



Autism within the Looked-After Child Population: How Diagnostic Information is Shared Between Professionals within One Local Authority in England
Executive Summary

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Background

As of 31st March 2017 there were 72,670 children being Looked-After by local authorities in England (Department for Education, 2017). Further data show that 3% of this population have a diagnosis of autism, but that this diagnostic information is not always considered in conjunction with a child's Looked-After status (Parsons, McCullen, Emery, & Kovshoff, 2019). The present study focussed on one local authority in England to explore how they consider autism within their Looked-After child population at a strategic level. Furthermore, the study explored how this diagnostic information was shared between professionals in the local authority, in educational settings, as well as with families.

Research Aims

The present study aimed to explore how diagnostic information about autism was shared between professionals in the local authority and education. Additionally, it explored information sharing between professionals and families, and aimed to understand which policies and procedures were in place to guide this sharing of information.

Method

A semi-structured interview was conducted with seven members of staff who were from either the local authority or schools based within the same authority, who worked with children and young people who had a diagnosis of autism and who were considered Looked-After by the local authority. The local authority participants were involved in overseeing Looked-After children's progression, including the co-ordination of Education Health and Care Plans, and strategic planning. Three participants were Designated Teachers (DTs); two from specialist schools, and one from a mainstream primary school. Questions focused on the processes in place for reporting or considering autism within their Looked-After children population. The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Southampton's Research Ethics Committee (Ref # 47857).

Key Findings

- Five key themes emerged in relation to sharing diagnostic information: **(1) policies and processes involved in supporting Looked-After children, (2) a diagnosis being viewed as a 'golden ticket' to resources, (3) communication, (4) child-centred planning, and (5) future-proofing.**
- Generally, the professionals interviewed indicated that being Looked-After and having a diagnosis of autism were considered independently from one another.
- Diagnostic information was shared between professionals via statutory paperwork such as the Personal Education Plan (PEP; for Looked-After children), or the Education, Health and Care

Plan (EHCP; contains diagnostic information as well as the child's 'story' which should include Looked-After information).

- There appeared to be no single policy for Looked-After children; this was instead covered by more general policies such as child protection. Autism was covered by the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities policy within respective organisations.
- Sometimes a diagnosis of autism was sought for a child or young person because of the belief that it would open up avenues of resources, both monetary and supportive, through the EHCP process and other means. The idea of the 'golden ticket' of a diagnosis was discussed mainly within by the local authority personnel.
- Professionals expressed a strong duty of care to the children and young people in that they explained they would fight on behalf of the children and young people to get the best service from education and other agencies.
- The future of the children and young people Looked-After by the local authority as well as the future of the services within the local authority were considered by the participants. They spoke about needing to find a way to predict the services and communities that children and young people would be needing to ensure a smooth transition between childhood and adulthood.

Conclusions

- Although an awareness of being Looked-After and having a diagnosis of autism was highlighted as being important, these two aspects were often not considered together in terms of planning for placements or preparing the child or young person for educational settings and services.
- Due to the transient nature of being Looked-After, the time required to receive a diagnosis of autism was something that concerned some of the participants and is supported by previous research that it takes nearly four years to receive an official diagnosis of autism after an initial appointment (Dowden, 2018).
- Most participants spoke of how they felt that the diagnosis of autism was less relevant in the Looked-After population and that they wanted to move more towards a 'needs-led' way of supporting these children, rather than a 'diagnosis-led' approach.
- The study also found that the methods of information sharing were reliant mainly on statutory paperwork such as the PEP and the EHCP.
- There are some important limitations to consider in the interpretation of these findings. The study was small-scale and focussed on a limited number of roles within one local authority.
- Future research should include representatives from social care and health care professionals to further inform the information sharing, and diagnostic processes involved in supporting Looked-After autistic children within local authority planning and provision.

References

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