

The Virtual School Handbook

What is the VSH Handbook for?.....	6
Audience.....	6
Definitions	6
Introduction	7
Underpinning Statutory Framework	7
National Association of Virtual School Heads	8
The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education	8
The Role of the Virtual School Head (VSH).....	8
1. Who is on the roll of the virtual school?	9
a) Age range of children on roll	9
b) Legal status of children on roll	10
c) Child-level personal information	10
d) Virtual School cohort profile	10
2. Where do children on the virtual school roll live and go to school?	11
a) Care placement	11
b) Virtual school cohort care placement profile.....	11
c) Education Placement.....	11
i) Principles underlying placement choice	11
ii) Education placement details	12
iii) Curriculum responsibility.....	12
d) Virtual school cohort education placement profile.....	13
e) Placement decisions	13
i) Emergency care placements.....	14
ii) Out of Area Notifications.....	14
iii) Belonging regulations.....	14
f) School Admissions – securing appropriate education.....	15
g) Boarding schemes	16
3. How are children on the virtual school roll doing?	16
a) End of key stage data	17
i) Statistical First Release (SFR).....	17
ii) Local Authority Information Tool (LAIT)	17
iii) The Local Authority Matrix.....	17

iv)	RAISEonline.....	17
v)	The virtual school’s own data.....	17
b)	Aspirational Targets.....	18
c)	Attainment and Progress.....	18
i)	Primary phase – tracking without levels	18
ii)	Secondary phase	18
iii)	Further education.....	19
iv)	PiVOTs	19
d)	Attendance	19
e)	Exclusion.....	20
i)	6 th day/1 st day provision	21
ii)	Permanent Exclusion	21
f)	Special educational needs	21
g)	Emotional health & well-being	21
h)	Virtual school performance profile	22
i)	Qualitative measures.....	23
4.	What will the VSH do to improve attainment and progress?.....	23
a)	Partnership working – the team around the child	23
i)	Senior School Leaders and School Governors	24
ii)	The Designated Teacher for Looked After Children	24
iii)	The child’s Social Worker	25
iv)	The child’s Foster Carer	26
v)	The Supervising Social Worker	26
vi)	The child’s Residential Carer	27
vii)	The Independent Reviewing Officer	27
b)	Partnership working – the broader network.....	28
i)	Local Headteacher Groups	28
ii)	Commissioning services.....	29
iii)	SEN and Educational Psychology Services	29
iv)	Alternative and Vocational Learning Providers	29
v)	Early Years and post-16 providers	29
vi)	Youth Offending Teams/Youth Justice Providers	29
c)	Risk and protective factors	30
d)	Pupil Premium Plus.....	31

i)	Allocation of Pupil Premium Plus (2014-2015).....	31
ii)	Working with the Finance Team.....	31
iii)	Use of Pupil Premium Plus	32
iv)	VSH Strategy for Pupil Premium Plus	32
e)	Personal Education Planning	33
i)	The Personal Education Plan (PEP).....	34
ii)	Who needs a Personal Education Plan (PEP)?	34
iii)	How often must the PEP be reviewed?	34
iv)	The quality of PEPs	35
v)	The importance of PEPs.....	35
vi)	The content and format of a PEP	35
vii)	The role of the VSH in personal education planning	35
viii)	The Early Years and post-16 PEP	36
ix)	Supporting transition to adulthood.....	36
f)	Interventions	36
i)	What works - learning support.....	37
ii)	What works - readiness to learn.....	37
iii)	Emotional health and well-being.....	37
g)	Models of service	38
h)	Challenge, support and mediation	38
i)	Challenge and Support to Children’s Services	38
ii)	Challenge and support to Schools	39
iii)	Mediation on behalf of the child	40
i)	Training and Professional Development	40
5.	How will the VSH know their actions have impact?	41
a)	Monitoring & Tracking outcomes.....	41
i)	Virtual School Management Information System	41
b)	Obtaining and sharing information	41
i)	Secure exchange of data	41
ii)	Direct relationship with the school	42
iii)	Indirect relationship with the school.....	42
iv)	Out of area schools - use of intermediaries	42
c)	Evaluation of impact.....	43
i)	The DIY Evaluation Guide	43

