The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children

This report examines the impact of virtual schools, established by local authorities to support and improve the educational achievement of looked after children. The report draws on evidence from cases and from the views of carers; children and young people; professionals, including local authority managers and social workers; and representatives from schools, colleges and the voluntary sector in nine local authorities.

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Executive summary

The educational attainment of looked after children continues to be considerably worse than the attainment of the rest of the school-age population. To help improvement, many local authorities have chosen to appoint a virtual school headteacher (or someone with a similar title), often supported by a virtual school team. This followed an evaluation of the piloting of this approach in 11 local authorities.[1] The virtual school approach is to work with looked after children as if they were in a single school, liaising with the schools they attend, tracking the progress they make and supporting them to achieve as well as possible.

This report explores the impact of virtual schools in nine local authorities. Inspectors examined the cases of looked after children and the effectiveness of the support for their education that they had received. They spoke to virtual school headteachers and team members, social workers, carers, and senior managers within local authorities. Inspectors also spoke to groups of looked after children and young people and elected council members.

The scope and structure of the nine virtual schools varied considerably, dependent on local circumstances. Some virtual schools only supported children of school age, while others also provided early years and post-16 support. Virtual school headteachers had varying levels of seniority within the local authority.

There were considerable differences in the roles undertaken by virtual school staff and the size of virtual school teams. These ranged from less than two full-time staff providing, in the main, a commissioning and advocacy role, to larger teams offering teaching support to children and training and consultancy to a wide group of stakeholders.

The challenging financial climate was having an impact on virtual schools. Budget constraints had led to a significant reduction in the capacity of the virtual school in some local authorities. Although most local authorities had been able to protect the existing resources of its virtual school, nearly all expressed concerns about the future.

There was a variable and inconsistent approach to addressing schools' expenditure of the Pupil Premium Grant, designed in part to support looked after children's education and allocated to schools' budgets. There was evidence in some areas that social workers were increasingly well equipped to challenge and work with schools on the use of this resource, although inspectors also saw evidence of some confusion.

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[1] *Looked-after and learning: evaluation of the virtual school head pilot,* Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009;
www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR144.

Services that had experienced a reduction in capacity had placed a greater emphasis on building capacity by providing training and support to other professionals, such as designated teachers, social workers and foster carers. The most effective virtual schools, however, maintained a focus on building capacity across the partnership regardless of the size of its own resources.

In all local authorities visited, inspectors found strong evidence that virtual schools worked closely with colleagues within the council and external agencies as part of an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to supporting looked after children. Within this multi-agency framework, virtual schools took the lead in ensuring that educational considerations remained central in care planning and reviews of plans.

Multi-agency working often led to an increased sensitivity to social care and emotional health issues within virtual schools. In turn, there was a growing understanding of educational issues among non-educationalist colleagues but, for social workers in particular, this generally remained an area of development.

Foster carers were generally well supported and took an active role in supporting children's education, but not all virtual schools provided enough training for carers. Foster carers did not always know what support was available from the virtual school.

The role of the designated teacher was developing effectively in most local authorities. Designated teachers network meetings were a productive forum for exchanging information, sharing good practice and delivering training, but not all local authorities had established such networks.

Inspectors saw some good examples of personal education plans (PEPs) but too many were not sufficiently challenging. Targets or planned actions were not always focused on academic achievements. PEPs were more likely to address the needs effectively of children who were performing below expectations and were generally less effective for children who were meeting expectations but could do even better.

Several virtual school staff, and some of their colleagues, expressed concerns that they were not able to provide the same quality of support to children and young people placed some distance away from the local authority as they were for children placed close to home.

There were uneven levels of engagement from corporate parents across the local authorities visited. Where corporate parenting was strongest, virtual schools were well resourced, empowered to influence service priorities, and were held to account effectively by elected council members and senior managers. Where corporate parenting arrangements were weak, the capacity for virtual schools to sustain improvement for children was questionable.

Most young people who spoke to inspectors were positive about the help they had been given by the virtual school. They particularly valued the additional tuition that

helped them to reach their potential. Others had found the support to help them settle into a new school had been very helpful. Several young people stated that they had been able to do better at school since they had been in care.

Most virtual schools believed there was still work to be done to raise some schools' expectations of looked after children. The most effective virtual schools were able to combine the necessary support to schools and students with an appropriate level of challenge that drove improvement. There was strong evidence that the distinct educational expertise that virtual schools provided was a key factor in maintaining focus on high aspirations and academic achievement.

Overall, there was evidence of improving educational outcomes for looked after children in all local authorities visited. Improvement was not limited to attainment, but there was also good evidence of increased levels of attendance and reduced numbers of exclusions. Furthermore, in many cases, improved educational achievement had considerably enhanced children and young people's sense of self-worth and had provided some much-needed stability in their lives.

Key findings

- Most outcomes were improving in the local authorities visited, although performance was variable from year to year. There was little evidence, however, that the gap in attainment between looked after children and other children was narrowing. Progress between Key Stages 3 and 4 was slower than during earlier key stages.

- Financial constraints had resulted in several local authorities recently reducing the number of dedicated posts within the virtual school, raising concerns that continued improvement would be threatened.

- The potential consequences of these cuts had not always been fully assessed, despite the acknowledged link between educational outcomes and other key outcomes for looked after children, such as placement stability and emotional well-being.

- Corporate parents' depth of engagement with issues relating to the education of looked after children was variable.

- Clearly stated roles and responsibilities for virtual schools were not always evident.

- Data management systems were of variable quality, which meant that some local authorities were not able to monitor and report on the progress of children and young people.

- The resources of the virtual school were not always effectively targeted.

- Inspectors saw evidence of very effective support involving the virtual school that not only made a difference to children's educational progress, but also often enhanced the stability of their placements and had a positive impact upon their emotional well-being.

- The quality of personal education plans was variable. The best examples retained a sharp focus on educational attainment while taking into account emotional and behavioural issues. Targets were sometimes ill-defined and insufficiently tracked.

- Children placed outside of the local authority area were less likely to receive good support from the virtual school.

- Schools, other professionals and carers valued highly expert support and challenge from virtual school teams and from virtual headteachers who had strong leadership skills, the necessary 'clout' to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility.

Recommendations

Local authorities and their partners should:

- ensure that corporate parenting and governance arrangements are sufficiently able to support the virtual school while robustly holding it to account

- ensure that a thorough risk assessment of the potential impact on children's outcomes is undertaken before decisions are made to reconfigure support services for looked after children's education, including reducing the capacity of the virtual school.

- ensure that the virtual school's roles and responsibilities are clear and that effective data management systems are in place to help target support to those children and young people who need it most

- ensure that the educational progress of individual children is closely monitored as soon as they become looked after, so that the impact of care upon educational outcomes is more accurately measured and understood

- implement robust protocols for the educational support of children placed outside of their own local authority area and monitor those arrangements closely, so that senior managers and corporate parents can be assured that the progress of those children is not compromised

- consider whether the virtual school's scope should include young people aged beyond the current statutory school age to ensure that the support needs of young people entering further and higher education are met.

The government should:

- consider whether corporate parents' continued prioritisation of the education of looked after children should be protected by a statutory requirement on local authorities to establish and maintain suitably robust virtual school arrangements.

Introduction

1. There were 65,520 looked after children at 31 March 2011, an increase of 2% from 2010 and an increase of 9% since 2007. Attainment data for the last six years show that their educational outcomes have been considerably worse than those of the rest of the school age population.[2] Like previous governments, the current Coalition Government has made narrowing of the gap between the achievement of looked after children and that of other children and young people a high priority.[3]

2. In March 2010, the then government produced statutory guidance for local authorities on the promotion of the educational achievement of looked after children.[4] This guidance remains in force and local authorities must act in accordance with it unless there are exceptional reasons for not doing so. The guidance makes it clear that the duty of a local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child looked after by them includes a particular duty to promote the child's educational achievement. In April 2011, the revised legal framework for looked after children came into force and the government also responded in detail to the Select Committee report on looked after children. The new Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations came into force in 2011 and outlined how local authorities should seek to ensure, as an integral part of care planning, that all looked after children are supported to achieve educational outcomes that are comparable to those of their peers.[5]

3. The virtual school approach is to work with looked after children and, in some cases, young people in post-16 provision, as if they were in a single school and to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve educational stability. Many local authorities have chosen to appoint a virtual school headteacher (or someone with a similar title) to undertake the role, although

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[2] As at 31 March 2011, 31.5% of children looked after continuously for at least six months, achieved five GCSEs at A*–C grades, compared to 78.1% of all children;13.2% achieved five GCSEs A*–C including English and mathematics compared to 57.9% of all children; *Outcomes for children looked after as of 31 March 2011*, Department for Education, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00200452/dfe-outcomes-for-children-looked-after-as-at-31-march-2011.

[3] Education of looked after children and care leavers, Department for Education website; www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/education.

[4] *Promoting the educational achievement of looked after children: statutory guidance for local authorities*, Department for Education, 2010; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DCSF-00342-2010.

[5] The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010; www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/959/contents/made.

there is no statutory obligation to do so. This followed an evaluation of the piloting of this approach in 11 local authorities.[6]

4. A systematic review of the research literature and analysis of key data were carried out in 2009 on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO).[7] Key messages included the following.

    ■ A high proportion of children and young people see their entry into care as beneficial for their education.

    ■ There is growing evidence that new initiatives such as virtual school headteachers, personal education plans (PEPs) and designated teachers are having a positive effect on the experiences of children and young people.

