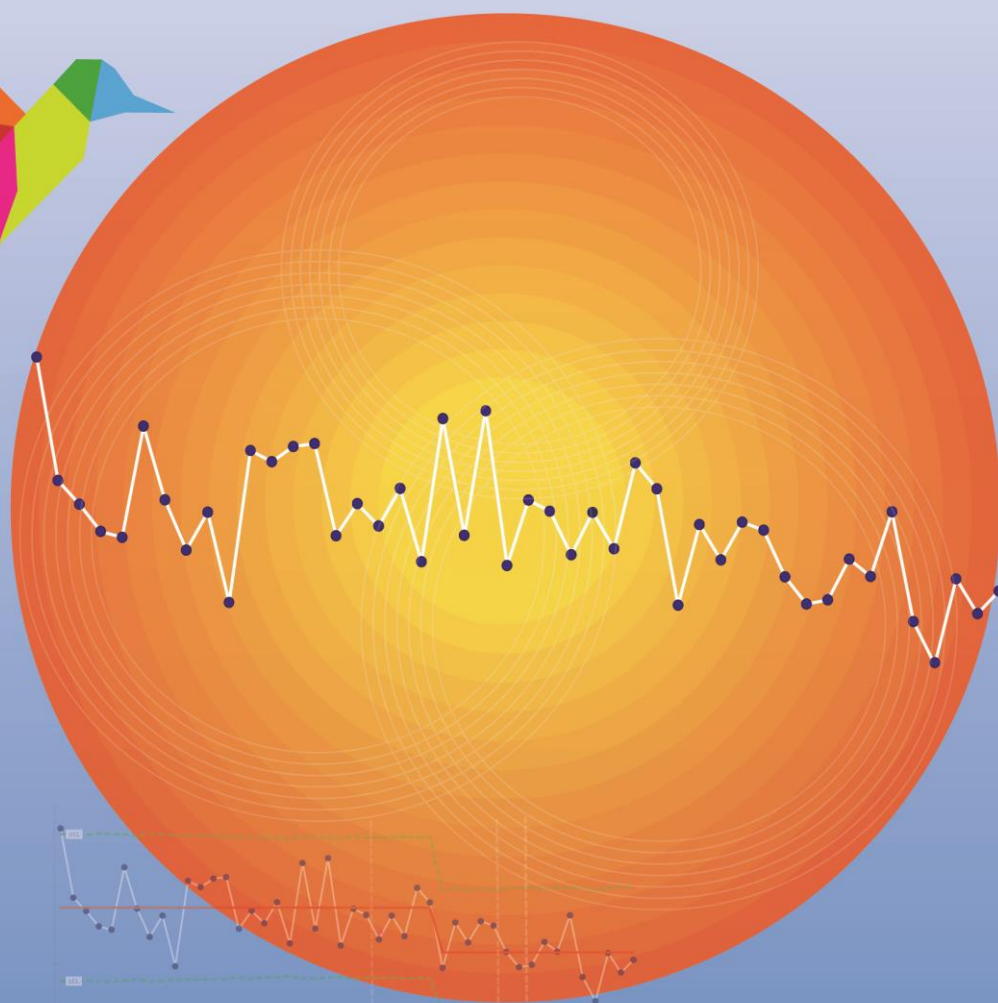


Looked After Children



Data Strategy, 2015



Children and Families Analysis

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The Scottish
Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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1. Introduction

This Looked After Children data strategy sets out the strategic direction for developing data on looked after children over the next five years. It focuses on ensuring data quality and providing the evidence to realise our policy ambitions set out in *Getting It Right for Looked After Children: Early Engagement, Early Permanence and Improving the Quality of Care*. This data strategy identifies the short and longer term actions that will be taken by the Scottish Government's Children and Families Statistics team and highlights the remaining evidence gaps that could be addressed by academic, public sector or other analysts.

