Boarding Chances for Children
A report on Lessons Learned

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS	
CiN	Child/Children in Need
CPP	Child Protection Plan
DfE	Department for Education
EEF	Educational Endowment Foundation
LAC	Looked After Children
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial

Executive summary

This report examines the range of factors that might influence the decision by social care professionals on the use of boarding schools as an intervention option for Children in Need[1] (CiN) or children on a Child Protection Plan[2] (CPP). Attempts to conduct a randomised controlled trial (RCT) failed to recruit participants. Initially, failure to recruit was attributed to randomisation inhibiting social care workers from making referrals. Subsequently, a Zelen's design was implemented with no improvement in recruitment. Finally, a two-stage design (including a first stage within-subjects design study where all participants received the intervention and a second stage matched comparison group) also failed to recruit. Despite the removal of randomisation it appeared that the intervention itself might be unappealing to social care workers.

To further understand the failure to recruit we conducted this investigative study by interviewing 20 social care workers. They occupy a range of professional roles in social care professions from directors of children's services through to managers, and social workers and family support workers who face the daily challenge of working directly with children and families in need or at risk. Some of our participants knew about the trial study but many of them were unaware. We

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[1] The Children Act 1989 Section 17 states that a child is in Need if (a) he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by a Local Authority under this Part; (b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or (c) he is disabled.

[2] A Child Protection Plan might be initiated under Section 47 of the Children Act.

gathered a range of views and attitudes towards both the trial methodology and importantly the intervention itself. As it was likely that both these factors influenced the failure to recruit, we sought to let participants guide us to what they considered to be the most important issues in the context of offering boarding chances for children. We hope that the interviews and our analysis of them offer a number of lessons learned to inform future trials, should they be commissioned, in the area of educational interventions that reach across into the field of social care.

Our findings in summary:

Social workers reported that there were very specific circumstances in which a referral might be made to the intervention or to a boarding school in general practice terms. The social workers believed that the intervention would only be successful if a referral could be made when the child was the 'right age', that it would need to be the 'right child' in the 'right circumstances', and that it must be the 'right school'. Hence, it was considered an intervention that would be used only in very special circumstances.

Using a boarding chances place would have to be robustly justified prior to a referral being made. Social workers are operating within the financial policy of austerity and in the face of stringent budgetary constraints. It was difficult for social workers to consider investing £6,000 per annum for up to seven years when the child was at the point of being a CiN/CPP. However, the option of considering a boarding chances place as an alternative to residential care was far more conceivable.

Boarding schools were recognised as being able to offer a positive environment supporting children's aspirations to achieve their academic and personal potential and delivering benefits to children who might attend them. All social workers reported being able to consider the benefits of the stability a boarding school environment might offer. Social workers talked about wanting to provide good opportunities for Children in Need (CiN) and children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and to support them in fulfilling their potential in life.

Although there were many positive factors about boarding schools that were recognised by social workers there were also a number of significant fears and concerns about them. These fears were often expressed in strong language and highlighted significant differences between the children perceived to typically attend boarding schools and those children social workers imagined could be referred to the study. This theme evoked issues concerning social class and culture and concerns about loss of attachments, of community, and a sense of belonging.

The study highlighted the significant gap between the perceived ideological positions of boarding schools and social work. Social workers believed their job is to be concerned with supporting children, families, and communities. Social workers said children needed to be raised

in families and they perceived boarding schools to be about separation and taking children out of families and their communities.

Social workers are interested in developing children holistically and there is a tension for some in using educational interventions to address a social care issue. Social workers were sceptical about the effectiveness of boarding schools being able to support a CiN/CPP in the way that social services might within the community beyond providing better educational opportunities.

Knowledge of the boarding chances project was generally low among social work professionals and, for those that had not heard about it, their knowledge of the use of boarding schools as a placement option for a looked after child (LAC) was also low. The social workers we spoke to suggested that boarding schools are not well understood in the social work profession. There is nothing about boarding schools on the curriculum of training courses and qualified practitioners reported rarely considering boarding schools because of a lack of knowledge about them.

Child-centred care was an important value for social workers. Social workers stressed the importance of ensuring children's voices are heard and that they should be at the centre of the intervention strategy. However, it was also noted that at the point at which a child is taken into care the child's voice is no longer central as the social worker is carrying out duties to protect the child regardless of the child's wishes. Social workers would need to ensure the child is at the centre of any pathway to boarding school.

Boarding school location is critical for referral. Social workers would be far more likely to refer a child into the study if they thought that the school could enable the child (when no threat to their safety is present) to remain within or close to their local community. There were concerns about a CiN/CPP being able to have regular contact with their family and others. Social workers assumed that boarding chances would be available at some far away or remote location.

Managing uncertainty regarding the RCT was an issue, but not such an issue as to prevent involvement. A number of social workers felt that in general they were not guaranteed to secure access to many care options for their service users, so being unsure due to randomisation was not as much of a concern.

Our recommendations:

Establish a multi-stakeholder partnership to further test pre-trial acceptability of the intervention to the local authorities, directors of children's services, social work managers, social workers, and the children and their families. The project already had a steering group that included boarding schools and local authorities. However, benefit would be gained from

including social workers and the likely participants of the project in early discussions. These partnerships could be used to help test the initial proposal by involving practising social work professionals and including input from children and families as service users. A committee could be formed that would act as the reference point for the development of the project. The key issue here is that this would be formed *prior to* the study being commissioned. The current trial possibly failed for being too centred around the boarding schools agenda and possibly did not account sufficiently for the views and feelings of those in the social work profession.

Create and engage a small but sufficiently heterogeneous set of partnerships between local authorities and boarding schools. We suggest that strong partnerships be developed between managers within local authority social services and boarding schools to build trust between the social workers and the schools where they are being asked to send children. Developers of interventions should be tasked with demonstrating the level of collaboration between local authority social care services and boarding schools prior to commencing the trial.

Prior to funding further trials in this area, developers of an intervention should be required to have established a memorandum of agreement with local authorities that they will implement the intervention. This might involve assigning a degree of ownership to local authorities and possibly identifying a key member of staff in each participating authority to give the final word on any controversial concerns, prior to launching. There could be more focus applied to understanding the attitudes, views, and perceptions of everyone involved, to bring about a unified intervention.

Boarding schools could more clearly articulate the plans, structures, and processes in place that address the pastoral care of pupils, particularly of pupils referred as CiN/CPP. It is possible that social workers and families might then be better disposed to using boarding schools for CiN/CPP. For some people there is a lack of trust in boarding schools, and the sector may want to do more to address its 'image'. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that some people fundamentally disagree with the underpinning ethos of boarding schools for children.

Before commissioning further trials, a process of assessing, identifying, and addressing the educational needs of the social care workforce regarding the potential use of boarding schools should be engaged. If the intention for boarding schools to be considered as a care option remains then social workers and social work students need to be educated about the potential utility of the Boarding Chances for Children project. The contents of this report could be used as a starting point for developing a curriculum that might begin to address some of the issues of concern. If a further or similar trial is to be commissioned we suggest that social workers within the partnerships formed (as suggested in the second recommendation above) should be given specific training addressing issues related to the use of boarding schools.

1. Introduction

> '...it's suggesting that we can't fix what's going on at home, so the next best solution other than the trauma of moving the child into permanent care—or even temporary care—is boarding school, because it will offer so much opportunity, and because it's a privileged world...' (P002)

But then,

> 'Many social workers will see boarding school as something that's negative. And they do: however much I demand that they identify boarding school as a suitable alternative, they won't, because they are generally of the view that boarding school is what the middle classes do to their kids, or the upper classes. And I know it's not a class system that we look at any more, but if you come to the underlying principle, social workers don't believe in boarding school.' (P009)

Ideas underlying the Boarding Chances for Children project have been supported by successive governments for a number of years. In 2014 the Department for Education (DfE) made funds available to support 150 places for children assessed as being a CiN or on a CPP to attend a State boarding school from the start of Year 7 through to the end of Year 13. Placements at independent boarding schools were to be funded by bursaries from either the school or Buttle UK. For the trial the local authority social care services where children were located were required to commit £6,000 per annum per child as a contribution to the costs of the intervention. Initially an RCT was commissioned. The Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) provided funding for the independent evaluation. After a year an insufficient number of children had been referred by social workers to the intervention developer, resulting in an insufficient number of participants recruited into the trial. At first it was understood that the major barrier to referral to the study centred on the uncertainty of randomisation. In 2015 the trial was relaunched using a Zelen's design. The Zelen's design in this context aimed to remove uncertainty for children and families regarding randomisation. It was envisaged that this amelioration of uncertainty would be achieved by randomising participants prior to obtaining consent. If randomised to the intervention group then the intervention is offered and consent is given. Randomisation to the control group leads to no further involvement in the trial intervention. However, despite the change in design, the issues with recruitment persisted. After a further substantial period attempting to recruit, the numbers remained so small that the project was halted. However, there was sufficient belief in the potential benefit of the intervention and there was hope for a new study in which all potential children and their families

would be able to access the intervention if they agreed to participate. A quasi-experiment using a comparison group matched from the National Pupil Database was commissioned (see below for details of how this was developed into a two-stage design). The University of Nottingham was appointed as the new independent evaluator in April 2016. However, after five months the study was again withdrawn, due to the low level of recruitment. The barriers to trial participation now seemed larger than had been initially perceived.