ii) Evaluating Pupil Premium Plus spending using the Guide	43
iii) Small cohorts	43
6. Who is the VSH accountable to?	44
a) The Director of Children’s Services.....	44
b) Line management.....	44
i) Through the Assistant Director (Learning/Education).....	45
ii) Through the Assistant Director (Safeguarding/Child Protection).....	45
c) Governance	45
i) Structures	45
ii) Elected members.....	46
iii) Looked after children - assuring the impact of ‘pupil voice’	46
iv) Senior local authority officers	46
d) Annual Report of the Virtual School Head	46
e) Inspection	47
i) Who is on the roll of the virtual school, where do they live and go to school	47
ii) How well are children on roll doing?.....	47
iii) What has the VSH done to improve outcomes?	48
iv) How effective has the work of the virtual school been?	48
v) Virtual School structure and resources	48
Acknowledgements	49
Appendix 1 – Advice a VSH might offer schools &/or requirements the VSH might have of schools if they are to receive the funding.....	50
Monitoring and tracking achievement	50
Use of the funding by schools	50
Staff professional development	50
The role of governors	51
Encouraging positive responses to looked after children	51
Buying Equipment with Pupil Premium Plus	51
Ownership and use of equipment.....	51
Purchase of laptops, computers and other internet-enabled devices	52
Appendix 2 – The personal education planning cycle	53
Initiating the PEP	53
Calling and chairing a PEP meeting	53
Effective and high quality PEPs	54

Implementing the PEP	55
Reviewing the PEP	55
Assuring compliance.....	56
Quality Assuring the PEP	56
Appendix 3 – Guidance on the Designated Teacher	58
Appendix 4 – Guidance on the role of Governing Bodies.....	61
Appendix 5 – Parental Responsibility and Delegated Authority.....	62
Parental responsibility.....	62
Delegated Authority	62
Day to day parenting	62
Routine but longer term decisions (e.g. school choice)	62
Significant events (e.g. surgery)	63
Appendix 6 – The broader responsibilities of the foster carer	64
The Placement Plan	64
Appendix 7 – Trauma, Loss and Attachment difficulties	65
Trauma	65
Loss.....	66
Attachment	66
Appendix 8 – When will boarding be best for vulnerable young	67
people?.....	67
The young person.....	67
The moral case	67
The social case.....	67
The educational case.....	67
The business case	68
Appendix 9 – Powers of direction (looked after children)	68
Local authority powers of direction (maintained schools).....	68
Secretary of State’s power of direction (academies and free schools)	69
Appendix 10 - Virtual School Headteacher Report Headings	69
Achievements.....	69
Pupil issues	69
Use of funding available to the Virtual School	70
Impact of the Virtual School.....	70
Case Studies	70

What is the VSH Handbook for?

The VSH Handbook **IS NOT** a replacement for the Statutory Guidance with which a Virtual School Head must be familiar. **NEITHER** is it an inspection framework **NOR** an inventory against which to judge a virtual school's performance.

Rather, **IT IS** produced by the Virtual School Head (VSH) community for the VSH community, as a guide to how a VSH **COULD** fulfil their duties and functions.

The Handbook is intended as an online, rather than a printed, resource enabling a VSH to find the information they need as efficiently as possible

Alun Rees, December 2014

Audience

Like the statutory guidance, *Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children (March 2014)*, this handbook is intended to be helpful to any local authority officers, in particular directors of children's services, virtual school heads, social workers, school admission officers, special educational needs departments, independent reviewing officers and Lead Members.

Definitions

Looked After Children (LAC): The term is disliked by many children for its acronym and this is why many professionals prefer Children Looked After (CLA) or Children in Care (CiC). This document uses Looked After Children because it is the term adopted by the DfE in its statutory guidance. It can, though, be read as CiC or CLA as the reader desires. 'Children looked after' has a specific legal meaning based on the Children Act. A child is looked after by a local authority if they have been provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, in the circumstances set out in sections 20 and 21 of the Children Act 1989, or is placed in the care of a local authority by virtue of an order made under part IV of the Act.

Care Leaver: A person who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who was in care on their 16th birthday. A young person's status as a care leaver can be divided into the following:

- **Eligible Child:** a young person who is 16 or 17 and who has been looked after by the local authority for at least a period of 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who is still looked after;
- **Relevant Child:** a young person who is 16 or 17 who has left care after their 16th birthday and before leaving care was an eligible child;
- **Former Relevant Child:** a young person who is aged between 18 and 21 (or beyond if being helped with education or training) who, before turning 18 was either an eligible or a relevant child, or both.