National Statistics context

As producers of National Statistics the Children and Families Statistics team have a responsibility to continuously review and improve our statistics. Our three priorities in continuing to improve our data on looked after children are:

- 1) Maximising the potential of data** – With a lengthening cohort of individual-level data, we will reach a point in the near future where we have fully mapped all looked after children's journeys through care. We should make best use of this rich data source to answer key policy questions.
- 2) Broadening the evidence base** – Individual data allows us to link to other datasets such as those in health, justice and education portfolios. We should use linkage to enhance our knowledge of outcomes for looked after children, which should in turn inform those responsible for providing care where improvements are most needed.
- 3) Enhancing data quality and availability** – Our data should continue to be of high quality, useful and relevant, as the political landscape changes.

Policy context

In November 2015 the Scottish Government published *Getting It Right for Looked After Children: Early Engagement, Early Permanence and Improving the Quality of Care* which outlines three priorities for improving the lives of looked after children:

- Early engagement
- Early permanence
- Improving the quality of care

In order to support and monitor progress towards these priorities, developments to data are needed.

Background to looked after data

The primary source for data on looked after children in Scotland is the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) collected annually from local authorities by the Scottish Government. This gives individual level data on the demographics and placements of all looked after children in Scotland.

The number of looked after children in Scotland is small, accounting for less than two per cent of under 18s. This means that the looked after population does not appear in any representative way in the national sample surveys (such as the Scottish Health Survey or Scottish Adolescent Lifestyles and Substance Use Survey). A much larger sample would be needed for these surveys to provide meaningful analysis of looked after children which would not be cost effective. As a result, this paper primarily focus on actions that could be taken to adapt the CLAS data collection. Information on the data collected in CLAS is available here:

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/ScotXed/ChildrenandYoungPeople/LookedAfterChildren>

The demographic information and data on numbers and types of placements collected in CLAS are reported in the annual National Statistics publication Children’s Social Work Statistics¹. Education Outcomes for Looked After Children Statistics² links the CLAS data to education datasets and reports on the exam results, post-school destinations, attendance and exclusions of looked after children.

2. Data needs

This section outlines the questions that we need to answer both to ensure the CLAS data is aligned to the policy priorities outlined in *Getting It Right for Looked After Children* and to continuously improve our data.

a) Data needs from *Getting It Right for Looked After Children*

In November 2015 the Scottish Government published *Getting It Right for Looked After Children: Early Engagement, Early Permanence and Improving the Quality of Care* which outlines the priorities for improving the lives of looked after children. In order to support and evaluate this policy strategy the Children and Families Statistics team will need to take actions which maximise the potential of our existing data as well as broadening our evidence base.

Early Engagement

The first priority identified by *Getting It Right for Looked After Children* for improving the lives of looked after children is Early Engagement. Early engagement refers to both intervening at a young age and intervening before family difficulties escalate. Early engagement is seen as key to avoiding the profound effects that a disruptive home environment can have on very young children, and more widely, to avoid or mitigate the negative effects of such problems on the lives of all affected children.

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/PubChildrenSocialWork>

² <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/EducOutcomesLAC>

The questions that data on looked after children could answer that would help to assess progress towards early engagement include:

- Are we engaging with children at a young age?
- Are we engaging with children before family difficulties escalate?
- Does early engagement mitigate the effects of a disruptive home environment?

Early Permanence

The second priority identified by *Getting It Right for Looked After Children* for improving the lives of looked after children is Early Permanence. Early permanence is the aim for children who are being officially looked after. The Scottish Government defines permanence as providing children with a stable, secure, nurturing relationship and home, where possible within a family setting, that continues into adulthood.

There are four different legal routes to permanence depending on the needs and circumstances of the child:

1. Returning to or remaining at home where family functioning has stabilised
2. A Permanence Order in foster care, kinship care or residential care
3. A Kinship Care Order
4. Adoption

It can be difficult to identify where a return home successfully offers permanence. In some cases a child will re-enter care after a period of weeks, months or even years who, in hindsight, did not achieve permanence at that time.