As the independent evaluator for the project, we were commissioned to conduct a small-scale qualitative study to investigate the possible reasons for successive failure to recruit, and to identify what lessons might be learned. The interest in boarding school for CiN and CPP remains high, and the Department for Education continues to show a desire, through the launch of the Boarding Schools Partnership,[3] for the potential use of boarding schools for CiN, CPP or for those from socially-economically deprived homes. Despite this drive towards using boarding schools there are some important issues to address. Research using educational interventions within the field of social care are, arguably, contentious. As one professional group are potentially working in the field of another, there is the risk of not understanding the nature of each profession. This issue could be exacerbated when applied in the context of boarding schools and CiN/CPP. Both can elicit strong emotional responses as people may hold one-sided opinions, thinking only from their own frame of reference rather than considering the potential benefits for others. As our interviews will show, boarding schools themselves elicit a mixture of responses from people in the field of social care. Social work as a profession has an equally complex public identity and is often presented as incompetent and not always clear on what social work is about (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Added to this, interventions targeted at vulnerable children are inherently highly emotive and can provoke strong opinion and reaction.

It is in the context of all the above that we set out to develop our knowledge about those factors that might have influenced recruitment and to establish the lessons learned. To do this, we addressed the following principal research questions in this study:

1. What aspects of offering boarding chances places to CiN/CPP do social care professionals consider acceptable and feasible or not?

2. What might influence social care professionals' participation in a future Boarding Chances for Children trial?

We have approached these two major questions by conducting 20 semi-structured interviews with social care professionals to explore their attitudes, beliefs and professional practice philosophies, their institutional structures and feelings about offering boarding chances for children. We were interested to understand how social work professionals felt towards boarding schools, both in general terms and in the context of an intervention for vulnerable children. In the interviews we

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[3] www.boardingschoolpartnerships.org.uk

also explored aspects of the trial design and linked this to recruitment to understand what might influence social care practitioners and services engaging in educational interventions.

First, we provide a brief summary of relevant issues related to the use of boarding school provision for vulnerable children. We shall touch on the rationale that has been given previously for the intervention. Second, we describe our methods and provide details on the participants that we interviewed within the study. Third, we set out our findings in the results section and fourth, consider these in the discussion. Finally, we make a number of recommendations and provide our conclusion.

1.1 Background on boarding school chances for children

For nearly a decade and a half, successive governments, responsible for developing and overseeing the delivery of educational policy and children's services in the UK, have considered the use of boarding schools to provide support and opportunity to thrive for vulnerable children such as those on a CPP or a CiN (DfCSF, 2007). While guidance on using boarding schools as an alternative to care or as part of residential care has been documented (Morgan, 2007) the actual use of boarding schools in this context remains relatively low. According to Nietmus (2017) there are currently only around 100 children that are in funded boarding school placements but the DfE aims to raise this to 2000 in the coming years. In 2014 the DfE published a paper making the case for using boarding school places for vulnerable children and more recently the DfE has advanced their interest through the information service known as the Boarding Schools Partnership (2017) aimed specifically at increasing the use of boarding schools by local authorities. A RCT commissioned by the EEF was a response to the continued interest, intent, and support from the DfE. This trial was intended to address the gap in the evidence base on the benefits of using boarding schools for CiN/CPP, educationally, emotionally, and psychologically. A series of pilot projects (for example, the Boarding Provision for Vulnerable Children Pathfinder [the Boarding Pathfinder]) was evaluated (Maxwell, Chase, Statham, & Jackson, 2009). Maxwell *et al.* (2009) and Lombard (2011) identified the reluctance of social workers to recommend or refer to boarding school as an intervention for vulnerable children. It was clear that the chance of a partly funded place at boarding school was not enough for social care professionals to be swayed into using the opportunity as a part of their response to CiN/CPP on the edge of care.

The underlying motivation for using boarding schools for CiN/CPP is, in one way, being driven by the poor educational attainment of these children. Children who are not 'in need' or 'in care' form the comparison group or benchmark for educational attainment. A 'gap' in educational performance between looked after children (LAC) and all others continues to grow throughout their school career (Sebba *et al.*, 2015). Some evidence to support the use of boarding comes from an educational programme in the United States. Findings suggest that socially disadvantaged children in Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) schools, offering a holistic

education experience and curricula that address both academic and non-academic development of children, are positive (Curto & Fryer, 2014): for each year a child is in a SEED school they achieve gains with effect sizes of around $d = 0.211$ in reading and $d = 0.229$ in mathematics scores. However, Curto and Fryer (2014) caution that the effects observed might be driven by gender, as girls significantly outperformed boys within their sample and therefore care is needed with interpreting this result for boys. Similar findings were reported in a recent study involving 258 students in the French oversubscribed 'boarding schools of excellence'. Disadvantaged students were in smaller classes and spent longer in class compared with the control group of 137 children (Behaghel *et al.*, 2017). Large gains and improvements (in comparison to size of charter school impacts in the US) were reported in mathematics tests, particularly for students who were already in the top third of students two years earlier. Those 'weaker' students in boarding schools showed no such improvement in academic measures. There were other notable social effects on new boarders that included a reduction in time watching television and poorer emotional outcomes at the end of the first year of boarding, although this was mitigated at the end of the second year. With quite different findings with respect to the effect of elite boarding schools on vulnerable children in Mexico City, more vulnerable students showed less academic progress and higher dropout rates than their more advantaged peers (de Janvry, Dustan, & Sadoulet, 2012). A weakness in this finding is the lack of comparison with other vulnerable children. The literature on the use of boarding schools as interventions is thus complex and conflicting.

A stable 'care' environment is critical in supporting children's academic development. Sebba *et al.* (2015) report significant variation in outcomes for LAC (three groups: those placed in care before the end of Key Stage 2, those placed in care after Key Stage 2 and those in short-term care for less than 12 months by the end of Key Stage 4), CiN/CPP children at the end of Key Stage 4 but not in care, and a comparison group of children not in care and not in need. Those children placed in long-term care early made more progress than groups of LAC or CiN/CPP. For example, those entering care after Key Stage 2 performed worse in comparison to those who entered care before the end of KS2. The 'relative educational performance of children in need… showed a decline over time' (Sebba *et al.*, 2015, p.26).

Another important factor informing the proposed trial was that the climate and environment afforded by boarding school might provide a positive change and offer an alternative to a child's current living situation. Children are often in need because of difficulties at home that might be due to the pressure of a parent or carer being disabled, experiencing psychological or emotional distress that limits their capacity to provide adequate care and safety, or that the children themselves might have some specific difficulty that means the parent or carer is unable to cope. When such circumstances arise it is a statutory responsibility of local authorities and social services to make provision under section 17 of the 1989 Children Act (CA1989). According to the Act it is the responsibility of the local authority to promote the upbringing of such children, where possible, 'by their families'. Advocates of boarding school chances argue that the stability of the boarding environment would improve the CiN/CPP's chances academically. Conversely, removing a child

from their home, family, attachment relationships and/or from their community environment may prove challenging to their emotional wellbeing (Curto & Fryer, 2014). The experience of loss involved in separation through attending a boarding school can lead to changes in identity that impact on a sense of belonging both at the school and estrangement from their community (Curto, 2014, provides a review of 'loss' of identity).

Developing the child in a holistic way means considering their psychological and emotional development in addition to academic attainment. The trial as proposed intended to see whether boarding schools could do this for CiN/CPP. The aim was to explore, in addition to academic effects, improvements in non-cognitive outcomes such as improvements in self-regulation, self-concept and in lowering children's difficulties. This was based on the growing body of literature showing links between non-cognitive outcomes and academic performance. There are, for example, associations between the academic attainment and level of difficulties a child reports on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Mundy *et al.*, 2017) with greater difficulties being more closely associated with lower academic achievement. Using large-scale datasets created through linking the National Pupil Database and the Children Looked After Database, Luke, Sinclair, and O'Higgins (2015) suggested that CiN were more likely to have poorer GCSE results than their LAC peers when the placement was stable and lasting over 12 months. The Self-Regulation Questionnaire-Academic (Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012) is a self-report questionnaire that measures self-regulation in academic settings by measuring external and intrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation has been shown to be associated with better academic performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and is in part shown to be environmentally developed (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). Academic Self-Concept (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Shavelson & Marsh, 1986) assesses the self-evaluation of learners and is a central construct in the field of education research that has been repeatedly shown to be related to achievement (Möller, Pohlmann, Köller, & Marsh, 2009).

1.2 Overview of the discontinued trials and study designs

There were two attempts to recruit to a RCT followed by one attempt to recruit to a within-subjects design. Three failed attempts to recruit participants to the interventions suggests something important is in need of attention and calls into question the perceived acceptability and usefulness of this intervention to social workers. In this section we provide a brief overview of the RCTs and the subsequently commissioned two-stage evaluation.

