foster care: Entry Level attainment in maths**

| Children in long-term foster care | Entry Level 1 Maths Number | Entry Level 2 Maths Number | Entry Level 3 Maths Number |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Age 14-16                         | 170                        | 150                        | 110                        |
| Age 17-22                         | 50                         | 50                         | 60                         |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

**Table 27 Children in long-term foster care: Entry Level attainment in English**

| <b>Children in long-term foster care</b> | <b>Entry Level 1 English Number</b> | <b>Entry Level 2 English Number</b> | <b>Entry Level 3 English Number entered</b> |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Age 14-16                                | 120                                 | 100                                 | 70  |
| Age 17-22                                | 30                                  | 30                                  | 30  |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

**Table 28 Logistic regression predicting any pass at KS4: children in long-term foster care without a SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**

| <b>Any pass at KS4 no SEN</b>  | <b>B</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>Df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|--|----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no)              | -.80     | .45         | 3.25        | 1         | .07             | .447              | .19-1.07                         |
| Residential placements after a long-term decision (ref category =none) | -1.49    | .67         | 9.08        | 1         | <b>.003</b>     | .179              | .06-.55                          |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)  | .94      | .43         | 4.75        | 1         | <b>.03</b>      | 4.45              | 1.20-16.50                       |
| Sex (ref category=male)  | .72      | .42         | 2.95        | 1         | <b>.03</b>      | 2.57              | 1.10-6.01                        |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)                                | .62      | .40         | 2.46        | 1         | .12             | 1.86              | .86-4.05                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)                         | 1.49     | .60         | 6.15        | 1         | <b>.01</b>      | 4.42              | 1.36-14.34                       |
| KS2 band (low)   | -        | -           | 28.01       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)  | 1.93     | .43         | 20.36       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 6.91              | 2.98-16.02                       |
| KS2 band (high)  | 3.18     | .84         | 14.37       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 24.01             | 4.64-124.31                      |
| Joined school in Yr10 or Yr11 (ref category =no)                       | -1.83    | 1.11        | 2.73        | 1         | .10             | .16               | .02-1.41                         |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1)                         | -        | -           | 6.85        | 2         | <b>.03</b>      | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4)                                      | .29      | .48         | .37         | 1         | .54             | 1.34              | .52-3.40                         |
| Number of placement changes (5-17)                                     | -1.25    | .64         | 3.82        | 1         | <b>.05</b>      | .29               | .08-1.00                         |
| Going missing from placement (ref = no)                                | .39      | .65         | .32         | 1         | .57             | 1.44              | .40-5.18                         |
| Constant   | -.34     | .61         | .32         | 1         | .57             | .71               | -                                |

Base n=550 Source ONS.

**Table 29 Logistic regression predicting any pass at KS4: children in long-term foster care with an identified SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**

| <b>Any pass at KS4 with a SEN</b>                                    | <b>B</b> | <b>SE</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>Df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|--|----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no)            | -.71     | .34       | 4.97        | 1         | <b>.03</b>      | .45               | .23 -0.86                        |
| Residential placements after long-term decision (ref category =none) | -1.91    | .57       | 12.167      | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .15               | .05-.47                          |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)                                      | .51      | .32       | 2.51        | 1         | .11             | 1.77              | .93-3.34                         |
| Sex (ref category=male)  | .22      | .24       | .94         | 1         | .33             | 1.40              | .87-2.24                         |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)                              | .07      | .22       | .10         | 1         | .75             | 1.17              | .74-1.85                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)                       | 2.77     | .47       | 34.71       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 15.96             | 6.35-40.11                       |
| KS2 band (low)   | -        | -         | 45.37       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)  | 2.75     | .41       | 44.10       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 15.59             | 6.92 -35.10                      |
| KS2 band (high)  | 1.28     | .70       | 3.38        | 1         | <.07            | 3.61              | .92-14.21                        |
| Joined school in Yr10 or Yr11 (ref category =no)                     | -.12     | .35       | .121        | 1         | .728            | 1.13              | .57-.2.23                        |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1)                       | -        | -         | 1.39        | 2         | .50             | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4)                                    | .30      | .25       | 1.40        | 1         | .24             | 1.35              | .88-2.21                         |
| Number of placement changes (5-17)                                   | .14      | .39       | .14         | 1         | .71             | 1.15              | .54-.2.48                        |
| Going missing from placement (ref category = no)                     | -1.08    | .52       | 4.33        | 1         | <b>.04</b>      | .34               | .12-.94                          |
| Constant   | -25      | .38       | 42          | 1         | .52             | .78               | -                                |

Base n=620 Source ONS.