Children and Young People: This is usually shortened to 'children' to simplify sentence structure.

Virtual School Head (VSH): means anyone fulfilling duties and functions of the VSH as laid out in statutory guidance, whatever their title.

Introduction

Local authorities have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child looked after by them. This includes a particular duty to promote the child's educational achievement. The authority must therefore give particular attention to the educational implications of any decision about the welfare of those children.

All professionals working with looked after children, all carers, and all elected members, constitute the corporate parents of children in care. In fulfilling that role they should each ask themselves whether the services, support, and opportunities available to their looked after children would be good enough for their own children. If they cannot honestly answer in the affirmative then it is their duty as a corporate parent to act to improve that offer.

A local authority has no specific duties, beyond those to all children, in relation to children living in its area, but looked after by another local authority. This does not mean that virtual school heads, and local authorities more broadly, may not establish reciprocal and cooperative arrangements between themselves relating to these children.

Underpinning Statutory Framework

The principal legislation related to this handbook is:

- the Children's Act 1989, as amended by the Children Act 2004 and the Children & Families Act 2014
- the Education Act 2005;
- the Education and Inspections Act 2006
- the Children and Young Persons Act 2008
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 as amended by the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 and the Adoption and Care planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014.

Statutory Guidance:

- Promoting the education of looked after children - Statutory guidance for local authorities, July 2014
- The role and responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked after children - Statutory guidance for school governing bodies, 2009

The statutory framework applies to every local authority in England and all children legally looked after by them, irrespective of where they live.

The linked statutory framework defining the role and responsibility of school designated teachers for looked after children applies to all maintained schools; Academy Schools (including Free Schools but not 16-19 Academies); Alternative Provision Academies (including AP Free Schools); and PRUs.

Other children's workforce professionals, including social workers and independent reviewing officers are bound by additional statutory frameworks.

National Association of Virtual School Heads

The National Association provides a national and regional network of support for the work of virtual schools in England and every Virtual School Head should become a member.

The Association offers the best access to local education advice for children placed outside the home authority and a secure means of exchanging information on children placed in other local authorities.

The National Association maintains links with the DfE and Ofsted, as well as other key influencers, to ensure that looked after children continue to be a priority for government.

VSH share their contact details with other VSH but often prefer not to have their details circulated to other professionals without their permission. Most communication should run from VSH to VSH.

The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education

The Virtual School Handbook has been produced with support from the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford, using an ESRC grant to employ experienced VSH as visiting practitioner fellows.

The Centre's sustainable relationship with the National Association for Virtual School Heads is driven through nine regional link-VSH who act as a bridge between the research team and practitioners.

The Role of the Virtual School Head (VSH)

The Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint at least one person for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children. That person – the virtual school head (VSH) - must be an officer employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in England.

The virtual school head 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 outside the caring authority's boundaries.

The inspection framework for local authority services to looked after children has very clear expectations of the information that will be available to inspectors, and these expectations must influence both the work of the virtual school head but also the organisation of the virtual school.

Directors of Children’s Services and Lead Members should be aware of the risks of identifying a virtual school head without considering the implications for a virtual school organisation to deliver the duties placed on the local authority by statute.

With that in mind this handbook:

- examines the functions a VSH might reasonably need to undertake in order to meet the obligations of the 2014 Act;.
- offers key questions to be considered by decision makers in a local authority;
- recognises that the context of every local authority is unique;
- provides advice on how the duties described could be met, based on current VSH practice;
- describes some of the implications for virtual school structure and function if a local authority is to meet its obligations.

There are six key operational spheres that will guide a Virtual School Head’s activity. The VSH must:

- know who is on the roll of their virtual school;
- know where they live and where they go to school;
- know, at any time, how they are doing;
- determine what actions to take if they are not doing well enough;
- evaluate the impact of actions taken to improve attainment and progress; and
- understand their accountabilities and how their virtual school will be inspected.

1. Who is on the roll of the virtual school?

Every VSH needs to have a shared understanding, with the Director of Children’s Services, of the scope of their responsibilities. Once they have this they must ensure they know who is on the roll of their virtual school.