The RCTs were due to address the following research question:

1. What is the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of local authorities offering boarding school as an early intervention for CiN as defined by CA1989 and who are the subject of CiN or CPP compared to not offering boarding school for such children?

The original design for the trial was proposed by the University of York and the University of Durham as the official independent evaluators. The trial was a pragmatic two-armed RCT that ran for one year with little success in recruitment. It was intended that children entering the study would receive the boarding intervention from Year 7 through Year 11 and where appropriate to Year 13. The trial anticipated recruiting over a three-year period and it was estimated that based on the 150 boarding places available that a total sample of 450 students would be recruited, based on a 2:1 (control/intervention) allocation. However, as an insufficient number of participants was recruited into the trial this led to the redesign of the trial. As a result a two-arm Zelen's design was proposed and opened with the unit of allocation being the individual pupil.

Zelen's method was used to improve and manage issues surrounding previous difficulties in recruitment. It is, as the University of York and University of Durham states, an unusual and uncommon trial design. Most professionals would be aware of the process of RCTs and the chances that service users referred might be randomised to the control and therefore would not access the potential benefit of the intervention. The Zelen's method was employed to minimise the disappointments to families and children from this eventuality. In the Zelen method randomisation takes place prior to the family and child being offered the intervention. Consent is gathered in stages. First families consent to providing data as part of a longitudinal study. Then if they are randomised to the intervention they would be offered the boarding chance. The child and family then decide if they would like to accept the intervention. If they decline the intervention they remain in the study and are followed up for study outcomes in the same way as the control group but would be analysed under the principles of intention to treat with the intervention group.

The trial using Zelen's design was intending to use scores on a standardised mathematics test as the primary outcome with secondary outcomes being assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1999). Data was to be collected at the end of Year 7, Year 9 and Year 11 and was to be analysed using regression models to test for differences between intervention and control groups. A cost-effectiveness evaluation was to be conducted using the monetary costs and comparing to non-intervention and estimate the quality of adjusted life years (QALY) for estimating the cost-effectiveness in non-academic terms through quality of life experienced by the intervention group compared to the control. QALYs are calculated by estimating the number and quality of life years remaining after an intervention.

Despite the change to the Zelen's design the recruitment resulted in an insufficient number of participants for a second time. A further study was put to tender by the EEF, and the University of Nottingham proposed a study that was accepted.

The study proposed by the University of Nottingham was a quasi-experimental design that set out to address the following primary research question:

1. Is there evidence that boarding school chances can impact on attainment and non-academic outcomes (i.e. does the approach change participant behaviour as predicted in the theory of

change, is the approach underpinned by evidence, is it likely that the observed behaviours could lead to a change in attainment)?

The secondary research questions were:

1. Is the intervention acceptable to social care professionals, children, and their families and can the intervention be scaled up?

2. Is there a suitable and sufficiently large target population to make a larger-scale roll-out both feasible and affordable?

3. Is the intervention sufficiently clearly defined to be replicable in a more rigorous efficacy trial?

4. Is the intervention affordable (this being a complex intervention where marginal costs will be difficult to identify)?

The study was designed as a two-stage experiment. This design was based on the knowledge of the previous two failed attempts to recruit a sufficient number of participants into a randomised design even when the Zelen's design was used. In contrast to the RCTs, the new design ensured that all participants consenting to the study received the intervention. At stage one all participants that were referred to the intervention and consented to participate were given the intervention. The design also proposed to construct a comparison group using data from the National Pupil Database, a large government database[4] containing the details of hundreds of thousands of children, which contains identifiers that mark a CiN/CPP status. At the end of stage one, data was to be analysed using the difference between pre- and post- scores on standardised mathematics and English tests for the intervention participants at Year 7 and Year 9 (change over time with no comparison group). Similarly to the RCTs, non-cognitive outcomes were to be assessed using the SDQ, but additional measures were to be used including the Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ: Weinstein *et al.*, 2012) and a measure of Academic Self-Concept (ASC: Shavelson et al., 1976; Shavelson & Marsh, 1986). At stage two the intent was that in the final year of the study we would model the probability of attaining five GCSEs grades A*–C (or equivalent with the new national exam score methodology which will be rolled out during the life of the project) for the 50 pupils against a pre-matched sample derived from a Bayesian Propensity Score Matching procedure for appropriate comparisons to be made, while minimising the bias inherent in observational studies. This would have used a two-stage process: first, fitting a multilevel logistic regression model to simulate propensity scores including the indicator that children have been referred to social services, free school meal entitlement, baseline attainment level from Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, and geographical area

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[4] www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-pupil-database

that the pupil resides in, and, second, using the R package 'MatchIt' in a loop to generate matches across the distribution, using 'near neighbour' matching with standard caliper of 0.2.

2. Method

We employed a qualitative methodology to explore the research questions in this small-scale investigative study. An interview protocol was developed iteratively by the researchers and a sample outline of questions and topics is included in Appendix 1. Additionally, participants were asked about their qualifications, experience, and training as social workers.

2.1 Recruitment and procedure

We identified our sample using a combination of convenience and snowball approaches. We identified potential participants by using existing contacts associated with the Boarding Chances for Children project that had been involved in some capacity in either of the RCTs or the within-subjects study. We knew that all local authorities in England had been contacted during the recruitment phases of the trials. We were supplied a list of contact and response details that the developer had used during the trial. From this we were able to select local authorities that had (a) responded positively and engaged in the trial, (b) responded positively but had not engaged in the trial, or (c) had not responded to the invitation to engage in the trial. Using this information we then approached the local authority contact or staff most appropriately positioned to respond to the request for an interview. Here we used existing contacts within local authorities or information supplied by the developer for the research study. Having identified the appropriate contact we sent invitations to participate via email. The email included a brief outline and overview of the project, an information sheet, and a consent form. Participants were recruited between June 2017 and August 2017 across England, including but not limited to the local authorities of Birmingham, Devon, Hampshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, various boroughs of London, and Suffolk.

We used semi-structured interviews and participants were invited to talk about their perspectives on both the intervention and more broadly the use of boarding schools as a social care intervention. All of the interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recording device and were securely stored on a server within the University. The interviews were then transcribed. Ethical considerations with regard to privacy and confidentiality of data were maintained in line with the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics and the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics.

2.2 Participants

We interviewed twenty-one participants using a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. The data for one participant was lost due to a recording failure. The remaining sample is N=20. Our participants spanned the full range of professional social work practice, researchers and academics involved in teaching and training social workers. We included directors of children's services (n=2), social work managers (n=3), experienced social workers (working in child protection, LAC services) (n=2), newly qualified social workers (n=4), family support workers (n=5), virtual school head (n=1), and research active social work academics teaching on social work degree programmes (n=3). Of the participants included in the data analysis the majority of participants were female (n=13, 65%) and half of the participants were located in the East midlands region (n=10, 50%).

2.3 Data collection

Social care professionals' attitudes, views, and perceptions were explored in the interviews by means of questions on: (1) qualifications and experiences in professional capacity; (2) social worker education and training; (3) knowledge of the Boarding Chances for Children project; (4) general thoughts about placing CiN/CPP in a boarding school; (5) approach to working with CiN/CPP; (6) considering boarding school as a positive alternative for a CiN/CPP; (7) concerns and benefits regarding placement of CiN/CPP in boarding school; and (8) recommendations regarding referral and recruitment of CiN/CPP to the boarding school intervention.

All interviews were anonymised and transcribed verbatim by two separate transcribers. These were then uploaded through a secure file portal for manual coding of the data and identification of recurrent themes. A second coder audited the coding, to ensure data quality and to establish the trustworthiness and reliability of the themes identified. Interviews lasted on average 28 minutes (range 18 to 39 minutes).

2.4 Data analysis

We used a form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to code the transcripts. Coding comprised five iterative phases: (1) interviews were transcribed and reviewed for initial coding; (2) field notes were drawn on in adding codes to transcripts and sections of transcript were highlighted to identify relevant quotes supporting themes; (3) themes were cross-referenced with regard to our research objectives; (4) preparation of a full list of themes and cross-checking by the second coder identifying in the transcripts themes and evidence; (5) clustering related themes and separating unique themes, retaining the identity of their constituent subthemes.

3. Results

Below we present the themes that we identified from within the data. In total we identified ten major themes, with each major theme having several component subthemes. Many of the component subthemes are interrelated and create a complex network of connected factors. It is not possible to fully communicate this complexity and interrelatedness, and it is to be expected that the combined effect of all the themes will be greater than the sum of their parts when considering what might have impacted the failure to recruit.

Table 1 lists the major themes and the number and percentage of participants endorsing each theme. Then we provide a narrative account of each theme and its component subthemes. To contextualise the various themes we include verbatim quotes from the participant interviews. We list the themes in order of frequency of endorsement within the sample.