## Factors predicting achieving any pass at KS4 2015/16-2018/19

Long-term fostered children without a SEN (n=550). The regression model explained 54% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2 = 167.38$ , df 11,  $p < .001$ )

Long-term fostered children with a SEN (n=620). The regression model explained 40% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2 = 230.70$ , df 11,  $p < .001$ )

Most of the children in long-term foster care had achieved one pass at KS4: 490 (90%) of children without a SEN and 450 (73%) of those with a SEN.

Three factors were statistically significant for all the long-term fostered children

- Previous KS2 attainment was the strongest predictor of achieving any pass at KS4
- Attending an academy converter increased the odds of achieving any pass at KS4, particularly for children with a SEN
- Residential placements after the long-term foster care decision were associated with lower odds of achieving any KS4 pass, especially for children without a SEN

While those three factors were significant for all, other factors were only statistically significant depending on a child's SEN status:

- **Long-term fostered children without a SEN:** Being female or of minority ethnicity increased the odds of achieving a pass. Decreasing the odds of achieving any pass were having five or more changes of placement after their permanence decision.
- **Long-term fostered children with a SEN:** Decreasing the odds of attaining one pass at KS4 were persistent absenteeism and going missing from placement.

**Table 30 Logistic regression predicting attainment of the Level 2 threshold 5+ GCSEs or equivalent qualification grade 9-4: Children in long-term foster care without a SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**

| <b>Level 2 threshold without a SEN</b>                    | <b>B</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no) | -1.45    | .42         | 11.84       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .23               | .10 -.53                         |
| Residential placements (ref category =none)               | -1.42    | 1.15        | 1.52        | 1         | .22             | .24               | .02-2.31                         |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)                           | .73      | .28         | 6.77        | 1         | <b>.01</b>      | 2.07              | 1.20-3.58                        |
| Sex (ref category= male)                                  | .60      | .23         | 6.93        | 1         | <b>.008</b>     | 1.89              | 1.16-2.84                        |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)                   | .21      | .23         | .87         | 1         | .35             | 1.23              | .79-1.93                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)            | .13      | .23         | .36         | 1         | <b>.55</b>      | 1.14              | .73-1.78                         |
| KS2 band (low)  | -        | -           | 80.49       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)                                       | 2.30     | .44         | 26.17       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 9.98              | 4.13-24.11                       |
| KS2 band (high)   | 4.21     | .50         | 70.40       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 67.22             | 25.15-179.65                     |
| Joined school in yr10/11 (ref category=no)                | -1.83    | 1.11        | 2.73        | 1         | .10             | .16               | .02-1.41                         |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1)            | -        | -           | 16.85       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4)                         | .66      | .24         | 7.65        | 1         | <b>.006</b>     | .52               | .32-.82                          |
| Number of placement changes (5-17)                        | -1.64    | .47         | 11.92       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .19               | .08-.49                          |
| Constant  | -2.83    | .48         | 4.20        | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .06               | -                                |

Base n=550 source ONS

**Table 31 Logistic regression predicting attainment of the Level 2 threshold 5+ GCSEs or equivalent qualification, grade 9-4: Children in long-term foster care with an identified SEN (2015/16-2018/19)**

| <b>Level 2 threshold with a SEN</b>                       | <b>B</b> | <b>S.E.</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|---|----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no) | -1.44    | .57         | 6.44        | 1         | <b>&lt;.01</b>  | .24               | .08 -.72                         |
| Residential placements (ref category =none)               | -.08     | 1.15        | .00         | 1         | .95             | 1.08              | .11-10.26                        |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)                           | .54      | .31         | 2.19        | 1         | .14             | 1.72              | .84-3.53                         |
| Sex (ref category=male)                                   | .18      | .31         | .22         | 1         | .57             | 1.19              | .65-2.20                         |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)                   | .14      | .30         | .87         | 1         | .64             | 1.15              | .64-2.06                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)            | .26      | .30         | .75         | 1         | .38             | 1.30              | .72-2.33                         |
| KS2 band (low)  | -        | -           | 75.71       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)                                       | 3.20     | .43         | 56.55       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 24.59             | 10.67-56.64                      |
| KS2 band (high)   | 5.18     | .65         | 62.75       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 177.08            | 49.19-637.41                     |
| Joined school in yr10/11 (ref category=no)                | -2.07    | 1.16        | 3.22        | 1         | .07             | .13               | .01-1.21                         |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1)            | -        | -           | 3.72        | 2         | .16             | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4)                         | -.17     | .32         | .29         | 1         | .59             | .84               | .45-1.57                         |
| Number of placement changes (5-17)                        | -1.08    | .56         | 3.71        | 1         | <b>.05</b>      | .34               | .11-1.09                         |
| Constant  | -4.07    | .46         | 78.05       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .02               | -                                |

Base n= 620. Source ONS.