Some virtual schools encompass every child from the early years to 25, others only the years of compulsory schooling, others variations in between. Whatever the range envisaged by a Director of Children’s Services, they must recognise that the broader the scope of VSH responsibility the greater the demands on them and the higher the level of resource required to fulfil their duties.

a) Age range of children on roll

The VSH has statutory responsibilities to every looked after child, whatever their age. This includes [eligible](#) older children (who remain ‘looked after’), but not [relevant](#) or [former relevant](#) young people

The core statutory obligation of the VSH encompasses looked after children of school age, that is to say children from reception to the end of Year 11 (plus. However, like any school, the virtual school will take an interest in, and support those responsible for, the transition of children from the early years foundation stage into reception, and from Year 11 to post-16 education, employment or training.

The VSH has responsibilities relating to [Personal Education Planning](#) irrespective of the age of the child, and responsibilities to children in the Early Years Foundation Stage as they relate to [Pupil Premium Plus](#).

Extending the virtual school's responsibility outside this age range requires additional staffing capacity and expertise, and consequently presents a greater resource pressure. This is particularly true if VSH assume the same responsibility for care leavers in a variety of education, employment or training places.

b) Legal status of children on roll

The local authority has a legal responsibility to those children it looks after, wherever they go to school or are placed. Responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of children looked after by other local authorities who go to local schools sits with those other, home, local authorities.

However, the remit of the VSH could include some support for a local school educating a child in the care of a different local authority, through liaison with the other authority's virtual school. Where a virtual school is part or fully funded from the Direct Schools Grant (DSG) local schools may feel they deserve support for looked after children on their roll, irrespective of the caring local authority.

Not all virtual schools include children on their virtual school roll who complex and multiple needs and who, through the volume of respite care they receive, are defined as 'looked after'. Their rationale is that they are not in care due to any lack of parenting capacity or specific risk to them and that their parents remain the key decision makers and supporters in relation to their education.

Additionally, the VSH should ensure there are arrangements in place to support children looked after by the authority who are in custody.

c) Child-level personal information

The VSH should ensure they have the information they need on every individual looked after child on their virtual school roll. As a minimum this should include:

- Forename (and use name if different)
- Surname (and alias if appropriate)
- Date of Birth
- Unique Pupil Number
- National Curriculum Year Group
- Special Educational Needs (SEN/D) status
- Ethnicity and English as an Additional Language (EAL) status
- This basic information will be supplemented by detailed information on [care placement](#) and [educational placement](#)

d) Virtual School cohort profile

The VSH should ensure they can quickly summarise the nature of the looked after cohort. This is essential context, particularly when comparisons are drawn within and beyond the local authority, and should, as a minimum, include:

- Breakdown by national curriculum year group
- Breakdown by SEN status and comparison
- Breakdown by legal status
- Breakdown by time in care
- Breakdown by Ethnicity and EAL status

Wherever possible unique features of the cohort should be demonstrated by comparison with ‘all children’ locally and looked after children nationally and in statistical neighbour local authorities.

2. Where do children on the virtual school roll live and go to school?

Looked after children benefit from stable education and care placements. The VSH must therefore understand where the children on their school roll are placed so they can both identify those at greatest risk of under-achievement but also provide management reports that summarise the nature and context of the cohort.

a) Care placement

The VSH should ensure they have the information they need on each child’s care placement. This should, as a minimum, include:

- Name of carer (or manager if residential placement) and contact information
- Address of placement (flagging an out of area care placement)
- Type of care placement (foster or residential, local authority or private provider)
- Record of previous care placements
- Legal Status (care order, interim care order, or section 20, and whether an unaccompanied minor/asylum seeker child)
- Date into care (first time and current episode, if different)
- Social worker and contact information
- Supervising Social Worker and contact information
- Independent Reviewing Officer and contact details

b) Virtual school cohort care placement profile

The VSH should ensure they can quickly summarise the nature of the looked after cohort. This is essential context, particularly when comparisons are drawn within and beyond the local authority, and should, as a minimum, include:

- Breakdown by type of care placement
- Breakdown by location of care placement (in, or out of, local authority area)
- Breakdown by previous episodes of care
- Breakdown by legal status
- Breakdown by age into care and time in care (from first time and most recent episode of continuous care)

Wherever possible unique features of the cohort should be demonstrated by comparison with ‘all children’ locally and looked after children nationally and in statistical neighbour local authorities.