    ■ Measurement of educational outcomes of the looked after group is complex.

    ■ There is evidence of many creative and useful initiatives at all levels of regional and local authority practice.

5. The strong reciprocal relationship between placement stability and positive educational outcomes has long been a major theme of policy and guidance. In 2008 a research project commissioned by the Scottish government found that factors such as placement type, reason for becoming looked after and age on becoming looked after were also significant in determining educational achievement.[8]

6. Other factors are important in understanding the relatively low achievement. Cassen and Kingdon (2007) found that more could be done to support children with special educational needs, and the Ofsted report on special educational needs (2010) found that 27% of looked after children also have statements of special educational needs.[9,10]

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[6] *Looked after and learning: evaluation of the virtual school head pilot*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009;
www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR144.
[7] *Improving the educational outcomes of looked after children and young people*, C4EO, 2009;
www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/vulnerablechildren/educationaloutcomes.
[8] M McClung and V Gayle, 'Exploring the care effects of multiple factors on the educational achievement of children looked after at home and away from home: an investigation of two Scottish local authorities', *Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 14, no. 4, November 2010.
[9] R Cassen and G Kingdon, *Tackling low educational achievement'*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007; www.jrf.org.uk/publications/tackling-low-educational-achievement.
[10] *The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough* (090221), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/090221.

7. In *Equalities in action* (Ofsted 2010), looked after children were considered as a vulnerable group and other factors were noted such as the instability in the lives of these young people:

> When looked after children who were living in temporary accommodation were moved frequently by the local authority, they underachieved. This was because the disruption to the roots that they had been establishing and movement away from the initial support they had received counteracted the progress they had made.[11]

8. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2010/11 reported that virtual schools and virtual headteachers for looked after children have been important drivers for improvement.[12]

9. In the evaluation of the pilot project on virtual schools in 11 local authorities, the authors make clear that the reasons for the lower attainment of looked after children are complex, including family background, pre-care experiences, instability and shortcomings in the care environment, low expectations and poor communication between social workers, carers and schools.[13] This supports the position of the studies cited above, namely that it is too simplistic to attribute underachievement to a single cause. They also make the point that key indicators nationally showed signs of improvement prior to the virtual school initiative. The main conclusions are as follows.

- Analysis of official educational outcome statistics showed that, over the period of the pilots, the 11 authorities performed well compared to the national average and most showed improvement in GCSE results.

- Although direct involvement with individual pupils and their schools was appreciated, the main thrust of virtual headteachers' work was strategic. They had helped to raise the profile of looked after children in schools and the importance given to education by social workers and by the local authority generally.

- Social workers who were interviewed often lacked knowledge and confidence in educational matters and welcomed the assistance of dedicated education support.

- The evaluation found that virtual schools can make a real difference, especially when the virtual school headteacher has a strategic role and sufficient seniority to influence practice and the use of resources across the local authority area.

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[11] *Equalities in action* (080272), Ofsted, 2010, p 7; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080272.
[12] *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2010/11*, Ofsted, 2011, p 147; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1011.
[13] *Looked after and learning: evaluation of the virtual school head pilot*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009;
www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR144.

10. In September 2012, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers published a report of a cross party inquiry into the education of looked after children.[14] The report acknowledges that the difficult start to life that many looked after children experience is likely to have an adverse impact on their later education. It identifies significant factors crucial to educational progress for children while in care, including the stability and continuity of the services and people responsible for looked after children and the level of understanding about the importance of education for those children by professionals and carers. The report makes 90 wide-ranging recommendations, include the proposals that the role of the virtual headteacher should be placed on a statutory footing and that the virtual headteacher should control the spending of the pupil premium.

Methodology

11. This report summarises the findings of a thematic inspection of nine local authority areas to look at the impact of arrangements that local authorities had put in place to support the education of looked after children and care leavers. The local authorities varied in size and geographical context. They included metropolitan areas and counties of varying size, with a combination of rural and urban features. The local authorities reflected a wide range of recent relevant inspection judgements and educational outcomes for children in their care.

12. Inspectors addressed the extent to which local authorities and virtual schools:

- challenge schools to improve educational, and other, outcomes for looked after children

- promote high aspirations and raise the profile of looked after children

- support headteachers, staff, governing bodies and other professionals, such as foster carers

- drive effective strategies for managing attendance, engaging young people in their education, and early intervention to support improvement

- work with designated looked after children's teachers to support individual children and young people – for example, by identifying at an early stage those children who might find transition from primary to secondary school difficult and putting in place appropriate support

- support schools to ensure that the personal education plans of looked after children are used and monitored effectively

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[14] *Education matters in care: a report by the independent cross-party inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children in England,* All-party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, 2012; www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/news.php/289/appg-chair-launches-education-report.

- work effectively with those young people facing exclusion to keep them motivated in education

- have established and implemented effective protocols for managing arrangements where a child is placed outside the local authority area

- offer value for money.

13. Inspectors from professional backgrounds in social care and education undertook the visits to the nine local authorities between March 2012 and June 2012. On each survey visit, two inspectors tracked a minimum of six cases by holding meetings with professionals with case involvement and examining case records. Inspectors also scrutinised elements of a randomly selected sample of relevant cases via electronic care records and meetings with practitioners.

14. Tracked cases included examples of:

- children with a statement of special educational needs

- young people in the current year 11

- children placed outside the local authority's geographical boundaries

- children placed in residential care

- children in foster care

- children performing at least as well as should be expected compared to all children of a similar age.

15. In total, 54 cases were tracked, and a further 16 cases were randomly sampled.

16. Inspectors spoke to a focus group of looked after children and care leavers in each local authority area. The report draws on evidence from those discussions and from meetings with key staff, including local authority managers and social workers, and other professionals working with looked after children such as psychologists, youth offending workers and careers advisers. Interviews were also held with representatives from schools and the voluntary and community sector.

17. Case studies in this report illustrate aspects of positive work that have benefited children in a specific area. They are not intended to suggest that practice in that local authority area was exemplary in every aspect.

What is a virtual school?

Scope, size and structure

18. No consistent model of a virtual school was seen across the nine authorities visited by inspectors. There were many similarities between local authorities, but no model was exactly the same as another. Local circumstances, particularly the size of the local authority and prevailing financial pressures, dictated the nature of the arrangements.

19. All local authorities had established a model of support that meant that one individual had the lead responsibility to drive improvement in looked after children's educational attainment. These individuals will be referred to as virtual school headteachers within this report, although not all were known by that job title. Their roles, responsibilities and position within the local authority structure varied considerably.

20. Seven of the virtual school services were located within the local authority's education services, connected to services such as school inclusion or school improvement. The remaining two were based within multi-agency services for looked after children or within quality and performance units. Generally, those virtual schools teams that were based within education services were perceived by key partners – most crucially, schools – to have greater credibility and 'clout'. There were some advantages and disadvantages to all such arrangements, but whatever structure was in place, the quality of the relationships forged by the virtual school and its partners was the strongest indicator of good outcomes.

21. The role of the virtual headteacher was similarly varied across the nine authorities. All had an education background and all virtual school teams reported directly to the virtual headteacher, but not all of these were full time and there were differing levels of seniority. Several virtual headteachers held senior management posts within the local authority's education service with only part-time responsibilities formally assigned to the virtual school. In one local authority, this was as little as one day a week. Day-to-day operational leadership of the virtual school team here was suitably delegated. In these circumstances, the virtual headteacher's role was largely strategic and formed part of the post-holder's wider responsibilities for vulnerable children. Other virtual headteachers, sometimes of less seniority, tended to be more involved in operational responsibilities and acknowledged that there were sometimes difficulties in devoting enough time to more strategic, longer-term issues.

22. All the virtual headteachers spoken to said that a main element of their role was to act as a 'champion' for looked after children. One said that a key part of the job was to 'rattle cages', while another described himself (and was similarly described by colleagues) as a 'cruise missile' who sought to break down barriers and provide the necessary challenge to schools, staff and corporate parents.

23. The effectiveness of the virtual headteacher seemed to be affected by a number of issues. A senior education background provided credibility. The level of seniority within the local authority could affect the timeliness of decision-making, allocation of work and access to resources. These factors were important, but strong inter-personal and leadership skills were valued the most by schools and colleagues.

24. The multi-agency nature of looked after children services meant that it was not always straightforward to define who was a member of a virtual school team,

but there was considerable variation among the local authorities in the number of dedicated posts to support the education of looked after children. All local authorities visited had established discrete virtual school teams, although like virtual school headteachers, they were not always known by that name. These teams varied in size and function, ranging from three local authorities with relatively large groupings of five or more members of staff reporting to the virtual headteacher, to two local authorities where the virtual school consisted essentially of two members of staff, including the virtual headteacher.

25. The size and capacity of the team had a major bearing on the purpose and function of the different virtual school teams. The larger teams were able to offer direct teaching support to children as well as liaising with schools, attending meetings, and offering training and support to a wide range of stakeholders, including foster carers, social workers and designated teachers in schools. However, some larger teams occasionally lacked the focus of the smaller virtual school teams on building capacity within existing services to support progress for looked after children.[15]

26. The smaller virtual school teams were able to offer less direct support to children and to other professionals, although they were sufficiently flexible to do so in exceptional circumstances. One local authority whose virtual school team consisted of less than two full-time members of staff saw their role as focused primarily on 'consultation and challenge'. This challenge was partly to carers, social workers and other involved professionals to ensure that the educational needs of children were prioritised, but especially to schools. The recent reduction in the capacity of the discrete virtual school had, in the words of the virtual headteacher, meant that the local authority was 'now wholly reliant on schools doing what they should be doing', if children were to reach their potential.

