



**Eurochild online meeting on capacity building of
Children in Alternative Care thematic group
12th November, 2020**

Resource Pack: Virtual Schools in England Promoting the Education of Children in Alternative Care

Note: The UK Children Act, 1989, uses the term “looked after” to describe children in alternative care. It therefore appears in a number of statutory regulations as well as being in common use. When children are looked after, they are in the care of local authorities which are part of the local government structure of the UK. Just over 150 local authorities look after children in England. This document refers to the development and work of Virtual School Heads (VSH) in England and also includes detail on VSHs in Scotland. In Wales, each authority has a Looked After Children Education Coordinator (LACE). In Northern Ireland, the overarching education authority provides support for personal education planning. The term “Virtual School” is not used here to mean an online school. Children and young people in care still attend regular schools. The term can be particularly confusing as Virtual Schools will often commission online learning to help young people for short periods.

Any imagery used in this resource pack is provided to allow easy identification of agencies and is not intended to imply approval of the pack by those agencies.

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Virtual School Heads and Virtual Schools

In 2014, the [Children and Families Act](#) required local authorities in England to appoint at least one person (known as the Virtual School Head) for the purpose of discharging the local authority’s duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children.

Virtual School Heads meet their duties in many different ways because local authorities are so different. Some large authorities look after up to 2000 children and the smallest authority might look after only twenty. Most authorities look after several hundred children. Local authorities will therefore employ teams of varying sizes and some will share a VSH across two or three authorities.

Broadly, all Virtual School teams, under the leadership of the Virtual School Head, will:

- Ensure every child in care has a suitable school place (see below)
- Ensure that there are systems in place to monitor the progress of each child each term through the child's Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP is part of the child's Care Plan and contributors include the child, the social worker, the child's carer, the school and any additional agencies involved.
- Use the system above to monitor educational progress of all children in the care of the authority and plan strategy from the knowledge gained.
- Use the partnership created with the [National Consortium for Examination Results](#) to make effective use of the extensive performance data available for each local authority in the [CLA Analysis Service](#).
- Keep an up to date list of Designated Teachers (see below)
- Arrange training for all stakeholders including teachers, social workers and carers. In particular, Virtual School teams promote awareness of the importance of how trauma and attachment can affect learning and why schools and other agencies therefore need to plan their strategies accordingly. One important resource in this context is Attachment Aware Schools, originally hosted by Bath Spa University (see below).
- Work with schools to ensure the [Pupil Premium Grant](#) is spent effectively. This is a grant provided by central government and a portion of it is passed to each local authority for the Virtual School Head to manage in respect of looked after children. For 2020/21, the grant is generated at £2345 (lower for early years) per child so, for VSHs the annual budget is several hundreds of thousands of pounds and, in some cases, millions. Note that the grant is not a budget for each individual child but rather the size of the overall budget for a local authority depends on the numbers of children looked after by that authority.
- Arrange additional support and/or advocate for individuals and groups of young people when needed.
- Provide information and advice to the parents, carers and educators of "previously looked after children." This is a legally defined group of children who leave care and become subject to an adoption order, a child arrangements order or a special guardianship order.
- Develop strategy in partnership with children and young people through the local authority's Children in Care Council and report to locally elected councillors on the work of the Virtual School and the progress of the children it serves.

The work of Virtual School Heads is underpinned by [statutory guidance](#) which is updated at intervals. Extracts from the statutory guidance are included later in this pack so it is probably better not to read it all from the link at this stage! You may, however, wish to find out more about Personal Education Plans from page 14 onwards. Most Virtual School Heads commission online systems from a small number of private companies which have created secure electronic Personal Education Plan systems.

In producing Personal Education Plans, a significant partnership exists between Virtual School teams and Designated Teachers in England's schools. This role has been a statutory requirement in schools since 2008, originally to promote the education of looked after children and now additionally, since 2018, children who are "previously looked after." The governing bodies of schools and Designated Teachers operate under their own [statutory guidance](#) which is updated in harmony with the guidance for local authorities and Virtual School Heads.