Table 1: Major themes and endorsement

Theme	No. endorsed	% endorsed
1. Four 'Rs'	20	100
2. Financial costs and buying-in	20	100
3. Positive environment, aspirations, and benefits	20	100
4. Fears, concerns, and parallels with the unknown	20	100
5. Social worker 'DNA'	15	75
6. Outcomes (education, emotional, psychosocial)	17	75

7. Knowledge of Boarding Chances for Children	7	35
8. Child-centred care	7	35
9. Boarding school location	6	30
10. Managing the uncertainty	5	20

1. Four 'Rs'

This theme stands for 'right age', 'right child', in the 'right circumstances', and finding the 'right school'. All of the social workers felt that this level of detail in planning a child's journey from home to boarding school would rule out a significant number of the children they worked with and therefore would limit referral to the project or a similar intervention more generally. Taking each of these in turn, beginning with the 'right age':

> 'I can imagine at 10, there's a great opportunity to change things around for them. If you get to 14, 16, you've already sort of lost them to a degree, whereas at 10, there's still that potential…' (P010)

> '...children, when they reach 16 years old, we always find it difficult for these children who don't want to go into care, but if that child's refused Section 20[5] accommodation through a local authority, but it's not always safe for them do so. So I do find that between the local authority and child protection and the child and family service, and the other agencies, that there is a bit of a problem with early teens, like coming up to their mid-teens to late teens with accommodation, so that's really why I thought I'd participate…' (P011)

Participants talked about the boarding chances intervention as if exploring a chance at boarding school would only be considered when making decisions about options for care and said:

> '...depending on the age of the child: if you were looking at Year 6, you'd be more likely to be looking at long-term foster care or even adoption for those young people, and it's more likely to be successful because they are at the younger age range. Not as many young people of that age group tend to be placed in residential care: they tend to go into foster placements.' (P016)

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[5] Section 20 Children Act 1989 refers to the provision of accommodation for children.

Referring to finding the 'right child' for the intervention, social workers were confident that such a child existed. They talked about being able to think of children they could identify within their caseloads that would be suitable and when they did this they were positive about boarding schools. One participant said:

> 'I think for the right child, it definitely could work: it's choosing that right child, it's having those right children, isn't it and what level they're involved with in need...' (P010)

In addition to finding the right child at the right age there also had to be the 'right circumstances'. By this it was implied that lots of other factors all had to be in place and that the child would need to be able to cope with the significant change of moving from their family and local community to the boarding school. The school had to be accessible for a child to visit home or for family to visit them if needed and, importantly, the child would need to be behaviourally capable of adapting to the new school environment. When these factors were all considered, the picture of being able to identify a candidate in the right circumstances began to diminish:

> '...I am sure for the right child, for the right circumstances, this might work. But I think that would be an exception rather than a rule.' (P005)

The final 'R' refers to the 'right school' and this was a concern for social workers. Social workers were explicit in stating the care they take over selecting placements for children. Thoughts were around the right community environment and they questioned whether the boarding school would be the right social environment for CiN/CPP. One participant said:

> 'I thought, the general thought, I think there's a perception of boarding schools as for posh people and clever people, and that perhaps a child in need living on a council estate in wherever, really … wouldn't fit in, and would be socially disadvantaged.' (P003)

The same participant went on to say:

> 'Social workers, professionals working with children, are possibly unreasonably prejudiced against the private school system anyway...and some of us would like to see the private sector abolished!... there's a social disadvantage in mixing with children from very, very different backgrounds.' (P003)

There was also a concern whether the school would be able to cope with the level of distress and disturbance that would be experienced by most of the children social workers might consider as suitable for a placement in a boarding school. Social workers generally felt that those children would possibly need more intense care than the boarding school might be able to provide. Social workers believed that children are better able to be cared for within the environment of a family and community that matched their background.

2. Financial costs and buying-in

There were concerns regarding the financial costs associated with referring a child to the boarding schools project and with using boarding schools more generally. Social workers were clear that they felt there would be a significant financial benefit to placing a child in boarding school rather than having them placed within a high cost-intensive children's home. However, significant concerns were expressed about, in a financially constrained social care environment, investing heavily in a child that might never become 'looked after'.

> 'I just wanted to say a couple of other things on why it didn't work. There is a practical side—because I don't want to make it all about ideology. There is an issue of budgets: there is an issue of money and austerity…this was an issue, because not only was it money, but it was child in need, child in protection plan children, which really is an early intervention, so to ask them to fix that money in place for an early intervention is also very much against what they are doing…' (P001)

While making an early intervention was viewed positively by social workers this was always counterbalanced by the issue of funding and investment. There seemed to be a difficulty in being confident that the money invested in one child would or could be justified. For example, one social worker commented that the money spent on sending a single child to boarding school would be better spent if invested in the 'entire local community', perhaps investing in library resources or other focal points within the community (P009).

There were issues with the trial in regard to social workers being very cautious about investment in a child where the placement might not work. This is reflected in the theme 'Four Rs' and also the 'Fears and concerns' theme. Social workers saw placing a child in a boarding school as akin to fostering or a children's home, although they recognised its value and possible role in supporting families. As our theme 'Social worker DNA' reports, these interventions are seen as a 'last resort'. That is to say, even if there was local authority 'buy-in' to the initiative, the intervention seemed to be at such odds with social work practice that individual social workers were unlikely to make referrals. However, one participant was able to see the benefits of boarding to potentially keep the family together.

> 'The last thing we want to do is take the children into care, and so I would hope our social workers would try in all possible ways to actually work with that child to keep them linked to the family. And boarding school is an ideal way of how they might do that.' (P004)

3. Positive environment, aspirations, and benefits

There were several statements by social workers that pointed to the idea that boarding schools could provide a positive environment with many benefits for the CiN/CPP. It was recognised that it is important to encourage an aspirational attitude to help children.

> 'I do think ideally, the best place is probably at home with a parent or carer that can look after you and can do that in a functional way and so on, but I just think the reality is for so many families that isn't the case, and actually the boarding environment, where you can focus on your education and you do get the care, and you can still be in touch with parents and go and see them—it's not ruining that relationship—I just think it still can be—and is—a much better place than, unfortunately, home is.' (P003)

However, positive statements were almost always qualified with some scepticism:

> 'I can see some sort of utopia where it could be absolutely brilliant, but how you provide the right level of support and convince the social workers and families of the benefits, I'm not sure.' (P003)

And another social worker said:

> 'I suppose what comes to mind is how crucial the initial stages of this are, how crucial it is for social workers to really have a clear understanding about what it is that they're being asked to refer into and what the benefits might be. And I suppose because lots of schools potentially could be involved, I'm just thinking, as a social worker, if I was going to suggest this to a family, I would want to have a really, really clear understanding about what it was I was suggesting that they are getting themselves into or what they do. I would really want to be able to explore with them what the potential schools might be able to offer, what their environments were like.' (P008)

Boarding schools were seen as being able to offer CiN/CPP stability (lifestyle, accommodation), to build character, develop resilience, provide routine, apply a structure, present discipline, supply nutrition, offer recreational activities, and support aspirations:

> 'I think it's got the potential to work at lots of different levels, really, because it's a safe way for the child to experience something new and that kind of cultural and social development that kind of gets forgotten about, because it's just about safeguarding and protecting, it's something that can build on that child's experience and confidence and self-esteem, which will hopefully come in good stead as they get a little bit older and may face challenges. And it's aspirational as well, isn't it?' (P015)

Despite all these positive views there were some very significant fears and concerns that might seriously inhibit social workers from using boarding schools.

4. Fears, concerns, and parallels with the unknown

Historically, social workers are associated with supporting families and involved in the institutionalised care of young children. Considering the ongoing welfare of a CiN/CPP, more than half (n=13, 65%) of the social workers regarded the boarding school system as an 'alien' concept, with many of them only referring to private boarding schools, even if they had experience of visiting children in State boarding schools:

> 'I think that sense of it being a bit of an unknown quantity, as well as my own kind of personal views about the class nature of private education, would potentially prevent it as an option.' (P016)

At times, this 'unknown quantity' (P016) was paired with strong language and compared to other forms of institutional or reform system such as 'borstal[6]' (P001; P017), 'emotional behavioural difficulty schools' (P005; P008; P017), 'surrogate care system' (P002), 'Nazi Germany' (P007). If such terms are still used alongside the idea of boarding school, there should be cause for concern, especially when there is a great deal of prejudice against and stigma attached to them. As one participant describes below, they had a concern about boarding school being used to change the class status of the children:

> '...my very positive perception of what you said at first suddenly became quite negative, thinking, "What are we doing? Are we breeding the child in need out of the child in need? Is that what the intention is here?" (P007)

Bearing in mind social workers' objectives around safeguarding, protection of children, and not repeating a pattern of 'apartheid-mentality' (P007), one participant explains that in preparing for a boarding school intervention:

> 'I wouldn't want to put a child in there that's quite vulnerable, might have suffered quite a lot of significant abuse—whether that's emotional, sexual or physical—putting them into a boarding school that might have three other children that have been quite dominant siblings in their family. And I would be aware that that would be all confidential and that would be down to the boarding school workers to manage that risk, but I think that I would want to know whether at this one time, would this placement and the people that are residing in that placement, are they going to pose any more risks to any more children?' (P011)

On the other hand, another social worker raised concerns over managing the risk to other children, stating:

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[6] Borstal is a term for a young offender institute. It went out of use in the late 1970s/early 1980s.