27. A senior manager within the same local authority expanded on this theme. She explained that when the virtual school team had been considerably larger there had been a tendency for the team to 'overstep' their responsibilities towards looked after children by providing resources for children that might be more appropriately provided by schools. This had the unintended effect of enabling some schools to sidestep their responsibilities.

Post-16 support

28. The scope of only three virtual schools extended, formally, to include looked after young people beyond Year 11. In nearly all local authority areas, this was an acknowledged area for development. While there was evidence in some local authorities of effective liaison with post-16 services and preparation for

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[15] Section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 places a duty on the governing body of maintained schools to designate a member of staff as having responsibility to promote the educational achievement of looked after children who are pupils at the school.

college, training and employment beyond the statutory school age, the quality of joint working between the virtual school and the leaving care services was variable.

29. There were examples of good practice seen by inspectors. For example, one virtual school advocated strongly for a young person to remain in his foster placement beyond the age of 18, which meant that he was able to remain in placement until the end of the academic year. Elsewhere, some tracked cases demonstrated a good focus on education pathways after Key Stage 4 and on post-16 support. Work experience opportunities were facilitated through good links with Connexions services. Strong partnerships with further education providers and the leaving care service had contributed to an increase in the number of sustained post-education placements.

30. Another local authority made continuing good use of the PEP for sixth formers and, when appropriate, with young people in training and employment. This reflected the view that the pathway planning did not have sufficient focus on young people's educational needs. Here, as with several other local authorities, there was evidence of good support regarding finance and accommodation being provided to an increasing number of young people studying at university. In another case, good arrangements were put in place by the social worker, virtual school and Connexions to support a young person's transition to college after GCSE exams.

31. However, in one local authority care leavers spoke of concerns that the level of support tapered off significantly after they reached the age of 18 years, at a time of significant personal change and transition.

Financial constraints

32. Inspectors saw significant impact of the challenging financial climate in several local authorities. Three of the nine local authorities had reconfigured their virtual school teams as a result of budget constraints. Two had reduced the size of the service from large multi-disciplinary virtual school teams and were now running small operations with a much-changed focus. These local authorities talked of now doing 'more with less', mainly by building the capacity of allocated social workers and designated teachers to support the educational development of looked after children. In order to ensure that efforts were targeted most appropriately, there was an emphasis on more systematic monitoring of children's progress, scrutinising plans where concerns were raised and intervening as appropriate. In the local authorities where virtual school resources had been hardest hit by budget cuts, there was an acknowledged concern by senior managers that the reduced resources represented the greatest threat to educational outcomes.

33. Elsewhere, however, most local authorities had made decisions to protect the existing resources of their virtual schools, although some had experienced small

reductions in budget and nearly all voiced concerns about the future. One local authority had self-funded a continuation of the personal education allowance of £500 for each looked after child and this sum was often used creatively to fund extra-curricular activities and additional educational support. Another local authority had secured significant Dedicated School Grant funding from each school in the area to support the virtual school's work, evidencing a strong shared commitment to looked after children across the local area. A council elsewhere had established an achievement fund that was used judiciously to provide support, including additional tuition and out-of-school activities.

34. Several virtual schools had not established clear eligibility criteria for their services, which tended to be accompanied by loose, informal referral processes. Capacity was more likely to be overstretched by fluctuating demand. One virtual school stated that additional support was available for all looked after children who wanted extra help. Aside from being unachievable should all children take up that offer, it was essentially a 'first come, first served' approach which did not prioritise the greater-assessed need. The local authority was aware of the potential pitfalls of this policy, which had been necessitated in part by a lack of available management information on which to base resource decisions. This meant that the virtual school had to react to demand for its services, rather than adopt a more proactive and targeted approach that was founded upon a thorough and up-to-date monitoring of children's educational progress.

35. Where there was greater detail and tighter eligibility criteria for the various services provided by the virtual school, there was more effective targeting of finite resources. This was supported further by effective data management systems that facilitated decision-making.

36. It was too early to assess the impact of financial cuts on children's educational outcomes. All nine local authorities were mindful of the link between educational outcomes and other key outcomes for looked after children, such as placement stability and emotional well-being. However, where the most significant cuts had occurred, inspectors did not always find evidence that local authorities had thoroughly assessed the risks to the potential outcomes.

Multi-agency working

Capacity-building

37. All the virtual schools embraced the concept of building the capacity of carers and professionals to promote the education of looked after children. In all local authorities visited, inspectors saw examples of how the virtual school worked closely with colleagues within the council and external agencies as part of an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to supporting looked after children in all aspects of their lives. This approach may have been born of necessity in those areas where the virtual school resources were scarcest; however, it was in keeping with the principles of good joint working which supported a holistic

assessment of children's needs. This assessment was completed while making sure that educational considerations remained central to the thinking of all professionals and carers involved with looked after children.

38. In one local authority, the establishment of a social work post within the virtual school team had helped to break down barriers between the two professions. Colocation of the virtual school with social care teams was recognised as beneficial in the development of professional relationships and facilitated access to support from the virtual school. This was not always possible, but inspectors saw several formal networking arrangements, additional to the many examples of good collaborative case working, which fostered positive working relationships.

39. For example, virtual school staff in most areas routinely attended key meetings such as multi-agency resource panels, and often attended colleagues' team meetings. Where the virtual school was represented on fostering panels, the school gained a greater understanding of foster carers' training needs and was able to ensure that educational needs featured strongly in placement planning.

40. All local authorities reported a growing understanding of educational issues, such as schools' legal responsibilities or admissions procedures, among non-educationalist colleagues. This was evidently reciprocal as the prevailing culture of multi-agency working underpinned the virtual school's increasing understanding of social care and emotional health issues. Indeed, virtual schools in several areas played a strong part in enhancing schools' understanding of how such issues can affect children's learning, which helped them to tailor support. However, this depth of understanding remained variable. Social workers, most significantly as lead professionals, were not consistently able to challenge schools, for a variety of reasons that are explored below. The most effective cases relied upon appropriate intervention from specialists as part of an integrated package of care.

Social workers

41. Inspectors spoke to groups of social workers in each area that they visited. Social workers spoken to by inspectors were consistently positive about the service provided by virtual schools. Comments included:

> 'Highly accessible, highly collaborative, efficient and effective.'

> 'They have made an enormous difference.'

> 'An excellent service.'

42. Social workers regularly said they valued a speedy response from the virtual school to requests for help. They particularly welcomed the lack of cumbersome and long referral processes when they felt support was necessary. Being able to

telephone the virtual headteacher to ask for help and receive a prompt answer was very important when faced with ever-changing demands of their caseload.

43. Most often, social workers were keen to emphasise how much they valued the important advocacy role that virtual school teams played when dealing with schools and other educational establishments. For example, a virtual school headteacher's strategic push to ensure that all external residential settings fulfilled their educational duties to children was welcomed by social workers in one local authority.

44. A social worker in another local authority talked about how the virtual school was able to pinpoint clearly the educational needs of children. The virtual school had been effective in reducing exclusions through effective challenge and support to schools. When children were not able to attend school, even temporarily, alternative packages were put in place promptly. For example, a child who presented too great a risk to other children was able to access online education through cyber-school and received one-to-one tuition.

45. Another social worker stressed the value of having expert knowledge from education specialists close to hand when she commented on the support she received from the virtual school:

> 'It's like having an education encyclopaedia on your desk!'

46. In a different authority, a social worker said more simply:

> 'I am hopeless with school stuff.'

47. Indeed, throughout the survey, social workers regularly expressed concerns that they did not have the skills or capacity to carry out the growing expectations that they should address children's educational needs. This was sometimes at odds with senior managers' assertion that social workers, along with schools, could meet the demands placed upon them as a result of a reduced virtual school. This tension was evident in several cases tracked by inspectors where social workers' scant knowledge of educational matters compromised the level of support provided to children.

48. A social worker allocated to a case sampled by inspectors acknowledged that an absence of detailed understanding of expected levels of achievement limited her ability to analyse a child's progress and to identify the appropriate help. In this case, there was a general lack of analysis of the child's school performance, whether in relation to other children or the child's own ability and potential. This was not challenged and academic targets outlined in the PEP were vague.

49. Elsewhere, a social worker was concerned that an impending move to mainstream secondary school would not meet a child's needs. The virtual school supported the social worker in seeking more suitable educational provision. The social worker was adamant that she would not have been able to ensure that all required assessments were completed and the child's needs met

more appropriately without the tenacious input of the virtual school. The social worker had received no training on education issues.

50. Generally, though, virtual schools made stringent efforts to address this acknowledged gap in expertise and knowledge. Several authorities had designed toolkits that explained expectations at each key stage that helped social workers to determine the extent of individual children's progress. One virtual school's routine monitoring of each child's progress resulted in 'red/amber/green' (RAG) ratings identifying areas of concern that the virtual school and social workers could follow up with teachers.

51. Inspectors did see some evidence of a strong grasp by social workers of education issues. On several occasions, social workers said that this knowledge and increased confidence in addressing school issues had stemmed in part from their experience of supporting their own children at school. Most authorities provided training on education matters for social workers and it was good in some areas, but the training did not generally equip workers with the depth of knowledge that would enable them to take an effective lead, if required, in supporting children's education.