The questions that data on looked after children could answer that would help to assess progress towards early permanence include:

- What is a meaningful measure of permanence and how long does it take children to achieve this?
- How quickly are children in foster placements achieving permanence?
- After being looked after what engagement do children have with Social Work Services?

Improving quality of care

The third priority identified by *Getting It Right for Looked After Children* for improving the lives of looked after children is quality of care. A child who is happy, comfortable and settled in their care placement is more likely to be able to deal with the negative effects of any previous bad experiences which may have led to them becoming looked after in the first place.

The questions that data on looked after children could answer that would help to assess progress towards improving the quality of care include:

- What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?
- To what extent do children choose to stay in their care setting?

- What are the cost implications for the changing patterns and definitions of care?
- How can resource best be deployed to have the greatest impact on the lives of looked after children?

b) Data needs for continuous improvement

As producers of National Statistics the Children and Families Statistics team have a responsibility to continuously review and improve our statistics. Submitting, validating and publishing data requires a lot of work both from the Children and Families Statistics team and from local authorities. To ensure that this work is justified we must work to ensure the efficiency of the data collection and usefulness of the resulting data. To do this we ask:

- Does our data reflect the key aspects of care for looked after children?
- Are we presenting data at a level that allows local authorities to reflect and improve on practice?
- Is our data presented in a clear and useable way?
- Is our collection as efficient as it can be?
- Is our data easily and securely available for interested data users?

3. Children and Families Statistics actions to meet data needs

1) Maximising the potential of data

With a lengthening cohort of individual level data, we can track the care histories of an increasing number of young people. We should make best use of this rich data source to answer key policy questions.

To achieve this we will undertake analyses to:

- a) track where **permanence** is being achieved
- b) understand the **effects of early engagement**
- c) measure the impact that the **extension of aftercare** has on uptake.

a) Track where permanence is being achieved

The definition of permanence is complex. As children can return to care it isn't enough simply to look at the numbers of children ceasing to be looked after. Children and Families Statistics will develop a new measure of permanence and publish this as part of the annual Children's Social Work Statistics. Possible options for indicators to better track permanence are:

- the number of days since a child left care

- the proportion of leavers who are maintaining permanence for a given length of time

Getting it Right for Looked After Children notes that while children may be in long term arrangements for foster or residential care which deliver positive relationships for them, both children and carers deserve to have their relationship underpinned by a more stable and secure legal status. Children and Families Statistics will include the new definitions of foster care placements in the CLAS collection from the earliest opportunity. These will illustrate how long the young person has been in a foster placement without having achieved permanence.

Children who have ceased being looked after but are still considered to be at risk by Social Work Services can be said to not have achieved a stable, secure, nurturing relationship and home. Children and Families Statistics will look into linking the CLAS dataset to the Child Protection data also collected by Scottish Government to identify how frequently children who cease being looked after are on the child protection register.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- What is a meaningful measure of permanence and how long does it take children to achieve this?
- How quickly are children in foster placements achieving permanence?
- After being looked after what engagement do children have with Social Work Services?

b) Analyse the effects of early engagement

Current CLAS data allows us to measure whether we are engaging with children at younger ages. There has been a clear move towards engaging with children at younger ages over the last fifteen years – between 2000 and 2014 the proportion of children who became looked after aged five or under increased from 24 per cent to 41 per cent. This aspect of Early Engagement is currently reported on as part of the annual Children’s Social Work Statistics. Children and Families Statistics will continue to publish these data.

In order to understand whether this earlier engagement leads to better outcomes for children work need to be undertaken to link the CLAS data to other information, as outlined in action 2b – Investigate data linkage options.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Are we engaging with children at a young age?
- Does early engagement mitigate the effects of a disruptive home environment?

c) Undertake analyses to measure the impact that the extension of aftercare has on uptake.

Under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 care leavers aged 19 to 25 are eligible to request an assessment for aftercare from their local authority. Children and families statistics have already agreed with local authorities that the CLAS data will be expanded to include these young people from 2015/16, with the first data available in March 2017. Once the data are of a high enough standard Children and families statistics will undertake analyses to measure the impact that this extension of aftercare has on uptake.