'I think it's recognised that the care settings we have don't work for a lot of children. They tend to breed behaviour. So putting them in an environment where that isn't acceptable and it won't be tolerated, and have peers that want to progress and want to achieve, that's got to be a positive influence. But you've got to probably weigh that off with if that child is the right child to go in that setting; would they have a detrimental effect on the other children, as well, because obviously you can't have 100 pupils and one completely disrupt everything.' (P010)

Social workers are aware that 'distressed, frightened children don't learn' (P017) and many children require emotional, therapeutic, and pastoral support when entering a completely foreign environment. Along with several others, one social worker explains:

'I think emotional regulation is absolutely crucial in doing that, because what we know of children is that they will not learn unless certain building blocks are in place, and emotional regulation is one of those absolute cornerstones that allows us to learn. We don't learn when we're frightened; and I think that that's something that needs to be understood by all our providers, whether they're private or mainstream or special.' (P014).

Likewise, the concerns about protecting individual children were voiced:

'...would need to know what safeguarding is put in place, because you're removing a child from their family home, essentially the same as putting them into a placement, so we'd need to know what all the child protection policies were, who the appointed contact was for safeguarding at the school; and also what support mechanisms would be put in place for the child to integrate effectively, so what pastoral support is available at the school, if there is a buddying system, if they could be integrated into the classes.' (P020)

While acknowledging these fears, one participant recognised that many concerns are contingent on the strength and quality of the social care professional relationship (Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013) and connection with the family and child in question. In respect of the boarding school intervention per se, the same participant said:

'It would be more just making sure the family don't feel that this is, depending on their trust levels within the social work side of things, isn't it, it's just about how do you make the parents see this as a positive thing and not actually removing the child from their care in an underhand way or anything like that; it just depends on the family's actual experiences of social services and how well they're engaged in the processes. But I think for a family maybe that's actually been at child protection level, and it's stepped down to child in need, with that view of eventually closing the social care, I think that would be a really positive thing, but I suppose it's just about how it's presented to the family, because I don't think there'd be great barriers to it in that respect. I think it's something that families would engage with and children would engage with.' (P015)

5. Social worker 'DNA'

We explored whether there is anything inherent to social workers and the structures that guide their practice that might prevent social workers from referring children into the study. We wanted to know what influences social workers on the inside and discover what informs their decisions about their practice. Are there certain 'implicit guidelines' that act as sequences that inform practice and decisions?

Despite the rhetoric surrounding the use of evidence to guide practice this seemed predominantly to be at best a secondary source of information being used. More importantly, there was broad consensus that the ultimate aim of social work was to do everything possible towards keeping the family together. So strongly was this theme expressed within the interviews that we labelled this goal of *keeping families together* or *keeping children in families* as being in the 'DNA' of social work practice. As if all actions in the sequence of social work intervention must, wherever possible, lead to this outcome. This is to some extent of course a paradoxical finding. The social work profession is often regarded with some trepidation, feared 'they may take away children' from the family (Prendergast, 2016), and at the same time, the profession is often reviled by the media for their apparent failure to intervene sufficiently robustly in order to protect a child (Laville, 2015). With funding of public social care services much reduced, pressures have increased.

> 'I think the other issue is that a lot of social workers are trained—and I don't know how in vogue it is at the moment… but there certainly has been a drive about keeping the family together, keeping the family together, and this thing about sending a child to boarding school, so again not seeing it as actually this is a way to support the family and child relationship in an environment that could actually give the parent and situation some respite, they're maybe seeing it as, 'Oh, we're pulling the children apart and that's against what we've been trained.' (P001)

The motivation towards keeping children in families was a potential barrier to the project. Social workers did not see boarding school as an option, or at least not until the child was at risk of or already in need of becoming looked after. There seemed to be little by way of thinking forward from an early intervention and prevention point of view. Where it was considered it was then held with a significant degree of suspicion. One participant said,

> 'Social workers are trained in the art of identifying risks and responding to that, protecting children and working with families to keep them together. Boarding school is theoretically—and I know it's only theoretically—a middle-class phenomenon, and therefore, social workers—who are often middle class, but they are probably, though, among the middle class who don't believe in boarding schools, and think the best way to help children is to keep them with their families—and consequently, if you don't do some

changing in the training of how we train social workers, we're going to keep coming across this problem.' (P019)

The same participant spoke enthusiastically about the prospect of using boarding schools referring to them as an ideal environment to provide a break from the family where there might be distress or other difficulties,

'Boarding schools are an ideal environment to take a vulnerable young person to live in a supportive environment and then they only have to be at home at weekends or holidays. So it's an excellent way to keep children linked to their family, but not surrounded by them every moment, so that then they can actually have a longer-term healthy relationship with their family.' (P019)

To some extent boarding school has an 'image problem' and one that social workers were very wary of, especially when it comes to placing a child in a boarding school. Despite P019 above alluding to the potential positive environment, others were less certain. One area where there was some agreement was for the potential of boarding school to be considered as a way to keep families together. When this was presented to participants they responded that respite for families and the children themselves was at times essential.

'I think respite is key. I think boarding school offers the structure of time away from the family but then time back with the family, and contact in between, which is always very much encouraged and prioritised when it can be in social work. So yes, absolutely respite. I think taking a child out of the everyday environment if that is the particular stressor, if community services and resources are scarce, then a boarding school may be able to offer things to that child that are not immediately available otherwise. A boarding school may be able to more closely work with a child than perhaps day school would be able to, whether more one-to-one or just by the nature of being a residential setting.' (P002)

Recognising the somewhat conflicting views about respite, the same participant suggested that respite may be considered less effective and does not consider important contemporary theoretical approaches such as those based on attachment theory, saying,

'I think the idea of just removing a child but making it better and that respite will make things better is quite an outdated idea in social work. Now, you know, modern-day social work is so much caught around attachment theory and understandings that the child flourishes best when the family is supported to care for them.' (P002)

The issue of attachment figures featured again when contrasting residential care and boarding school suggesting that a temporary attachment figure in the child's life can be disruptive to their development,

> '...residential care is often criticised for the turnover of workers that leads to children not having permanent, stable one-to-one relationships: there's a real danger, I think, that the boarding school project just mirrors that turnover of very well-meaning and often very kind but not permanent figures in a child's life...' (P017)

It is important to situate the notion of keeping families together within the history of social work practice and the development of the social work profession moving away from the idea of 'institutional care'. Boarding schools were often considered as being similar to the children's homes in the past. A participant was asked if their attitude towards institutions would be a barrier to referring children to a boarding school place,

> 'I think there is probably—again, it's probably prejudice rather than evidence—about well actually, if the child is troubled in some way, in what way will a boarding school wrap around them in terms of the needs for support that they've got?' (P005)

Another participant said,

> 'One of the issues about social workers is that generally they don't believe in institutional care, and that probably 95%, if not higher, of social workers would always want children to be with families and to be placed in families. So I think there is always, this is a natural predisposition against any sort of institutional care. So, institutional care would cover a boarding school, so that is a sort of inbuilt prejudice that they might have, or a sort of practice philosophy, you might say.' (P005)

In the event that a family can't be kept together social workers will aim to consider placements for children in a situation in which they are likely to feel 'at home' or somewhere they feel they belong. There was a view that there were huge cultural difference between many of the children that social workers were holding in their mind when considering the Boarding Chances for Children trials and the kinds of children that might 'fit in' at a boarding school. There was a tendency among participants to homogenise the natural variation of children that attend boarding school, resulting in the suggestion that moving children to boarding school would be some kind of 'cultural shock' (P014).

Social workers might have been deterred from referring children to the study because of their own views about how a child would fit in based on the class differences that are perceived to exist. One social worker said:

> 'I'm sure I'm not the only person for this perception to cross my mind—what boarding school stands for in public perception and perhaps concerns around the cultural clash and elements of concern around boarding schools representing quite an elite, upper-class, expensive institution, and generally when you're working with children from a socially disadvantaged background, how would that cultural experience be for them and how easy would it be for them to feel at home, to integrate, and to flourish in an environment where

> … boarding school does feel different from any other kind of school in the public perception.' (P002)

Class differences feature again as a potential barrier to referral when another social worker considered their own perceptions of boarding schools,

> 'I guess my own kind of association with boarding schools is that they would be upper-middle to upper-class young people, or young people from wealthy backgrounds, who probably have quite different socio-cultural experiences to the young people that are usually identified by local authorities.' (P016)

Drawing this theme together we have presented the proposal that the values and beliefs that social workers are concerned with centre strongly around keeping the child within a family environment. This is in part based on the belief that institutions caring for children represent something less than ideal and that families and local communities are good.