52. Stronger practice tended to be based on a social worker, as lead professional, facilitating a multi-agency team approach in which the virtual school took an active part. This approach was particularly useful in more challenging and complex cases, as seen in a local authority where multi-agency working with looked after children was well embedded. To review a child's progress, the allocated social worker convened half-termly planning meetings involving all key stakeholders, including the foster carers, designated teacher and class teacher. The structured approach to case planning in this complex case was required to ensure that all activity was coordinated. The meetings were integrated into PEP and statutory reviews whenever possible to avoid duplication. Full consideration of the child's educational needs was taken into account. Carers and schools were well informed and prepared.

53. In another case in a different local authority, the virtual school had agreed funding for transport that enabled a young person to remain at the same school despite a placement move. One-to-one tuition and support were also provided. The social worker was convinced that without the support of the virtual school she would not have been able to present the successful case for these resources. The young person had flourished since this decision. Predicted grades had improved and the young person had clear and ambitious plans for his future.

54. Social workers also often stated that virtual schools' professional link to schools gave them important credibility. One said:

> 'Their views carry more weight with schools even if they are saying the same things as social workers.'

55. Specialist looked after children teams generally had a sharper understanding of children's educational needs than social workers who worked at an earlier stage of the child's journey in care and who were more likely to be carrying a mixed workload of children in need, child protection and looked after children cases. Overall, although inspectors saw considerable evidence of a strong commitment from social workers to prioritising children's education, their expertise was understandably limited. They did not consistently carry the same level of credibility with schools and colleagues as their virtual school colleagues with education backgrounds and their ability to focus on education issues were often stretched by competing caseload demands.

Schools and designated teachers

56. Like social workers, groups of designated teachers interviewed by inspectors in each area were universally positive about the impact of virtual schools, which were seen to be central to effective multi-agency working, from the perspective of schools. The ability of some virtual schools to help 'join everything up', in the words of one designated teacher, was considered invaluable.

57. Tracked cases provided many examples of effective engagement of schools in case planning and review. Virtual schools were often instrumental in ensuring that schools' attendance at regular professionals' meetings was transferred into practical and active support, such as advice from the designated teacher at the secondary school on the best way in which the foster carer could help the child to learn at home.

58. In several cases, a designated teacher was an active member of a core group of professionals working together to support children. In one case, for example, the teacher was part of a proactive, multi-agency approach to supporting a successful transition between primary and secondary education, which was supported further by joint training involving the foster carer, the designated teacher, the virtual headteacher and the education and inclusion support worker.

59. In more than one local authority the virtual headteacher, or a member of the virtual school team, attended routine meetings with the designated teachers at every local school and discussed the progress of each looked after child attending the school. Sharing information at these meetings facilitated a timely response to children's emerging needs and provided an opportunity for virtual headteachers to address more formally any aspects of a child's education that might be raising persistent concerns.

60. Elsewhere, a designated teacher provided termly progress reports, which supplemented the personal education plan meetings. The regular communication from the designated teacher meant that, whenever the child's expected progress veered off-course, there was prompt and flexible intervention from the virtual school and carers.

61. Communication was not consistently good, however, across all local authority areas. In one local authority, for example, schools did not routinely provide the virtual school with regular information regarding the progress of looked after children. This gap contributed to the local authority's lack of an overview about how well children were doing in school. This was compounded by a generally insufficient challenge to schools when it was required, such as when a poor quality PEP had been produced or if a child's progress was unexpectedly slow.

62. Designated teachers regularly told inspectors that the involvement of the virtual school had strengthened professional relationships between all relevant parties but that there remained pockets of poor communication, particularly from some social workers, who did not all seem to understand the extent of the role that schools could play in supporting children. In one local authority, designated teachers said that certain social workers often failed to keep schools up to date with key developments in a child's life. An example was given of a social worker failing to tell a school when a looked after child had begun seeing his birth mother again after a long period without any contact. As a result, the school was not able to understand, or predict, changes in the child's behaviour or mood.

63. In nearly all local authorities, virtual schools had established regular – usually termly – network meetings for designated teachers, who valued the chance to meet with colleagues and share experiences and good practice. These meetings provided opportunities for designated teachers to receive training on issues such as attachment and the looked after children system. Designated teachers particularly welcomed presentations from other professionals such as psychologists and youth offending workers, outlining the nature of their work. Designated teachers reported that the meetings enhanced a mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities and an increased awareness of issues facing looked after children.

64. In one local authority, the regular designated teacher forum had led to the delivery of additional school-based training on issues identified at forum meetings. Other initiatives arising from the forum included the delivery of training by more experienced designated teachers to newly designated teachers in other schools. Designated teachers also met with all newly qualified teachers to advise them on issues relating to looked after children, and on the role of the designated teacher.

65. Overall, the network meetings were a valuable way of building networks and establishing consistency of practice. However, regular designated teacher networks had not yet been established in two authorities visited by inspectors. Although the potential benefits were acknowledged by the virtual schools, plans said to be in place to set up networks had not yet been implemented.

66. There was no apparent correlation between the size of the virtual school, or the size of the local authority, and the capacity to support a designated teacher

network. Indeed, the smallest virtual schools had sustained well-established, creative and dynamic networks of designated teachers. The size of the local authority did not appear to make it more difficult, or easier, to establish a network of designated teachers.

67. Generally, inspectors found an increasingly prominent responsibility of the designated teacher was to link more closely with other professionals working with looked after children. Where the effectiveness of the designated teacher was most evident, virtual schools had taken a strong lead in facilitating regular communication between professionals and providing varied and interactive training that increased the skills and knowledge of designated teachers and equipped all relevant professionals to work together more effectively in the interests of children.

Foster carers and children's homes

68. The central role of carers in supporting the education of looked after children was well understood and articulated by all local authorities visited. There was evidence in all local authorities of varied and challenging training that aimed to raise the educational aspirations that foster carers had for the children they were looking after. Inspectors saw many examples in tracked cases of some very effective encouragement and support given to children by carers who clearly recognised the importance of children's education. However, in a small number of local authorities, the level of education-related training provided by virtual schools to carers was insufficient.

69. Foster carers spoken to by inspectors in one local authority were full of praise for the virtual school. They said that the virtual school exerted a strong and positive influence on schools, provided a flexible support when required, and was a powerful advocate for children when necessary. The carers saw the virtual school's reliability and good communication as particular strengths. One carer said that the virtual school 'made sure that we prioritised learning'.

70. Managers, social workers and virtual school staff in several authorities spoke of the continuing challenge that they faced in equipping all foster carers with the necessary skills, knowledge and motivation to prioritise education. One senior manager said:

> 'One issue is... the quality of some foster carers – specifically the priority they give to education, the lack of engagement of some with schools and in continuing the work that schools do at home.'

However, most virtual schools had risen to this challenge with some gusto.

71. In one local authority, the programme of training provided or arranged by the virtual school included training for new and existing foster carers on supporting children's development and education. More specific courses addressed strategies for supporting learning at home and understanding the impact of

psychological and emotional issues upon learning. Training was available at a wide variety of venues and times.

72. In another area, a wide range of relevant and popular training included courses that covered post-16 education opportunities, education for 14 to 19 year olds, internet safety, primary to secondary transition, and learning through play.

73. Elsewhere, specific training on personal education plans and the role of the virtual school had helped carers become more involved in the education of the children they looked after. A group of foster carers in one local authority said that the regular training and awareness-raising courses facilitated by the virtual school for carers and residential social workers had increased their understanding of their role as parents and advocates for children in their care. The training had helped them to develop the skills and confidence to challenge schools directly when it was necessary.

74. In a small number of local authorities, the picture was less positive. Inspectors came across cases where foster carers had not received any training relating to education. In one local authority, the lack of relevant training was seen as a significant gap by carers. This was acknowledged by the virtual school.

75. Virtual schools that did provide comprehensive training to carers were generally more strategic in their overall approach to the development of their services. They were typically proactive in letting foster carers know what training was available, and what was required. In those few authorities where formal training was under-developed, the approach to service delivery was too reactive and there was less clarity overall about what support was available to carers. A foster carer in one such local authority commented:

> 'Whenever we've asked for support, we've received it. But I'm not sure what would happen if you were a foster carer who didn't understand the education system and didn't know what to ask for.'

76. Another carer in the same area, who was very happy with the private tuition the children in his care had received, said:

> 'I know about the support I have received but I don't think I was ever told what kind of support they [the virtual school] can offer. I still don't really. I'm sure it's the same for most foster carers.'

77. A foster carer elsewhere was concerned about the lack of clear information about other education services, such as the available support for children with special educational needs.

78. Generally, foster carers took an active role in promoting the education of the children they looked after and were well supported to do so by the virtual schools. In nearly all cases seen, foster carers did, as a social worker said,

'what you would expect a parent to do'. Most carers were clear about their role and the expectations the local authority placed upon them. This included attendance at parents' evenings and meetings, including PEP reviews, and helping with homework. Providing transport to school was sometimes difficult for carers who were looking after more than one child attending different schools, but in several cases the virtual school provided funding for transport.

79. In one tracked case, new foster carers were extremely supportive of a successful return to mainstream school for a child recently placed with them. The carers were an integral part of a core group that met weekly to monitor progress; they recorded and shared observations with professionals and supported extra-curricular activities, which were planned as part of the overall package of reintegration.