## Factors predicting attaining Level 2 (grades 9-4 or equivalent qualifications)

Long-term fostered children without a SEN (n=550). The regression model explained 48% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2=7.02$ , df 8,  $p<.001$

Long-term fostered children with a SEN (n=620). The regression model explained 43% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2=8.27$ , df 8,  $p<.001$

The Level 2 threshold had been achieved by 220 (39%) of children in long-term foster care without a SEN and 80 (12%) of those with a SEN.

- KS2 attainment at the expected or higher levels was the strongest predictor of attainment for all the long-term fostered children with very high probabilities of success: a 91–99% probability of achieving the Level 2 threshold
- Persistent absence and frequent placement changes were associated with very low probabilities of success (14%-19%)
- Being a girl and non-White ethnicity were positive predictors of attainment (65%-67%) for all the long-term fostered children, but slightly less so for children with a SEN
- Joining the school in Year 10 or 11 and residential placements, although not statistically significant, were linked to lower probabilities of attainment. Residential placements appeared less detrimental to attainment for children with a SEN

**Table 32 Logistic regression predicting Level 2 (5 + GCSE/applied only grade 9-4), including English and maths: children in long-term foster care with an identified SEN**

| <b>5 A*-C/9-4 grades (GCSE/applied only) including English and maths - Children with a SEN</b> | <b>B</b> | <b>SE</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|--|----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no)                                      | -1.44    | .57       | 6.44        | 1         | <b>.01</b>      | .24               | .08-.72                          |
| Residential placements after long-term decision (ref category =none)                           | .08      | 1.15      | .00         | 1         | .95             | 1.08              | .14-10.26                        |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)  | .54      | .37       | 2.19        | 1         | .14             | 1.72              | .84-3.53                         |
| Sex (ref category=male)  | .18      | .31       | .32         | 1         | .57             | 1.19              | .65-2.20                         |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)  | .14      | .30       | .22         | 1         | .64             | 1.15              | .64-2.06                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)   | .26      | .30       | .75         | 1         | .38             | 1.30              | .72-2.33                         |
| KS2 band (low)   | -        | -         | 75.72       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)  | 3.20     | .43       | 56.55       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 24.59             | 10.67-56.64                      |
| KS2 band (high)  | 5.18     | .65       | 62.75       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 177.08            | 49.19-637.41                     |
| Joined school in Yr10 or Yr11 (ref category =no)   | -2.07    | 1.16      | 3.22        | 1         | .07             | .13               | .01-1.21                         |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1)   | -        | -         | 3.72        | 2         | .16             | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4)  | -.17     | .32       | .29         | 1         | .59             | .84               | .45-1.57                         |
| Number of placement changes (5-17)   | -1.08    | .56       | 3.71        | 1         | <b>.05</b>      | .34               | .11-1.02                         |
| Constant   | -4.07    | .46       | 78.10       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .017              | -                                |

Base n=620 Source ONS

**Table 33 Logistic regression predicting Level 2 (5 + GCSE/applied only, grade 9-4 including English and maths): children in long-term foster care without a SEN**