6. Outcomes

As far back as the Pathfinder Report (2007), senior social workers identified the use of boarding schools as a 'positive placement choice' (p. 10) rather than for crisis cases or emergency situations. Social workers agreed with the outcomes of the pilot studies and felt that these aligned well with their values and intentions in practice.

> 'Certainly, I feel that some of the young people I worked with when I was in the care sector—and other young people, but I'll focus on that—had boarding been an option, and they had been able to enter boarding school, I really believe that the outcomes of their life would be absolutely radically different.' (P001)

Three quarters of our social care professionals considered that the boarding school chances can impact on attainment and raise aspiration. As one participant described, these outcomes cultivate multi-level developments:

> 'I think it's got the potential to work at lots of different levels, really, because it's a safe way for the child to experience something new and that kind of cultural and social development that kind of gets forgotten about, because it's just about safeguarding and protecting, it's something that can build on that child's experience and confidence and self-esteem, which will hopefully come into good stead as they get a little bit older and may face challenges. And it's aspirational as well, isn't it?' (P015)

Likewise, expanding on the aspiration, another participant further elaborated:

'You're raising aspirations in that child; you're taking that child and if we look at the power of socialisation and nurture, you're putting that child in an environment where the highest end of society exists, and where jobs, contacts, educational attainment will lead you down a certain path, very different from your typical Child in Need sort of environment. Aspirations, for me, is the most appealing.' (P007)

Social workers viewed the boarding school intervention as an opportunity for CiN/CPP to experience a new environment which encourages attainment that can be carried forward to all aspects of their lives and continue to develop over time:

'It could offer them routine and that structure in their lives that they've not previously had, that they would take into adulthood, it'll help them mix and socialise and associate with other people that they may not have necessarily had the opportunity to do that with; and then there's all the academic opportunities, and even more so, it could improve their relationship with their family, because that's what they needed, some respite and space from each other.' (P006)

Similarly, another participant said '[it could] give the child a different view of the world, really, which is just broadening their experiences, that sort of thing would always be something that's really beneficial' (P015). Several statements by social workers suggested the boarding school initiative for CiN/CPP to be a positive alternative, compared with going into care. However, as many mentioned, such outcomes cannot be achieved and maintained without a positive attitude toward the school and a motivation to succeed by the child themselves (Bass, 2013).

7. Knowledge of Boarding Chances for Children

Failure to recruit to this study reflects a complex interaction of factors that we explore below. A significant contribution to the failure to recruit was social workers' lack of knowledge about boarding schools generally and, more specifically, a lack of awareness of the boarding chances for children project. Despite our targeting a number of local authorities involved in the study (LAs classed as 'involved' were those that registered an interest) there was a low level of prior knowledge regarding the study trials within the participant sample. Among the twenty participants, almost two thirds (n=13, 65%) had no prior knowledge of the Boarding Chances for Children project.

Most of the attitudes towards and perceptions of boarding school that were expressed by participants were based on the indirect (n=18, 90%) experiences of family and friends, previous social work cases, and through press and media-related sources. With regard to social worker theoretical education and practical training about boarding schools (n=3, 15%) there appeared to have been very little by way of training on the use of boarding schools as a social care intervention. According to one respondent:

'It's not ever floated as an idea, it's not mentioned in any textbook, it's not on any whiteboard, it's not in any discussion, so it's not going to be in the psyche of a social worker to think, "Ah, boarding school." So I think you've got that problem straight away, whereas I think if it was in social work training, even as a small part, it's just there, it becomes, it's part of the fabric, "...that's an option, that's something we can do". But it really isn't. So I think you've got that kind of foundation…' (P001)

Direct experience of boarding schools was low among social workers. Very few social workers (n=6, 30%) had actually visited a boarding school either for personal or professional reasons and even when they had the associations were negative. For example, one social worker (P008) had visited a boarding school because of a safeguarding concern that had been raised about a child attending a school. Another (P004) had visited friends at a boarding school as a child and felt that the intensity of social relationships among peers was potentially overwhelming for a young person that might have already developed some interpersonal difficulties due to their family circumstances. For both these social care workers their contacts with boarding school had left its mark as being a quite difficult environment in which to live. When asked about their feelings on boarding schools there were comments such as:

'I'd be lying if I didn't say I had some fairly strong feelings toward boarding school. Growing up, I thought it was kind of barbaric, if I'm honest. A very close friend—we got into a lot of trouble together when we were little—and he was sent away to boarding school… and I suppose from that early age, I thought, "Why are you taking my friend?"' (P007)

Many of the attitudes towards boarding schools that were expressed tended to be based on life experiences, often in childhood, which had had a lasting effect. These were often evident in emotional narratives such as that described above around themes of loss, separation, or with fitting in. When asked about these attitudes and feelings, one respondent said,

'It's really interesting, isn't it, because I would have to dig deep to address my own prejudices, and, you know, I'm wondering how much of that is colouring my discussion with you. My brother went to a private school—it was a boarding school. I'm a bit older than him, and to cut a very long story short, I went to be interviewed, I didn't want to go, and they refused to offer me a place but said they'd take my sister, who didn't go—my brother's six years younger. He went to this private school, it was not far from where we lived. He begged my parents to let him board, which he did from about the age of 13, and he absolutely loved it, he had an absolutely fantastic time. But my view of what boarding schools turn out at the other end has been coloured by that, in terms of that sort of arrogance and things. So I wonder whether that view would really, you know, colour my perception about how a child from a really vulnerable family might fare in that situation, and I guess it's sink or swim. And I think probably some children would survive and other children wouldn't. I think that's what my worry would be, about how they'd fit in.' (P008)

These attitudes towards boarding schools really underpin and guide social workers' practice and decision-making processes. But how far are they shared?

8. Child-centred care

The importance of involving the child at every stage of the decision-making process for the trial was critical and aligns itself well to social work practice. Social workers all stressed the importance of child-centred practice.

> 'I think we have to work in a very child-centred way, it would have to be right for that particular child...' (P002)

Working in a child-centred approach meant that social workers were open to following the child's lead wherever this might be possible.

> 'I think I would want to consider, you also want the child to be as much a part of the decisions as well. So, no I would want to discuss it with them and… my children previously, we've spoken about different schools and we've done like pros and cons for them to have down on paper what they would think. So, no it wouldn't make me think that can't be an option. But, I would want to make sure I have an unbiased opinion on what would be best for them.' (P017)

Empowering the child by giving them a voice in the decision-making process was important and it seems referral to the trial would have depended largely on the child's preference for doing so:

> 'I suppose always my remit, really, from social care's point of view, is to capture the child's voice, really, so that I gain their wishes and feelings. My aim with my role is to ensure that the child's voice is at the centre of all our team meetings, so that I can feel confident that when we're discussing the child's situation, I can report that that child's voice, their wishes and feelings, have been heard.' (P015)

And another said:

> 'Whenever we work with schools, it's always through the eyes of our children, and so we're always trying to support a school in a way that supports them to improve the chances and the efficacy of their school for our children, and that's the way we've supported our boarding schools. It's a like-for-like offer…' (P014)

However, one social worker quite explicitly questioned the extent to which social work practice can be truly child-centred, saying that when a child has to be removed from home,

> 'It's not child-centred because we're not asking the child.' (P007)

9. Boarding school location

Social workers are primarily focused on supporting the lives of children, their families and their communities. Consequently, for most social workers referring a child into the trial would carry the same association as removing a child from their family environment. One participant described,

> 'It's about this ecological understanding of the child within their wider family, within their wider community, and often the criticism of social workers is that they just think about actually the household or individual parents and caregivers and not the wider family, and so those are the two starting points, I think, to look at before you're looking to council-supported boarding schools.' (P009)

With this wider view, another participant mentioned that understanding a child means needing to look at what is happening in the home environment, in those immediate and surrounding relationships and intervening in a way that supports the child in their community and through their community including the school they go to:

> 'I think a good social worker has to be able to balance the benefits of staying home with the extent to which that is nurturing, and as child protection workers, we often have to make very uncomfortable decisions that require us to really thoroughly ecologically understand the extent to which being at home presents risks of significant harm, and can we reduce that harm to make it safer to stay at home…' (P017)

With this in mind, social workers were hesitant in a placement geographically outside the local community or far away from the child's family. Prior to using boarding schools, or any intervention for that matter, social workers believe that the family dynamic has to already represent a secure and a safe place for the child to transition back to or else it will be challenging,

> 'There's an interesting thing, as well—it goes back to the thing about community and family attachment—about taking a young person out of their community and you might be exposing them to these new opportunities, they might be able to succeed academically in ways they wouldn't have at home, but also if they're almost developing this chameleon identity, where they're having to live within two groups, and then when they go back to their family, they might be less accepted as a result of that. There are real ethical issues around that, would that young person want that, would they want to be estranged from their community?' (P009)

Not only was the location of the boarding school an issue for detaching a child from their community, but concerns were expressed about what happens to the child at the end of the school term, year or school career. Will they now still 'fit'?