80. The active role that another set of foster carers played in plans for a child's education, including the one-to-one reading they did with him at home, was considered to have contributed greatly to the marked improvement in his literacy skills. This case was marked by effective multi-agency working, underpinned by an evidently strong placement match and effective support for all areas in the child's life. This had a demonstrably positive impact on improving the child's educational progress.

81. Several virtual schools said that it was a constant challenge to find out what would be most useful for individual carers. However, most worked well to respond to this important challenge and inspectors saw some very good examples of support for, and engagement with, carers. In one tracked case the virtual school liaised effectively with the social worker and the family placement team to ensure that carers, who sometimes had unrealistic expectations of children, were given good support and, when necessary, clear direction to work in line with the agreed plan.

82. Home tuition to help young people prepare for exams or to hasten progress was particularly beneficial. Organised activities during holiday periods were also much appreciated and virtual schools worked hard to organise activities which catered for all interests.

83. Children's home staff spoken to by inspectors generally had a greater awareness of the support that the virtual school could offer than foster carers. This was often based on regular, routine visits that virtual school staff would make to the homes. All children's home staff spoken to by inspectors were positive about the support that they received from the virtual school, although several staff spoke of the continuing difficulties in identifying suitable alternative provision for young people who were not currently in full-time education. Some considered that support from the virtual school was more tailored towards younger children. A small number of staff and carers thought that the virtual school still did not have enough influence with schools and they believed that schools sometimes continued to seek exclusion as a quick response to difficulties.

84. In one local authority, the link worker from the virtual school had worked hard to raise awareness of education issues within children's homes. The link worker ensured that suitable education placements and support packages were in place on admission. The children's homes provided social workers and the virtual school monthly summaries of progress for each child. The virtual school had provided funding for new computers and learning materials for study rooms at home. A successful gardening project for young people had also been supported by the virtual school. The wide range of training on education available for children's homes had been 'very empowering'. The impact of this enhanced focus on education was considerable. There had been a significant reduction in the number of exclusions and every young person who had completed year 11 at school had gone to college or other post-16 provision.

Hampshire literacy project for looked after children

Hampshire has over a thousand looked after children and it is difficult for the virtual school to be directly involved with all children and young people. The virtual school consequently views the building of schools' capacity to support children and young people who are looked after as key to raising standards. Evidence-based projects demonstrate interventions which can be effective and which schools can then adopt confidently in the knowledge that the interventions make a difference. The literacy project compared the reading age of each child before and after participation in the project. Participation was offered to looked after children attending both primary and secondary schools. Pupils could take part in one of three interventions.

■ Paired reading, for a period of 16 weeks, was offered to all pupils who were looked after, including those with reasonably good literacy skills.

■ A phonics-based learning programme was offered to pupils with lower levels of literacy for a period of 12 weeks.

■ Both joint paired reading and the phonics programme were offered to pupils with lower levels of literacy and who had carers who were able to offer active support.

The reading age of pupils improved on average by seven months following involvement in either paired reading or the phonics programme. When the two interventions were combined, improvement was even greater and mean reading age improved by an average of 11 months.

On average, primary pupils' reading age increased by at least 1.5 months for every month spent on the intervention.

In addition to improvements in reading ability, there were also important improvements in pupils' attitudes towards reading. Following each of the interventions pupils perceived reading as less difficult and felt more

competent. There was also an impact on pupils' views on their own ability to learn and the findings suggest that the literacy interventions also impacted on pupils' general feelings about themselves as learners. These findings suggest that such interventions offer a helpful way of supporting looked after children, not only by improving their literacy skills, but also by enhancing their general attitudes towards school and learning.

External agencies

85. In some areas, virtual schools were able to commission a wide range of services, either as additional extra-curricular activities or as alternative provision for children and young people who were not in full-time education.

86. These activities ranged from construction and horticulture projects to dance programmes and sailing academies. Such projects, sometimes residentially based, provided young people with qualifications, as well as opportunities to develop skills in team-building and to discover hidden talents, increasing their self-esteem and confidence.

87. In other local authorities, resources were tighter and there were fewer opportunities to access such provision, although all authorities worked hard to maintain strong relationships with partners such as the youth offending service, educational psychologists and the leaving care service. Several local authorities had developed good partnerships with further and higher education providers and ensured that there was effective sharing of information between parties so that support to looked after children and care leavers was sensitively managed.

88. Two local authorities continued to fund a limited number of places on courses to encourage young people to aspire to further and higher education, despite the ceasing of 'Aim Higher' funding.[16] In one of these local authorities, looked after children had attended residential programmes annually since 2006, funded by a local university and supported by care leavers and student ambassadors. The number of care leavers attending university had risen considerably.

JUMP (Joint Universities Mentoring Programme) – Lincolnshire

JUMP was established in 2007. The programme supports looked after children and young people between the ages of nine and 16 by facilitating access to a diverse range of cultural, sporting and recreational experiences. The programme is funded by Lincolnshire County Council and donations from Bishop Grosseteste University College, Lincoln University and CfBT Lincolnshire School Improvement Service.

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[16] The Aim Higher programme was established to encourage progression to higher education for students who had the potential to progress to higher education, but might have been at risk of under-achieving. The programme closed in 2011.

The programme's aims are:

- to offer additional educational opportunities, activities and accreditations to looked after children in Lincolnshire aged from nine to 16

- to provide selectively recruited and trained university students to act as mentors to the young people.

In 2007, 13 places were available. The project has grown over time to the extent that, in 2011/12, a total of 87 places were filled by 44 young people. Every project was accredited, with many of the accreditations being nationally recognised. Projects included:

- JUMP to the Beat – a 10-week programme of activities centred on jazz and rock music. Each week, young people took it in turns to cook tea for the group.

- JUMP Arts Award – following a successful pilot in May, young people aged from 11 to 16 were given the opportunity to achieve their Bronze Arts Award qualification.

- JUMP Masterchef – a weekend of cooking and food-related activities.

- JUMP Artists' Retreat – looked after children and their mentors worked together to produce a large scale bespoke mosaic. Young people also had the opportunity to develop photographic skills.

- JUMP Adventure – young people took part in a number of adventurous activities such as climbing, archery, a low-ropes course, orienteering and a night hike.

- JUMP Duke of Edinburgh – this project is still ongoing. Seven young people have been working since November on their Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Feedback from carers and young people has been consistently positive and will inform future plans.

Certificates of achievement were presented to the JUMP participants at Lincolnshire's FAB! celebration award event for looked after children.

Wider impact

89. Through collaborative work with internal and external colleagues, virtual schools were sensitive to issues faced by looked after children that might affect their educational achievement, such as their emotional well-being. In turn, there was also consistently strong awareness of the benefits to children of improved educational placement stability and attainment on their overall outcomes, including, most often, placement stability. Inspectors saw many examples of these reciprocal benefits in the tracked cases.

90. The majority of cases revealed a careful consideration of all relevant issues when planning for children. There was a common view across authorities that the virtual school's championing of education had resulted in a stronger emphasis on keeping children at the same school whenever possible and minimising instability, particularly if a change of care placement was required. In one local authority, the sensitivity of one group of designated teachers to these wider issues was evident:

> 'There is little consideration given by government to the trauma facing the child that blocks their ability to learn for a period of time. There's a need for building emotional resilience that must take priority over educational performance…once this has been attended to… then learning capacity improves.'

91. In this local authority, great efforts were made to maintain children at the same school when they first came into care. Here, and in other local authorities, transport was provided to facilitate this. In another local authority, a foster carer echoed the general view among carers spoken to that the virtual school had influenced a greater emphasis on prioritising education and minimising change:

> 'Convenience for carers and staff used to be much more important.'

92. In one tracked case, a move to a school had been deemed necessary for one young person, due to some serious safety concerns. The new school was some distance from a foster placement. The virtual school provided strong evidence to another initially reluctant school, local to the foster placement, that they were the best option. The team did 'push and challenge' the school, in the view of the social worker. He was sure that without the virtual school's authoritative involvement he would not have been able to negotiate the move, which was successfully managed and reinforced crucial placement stability for the young person.

93. In another local authority, intensive support from the virtual school, including establishing a programme of ongoing full-time support, had enabled a child to move from inappropriate residential school provision to mainstream primary education for the first time at the age of eight. Progress was steady – 'small steps', commented the social worker – but is measurable both academically and socially. The skilled and tenacious intervention of the virtual school that had significantly stabilised the child's education had, in turn, helped sustain and enhance the foster placement.

94. Elsewhere, robust intervention from a virtual school had resulted in a school setting more realistic target grades for two children, whose learning needs were not being met at school and who had been falling behind. The children reported that they were now happier and enjoying the additional support that they were receiving to help them with their reading, writing and mathematics. Initial signs of progress were positive and the intervention had supported extremely

committed foster carers who were struggling to manage the children's challenging behaviour.

95. Carers in all the local authorities visited spoke about how a proactive and creative virtual school can support placements. Interventions included alternative packages of education during temporary exclusions, and support to access holiday and after-school activities.

96. A children's home manager described how the virtual school had organised a photographic project for young people. The project had been suitable for a wide range of abilities:

> 'It was the best thing they could have done… it was brilliant for their self-esteem.'

97. One carer spoke of the huge progress the children he was looking after had made since they had been offered one-to-one support at home. This progress was evident in the children's emotional well-being as well as their educational attainment. The children's confidence, self-esteem, attitude and behaviour had all improved, which helped them to make the most of their education:

> 'It's not just about improving learning – it's about removing the barriers that have prevented it happening in the past.'