c) Education Placement

i) Principles underlying placement choice

In identifying the appropriate education placement for a child the following principles should apply:

- educational provision should mean a full-time place (generally taken to be 23-25 hours depending on age);

- schools judged by Ofsted to be ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ should be prioritised for looked after children in need of a new school;
- unless there are exceptional, evidence-based reasons, looked after children should never be placed in a school judged by Ofsted to be ‘inadequate’ ;
- the choice of the education setting should be based on what any good parent would want for their child and based on evidence that the setting can meet the educational needs of the child and help maximise their progress in learning;
- the child’s wishes and feelings should be taken into account and the suitability of the education setting tested by arranging an informal visit for the benefit of the child (not an ‘interview’ by the school). The corporate parent should not, though, abdicate its responsibilities simply because a child wants to go to a certain school.

Where a looked after child would benefit from attending a [boarding school](#), either in the state or independent sector, VSHs and social workers should be proactive in considering this option. This decision is usually based on the care placement needs of the child and the boarding school’s ability to meet these needs

ii) Education placement details

The VSH should ensure they have the information they need on each child’s education placement. This should, as a minimum, include:

- School name
- School address (flagging out of area school)
- Type of school (selective/non-selective, maintained/academy/free school, public/private funded, &/or location on the site of a residential care placement)
- Start date at the current education placement and record of previous education placements
- Most recent OfSTED judgement (&/or most recent local authority judgement/risk assessment for maintained schools) and note of rationale where a child has been placed in a provision since it was judged less than good
- Headteacher and contact details
- Chair of Governors and contact details (&/or proprietor of the school in the case of an academy or free school)
- Designated teacher and contact details
- Childs’ current attainment
- Child’s prior attainment including at the end of previous key stages

iii) Curriculum responsibility

It is the responsibility of the school where the child is on roll to match the curriculum to their individual needs irrespective of their legal status as a looked after child.

However, [inspectors](#) increasingly expect the VSH to understand the nature of the curriculum every looked after child is following. Some VSH require an up-to-date copy of the child’s timetable to be attached to the PEP. Every VSH should ensure that there is sufficient information regarding the curriculum [recorded in the PEP](#) to allow them to identify risks to the child’s progression arising from the curriculum offer. These can include the use of ‘learning at home’ in place of a full-time curriculum and the use of alternative provision without appropriate safeguards or permissions.

Significant changes to the curriculum, such as the first use of alternative education, or an increase in the proportion of off-site learning, should trigger an informal, but agreed, update to the PEP. The VSH must also satisfy themselves that off-site provision for a looked after child is subject to the same checks as for their non-looked after peers, supplemented by clear recording in the PEP of the reasons for, planned duration of, and expected reintegration from, alternative provision.

The VSH should ensure that there is sufficient guidance available to social workers and carers to enable them to support a child to make appropriate curriculum/subject choices. This includes seeking advice if there is a risk that curriculum choices could constrain a child's existing or future aspirations.

d) Virtual school cohort education placement profile

The VSH should ensure they can quickly summarise the nature of the looked after cohort. This is essential context, particularly when comparisons are drawn within and beyond the local authority, and should, as a minimum, include:

- Breakdown by location of education placement (in, or out of, local authority area)
- Breakdown by type of school
- Breakdown by time at current school
- Breakdown by number of previous education placements
- Breakdown by OfSTED judgements

Wherever possible unique features of the cohort should be demonstrated by comparison with 'all children' locally and looked after children nationally and in statistical neighbour local authorities.

e) Placement decisions

The VSH has primary responsibility for ensuring that there is suitable education in place for all children looked after by the local authority. Therefore their views must be given appropriate weight in placement decision making. There should also be appropriate consultation with [the VSH in another local authority](#) where out-of-authority placements are planned and made.

VSHs, social workers, and independent reviewing officers (IROs) should work in partnership to ensure that education arrangements for a child are arranged at the same time as a care placement and that an out-of-authority care placement should not be made unless there is appropriate educational provision in place before the placement is agreed.

The VSH should be represented on any panel making placement decisions, particularly where a change of care placement could result in a change in education placement. In that case they should be empowered to resist a change that, in their professional opinion, would impact adversely on educational outcomes.

Children should never suffer changes to their education placement unless absolutely necessary, and not at all once they begin Key Stage 4, or once they have made curriculum choices in Year 9 (or sometimes earlier).