'So, the transition at the end is really difficult to come back into… and then your friends aren't local, you've got to rebuild those friends up, and build your support up again' (P021)

'...may struggle to swap back into that seamlessly, having had the experience they've had with the boarding school provision' (P014)

While social workers found themselves supporting maintenance of the children's support networks when away from home, they also saw this as a holistic opportunity to work with parents and caregivers to rebuild those relationships. A participant said:

'Essentially, if the child was being neglected—I mean, it's [boarding school is] similar in a way to removing a child out of a family that can't parent a child—that child is then given the opportunity to grow and be given a stable home, and it's also giving the parents a chance perhaps. What would then be needed would not be just to leave the parents, so that when the child returned in the holiday period, they would just return to the cycle of abuse, that the support's put in place to develop the parents while the child's away, so that their parenting skills and their ability to look after the child are improved, so during holiday periods or periods when the child would return, their parenting develops so that they're able to look after the child.' (P020)

Social workers seemed to imagine that boarding schools would be far away and that contact between the child and their family would therefore be limited. This was a potential barrier for social workers considering boarding schools as a placement option.

10. Managing the uncertainty

Originally, it was thought that social worker attitudes towards the prospect that any child they referred to the study would be randomised to either intervention or control was what might have led to a failed period of attempted recruitment. This prospect of uncertainty about whether a child put forward for an intervention will actually be able to access that intervention would affect the decision to recommend a child to the project. As one participant went on to explain:

'For sure. Absolutely. It's affected me in the past. A really, really good intervention came here that was the same, you weren't sure, and the minute I knew, even though I'd met with them and I'd built a relationship with them, I invited them in, they invited me down to meet with them, we did build a relationship, I was incredibly impressed with the person running the intervention, but I couldn't do that to a family.' (P007)

With a similar viewpoint and attitude, another participant rationalised:

'I feel quite concerned about going to talk to a family about what is essentially an abstract concept, and also it's an abstract concept, and you may or may not get it anyway.' (P008)

In contrast, another participant suggested that no intervention, at any level of social care work, is guaranteed, saying in response to whether randomisation would affect their decision to refer a child to the study:

> 'No, it wouldn't, the reason being is that we have some services that we have to put referrals in for anyway… So would I have a problem putting someone forward for an intervention if they weren't to get it? Again, probably not, because what I do is if I put a referral in for an intervention that you're not guaranteed of getting, I tell them that.' (P006)

As well, boarding school intervention is not an established practice philosophy. Each family experiences and manages difficulties—physical, emotional, psychological—differently. Where social care and education overlap, concerning the ethos of research interventions with CiN/CPP, is very much up for debate:

> 'I know it's really very difficult, isn't it, because social care uses the words evidence practice: we want to use evidence-based practice. But for an awful lot of our work, there is very poor evidence, and actually the outcomes can be longitudinal' (P005)

At the individual level, social workers may have based their decisions for referral on either existing knowledge—education, training, and personal experiences—which reflected their ideologies. However, as far as the boarding school intervention is concerned, there needed to be a more systematic way of team initiative, supported by evidence-based research:

> 'We absolutely don't have enough of a robust body of research to support the premise: we do have a lot of research about attachment…' (P017)

Although social workers may have failed to secure the agreement of families to refer a child to the study and this was sometimes attributed to randomisation in the design, one of the social worker considers this as an excuse for social workers' own personal perceptions or misperceptions:

> 'I think it was a factor but I don't think it was all about that. I think sometimes it was a convenient thing for people: if they were saying no, particularly having maybe having had a meeting, it was easier to go, "Oh, we don't really like the randomisation," and I think sometimes that was easier than saying, "This is actually just all a bit too 'out there' for us".' (P001)

4. Discussion

The Boarding Chances for Children project was not supported by the participants interviewed for this report. There were elements of positivity about outcomes and possible benefits but these were outweighed by the reluctance, misgivings, and reservations expressed by social workers over the

use of boarding schools. Three quarters of our social care professionals considered that the boarding school chances could have a positive impact on attainment and raise aspiration. In this section we provide a brief discussion of the findings before making five recommendations based on our findings. We refer the reader to Appendix 2, a concept map that aims to draw together the findings and recommendations.

The evaluation of the Pathfinder scheme (Maxwell *et al.*, 2009) identified some 'gaps' that needed to be bridged between the school, social care, health, and youth justice systems, recommending 'further work was required to align the priorities of education and social care professionals working with young people and their families, and to challenge the view held by many social care professionals—as well as young people and parents—that boarding schools were only appropriate for those from more privileged backgrounds' (p.6). The perhaps apocryphal 'elite' aspect of boarding school provision was widely expressed as being of concern to social workers: both in regard to distancing the child from the family of origin by placing children in a very different social and cultural (and privileged) environment and in legitimising a socially divisive system of schooling. As a response to our investigative research, Nick Duffell (2017), a leader in this controversial field, personally communicated the following concerning social workers' reluctance:

> 'It is not surprising that social workers may be suspicious about how the boarding habit of sending children away to endure what I have been calling 'privileged abandonment' still thrives at a time when otherwise our society universally admires the concept of family, and social services do everything in their power to keep children in families.' (Duffell, 2017, personal communication)

As a way of mitigating the effects of keeping a CiN in the family home, boarding schools may offer security, opportunities for 'staying on track' with respect to educational attainment over time among other benefits. A recent study in France showed that the more able students made greater gains in mathematics compared with their lower-achieving peers, although this was not until the end of the second year (Behaghel *et al.*, 2017). Notably, the authors focused on the 'disruptive' nature of being placed in a boarding school (p.31) and explored wellbeing, motivation, and study habits over an extended period of time. Again, more-able students fared better than less-able students two years after the placement began.

As represented in this study sample, social work as a profession appears conflicted over the use of boarding school. On the one hand, it was seen as a positive option offering stability and security (Lee & Barth, 2009). This was countered by expressions of concern regarding culture clash and a perceived lack of ability of boarding schools to care for disturbed children. Social workers wanted to offer the best opportunities to their children. However, they were concerned about using boarding schools for CiN/CPP because they held the perception that boarding schools were part of a sinister social process of class apartheid and segregation. However, according to Bass (2013) even when the boarding school environment is positive and gives access to social, cultural, and

education capital, the quality of their experience is dependent on the home environment which that child has left and their own individual motivation to succeed.

It seems that based on the findings that if further trials are to be commissioned there would need to be some re-visioning of both social work and boarding school objectives. Social work would need to engage in a process of educating its workforce on the potential benefits of boarding for the 'right child' at the 'right age' in the 'right circumstances' and able to identify the 'right school'. Boarding schools clearly have an image problem that they have to address to convince social workers that they are available for a much wider section of the population than is the current perception. Both boarding schools and social work are based on a long history and tradition that seem to have counter narratives—one premised on keeping families together and the other designed to separate children from being dependent upon the family attachment and to foster independence (Poynting & Donaldson, 2005).

From our analysis of the interviews we think that social workers are open to the possibilities offered by boarding schools. Social workers really do have to consider investing more and earlier in the care of CiN if this intervention is ever to prove acceptable to practice as usual. However, they are fearful too. Currently, removal of a child from the home is a last resort and boarding is currently perceived as a removal option. For this reason they see that the number of children potentially suitable is actually quite low. They are concerned about funding, finding the right school location, and acculturation into the school community.

Interestingly, despite the pre-study concerns, the issue of randomisation featured only at a low level in decision making for a care option. Social workers generally seemed supportive of research and were sympathetic to the idea of generating knowledge to support the development of evidence-based practices. Social workers felt that often when they put a child or family forward for an intervention they were by no means guaranteed to secure access. Costs and financing the intervention were more of a concern. For a similar intervention to succeed as a research study there would need to be much closer working alliances formed with local authorities and specific teams of social services who felt they were in control of the study as much as the developers. A sense of buy-in and ownership appeared to be lacking and we recommend this needs to be addressed in the future.

Social workers would want to maintain contact with the family and are of course focused on reducing risk of harm. Any future study would need to stress the early phase intervention and the notion of prevention must be included as a part of any re-envisioning for social care workers in local authorities that would participate. As it stands, throughout social worker sample dialogue, this re-envisioning should be initiated with a change in perceptions of boarding school. The emphasis now should be on trying a different process with respect to understanding the current state of attitudes and views toward boarding schools, as discussed:

'There remain very pertinent questions to explore about how and why a form of voluntary institutionalisation of the children of the elite, which is based on hyper-masculine, militaristic principles dependent on destroying the influence of the family (in Victorian times imagined to foster weakness) and disrupting children's attachments that is not supported by *one single* theory of child development is still thought of as desirable, privileged and worth spending upwards of £30K per annum on, only appeals to Britain and her former colonies.' (Duffell, 2017, personal communication)

The 'cost-to-gain' ratio needs further clarification. These factors need to be more explicitly obvious as advantages to social workers, as would the potential for supporting the wider implementation of the approach to the development of local community, not only financially, but holistically as well. In a small-scale consultation, Morgan (2007) reported views regarding placement experiences of both children in care in boarding schools and children not in care but placed in a boarding school. Interestingly, many of the views and experiences of the children consulted were similar to the 10 major themes endorsed by social workers in our research. From a boarding school perspective, they too would likely gain from thinking more about the mental health, emotional development, and support of all of their children to allay concerns if they were to attend boarding.