Measuring children's progress

Personal education plans

98. Every child and young person in care should have a personal education plan (PEP) as part of his or her overall care plan. The PEP should set out high expectations of progress and put in place the support that a child requires to achieve their full potential.[17]

99. The PEP should be the key document that monitors and drives improvement and planning should involve all those involved with a child's education such as teachers, social workers, carers and the young people themselves.

100. Virtual schools were striving to improve the standards of PEPs, but the quality seen by inspectors was variable. The standard of the plans was constrained by a variety of factors, including difficulties with electronic data systems and the inconsistent approach to holding face-to-face meetings. Most importantly,

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[17] For further information: *The role and responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked after children: statutory guidance for school governing bodies*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-01046-2009.

targets set for children and young people were not all sufficiently specific or challenging.

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Tower Hamlets – reviewing children's progress

Tower Hamlets' virtual school has overhauled the personal education planning (PEP) process.

The formal PEP meeting takes place twice a year for each looked after child and is attended by all relevant parties including the carer and the child, as well as the social worker. The virtual school staff may attend if there are any significant concerns.

Prior to the formal half-yearly PEP meeting, and on at least a termly basis, the virtual school team convene a 'PEP 1' professional learning conversation with each school and about each pupil. This process constitutes a professional dialogue (either over the telephone, by email or in person) with all schools, to ensure targets for improving attainment and progress are achieved. It ensures that the targets are clear and meet the needs of the looked after pupil, whether placed within or outside the local authority area. During this focused conversation, progress levels are recorded, targets are discussed and any concerns and additional support needs are negotiated with the school. As a result, every child receives a learning intervention at least termly to ensure the appropriate levels of progress are made and barriers to learning are addressed swiftly and actively. The Pupil Premium Grant is regularly used appropriately for this purpose.

The formal PEP meeting confirms the interventions made. Concerns about the child's engagement are shared, including issues about placement stability and progress levels. Targets are confirmed, and the review checks that tracking has been effective, and targets are sufficiently challenging and, above all, meet the child's learning needs.

The focus of the meetings is on the learning outcomes for the child and the commitment by all parties to support ongoing progress that best reflects the child's learning ability and potential. The process is highly inclusive, appropriately targeted, and flexible enough to meet both children's and carers' different circumstances. This high-level and focused approach for each child on learning outcomes has worked to raise both the attainment and the aspirations of this group of children.

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101. Several local authorities identified PEPs as a continuing area of development. Most virtual schools undertook regular audits of PEPs for compliance and quality, although some audits had had minimal impact upon quality and lessons had not been systematically disseminated. For example, in one local authority, social workers received support from virtual school staff in developing the PEPs in partnership with designated teachers, but the quality was audited by a

number of different managers. It was not clear how coherence and consistency in monitoring was achieved.

102. Another virtual school had sharpened focus on the PEP by delivering good training to social workers and establishing robust monitoring and tracking arrangements. The virtual school was able to target development work towards those who needed it most, as it had a good understanding of where weaknesses lay. In this local authority, evidence from several tracked cases demonstrated that PEP reviews were used constructively and consistently to refresh targets, challenge schools when progress was unexpectedly slow, and ensure that appropriate support was put in place to drive more rapid improvement.

103. Another virtual school had identified that, although schools generally paid much closer attention to PEPs, their quality still required overall improvement so that the plans were more consistently used as tools for providing support, monitoring the impact of support and raising attainment. The virtual school worked hard to encourage schools to set more ambitious progress targets for individual looked after children. Age-appropriate PEPs were accessible, comprehensive and accompanied by clear and detailed guidance for their completion. They usually took close account of children's views.

104. This local authority had commissioned a report from internal inspectors on the quality of PEPs. When there were identified shortfalls in quality, an inspector supported schools to make the necessary improvements, which included accounting for the expenditure of available resources to support children, and setting specific and measurable targets.

105. In certain schools, experienced internal inspectors attended initial PEP meetings to help set ambitious targets and put in place the necessary support for children as soon as they were admitted into care. This emphasis on quality assurance of PEPs was well embedded, with clear arrangements enshrined in the children's services plan.

106. Another virtual school had also provided training on PEPs that social workers and independent reviewing officers had found useful. However, recent reductions in the capacity of the virtual school, and the deletion of a PEP support officer post, had meant greater responsibility was placed on social workers and schools to lead the agenda. This was despite ongoing concerns, shared by Ofsted inspectors, that the quality of PEPs remained variable. One example seen by inspectors described a young person as 'doing well', when in fact she was performing well below expectations. The social worker acknowledged that she had limited knowledge of how to interpret information about a child's educational development.

107. Improving the effectiveness of PEPs was hindered further by the lack of integration of the electronic PEP (e-PEP) with the electronic social care record.

Furthermore, the unreliability of the e-PEP system meant that key information, such as agreed actions and targets from PEP meetings, was sometimes 'lost'.

108. An e-PEP system had been adopted by another local authority and the virtual school reported that the percentage of looked after children with completed PEPs had more than doubled. The e-PEP was described as a 'living document' and could be accessed by all professionals. The child could also see it and record feelings and views. Examples seen by inspectors had specific and measurable targets. However, the remote nature of the e-PEP process meant that face-to-face meetings were held less often than previously. There was some concern that the increase in completion might not necessarily be accompanied by an improvement in quality. The best planning occurred when e-PEPs were supplemented by face-to-face meetings, such as statutory reviews, that also addressed educational progress and were underpinned by a robust analysis and monitoring of progress.

109. Children and young people in one local authority strongly agreed that PEPs were of limited value and felt that the timing and venue of the meetings, sometime held during the day and at school, were arranged to meet the needs of the professionals rather than the young people themselves. In another local authority, the PEP meetings were often held during the day, due to the limited capacity of the virtual school team. There was evidence that e-PEPs, while having their drawbacks, provided an alternative approach that some young people found more comfortable than face-to-face meetings led by professionals.

110. Inspectors saw some good examples of PEPs which outlined clear and challenging plans for improvement and addressed all aspects of a child's learning, including out-of-school activities. Too many, however, were not sufficiently challenging. Targets or planned actions were not always focused on academic attainment and lacked clear timescales. PEPs were more likely to identify those children who were performing below expectations. There was less focus generally on those who were meeting expectations but could do even better. In some of the PEPs seen the local authority, supported by the virtual school, could have been more of a 'pushy parent'.

Personal educational planning in Kent

Kent's virtual school has worked with children and young people and key partners to develop a customised electronic PEP that allows for multi-agency contributions as well as the active involvement of children in decisions that affect them.

The online e-PEP encourages young people to enter information directly into a computer with support from a range of age-appropriate animated virtual characters. It addresses culture, for example by taking account of speech patterns, and disability, for example by using subtitles for deaf

people. Young people can access the e-PEP on their computer at home if they prefer by using their own personal log-in.

Once the character has been selected, the young person is asked to respond to a number of carefully crafted questions about their education, talents, interests and emotional health and well-being. This information provides valuable insight into the thoughts and feelings of young people for use in PEP meetings to set personal goals.

The attainment section of the e-PEP requires input from the designated teacher. Once data has been entered, database integration enables key attainment data to be displayed as a range of easily understood graphs that can be readily used by teachers, independent reviewing officers, social workers and other key professionals at the PEP meeting. Significantly, a health section gathers information from existing and compatible social care databases and enables education professionals, social workers and specialist named nurses to identify and discuss medical needs, such as mental health issues.

Information gathered from the e-PEP is also used to evaluate interventions, to inform service delivery and the strategic deployment of resources, and to address gaps in provision at a local level.

Data management

111. A strong feature of most of the authorities visited was the establishment of robust data systems that enabled the virtual schools to monitor and track progress of children, individually and collectively. This enabled virtual schools to address performance issues with schools, professionals and carers promptly. It also facilitated up-to-date performance reporting to senior managers and elected council members. Perhaps most significantly, finite resources could be targeted where they could have the most impact and increased the capacity and efficiency of the virtual school.

112. Systems that allowed early identification of concerns had demonstrably positive impact upon the attendance rates of looked after children and, in some cases, educational outcomes. Child-level and aggregated data were used to demonstrate and explain performance effectively to those who needed to understand it. Good-quality data were used to inform strategic decisions and the allocation of resources. There was a focus on the overall progress of looked after children as they advanced through their education, which provided a fuller picture of impact than annual comparisons of attainment between different year cohorts with varying abilities, backgrounds and lengths of time in care.

113. In one local authority, schools had regular tracking mechanisms for looked after children. Clear and measurable expectations of progress were set and children

were encouraged to be actively involved in the process, sometimes being shown their tracking reports as appropriate.

114. Two local authorities, however, did not have such robust systems in place and relied on time-costly manual data-gathering to understand performance. Whereas effective data management systems facilitated timely, efficient use of resources, virtual schools in these areas were not able to respond to need proactively and did not have sufficiently up-to-date understanding of the performance of the looked after children population. This was a significant gap and was identified as such by the local authorities concerned, but plans for implementing alternative systems were at an early stage.

Cornwall – use of data by the virtual school

The virtual school makes effective use of data at a number of levels to track progress, attainment and the impact of interventions put in place to raise standards. Progress and attainment is tracked from EYFS through to Key Stage 4 at group, cohort and individual level. Post-16 destinations are also monitored. All schools and academies currently provide pupil data to the local authority statistics team. Analysis of data is carried out by the virtual school leadership team and is used for benchmarking purposes where possible. The progress of children placed outside of the local authority area is also monitored, either remotely or through commissioned monitoring visits undertaken on behalf of the virtual school.