| <b>5 A*-C/9-4 grades (GCSE only) including English and maths</b>     | <b>B</b> | <b>SE</b> | <b>Wald</b> | <b>Df</b> | <b>P</b>        | <b>Odds ratio</b> | <b>95% CI for the odds ratio</b> |
|--|----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Children without a SEN</b>  |          |           |             |           |                 |                   |                                  |
| Persistent absentee in secondary years (ref category =no)            | -1.45    | .42       | 11.84       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .23               | .10-.53                          |
| Residential placements after long-term decision (ref category =none) | -1.42    | 1.15      | 1.52        | 1         | .22             | .24               | .02-2.31                         |
| Ethnicity (ref category =White)                                      | .73      | .28       | 6.77        | 1         | <b>.01</b>      | 2.07              | 1.20-3.58                        |
| Sex (ref category=male)  | .60      | .23       | 6.93        | 1         | <b>.008</b>     | 1.89              | 1.16-2.84                        |
| Has a summer birthday (ref category=no)                              | .21      | .23       | .87         | 1         | .35             | 1.23              | .79-1.93                         |
| Attending academy converter (ref category =no)                       | .13      | .23       | .36         | 1         | .55             | 1.14              | .73-1.78                         |
| KS2 band (low)   | -        | -         | 80.49       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| KS2 band (moderate)  | 2.30     | .45       | 26.17       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 9.98              | 4.13-24.11                       |
| KS2 band (high)  | 4.21     | .50       | 70.40       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | 67.22             | 25.15-179.65                     |
| Joined school in Yr10 or Yr11 (ref category =no)                     | -1.83    | 1.11      | 2.73        | 1         | .10             | .160              | .018-1.41                        |
| Number of placement changes (ref category 0-1 change)                | -        | -         | 16.15       | 2         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | -                 | -                                |
| Number of placement changes (2-4 changes)                            | -.66     | .24       | 7.65        | 1         | <b>.01</b>      | .52               | .32-.82                          |
| Number of placement changes (5-17 changes)                           | -1.64    | .47       | 11.92       | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .19               | .08-.49                          |
| Constant   | -2.83    | .484      | 4.20        | 1         | <b>&lt;.001</b> | .06               | -                                |

Base n=550 Source ONS.

## Factors predicting 5 or more GCSEs/applied only 9-4 grade, including English and Maths

It is worth noting that the confidence intervals for the odds ratios were quite wide, particularly for those achieving the higher KS2 Levels. This suggests variability in the estimates and highlights the need for cautious interpretation.

Long-term foster care children without a SEN (n=550). The regression model explained 48% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2 = 7.02$ , df 8,  $p < .001$ )

Long-term foster care children with a SEN (n=620). The regression model explained 43% of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ )  $\chi^2 = 8.27$ , df=8,  $p < .001$ )

160 (29%) of children in long-term foster care without a SEN and 40 (7%) with a SEN had attained a Level 2 qualification through GCSEs that included English and maths. Due to the low numbers attaining at this Level and the variability within the data, the confidence intervals for some variables were very wide.<sup>105</sup> While the p-values were statistically significant, caution is needed regarding the odds ratios and generalisability of the findings.

- The strongest predictor for all children remained their previous attainment at KS2
- Persistent absence significantly reduced the likelihood of success for all children, with similar odds ratios for children with and without a SEN
- Changes of placement were more detrimental to attainment for children without a SEN, though still impactful for those with a SEN. Two to four changes had a moderate negative impact, while five or more changes had a strong negative impact
- Ethnicity (non-White) and being a girl were stronger positive predictors for children without a SEN
- Joining the school in Year 10 or 11, although not statistically significant was a negative predictor for all children
- Residential placements were linked to lower probabilities of attainment for children without a SEN and were not a statistically significant factor for children with a SEN

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<sup>105</sup> A 95% confidence interval in binary regression provides a range within which the true population falls, based on the sample data. It helps assess the precision of the odds ratio.

## Post-16

**Table 34 Young people who had been in long-term foster care, total number of GCSEs, grade 9-4 by age 22 (2015/16-2022/23)**

| Total number of GCSE grades 9-4 | Young people in long-term foster care n (%) |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 0                               | 520 (44%)                                   |
| 1                               | 120 (10%)                                   |
| 2                               | 90 (7%)                                     |
| 3                               | 80 (7%)                                     |
| 4                               | 70 (6%)                                     |
| 5                               | 60 (5%)                                     |
| 6                               | 50 (4%)                                     |
| 7                               | 60 (5%)                                     |
| 8                               | 50 (4%)                                     |
| 9                               | 40 (3%)                                     |
| 10-13                           | 30 (3%)                                     |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