We do not currently collect data on the length of time over which care leavers are in receipt of aftercare services, for any age of care leavers. This information is required in order to better understand journeys into stable adulthood

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Does our data reflect the key aspects of care for looked after children?

2) Broadening the evidence base

Individual data allows us, with some work, to link to other datasets such as those in health, justice and education portfolios. We should use linkage to enhance our knowledge of outcomes for looked after children, which should in turn inform those responsible for providing care where improvements are most needed.

To achieve this we will:

- a) Investigate how best to **develop the CLAS collection to allow robust but secure linkage** with other data sources.
- b) If and when this has been achieved, **improve the coverage of health-related outcomes**.
- c) Investigate options for **longer-term outcomes data** for looked after young people.
- d) Introduce **new data on emerging areas**
- e) Continue to **monitor data developments**

a) Investigate data linkage options

International studies consistently show that children who have been looked after go on to have poorer education, physical and mental health outcomes. While we suspect that looked after children in Scotland have consistently poorer outcomes than non looked after children, however, we do not have equivalent evidence in Scotland to demonstrate the immediate

non-education outcomes of looked after children or the long term impact of care on later life. Developing relevant evidence is challenging because of the sensitivity of the topic and need to ensure looked after children's privacy. The nature of the looked after population (particularly the fact that their names and addresses change more often than most children) also makes them a particularly difficult group to follow through time.

Children and Families Statistics intend to expand the looked after children data collection to allow data linkage. This will enable us to identify initially the health outcomes but also the justice and employment outcomes of looked after children in Scotland. It will also enable us to answer questions on the long term outcomes of looked after children. To achieve this Children and Families Statistics will pilot a project to investigate methodologies to establish what (if any) additional fields need to be added to the CLAS data collection to allow us to robustly link from looked after children data while preserving the privacy of the children involved.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?

b) If data linkage is possible, improve the coverage of health-related outcomes

If an appropriate methodology for linking is identified Children and Families statistics will go on to link CLAS data to health data. This would give us comparable data on the wellbeing of looked after and non-looked after pre-school children for the first time, allowing us to measure the impact of early engagement on health outcomes. If the linkage is proven to be successful then Children and Families statistics will work with local authorities to add the identified additional field(s) to CLAS.

There is also an ongoing collaboration between NHS Scotland's Information Services Division and Scottish Government to link data on dental health to information on the Pupil Census, which should allow comparison of the outcomes of the sub-population of looked after children. We will monitor the success of this methodology as it may be useful for future analyses of looked after children.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?
- Does early engagement mitigate the effects of a disruptive home environment?

c) Investigate options for longer-term outcomes data

If an appropriate methodology for linking CLAS data is identified Children and Families statistics will investigate options for linking to other data sources, such as vital event records, employment and justice data.

There are opportunities with the current CLAS dataset to broaden the outcomes data that is reported on by expanding the linking via Scottish Candidate Number. Skills Development Scotland are publishing new data on the post-school destinations of all 16-19 year olds. Given anecdotal evidence that looked after young people take longer after transitions (such as leaving school) to adapt than non-looked after children, this may provide a more representative view of looked after school leavers' outcomes. Children and Families Statistics will investigate the possibility of linking to these data as it develops.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?

d) Introduce new data on emerging areas

As part of the incoming National Improvement Framework there will be national standardised assessments for children in P1, P4, P7 and S3. These assessments will focus on standards of literacy and numeracy and will also bring greater focus to improvements in the health and wellbeing of children and young people. These national assessments will provide education outcomes data for younger looked after children for the first time. Once several years' data are available this will also allow us to investigate the longitudinal impact of care and the outcomes over time of children who have received early engagement. It is likely that these data will be available from the end of 2017. Children and Families Statistics will incorporate this information in to the annual Education Outcomes for Looked After Children publication.