Each pupil has an individual summary report which captures key information, including schools attended, attendance, exclusions and end-of-key-stage assessments, which in virtually all cases include Year 4 assessments. PEP timeliness and quality are monitored. Cohort attainment and achievement are also reported and outcomes of data analysis are presented for, and used by, a range of audiences including the virtual school governing body, the directorate leadership team, Ofsted, schools, designated teachers, social care managers and social workers.

Outcomes of thorough analysis enable the virtual school to monitor progress and achievement closely. They are used in an appropriate and timely manner to deploy resources and determine targeted intervention to individuals and cohorts. For example, below-average scores in communication, language and literacy development at the end of EYFS led to the implementation of a targeted reading project for Year 1 children. In Year 5 and Year 6, targeted teaching and support is provided for identified individuals to secure accelerated progress. Data, including Fischer Family Trust Data, are used to set targets at an individual pupil level for the end of Key Stages 2 and 4. Robust challenge is provided to schools and social workers where appropriate, based upon data analysis. It is also used to ensure children's achievements are celebrated.

The impact of precise use of data has led to raised expectations for looked after children. In most cases, it has also led to improved outcomes, increased rates of progress and standards of attainment for looked after children in the area. In most cases, attainment levels are now in line with (or better than) the national average for all looked after children. The attainment gap between Cornwall's looked after children and all children is reducing and better than the national average, particularly in Key Stage 4.

While cohort fluctuation is always a factor to be considered, the ability to track individual pupils closely allows the virtual school to respond to needs at an operational level. Strategically, the systems in place provide good evidence of the impact of the virtual school over time and enable it to provide a high level of professional challenge and accountability to service providers.

Children placed out of area

115. Inspectors tracked cases of children placed outside of the local authority area on each visit. Generally, inspectors saw evidence of virtual schools working hard to overcome the inherent difficulties of monitoring educational placements some distance from home.

116. For example, where a child had been placed in a children's home more than 100 miles away, the virtual school challenged the appropriateness of the education provision to be provided on site. The virtual school liaised with the host local authority's admissions team and visited potential schools. The transition to a local school was successfully managed and the virtual school continue to take an active role in the case, attending PEP meetings and statutory reviews and liaising with the carers on strategies for supporting the child's education.

117. Elsewhere, it was evident that the virtual school had been instrumental in tracking progress of a child placed on a long-term basis in residential provision outside the local authority area. The virtual school ensured that multi-agency partners were working to help the young person achieve specific targets. This help included integrated youth support as part of the plans for post-16 provision. There was robust tracking of progress and effective information sharing.

118. Another virtual school had worked across three different authorities to negotiate a child's successful move from a school outside the home local authority to a pupil referral unit in a third local authority area. The virtual school had brokered good communication between the three local authorities and secured a full-time placement following exclusion. These positive examples were typical of most tracked cases seen where children were placed outside their home areas.

119. In focus groups and individual meetings with inspectors, however, several virtual school headteachers and team members voiced concerns that they were not able to provide the same quality of support to children and young people placed some distance away from the local authority as they could for children placed close to home. The positive relationships developed over time with schools and designated teachers nearby were difficult to replicate from a distance. As one virtual headteacher commented:

> 'There's the same monitoring system, but there's a different relationship.'

120. Inspectors saw little evidence in tracked cases of active liaison between virtual schools across local authorities. The virtual schools in a child's home local authority tended to take the lead in checking placements and monitoring progress once a child was placed in external provision.

121. Another virtual headteacher acknowledged that, although there was a stated policy of an equitable approach from the virtual school to children placed in schools in their local authority area by another local authority, in practice this was generally not the case. More attention was paid by the virtual school to their own local authority's looked after children.

122. Social workers in another local authority felt that, although attainment could be tracked, the required level of support provided to the more vulnerable young people more than an hour's journey away was over-stretching the capacity of the virtual school team.

123. A virtual school within a local authority with a particularly high number of children looked after by other local authorities placed within its boundary said that satisfactorily addressing the needs of those children was a difficult challenge. There was a strong consensus in this local authority that these children typically arrived with poor plans and equally unsatisfactory follow-up support from the placing local authority, and the host local authority was not always notified of these placements in line with regulations.[18]

Placement officer – London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

Barking and Dagenham Council has placed a high number of looked after children in Kent. The young people that are placed in Kent are often those who are most vulnerable and placed in residential therapeutic children's homes or within the selective school system. They are often the most needy and most vulnerable with a history of placement instability.

Barking and Dagenham Council has established a looked after children advisory teacher post, based in Kent, with specific responsibility to support

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[18] The Arrangements for Placement of Children (General) Regulations 2010 require a local authority, when it places a child which it is looking after within the area of another local authority, to notify that authority of the placement and provide relevant information.

the high number of the local authority's looked after children placed in that county and to promote effective transition to further and higher education. The advisory teacher attends the majority of PEPs, exclusion meetings and reviews.

By being based in Kent, the looked after children advisory teacher has built up positive working relationships with Kent professionals and schools, which enables looked after children to access appropriate school places and additional support where required. The advisory teacher is also able to take responsibility for those children, looked after by Barking and Dagenham Council, who are placed in Sussex and boroughs in the south of London.

Challenge and support: striking the right balance

Challenging schools and colleagues

124. There was a general consensus from staff and carers across the nine authorities visited that, while there had been considerable improvement over recent years, there was still work to be done to raise further some schools' expectations of looked after children and to increase their understanding of what may lead to certain patterns of behaviour. The most effective virtual schools were able to:

   ■ combine the necessary support to schools and students with an appropriate level of challenge that did not lose sight of the collective ambition to improve achievement and attainment for all looked after children

   ■ strike the right balance between support and accountability.

125. One virtual school – described by a colleague as 'a nice hit squad' – were well equipped to challenge key partners when necessary. Their powerful advocacy for children was evidence-based, underpinned by professional credibility and access to quality data that facilitated strong performance management.

126. In another case elsewhere, areas of required improvement for a PEP had been identified by the virtual school's audit process. The latest PEP clarified specific needs for the young person and outlined clear, measurable targets. This virtual school has developed strong relationships with local designated teachers who were effectively challenged and supported. Designated teachers reported that the virtual school had moved from a service in crisis that struggled with the demand of high numbers to a trusted, expert service that offered proactive, targeted and timely support. Regular and robust monitoring and tracking was now in place and accountability for looked after children was demanded.

127. Effective progress monitoring by another virtual school enabled them to challenge schools and other professionals appropriately. In one case, when progress for a child had been unexpectly sluggish, the virtual headteacher

responded by convening a meeting with the school and holding six-weekly reviews to monitor progress. Performance was closely analysed and robust actions agreed to improve communication and drive improvement. The virtual headteacher maintained regular contact with both the carers and the social worker to ensure that the child's educational needs were at all times being properly met.

128. Less robust challenge was seen in several tracked cases. A child with challenging behaviour achieved Key Stage 2 results in line with national expectations, but far in excess of the school's own expectations. This raised questions about the accuracy of the assessments made on this child by her school and whether concerns about the child's behaviour were influencing teachers' perceptions of her ability. In this case, there may have been a need for the virtual school to provide teachers with further training on raising their expectations of looked after children.

129. In another case elsewhere, the secondary school had identified a child's lack of progress but the data was not rigorously analysed. The PEP summary did not clarify when the lack of progress had been identified and what had been done to tackle it. In a different local authority, a young person's current performance was higher than the school's own grade predictions. The young person believed his potential was being underestimated. Where there was a discrepancy, the virtual school would usually discuss potential intervention with the designated teacher, but this had not happened in this case. The monitoring systems did not pick up the more subtle indicators of underperformance or low expectation, and the social worker had not taken the matter up with the young person's teachers or with the virtual school.

130. Decision-making processes about applications for school places were not always clear. In one local authority, a protocol had been implemented which meant that social workers must inform the virtual school when a change of school was being considered or a new placement being made. This enabled the virtual school to provide advice on the suitability of schools. Review procedures in this local authority are now rigorous. Foster carers, children's homes and social workers were more aware of the importance of the right choice. Foster carers, children's homes and social workers confirmed that educational needs are now given much higher priority in deciding placements. Ofsted's inspection judgements were closely monitored and taken into consideration when making decisions about school placements for children and young people. This was not the case in all local authorities and several virtual schools had identified the need to maintain a formal overview of applications.

The Pupil Premium

131. There was a variable and inconsistent approach to addressing schools' expenditure of the Pupil Premium Grant allocated to schools' budgets. The grant is designed in part to support looked after children's education. Local

authorities should make payments to schools and academies when an eligible looked after child is on roll.

132. Social workers were not always clear about how the Pupil Premium should be used. Several virtual schools stated that there was a lack of clarity and knowledge among professionals about use of the Pupil Premium. This lack of understanding sometimes hindered the ability of local authorities, as corporate parents, to question and challenge schools about how their child was benefiting from Pupil Premium funding and whether the school was meeting the child's needs. In some local authorities, the virtual school had implemented clear guidance to ensure that schools were able to access all appropriate Pupil Premium funding and were using the PEP reviews to monitor expenditure in line with government guidance.[19] Social workers in these local authorities were well informed and becoming increasingly confident in working with schools to make creative use of the Pupil Premium, using it flexibly to support academic progress or to support leisure activities with a focus on enjoyment as well as achievement.