**Table 35 Young people in long-term foster care: age in years at which Level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications were achieved (2014-2023)**

| <b>Attainment Levels</b>  | <b>Age<br/>13-16<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Age<br/>17-19<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Age<br/>20-24<br/>n (%)</b> | <b>Not<br/>achieved by<br/>age 24<br/>n (%)</b> |
|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Level 1 (GCSE grade 3-1, and Level 1 NVQs or Diplomas or functional skills) | 830<br>(72%)                   | 10<br>(1%)                     | 0<br>(0%)                      | 320<br>(27%)                                    |
| English and maths functional or academic grades GCSE 9-4 or equivalent      | 250<br>(22%)                   | 90<br>(8%)                     | 20<br>(1%)                     | 800<br>(69%)                                    |
| Level 2: 5 or more GCSEs at grade 9-4 or a Level 2 vocational qualification | 300<br>(26%)                   | 270<br>(22%)                   | 40<br>(2%)                     | 590<br>(50%)                                    |
| Level 3: two or more A levels or equivalent qualification                   | 0 (0%)                         | 240<br>(22%)                   | 50<br>(3%)                     | 880<br>(75%)                                    |

Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

The number of young people in long-term foster care in Table 35 differs slightly from Table 18 because Table 18 only includes young people who were in state-funded education at KS4. Table 35 uses YPMAD population data and includes children educated in the independent sector and those who took exams but were not registered with a school.

## Appendix: Educational stages and measures

### Key Stage 1 (age 6/7)

Between 2010/11 and 2013/14, when the children in long-term foster care completed Key Stage 1 (KS1), their attainment was measured through teacher assessments of English, reading, writing, and maths. These assessments considered whether pupils were working towards the expected standard, at the expected standard or working at greater depth. A pupil's KS1 outcomes were converted to points and combined to give an average KS1 point score.<sup>106</sup>

### Key Stage 2 (age 10/11)

Between 2010/11 and 2013/14, when the long-term foster care children completed Key Stage 2 (KS2), their skills and attainment were assessed in Levels.<sup>107</sup> (Table 36). Level 4 was expected to be achieved, although some pupils attained the higher Levels of 5 or 6.<sup>108</sup>

**Table 36 Expected attainment level for pupils in primary school by school year and child's age (2010/11-2013/14)**

| Expected Attainment Level | School year        | Child's age  |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------|
|                           | Reception          | 4 years old  |
| Level 1                   | Year 1             | 5 years old  |
| Level 2                   | Year 2 Key Stage 1 | 7 years old  |
| Level 3                   | Year 4             | 9 years old  |
| Level 4                   | Year 6 Key Stage 2 | 11 years old |

Before 2012, KS2 English results were the combined marks from externally marked tests (reading 50% and writing 50%). In 2012, the writing test was replaced with a teacher assessment. A national comparison of test results and teacher assessments found that teacher assessments increased the percentage, reaching the expected level by approximately 5 percentage points.<sup>109</sup> One reason for this difference is that a test

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/primary-school-accountability> pp. 18-19

<sup>107</sup> From 2016, expected attainment Levels were replaced with scaled scores

<sup>108</sup> For example, the 2013 results show that 21% of pupils achieved Level 5 in reading, writing, and maths tests [National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](http://publishing.service.gov.uk)

<sup>109</sup> Department for Education *National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England (REVISED)* SFR 33/2012

provides results on a specific day, whereas teacher assessments are based on a full year's work.<sup>110</sup> Due to the variation in the percentage of children reaching the expected standard, the English writing test results (2010/11-2011/12) and English writing teacher assessments (2012/13-2013/14) were analysed and reported separately.

## Key Stage 4 (age 15/16)

Key Stage 4 refers to the period between Year 10 and Year 11, when pupils are typically 14 to 16 years old. During this time, most young people are working towards their GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education). At the end of KS4, pupils are expected to have achieved Level 2 and passed English and maths. The Key Stage 4 Levels have no relationship to the Levels previously used at Key Stage 2.

In 2016, the government introduced a new set of school accountability measures. The GCSE grading system experienced significant changes starting in 2017, with the introduction of a reformed English (language and literature) and maths GCSE. The traditional letter grades (A\*-G) were replaced by a numerical system (9-1), with 9 being the highest and 1 the lowest. The reforms also involved changes to the exam structure, placing greater emphasis on final exams and reducing focus on coursework.

Nationally, pupil performance in the reformed KS4 exams is measured by several indicators, including the attainment of 5+GCSEs, passing English and maths, Attainment 8 scores, the average point score of the English Baccalaureate, and Progress 8 scores. A brief overview of each of these national measures follows.

### **Key Stage 4 Level 2: 5 + GCSEs or equivalent qualification (grades 9-4) and Level 2: 5 + GCSEs (grades 9-5), including English and maths GCSEs/applied only**

There is an expectation that most young people will achieve a standard pass at Level 2 (5 + GCSEs or equivalent qualification grades 9-4) by the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4). The percentage of pupils attaining a strong pass with 5 or more GCSE grades 9-5 is also published, as Universities and employers often prefer higher grades.