Out of area care placement decisions should be made with sufficient notice to enable the VSH to make enquiries about the destination's educational landscape so that care placements are not made where the available local educational provision is poor or not appropriate to the needs of the child.

i) Emergency care placements

Sometimes circumstances require a placement change at very short notice and local education provision cannot therefore be assured beforehand. In such circumstances there is a real risk of the child's learning being interrupted and seriously derailed. Effective and pro-active planning should minimise the number of such placements but sometimes an [emergency placement](#) is necessary.

Where emergency placements are being made regularly, and particularly where they require a change in education placement, the VSH should raise the issue with senior social work managers &/or the Director of Children's Services (DCS). The VSH should also express concern where a single child is subject to a series of emergency placements.

There should be an agreed protocol surrounding emergency placement that ensures they do not have an undue impact on the child's learning. Such a protocol might include:

- an undertaking to secure a suitable new education placement within 20 school days
- clear agreements that during that 20 days the child will have similar access to learning as if they had not moved.

Emergency educational provision could be a place at a local school that all parties know will be temporary, 1-to-1 or small groups tuition, or education on the site of the care placement (so long as it is of high quality and Ofsted inspected).

There is no reason why a decision by a carer to give notice on the care placement should result in an emergency placement. The notice period is sufficient to allow alternatives to be sought and properly considered.

ii) Out of Area Notifications

When a decision is made to place a child looked after by a local authority outside the authority's boundary, they are required to inform the destination local authority of their decision.

VSHs should be included in the systems of internal notification, so that when a child arrives or leaves their authority they know about it and can ensure the local, receiving, school is also informed.

iii) Belonging regulations

These regulations are designed to ensure that when a child moves from one local authority to another the obligations of maintaining a Statement of SEN (and in future and Education Health and Care Plan) transfer to the new local authority. While this makes a great deal of sense for children living with, and moving with their family there are some disadvantages for looked after children.

Moves across LA boundaries to satisfy the demands of the care placement may move a statemented/EHCP child across a boundary though the placement team know the placement may not be as 'permanent' or 'long term' as it looks. They may actually hope and intend to return the child to a local carer 'soon'.

Meanwhile the SEN team are statutorily obliged to transfer the statement/EHCP under the belonging regulations if the placement is likely to be 'permanent, or even 'long term'.

The VSH should do their best to broker improved mutual understanding of the motives of these two teams. They should help the SEN team understand that while the placement may be badged as

'permanent' bitter experience, tells them that it may fail. Equally the placement team should be encouraged to see SEN colleagues not as 'obstructive' and driven only by statute, but as a vital resource that can help them find the best educational placement for a child with specific needs.

Many VSH help shape a protocol that satisfies both parties and helps define when permanent means permanent and when it doesn't.

f) School Admissions – securing appropriate education

When a child becomes looked after their local authority must arrange a suitable care placement. In doing so, the child's allocated social worker should do everything possible to minimise disruption to the child's education, whatever the child's age but particularly at Key Stage 4, or earlier if they have already embarked upon GCSE or similarly accredited programmes, that will be essential to their future progression to education, employment or training.

In relation to school admissions legislation a child must be legally looked after at the time of the application for a school place if they are to benefit from the priorities associated with that status in the Admissions Code.

If it is not possible to maintain the child's existing education placement, the child's new education placement should be [arranged in consultation with the VSH at the same time as the care placement](#).

Looked after children have been given the highest priority within school admission arrangements. The admission requirements for looked after children are set out in the School Admissions Code which applies to maintained schools and academies, including free schools.

Put simply, a looked after child must be given a place in the school chosen irrespective of the current numbers on roll or in a class. The home local authority can instruct a school in ANY local authority to admit a looked after child.

The VSH should ensure that social workers, IROs, admission officers for the schools maintained by the local authority, and SEN/D teams understand and comply with the requirements in the [School Admissions Code](#) relating to the [priority admission arrangements for looked after children to maintained schools and academies](#) and the [special educational needs and disability code of practice 0 to 25 years](#).