As the care system continues to evolve, the CLAS collection needs to adapt. Children and Families Statistics will introducing new data on foster care placements as mentioned under action 1a and will also be expanding CLAS to collect data on Continuing Care.

Continuing Care is a new category of support designed to ease the transition of a young person leaving foster, kinship or residential care but wishing to stay in the same care setting, and offers crucial support where needed between care and aftercare. Children who leave care in or after April 2015 will be eligible. Children and Families Statistics will collect information on Continuing Care, along with the current and any future further extension of Aftercare provision, will provide a richer source of data on outcomes enabling better

knowledge of where improvements in care can be made. The first full year of data on this will be collected in 2016 and, depending on data quality, published from 2017.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Does early engagement mitigate the effects of a disruptive home environment?
- To what extent do children choose to stay in their care setting?
- Does our data reflect the key aspects of care for looked after children?

e) Continue to monitor data developments

Data will continue to be developed in other areas for other purposes which, with the cross-cutting nature of looked after children policy, could be relevant. Children and Families Statistics will continue to monitor developments in justice, education and other relevant areas. Children and Families Statistics will also monitor relevant data sources (such as the Loughborough Cost Calculator, which allows local authorities to calculate the costs of social care placements for looked after children) and organisations (such as the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and Children's Hearings Scotland) for potential future developments.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Does our data reflect key aspects of care for looked after children?

3) Enhancing data quality and availability

Our data should continue to be of high quality, useful and relevant, no matter how the political landscape changes. We should be ready to adapt to answer new questions as they arise while retaining a common thread of quality and comparability across the years

To achieve this we will **improve the published information** produced by:

- a) Making our data more easily accessible for interested users
- b) Simplifying presentation of complex tables and time series

We will also **make the CLAS collection as efficient as possible** by:

- c) Stopping collecting unused variables in CLAS
- d) Continuing to improve data quality

a) Making our data more easily available for interested users

While Children and Families statistics present some local authority figures in an annual benchmarking spreadsheet to allow local authorities to reflect on and improve their quality of care. There is demand from local authorities for this information to be presented in a clearer and more user-friendly way. Children and Families Statistics will provide a dashboard tool which presents local authority level data on looked after children to help local authorities assess their progress and to aid other data users.

Because of the relatively small number of children and the sensitivity of the data, it is not possible to publish the CLAS data below local authority level. The Children and Families Statistics team currently publish local authority data in excel tables on the Scottish Government website, which is not easily accessible to users. To improve the accessibility of our data the Children and Families Statistics team will publish local authority level looked after children data on an open data platform.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Are we presenting data at a level that allows local authorities to reflect and improve on practice?
- Is our data easily and securely available for interested data users?

b) Simplifying presentation of complex tables and time series

Feedback from data users suggests that some tables in the Children's Social Work Statistics and Education Outcomes for Looked After Children are overly complex. Children and Families Statistics will review their published data and simplify tables where possible.

Question(s) this helps to answer:

- Is our data presented in a clear and useable way?

c) Stopping collecting variables where there is little benefit in retention

Where data fields are collected in CLAS that no longer provide useful information, the definitions of these should be refined or they should be excluded from the collection. Children and Families Statistics will hold annual discussions with local authorities to identify such fields.

Question(s) this helps to answer

- Is our data collection as efficient as it can be?

d) Continue to improve data quality

Scottish Candidate Numbers (SCNs) are the unique identifiers given to each young person taking an SQA qualification, used to link CLAS data to education outcomes. Not all local authorities currently provide all SCNs to the CLAS return. Children and Families Statistics are working with local authorities to continuously improve the quality of the CLAS collection.

While the CLAS collection is robust there are ongoing issues of variation in reporting practice and IT systems across local authorities. Children and Families Statistics will continue to look into options for improving data reporting, whether that be setting national guidance for local authorities or considering whether a more integrated IT system would help to resolve data issues.

Question(s) this helps to answer

- Is our data collection as efficient as it can be?