Duffell, a boarding school pupil in his youth, now works as a psychotherapist specialising in the treatment of what has been termed a trauma syndrome for survivors of the boarding school system. He is being consulted by academics in Germany and other countries (Arieli & Kashti, 1977; Stickney, 1977; Yao, Deane, & Bullen, 2015) with an interest in the use of boarding schools as part of the social care system. With the first conference dedicated to the psychological impacts of boarding school recently (September 2017) held at the University of Brighton, this is a narrative that possibly deserves further attention than it has received so far.

Within our research we have identified an emerging critical perspective that seems to gather apace within the UK based literature (Duffel, 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Duffell & Basset, 2016; Renton, 2017; Schaverien, 2015; Stibbe, 2016). Duffell (2014a; 2014b; 2015) and Duffell & Basset (2016) are constructing a counter narrative to the government's agenda to support places at boarding schools for CiN/CPP. Their view is that boarding schools should be radically re-envisioned. Of course this is unlikely to happen but their perspective is that boarding for young children should cease with immediate effect. Their line of argument strikes a very similar chord to that of many of the social workers within our sample.

5. Recommendations

In this section we will outline a number of proposals for the EEF to contemplate should they consider commissioning further research trials in the area of Boarding Chances for Children. The

recommendations might also apply to other studies the EEF consider where there might be a significant crossover between education and social care.

Prior to commissioning further research we recommend that the EEF:

1. **Establish a multi-stakeholder partnership to test pre-trial acceptability of the intervention to the local authorities, directors of children's services, social work managers, social workers, and the children and their families.** These partnerships could be used to help test the initial proposal, including input from children and families as service users and also involve practising social work professionals. A committee could be formed that would act as the reference point for the development of the project. The key issue here is that this would be formed *prior to* the study being commissioned.

2. **Create and engage a small but sufficiently heterogeneous set of partnerships between local authorities and boarding schools.** We suggest that, even though in the original project attempts were made at developing a strong set of partnerships between local authorities and boarding schools, efforts should be made to build trust between the social workers and the schools where they are being asked to send children. Developers of the intervention should be tasked with demonstrating the level of collaboration between local authority social care services prior to commencing the trial.

3. **Developers implementing the intervention should be required to have established an agreement with local authorities that they will implement the intervention**. This might involve assigning a degree of ownership to local authorities and possibly identifying a key member of staff in each participating authority to give the final word on any controversial concerns, prior to launching. There could be more focus applied to understanding the attitudes, views, and perceptions of everyone involved, to bring about a unified intervention.

4. **Boarding schools could more clearly articulate the plans, structures, and processes in place that address the pastoral care of pupils, particularly pupils referred as CiN/CPP.** It is possible that social workers and families might then be better disposed to using boarding schools for CiN/CPP. For some people there is a lack of trust in boarding schools and such schools could do more to address their 'image'. However, some people fundamentally disagree with the underpinning ethos of boarding schools for children.

5. **Assess, identify and address the educational needs of the social care workforce regarding the potential use of boarding schools.** If there is a serious intention from government for boarding schools to be considered as a care option then social workers and social work students will need to be educated about their potential utility, perhaps through a visit during their training. The contents of this report could be used as a starting point for developing a curriculum that might begin to address some of the issues of concern. If a further or similar trial is to be commissioned we suggest that social workers that work within the partnerships formed (as suggested in 2 above) should be given specific training addressing issues related to the use of boarding schools.

6. Conclusions

We draw this study to a close by concluding that the Boarding Chances for Children project failed at both the RCT and within-subjects stages not because of issues concerning randomisation or social worker reluctance to engage in a research study with some uncertainty for child participants. These might have been factors but they were less important than other factors. If further studies are to be commissioned in the area of boarding chances for CiN/CPP it seems that a substantial amount of groundwork is required prior to the launch of a research trial. Social workers, according to this sample, are reluctant to consider boarding school places for both CiN/CPP and LAC. This is due to the incongruence of the action of placing a child in a boarding school with the social work mission of giving children the chance to live in a family environment. Social workers do not consider Boarding Chances for Children a realistic option for an early intervention because of the significant financial implications and because it is considered a form of removing a child from the family environment. Boarding schools also have work to do if they are ever to lay these concerns to rest. If boarding is to be considered as a potential option for CiN/CPP then both boarding schools and local authorities will have to work more closely to understand how each other operates and to see how they may best collaborate. Boarding school has an image problem in how it is perceived. A great deal of suspicion is held by social workers concerning boarding school cultures; their doubts are related to class struggle and difference with boarding schools being associated with the middle and upper class and social services spending the majority of their time supporting families in poverty. This issue cannot be overlooked. Further research trials that might be commissioned in this area, we believe, need to incorporate additional planning phases where the two professional communities of education and social care practice come together.

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Appendix 1

1. To get us started, could we talk a bit about placing CiN in boarding schools. This project did not recruit participants through social worker recommendations …

   a. Did you hear about this project to recruit CiN/CPP for a sponsored boarding school place?

2. In general, could you talk about your approach to working with a CiN/CPP?

3. Have you found yourself in a position working with a CiN/CPP?

   a. Could you describe your general thoughts about using boarding schools for CiN/CPP?

   b. Do you believe that boarding school could be a positive alternative to a CiN/CPP?

   c. What would you feel about placing a CiN in a boarding school?

4. What might help you recommend CiN/CPP for a boarding school place?

   a. Prompt such as … What benefits might there be for such a child/family?

   b. What alternatives might you recommend to boarding school places?

5. What concerns would you have about this [CiN/CPP for a boarding school place]

   a. Prompt such as … Costs, keeping CiN/CPP in contact with family?
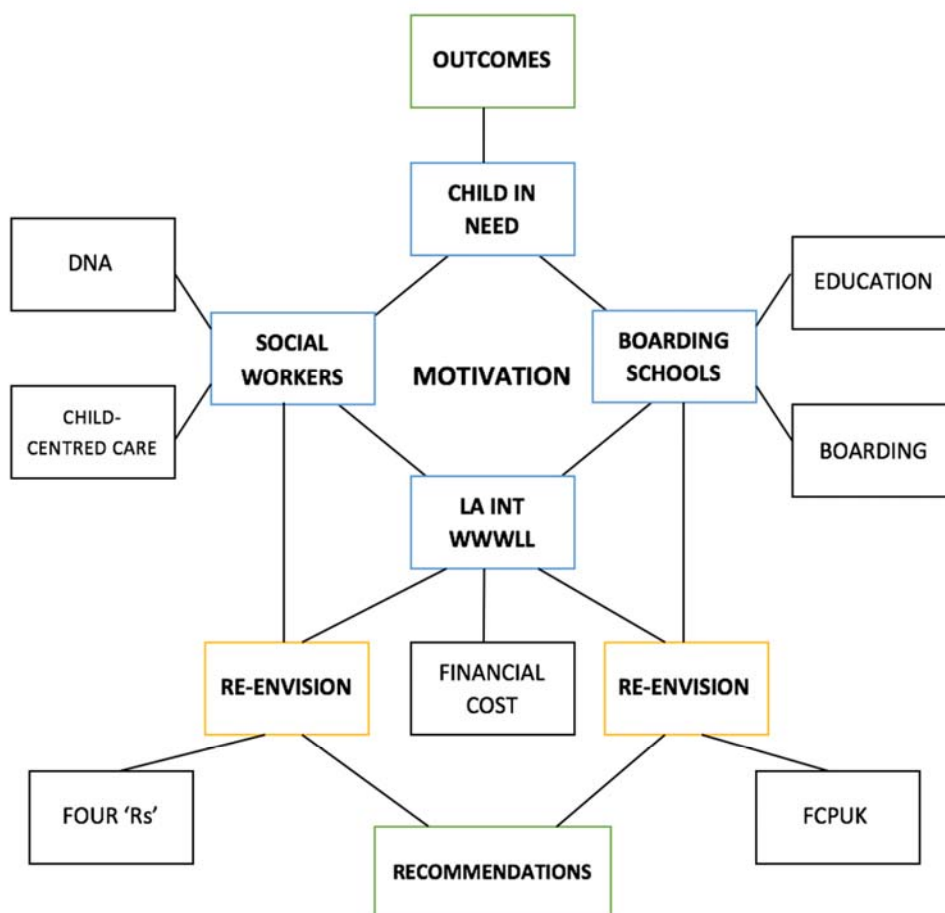
Appendix 2

Figure I. Concept map.
FCPUK: fear and concerns - parallels with 'the unknown'; FOUR 'Rs': 'right age', 'right child', 'right circumstances', 'right school'; LA INT WWWLL: local authority intervention – what went wrong and lessons learned.