### **Key Stage 4 Level 2: English and Maths attainment (grades 9-4 standard pass) and English and maths (grades 9-5 strong pass)**

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<sup>110</sup> Department for Education *National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stage 2 in England*, SFR 39/2016. For a more detailed history of statutory assessment since the 1988 Education Reform Act and the introduction of the National Curriculum, see DfE *Attainment in primary schools in England: Quality and methodology information*. Statistical First Release 39/2016

English and maths attainment are commonly referred to as the 'Basics'. The proportion passing English and maths is used as an indicator by several government departments to measure attainment gaps and social mobility.<sup>111</sup>

## **Attainment 8**

Attainment 8 is a scale measure used to assess the average academic performance of students across eight subjects at the end of Key Stage 4. The scale for Attainment 8 is based on the grades achieved in these subjects. Each grade is assigned a point score using the GCSE grading system (9 to 1), with English and maths receiving double weighting. The scores are summed and then divided by ten.

## **English Baccalaureate (EBacc)**

The EBacc consists of English, maths, science, a language, and either history or geography. To achieve the EBacc, students must get a Grade 5 or above in each subject. Points gained in the EBacc are included in the Attainment 8 score. The average EBacc point score was introduced in 2018 as one of the national measures of attainment.

## **Progress 8**

Progress 8 scores are a relative measure that captures students' average progress between Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) exams. It compares the young person's Attainment 8 score with the national average Attainment 8 score of young people with the same starting point at Key Stage 2. The scale can change from year to year; therefore, it is not possible to compare Progress 8 scores across years. The higher a pupil's Progress 8 score, the more progress they have made. A score above 0 means pupils are doing better than average, and a score below 0 means doing less well than average. For example, a -1 score means they are one grade behind pupils who started with the same prior achievement at KS2.

## **Post-16 education**

There are three routes to post-16 qualifications: academic, vocational, and applied/work routes (Table 37). T levels, introduced in 2020, combine the academic and vocational routes at Level 3. Work-based learning and apprenticeships combine paid jobs and off-the-job training. In 2014, the government introduced the condition of funding for post-16 education, requiring students without a grade 4 or above in GCSE English or Maths to continue studying these subjects.<sup>112</sup> In 2015, it became mandatory for students who achieved a Grade 3 in these subjects to retake the GCSE to aim for a Grade 4. There

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<sup>111</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2024) State of the Nation [Social mobility in the UK - Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>112</sup> [www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding)

have been additional interventions since the policy was introduced, including additional funding to support those with low prior attainment.<sup>13</sup> The policy aims to ensure that all students leave school with a basic level of English and mathematics. Young people studying part-time post-16 and those who achieved a Grade 2 or below can take a Functional Skills qualification instead of English and maths GCSEs.

**Table 37 Route and qualification to Educational Qualifications from KS4 to Adulthood**

| <b>Attainment Level</b> | <b>ACADEMIC ROUTE</b>                                       | <b>VOCATIONAL ROUTE</b>                                     | <b>APPLIED /WORK ROUTE</b>           |
|-------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| Level 8                 | Doctorate (PhD)   | n/a   | NVQ 8                                |
| Level 7                 | Master's Degree (MA)  | n/a   | NVQ 7                                |
| Level 6                 | Bachelor's Degree (BA BSc)                                  | n/a   | NVQ 6<br>Degree Apprenticeship       |
| Level 5                 | Foundation Degree (FdA/FdSc)                                | Higher National Diploma (HND)                               | NVQ 5                                |
| Level 4                 | n/a   | Higher National Certificate (HNC)                           | Higher Apprenticeship<br>NVQ4        |
| Level 3                 | A levels Grade A-E,<br>International Baccalaureate          | BTEC diploma/<br>certificate                                | Advanced apprenticeship<br>NVQ 3     |
| Level 3                 | T Levels (combining practical skills and academic learning) | T Levels (combining practical skills and academic learning) | n/a                                  |
| Level 2                 | GCSE grades 4-9 or C, B, A, A*<br>English Baccalaureate     | BTEC first diploma  | Intermediate apprenticeship<br>NVQ 2 |
| Level 1                 | GCSE Grades 1-3 or D, E, F, G                               | BTEC entry /Level 1<br>Functional skills<br>Skills for Life | Traineeship<br>NVQ 1                 |

n/a = not applicable



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