The [School Admissions Code](#) ensures that looked after children have top priority in oversubscription criteria. Local authorities and the Secretary of State have powers to direct schools and academies respectively to admit looked after children.

The National Association



The National Association of Virtual School Heads ([NAVSH](#)) was formally established in 2016 after it had existed informally for several years beforehand. The association provides leadership and strategy for the work of Virtual Schools and its strong links with the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and the relevant government ministers have proved vital in sustaining progress in improving educational experience and outcomes for children in care and care leavers. Representatives of regional VSH networks form the NAVSH board with elections for the chair and other roles. An annual conference provides the forum for all VSHs to meet, learn, share practice and form policy.

NAVSH has commissioned the most recent version of the [Virtual School Handbook](#), building on the original work undertaken by the [Rees Centre](#) at the University of Oxford with author Alun Rees, a highly experienced Virtual School Head.

Agencies and partners



The UK government's Department for Education (DfE) has officers who lead on a number of aspects of children's care and a dedicated officer who links with NAVSH. The DfE's website includes a guidance section on [looked after children](#).



The [Office for Standards in Education](#) has a specialist adviser HMI (Her Majesty's Inspector) for looked after children who works closely with NAVSH. In 2014, collaboration between OFSTED and Virtual School Heads through their regional organisations led to changes in the way that inspections of schools were conducted to ensure that the needs of looked after children were included in the inspection process. NAVSH continues to provide training for HMIs.

OFSTED inspects local authority children's services as well as schools. Virtual Schools are inspected as part of the [children's services inspection](#).



The UK government's [Office for National Statistics](#) publishes data on the [educational outcomes of looked after children](#). The data is captured for children who were in care continuously for twelve months on 31st March prior that year's national assessments and examinations. At any one time this represents about 10% of children who have experienced care. Discussions between representatives of Virtual School Heads and the DfE have led to acknowledgement that this data is a poor proxy for the effectiveness of care and should therefore no longer be used to make year on year comparisons nor to make unqualified comparisons between local authorities.



[The Rees Centre](#) at the University of Oxford's [Department of Education](#) aims "to improve the education, wellbeing and life outcomes of those who are, or have been supported by children's social care services, with a focus on children in need (including those in care), adoptive and special guardianship families and care experienced adults."

[Rees Centre research](#) demonstrating how and when care is effective and the importance of a child's education can be found by clicking the link at the beginning of this sentence and scrolling to the relevant item:

- "Children in Need and Children in Care: Educational Attainment and Progress" 2020 (in partnership with the University of Bristol) (Linked to the project above, funded by the [Nuffield Foundation](#), is a [resource for young people](#))
- "Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data" 2015

The Rees Centre has also just published this [report](#) on the [Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools programme](#).



The [National Consortium for Examination Results](#) operates a [Children Looked After Project](#) which ensures that Virtual School Heads and other local authority officers have the following benefits when requiring data on national tests:

- “Early access to CLA analysis months ahead of national publications
- Ability to tailor reports using education and CLA pupil group filters and aggregations
- Ability to run reports with additional contextual filters such as special educational needs, disadvantaged or minority ethnic pupils
- Regional and NCER National comparators for CLA pupil cohorts
- Complex data translated into visualisations that are easy to engage with by different stakeholders”

The Nova module within NCER’s Nexus system has transformed the work of VSH’s in data analysis and reporting. Local authorities are therefore far better informed than previously when developing strategies to improve outcomes.

Bath Spa University and Attachment Aware Schools

“Attachment Aware Schools” was a partnership between Bath Spa University, Bath and North East Somerset local authority, the National College for Teaching and Leadership and a range of organisations, specialists and schools. The basic premise can be found in a number of places simply by searching the phrase.

In partnership with NAVSH, the university also offers [post-graduate study](#) for professionals involved in the education of children in care.