133. However, practice was less well embedded in most of the other local authorities visited. A small number of social workers suggested that, since the advent of the Pupil Premium and the withdrawal of the ring-fenced Personal Education Allowance that had been controlled by local authorities, it had become more difficult to finance leisure and enrichment activities for looked after children.

Corporate parenting

134. Strong corporate parenting empowered virtual schools, which in turn were enabled to enhance the skills and awareness of corporate parents. There was, however, a variable depth of engagement with issues relating to the education of looked after children from corporate parents across the local authorities visited by inspectors.

135. Where strategic ownership of these issues was well embedded, the virtual school had strong links to corporate parents. Robust and mutually challenging reporting mechanisms were in place that ensured senior managers and elected council members had a firm knowledge of current performance and areas requiring improvement. Children's views were actively sought and informed planning.

136. The virtual school was a visible presence and strong influence on key strategic bodies. For example, one virtual school reported regularly to the local Care Matters Board; it was well represented on various sub-groups, strengthening its

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[19] Pupil Premium guidance at Department for Education website: http://education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/premium. See also Further information on p 43.

influence on service priorities. Monitoring of performance by senior managers and councillors in this local authority was detailed, regular and challenging.

137. This firm grasp of relevant issues and data was seen from leaders in several other authorities. One had established a virtual school governing body with representation from local schools and elected council members. Elsewhere, an active corporate parenting group, chaired by the lead member for children's services, received thorough updates from the virtual headteacher. In these authorities, corporate parent groups were part of strong overall governance arrangements. Inspectors saw several examples of robust virtual school business plans, which linked well to other key planning documents.

138. In another local authority, members of the corporate parenting group demonstrated a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of provision and the particular difficulties that young people in care have to face. Concern about the use of the Pupil Premium, for example, had prompted the lead member to write to all schools. Expenditure of the Pupil Premium was monitored through PEP reviews and the virtual school is now expected to provide a regular report to the corporate parenting group to show how the grant is having a positive impact. The group, however, recognised the need for more robust and regular reporting on the performance of looked after children.

139. Performance reporting to elected council members and senior managers was not always sufficiently analysed. Conclusions were sometimes over-optimistic. For example, in one local authority, attainment data had been produced that showed some improvement for the looked after children cohort. It did not, however, include national figures which would have demonstrated that the gap in attainment of looked after children and all young people nationally was not closing. The lack of this information limited the scope of senior managers to challenge and did not encourage higher aspirations for the children looked after by the local authority.

140. One local authority's corporate parenting body was effectively inactive, having not met for over a year. In this area, which had experienced significant cuts to the capacity of the virtual school, there were limited opportunities for elected council members to hold all relevant officers to account and for the virtual school to influence and inform service priorities.

141. Local authorities that had been able to protect the resources of the virtual school were more likely to have well-established and effective corporate parenting mechanisms in place. These arrangements included consistent reporting on issues relating to looked after children to elected council members who were well supported to make informed decisions. Corporate parenting in local authorities that had decided to reduce the capacity of the virtual school was generally less well developed.

142. Corporate parents who were active and well informed fully understood the potential and actual impact of effective virtual school arrangements . One local

authority cited the allocation of the Dedicated Schools Grant for looked after children as 'a significant step forward'. Another said that the virtual school's successful engagement of partners and the resultant increased focus on the education of looked after children had strengthened accountability and scrutiny both at council and local level. One councillor said simply:

'They have raised our aspirations for looked after children.'

Children's views

143. Inspectors met with a small group of looked after young people or care leavers in each local authority.

144. Young people had varying levels of awareness of the virtual school although nearly all knew what they were meant to do. Sometimes, young people knew the service by another name or were aware of individuals from the virtual school team with whom they might have come into contact, but understandably did not know how they fitted into the service's structure.

145. Most young people who spoke to inspectors had received some kind of support from the virtual school, directly or indirectly. They were generally positive about the help they had been given. Several young people particularly valued the extra one-to-one tuition they had been given to help them catch up with missed learning or to help them achieve higher grades and make sure that they achieved their potential. Others said that the support they had received to help them settle into a new school had been beneficial. Young people said that it was important to have the same people involved in their lives for as long as possible. For example, they were glad if they could keep the same tutor for as long as possible when they were happy with the help they were receiving.

146. A large majority of young people told inspectors that they had someone to speak to if they had concerns about their education or any other aspect of their lives. These were most often their carers or sometimes other professionals such as youth workers or their social worker. A small number of children said they could speak to their school's designated teacher, who normally attended the PEP reviews, although not all young people fully understood the role of the designated teacher. One young person said that the virtual school, 'will go out of their way to help'.

147. In some local authorities, it was evident that children were able to play an increasingly influential role in reviewing the quality of educational support. However, not all young people who spoke to inspectors knew how they could become involved with the work of the local authority's children in care council, or how they could otherwise speak to senior managers or elected council members if they wanted to express their views about their education.

148. Most young people took an active role in their PEPs. Some spoke of how PEPs had helped them to focus on their education and agree how they could do better at school. A small number said they found the reviews 'enjoyable' although several found them 'boring' due, variably, to the formal nature of the meetings and their subject matter. One young person felt uncomfortable having personal issues addressed in PEP reviews and felt that there should be a clearer distinction between discussions about his education and other more holistic meetings, such as statutory reviews.

149. Generally, young people were very positive about the support they had received to achieve in their education. Several said that that they had been given good opportunities to do better at school since they had been in care. One young person who had recently achieved positive results in his GCSE exams said:

> 'If I hadn't been in care, I wouldn't have got such good grades.'

Impact on outcomes: conclusions

150. There was evidence of improving educational outcomes for looked after children in all of the local authorities visited. Improvement was not limited to attainment, but there was also good evidence of increased levels of attendance and reduced numbers of exclusions. More often, improvement was steeper for younger children at Key Stage 2. Progress during Key Stage 4 was evident but was slower than at Key Stage 2. Narrowing the gap between the percentage of looked after young people attaining five or more good GCSE passes, including English and maths, and the performance of all children in the country remained a challenge for all local authorities.[20]

151. All virtual schools visited understood the volatile nature of measuring improvement by simple comparisons between year cohorts within a short time frame, given the likely variation in the abilities and vulnerabilities of each year group and the differing length of time that young people may have spent in care. Virtual schools that had established effective data management systems were better placed to measure the progress of individual children and assess the impact of support while children were looked after. Elsewhere, local authorities relied upon straightforward attainment data that did not fully reflect the progress that individual children might have made since becoming looked after.

152. Inspectors saw very little evidence of virtual schools seeking to evaluate the impact of the services that they provided by, for example, gathering feedback from stakeholders or analysing reasons for requests for help.

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[20] *Outcomes for children looked after as of 31 March 2011*, Department for Education, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00200452/dfe-outcomes-for-children-looked-after-as-at-31-march-2011.

153. It is difficult to ascribe improvement with any certainty to the specific work of virtual schools, which operate as a key part of a collaborative, multi-agency framework. Virtual schools, acting as champions for looked after children's education, play a central role in raising the awareness of all those involved in supporting looked after children. Their distinct professional skills and knowledge are highly valued and not only make a crucial contribution to improved educational achievement but to the enhancement of placement stability and emotional well-being.

154. The level of effectiveness of the virtual school is dependent on a range of critical factors, including:

- a virtual headteacher with good leadership skills, the necessary 'clout' to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility
- a well-embedded culture of multi-agency working with effective communication and joint training
- clear and agreed cross-boundary arrangements that meet the needs of children educated outside their home local authority
- a robust data management system that facilitates sound performance management and a clear focus on the progress of individual children
- a consistently high standard of personal education plans
- the scope to provide support to young people in transition, particularly those moving on to higher or further education
- well-embedded corporate parenting arrangements
- the ability to reflect high strategic aspirations for the looked after children population in a similarly ambitious approach for each child at an operational level.

Further information

Publications by Ofsted

The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2010/11, Ofsted, 2011; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/annualreport1011.

Equalities in action (080272), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080272.

The special educational needs and disability review: a statement is not enough (090221), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/090221.

The Pupil Premium: How schools are using the Pupil Premium funding to raise achievement for disadvantaged pupils (120197), Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120197.

Other publications

Looked-after and learning: evaluation of the virtual school head pilot, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RR144.

The care planning, placement and case review (England) regulations 2010, Adoption national minimum standards; www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/959/contents/made.

M McClung and V Gayle, 'Exploring the care effects of multiple factors on the educational achievement of children looked after at home and away from home: an investigation of two Scottish local authorities'*, Child & Family Social Work*, vol. 14, no. 4, November 2010.

R Cassen and G Kingdon, *Tackling Low Educational Achievement*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007; www.jrf.org.uk/publications/tackling-low-educational-achievement.

Education of looked after children and care leavers, Department for Education website; www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/childrenincare/education.

Outcomes for children looked after as of 31 March 2011, Department for Education, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/allstatistics/a00200452/dfe-outcomes-for-children-looked-after-as-at-31-march-2011.

The role and responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked after children: statutory guidance for school governing bodies, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-01046-2009.

Education matters in care: a report by the independent cross-party inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children in England, All-party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and care Leavers, 2012; www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/news.php/289/appg-chair-launches-education-report.

Annex: Providers visited

Local authorities

Blackpool Council

Calderdale Council

Cornwall Council

Hampshire County Council

Hartlepool Borough Council

Kent County Council

Lincolnshire County Council

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Council

London Borough of Tower Hamlets Council