4. Further analytical actions to meet evidence needs

We have identified developments in the evidence base to support *Getting it Right for Looked After Children* that can be addressed as part of this data strategy, although some cannot be readily met by Children and Families Statistics. Some questions require data collected by other agencies/bodies and some would be better answered through more in-depth qualitative or academic studies. These include the following:

Early Engagement:

- **What are children's situations prior to becoming looked after?** In order to fully assess the impact on a child of becoming looked after we need to better understand their situation prior to being looked after.
- **Are we engaging with children before family difficulties escalate?** - In order to assess whether vulnerable children are being engaged with before family difficulties escalate we need information on how long they were experiencing difficulties prior to becoming looked after. CLAS does not hold any details on the home circumstances of looked after children prior to being looked after partly because the range and complexity of children's engagement with care services is difficult to record in a quantitative collection

Early Permanence

- **Why do adoptions break down?** Adoption should be a permanent solution for looked after children, but sometimes adoptions break down. It would be helpful to understand the reasons for adoption breakdowns (and more generally, other "permanent" placements) and whether there are any groups who experience more permanent placement breakdowns.

Quality of care:

- **How suitable are placement types for children?** There is little current evidence on whether children are being placed in the most suitable type of placement.
- **Are placement endings planned?** We do not know whether placement endings are planned, making it difficult to interpret the implications of a child ceasing to be looked after.
- **Why do children choose to stay in their care settings?** Continuing Care is a new category of support designed to ease the transition of a young person leaving foster, kinship or residential care but wishing to stay in the same care setting. CLAS can measure the extent to which young people choose to stay in their care settings, but cannot unpick the why some choose to do so and others do not.
- **What are the cost implications for the changing patterns and definitions of care?**
 - a. The **costs of providing care** to looked after children, and all of the surrounding systems and processes are published at a very high level, but the detail of costs at a lower level are not routinely estimated or published. Without an understanding of the cost of delivering one service over another, it is difficult for local authorities to plan effectively or to make the most efficient use of scarce resources.
 - b. There is no up to date information available on the **costs of care per child** for either residential or community care settings and this information gap requires addressing urgently. Being able to value the savings arising from preventing children becoming Looked After forms a key part of the wider shift to prevention and early engagement and such cost information is core to achieving this.
 - c. Modelling of these costs has been attempted to inform policy development, but without any direct information on the costs of this care, the potential work streams in this area are limited. The **extension of Aftercare** provision to any formerly looked after children up to the age of 26, as well as the creation of the new category of '**Continuing Care**' support will most likely cause an increase in costs, thought is required on the best ways to measure this Three components need to be determined to estimate what costs Aftercare and Continuing Care are likely to incur – the number of eligible persons under the revised criteria, the number of applicants coming forward for a needs assessment and the corresponding pass rates, estimates of the average cost of Aftercare and Continuing Care).
- **What impact does the extension of aftercare have on young people?** It would be useful to understand how effective aftercare is in supporting young people's post-care transitions. It would also be useful to understand whether it has an impact on the length of time young people receive aftercare.

We would like to call on potential funders and researchers to reflect on this list of questions and consider, firstly, if they would be able to undertake analysis to answer any of them and, secondly, whether there are additional questions which are key to improving outcomes for looked after children which we have not included. Scottish Government will hold a conference in 2016 to develop and prioritise this list of questions which would help to improve the lives and outcomes of looked after children in Scotland. We look forward to engaging with our partners to improve the evidence on looked after children.

5. Conclusion

This long-term strategy for looked after children is intended to ensure that we improve outcomes for our looked after population by having the right data, of the right quality, presented in the right way to enable decisions to be taken about policy and practice for looked after children. In particular it will support early engagement, early permanence and quality of care. Children and Families Statistics plan to embark on an ambitious programme to undertake this programme (see Annex A). Over the short and long term we look forward to working with our partners to consider how we best take forward other elements of the strategy where other skills and resources permit. We are confident this will deliver better outcomes for our looked after children and young people.