[What Works for Children's Social Care](#) is a relatively new agency which “seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector.” The agency conducts research projects championing robust standards of evidence. WWCSA has run webinars in partnership with NAVSH both to make good use of that evidence and to foster relationships which will lead to successful future research.



The [National Network for the Education of Care Leavers](#) exists “to transform the progression of young people in or leaving care into further or higher education.”

The [Moving On Up Report](#) , prepared by Dr Neil Harrison at the University of the West of England on behalf of NNECL, is the first study undertaken to provide a picture of care leavers in higher education.

The network has successfully encouraged a more active approach to genuinely inclusive support for care leavers in higher education. This [example from the University of Greenwich](#) is one of many.



[CELCLIS](#) is based at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. The organisation is “dedicated to making positive and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of children and young people living in and on the edges of care, and their families, across the whole country, and the globe - children who, through no fault of their own, are not able to enjoy the same positive experiences and outcomes as many of their peers.”

CELCLIS has been instrumental in rolling out the introduction of Virtual School Heads in Scotland. Following the initiative of Larissa Gordon, who was appointed to the VSHT role when it was introduced in Aberdeen City Council in 2015, there now exists a network of eleven local authorities which meets to promote the educational experiences and achievements of looked after children. The majority of local authorities who are taking this role forward are using their Care Experienced Children and Young People’s Fund, part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, to fund these positions. Six of the authorities have a specific VSH role whilst dedicated staff provide a resource in the others. Meetings, attended by representatives of the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, are convened and facilitated by CELCLIS.

The [CELCLIS Education Forum](#) is “a free, open-access network of practitioners and leaders who are involved, with or interested in, the education of children with experience of care, and their families.”

Fundamental to change in Scotland is [The Promise](#), published by the [Independent Care Review](#). This review was commissioned in 2016 by Scotland’s First Minister after she made a commitment to “figure out how Scotland could love its most vulnerable children and give them the childhood they deserve.”

(with thanks to Linda O’Neill, Education Lead at CELCLIS)

The Statutory Guidance

The following is an extract from the Department for Education's document "Promoting the Education of Looked-After Children and Previously Looked-After Children – [statutory guidance](#) for local authorities. February, 2018." It is worth reading through this section not only because it outlines the role of the Virtual School Head but because it

- identifies the wider responsibilities a VSH has in contributing to a successful care system
- articulates the role the wider community of stakeholders has in improving the educational outcomes of children in care

Extract:

The role of the VSH for looked-after children

1. Parents want their children to have the best start in life and to reach their full potential. As corporate parents, local authorities should have equally high aspirations for the children they look after.

2. As leaders responsible for ensuring that the local authority discharges its duty to promote the educational achievement of their looked-after children, Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services should ensure that:

- *top priority is given to creating a culture of high educational aspirations and that the authority strives for accelerated progress and age-related attainment or better for looked-after children;*
- *looked-after children have access to a suitable range of high quality education placement options and that, when commissioning services for them, the authority takes account of the duty to promote their educational achievement;*
- *VSHs are in place and that they have the resources, time, training and support they need to discharge the duty effectively;*
- *VSHs have robust procedures in place to monitor the attendance and educational progress of the children their authority looks after; and*
- *the authority's Children in Care Council (CiCC) regularly considers the educational experiences as reported by looked-after children and is able to respond effectively to any issues.*

3. The VSH should be the lead responsible officer for ensuring that arrangements are in place to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the authority's looked-after children, including those placed out-of-authority.

4. VSHs should ensure the educational attainment and progress of children looked after by the local authority are monitored and evaluated as if those children attended a single school.

5. The VSH should ensure that there are effective systems in place to:

- maintain an up-to-date roll of its looked-after children who are in school or college settings, and gather information about their education placement, attendance and educational progress;
- ensure sufficient information about a child's mental health, SEN or disability is available to their education setting so that appropriate support can be provided;
- inform head teachers and designated teachers in schools if they have a child on roll who is looked-after by the VSH's local authority;
- ensure social workers, designated teachers and schools, carers and IROs understand their role and responsibilities in initiating, developing, reviewing and updating the child's PEP and how they help meet the needs identified in that PEP;
- ensure up-to-date, effective and high quality PEPs that focus on educational outcomes, and that all looked-after children, wherever they are placed, have such a PEP;
- avoid drift or delay in providing suitable educational provision, including special educational provision, and unplanned termination of educational arrangements through proactive, multi-agency co-operation. Where this requires negotiation with other authorities this should be completed in a timely manner and with the best interest of the child as paramount;
- ensure the educational achievement of children looked after by the authority is seen as a priority by everyone who has responsibilities for promoting their welfare; and
- report regularly on the attainment, progress and school attendance of looked-after children through the authority's corporate parenting structures.

Corporate Parenting and the VSH

6. In local authorities with a strong ethos of corporate parenting, the sense of vision and responsibility towards looked-after children and care leavers is a priority for everyone from the Chief Executive to front line staff. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 established seven fundamental needs (collectively known as the corporate parenting principles) to which the local authority must have regard when they are carrying out functions in relation to looked-after children and care leavers. VSHs will need to consider how to apply the seven principles set out below to their role for looked-after children. In particular, VSHs will want to work with social workers and others in the local authority to ensure principles e) and f) are central to the authority's ethos, and work with relevant children.

- A) to act in the best interest and promote the physical and mental health and well-being of children and young people;
- B) to encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
- C) to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people;

- *D) to help children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;*
- *E) to promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for children and young people;*
- *F) for children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and*
- *G) to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.*

A compact history of Virtual Schools in England

- Early 2000s: various pieces of research, including that done by the Institute of Education and the Social Exclusion unit, provide evidence that significant numbers of children who had experienced care were not achieving the educational outcomes which would have been expected. Local authorities, responsible for those children, use various strategies to support them, often by means of a dedicated Looked After Children Education Support (LACES) team.
- 2002 to 2005: the idea of monitoring all the children in the care of a local authority in the same way as a good school monitors the progress of the children attending the school is discussed by many professionals. The terms “virtual headteacher” and “virtual school” are coined to describe this idea.
- 2005: some fledgling Virtual Schools are started, extending the work of LACES teams in a handful of local authorities.
- 2007-2009: The Department for Children, Schools and Families runs a pilot scheme in 11 local authorities to explore the potential of the Virtual School Head (VSH) for Looked After Children. Evaluation published by the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, August 2009.

- 2008: The Children and Young Persons Act requires schools to have a Designated Teacher for Looked After Children. The Designated Teacher should be senior enough to lead the school's approach to the education of children in care.
- 2010: The Department for Education convenes a National Steering Group of Virtual School Heads from local authorities which have established virtual schools. The steering group has representatives from each of the nine English regions.
- 2014: The Children and Families Act requires local authorities in England to appoint at least one person (the Virtual School Head) for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children. The government assigns part of the Pupil Premium Grant (a nationwide grant assigned to schools to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children) to be managed by the Virtual School Head for each authority.
- 2014: The National College for School Leadership (now the National College for Teaching and Leadership) commissions support from VSHs through the DfE to rewrite training materials for school leaders and school governors reflecting the statutory changes regarding the promotion of good educational outcomes for looked after children.
- 2016: The National Association of Virtual School Heads is formally established (it existed informally beforehand), ensuring that the VSH for each local authority is a member.
- 2018: Statutory instrument makes VSH have responsibilities regarding children who have left care.
- 2020: The Covid-19 pandemic changes almost everything and provides new understanding of how children can succeed educationally.

What next?

- The government and DfE are considering what role Virtual School Heads and Virtual School teams can have in supporting Children in Need. Children in Need are known to and supported by social care but who are not looked after. They form a considerably larger cohort.
- An equivalent of the Pupil Premium Grant for young people who are looked after in years 12 and 13 (ie 16-18 year olds) will be introduced.
- Proposal of research on effectiveness of Virtual Schools from Dr Neil Harrison, Deputy Director of the Rees Centre.