Annex A – Data programme

SHORT TERM PRIORITIES			
Gap	Theme	Action	Priority
Does early engagement mitigate the effects of a disruptive home environment?	Broadening the evidence base	Pilot work to identify what additional fields that would allow linkage to health data with the best balance between data security and accuracy	High - Linking CLAS to health data would give information on outcomes for all looked after children (not just those of school age as at present).
What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?	Enhancing data quality and availability	Work with local authorities to improve SCN coverage in data.	High – SCN allows us to link to Education Outcomes data, so improving the quality of this measure is key
What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?	Broadening the evidence base	Investigate Skills Development Scotland’s data on post-school destinations of 16-19 year olds.	High - These data would be extremely useful. If it is not possible to obtain it via SDS we will look into alternative (possibly qualitative) sources for this information.
Are we presenting data at a level that allows local authorities to reflect and improve on practice?	Enhancing data quality and availability	Develop a user-friendly way to present local authority data.	Medium - The presentation of local authority level data could be significantly improved and better promoted. This would help local authorities to review and improve practice.
While children are looked after, how stable are their placements?	Maximising potential	Undertake one-off analyses on longitudinal movement through care system and educational outcomes of different looked after children.	Medium - This work is valuable but time-consuming. Focused analysis should be implemented and possibly tailored for future inclusion in official publications.
Is our data presented in a clear and useable way?	Enhancing data quality and availability	Review tables in our publications and simplify where possible	Medium – This should be undertaken before the 2016 publications as it will help improve the clarify of our data.
Is our data presented in a clear and useable way?	Enhancing data quality and availability	Publish data on an open data platform	Medium - This will help improve the availability and use of our data.

LONGER TERM PRIORITIES

Gap	Theme	Action	Priority
What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?	Broadening the evidence base	If a linkage methodology is established, add field(s) to CLAS to allow further linkage and undertake a pilot linkage to health data.	High – the success of this initial pilot could enable linking to numerous datasets in external portfolios, greatly increasing our knowledge of LAC outcomes.
What are the cost implications for the changing patterns/ definitions of care?	Broadening the evidence base	Explore the utility of local and Scotland-level information for evidence on the financial cost of social care.	High – There are direct budgetary implications from improving this evidence.
What is a meaningful measure of permanence and how long does it take children to achieve this?	Maximising potential	Develop and publish a measure of permanence. Collect data on new definitions of foster placements and report when data is of a high enough quality	High – Identify whether particular groups of children are more likely to take time to achieve permanence/ re-enter care would help inform policy development and potentially focus additional support.
Introduce new data on emerging areas	Maximising potential	Link CLAS data to National Improvement Framework data when it becomes available. Incorporate analysis into Education Outcomes for Looked After Children publication	High – This will give vital information on the earlier education outcomes for looked after children and fits with the looked after strategy priorities of early engagement.
What is a meaningful measure of permanence and how long does it take children to achieve this?	Enhancing data quality and availability	Analyse the extent to which children who cease being looked after remain on the Child Protection Register	Medium – This fits with the looked after strategy priorities of early engagement and early permanence.
To what extent do children choose to stay in their care setting?	Broadening the evidence base	Collect data on continuing care and report on the extent to which children choose to stay in their care setting	Medium – This fits with the looked after strategy priorities of early engagement and early permanence.
What are the long term outcomes of looked after children?	Broadening the evidence base	If linkage to health data is successful, report on health review data for looked at and non-looked after children.	Low – requires various data developments before it would be possible.

Gap	Theme	Action	Priority
Does our data reflect the key aspects of care for looked after children?	Maximising potential	Undertake longitudinal analysis to see the impact that the extension of aftercare has on uptake and how long after leaving care children take it up.	Low – it will not be possible to measure the effect of the expansion of aftercare for several years. CLAS can be used to measure the overall uptake rates.
Is our data collection as efficient as it could be?	Maximising potential	Continue to look into options for improving data reporting (refining guidance, considering options for a more integrated IT system).	Low – this has potential to save a small amount of time for local authorities and Scottish Government when completing and processing data.