It is also the responsibility of the VSH to ensure that:

- admission authorities understand that Fair Access Protocols **do not apply to looked after children** and that they are 'excepted pupils' in relation to infant class size regulations
- the local authority, as a corporate parent, does not tolerate drift and delay where looked after children are without an education placement that is appropriate to their assessed needs. This includes using their [powers of direction](#) in a timely way rather than delay issuing a direction as a result of protracted negotiation

The [choice of school](#) requires skilled working between relevant people. It should be based on a discussion between the child's social worker, their carers and, if appropriate, birth parents.

The VSH should be consulted to avoid choosing a school that is unlikely to meet the child's needs. Delegated authority relating to school choice should be addressed explicitly in the child's [permanence plan](#), which is part of their wider care plan.

Designated teachers should be made aware of the arrival of a looked after child in advance. They should then receive full details of a looked-after child's care placement and other relevant information within 24 hours of the child joining the school.

g) Boarding schemes

Where a looked after child would benefit from attending a boarding school, either in the state or independent sector, VSHs and social workers should be proactive in considering this option. This decision should be based on the care placement needs of the child and the boarding school's ability to meet those needs.

Local authority funded places at a boarding schools have been found to be effective when children find themselves on the edge of care, or in care but placed with relatives who struggle to parent for 52 weeks a year. The option to provide a boarding school place for 30-40 weeks of the year while returning home to carers during the school holidays can provide a helpful support to both child and carers.

Generally schools that do not register for statutory inspection by Ofsted should not be considered unless there are compelling advantages to the child that outweigh this obstacle. No placement should take place if the boarding school does not fulfil all the expectations that the VSH has of local, publicly funded, schools, including the appointment of a suitably senior, trained and experienced designated teacher.

The [Royal National Children's Foundation](#) provides guidance on boarding places for vulnerable children.

3. How are children on the virtual school roll doing?

Sometimes virtual schools can become over-reliant on the [published national data sets](#) which focus exclusively on end of key-stage measures. While these are vital indicators of a virtual school's performance, and offer national or regional comparisons, summative outcomes arrive too late to influence outcomes the cohort has already received.

The most effective virtual schools collect in-year attainment on every child, not just those in Year 6 and Year 11. They are able to use this data to assess whether a child is making expected progress and to challenge schools where progress is poor, or progress appears good but against low school expectations.

When combined with attendance and exclusion data a rich picture of the child's current educational context can be built up and used to identify those in need of support and the support they need. It is this picture of current educational need that should drive the management of the [Pupil Premium Plus](#).

Without such systems a [VSH can be exposed when an inspector will ask](#) for the current picture of attainment, progress, attendance and engagement with learning; the actions taken to improve them; and an evaluation of the impact the actions have had.

Therefore the VSH should adopt best practice from bricks and mortar schools to enable a robust summary of the current position across their virtual school to be produced on demand, at any point in the year.

a) End of key stage data

All the nationally available data sets are built around end of key stage measures, supplemented by information from the annual 903 return submitted by local authorities each March. Therefore they only provide a backward looking picture of a cohort that has moved on.

All the national data sets are produced when the DfE uses the child's UPN to match the 903 return with the pupil level outcome data they hold. The VSH should make every effort to ensure that each child has a valid UPN before the 903 is submitted, otherwise they can find children's results being lost.

i) Statistical First Release (SFR)

Much of what the VSH needs can be found in the Statistical First Release (SFR) which is usually published by the DfE each December. It provides local authority level comparative data for end of key stage measures and a variety of other indicators that can be of interest to the VSH even if they are not key measures of educational progress.

ii) Local Authority Information Tool (LAIT)

The tool can be downloaded from the .GOV site and details the same looked after children educational outcomes (and much else) as the Statistical First Release. However it also calculates statistical neighbour and national averages for comparison.

iii) The Local Authority Matrix

This is now hosted on the Local Authority Knowledge Hub but can usually be obtained from the local authority performance/data team. If they don't know about it then a VSH may be able to join the Knowledge Hub community and receive direct access. It presents much the same information as the SFR and LAIT but displayed as a two page spread. Looked After Children information is usually at the bottom left of the first page, below a block of information on all children education outcomes.

Frustratingly the indicators for all children are not identical to those for looked after children, but they still provide a simple snapshot of the current position and recent trends.

iv) RAISEonline

RAISE is available at the level of the local authority as well as at the level of individual schools. The local authority performance/data team can usually gain access for a VSH. Unfortunately the looked after children data is not grouped conveniently in one place and sometimes is lumped together with FSM data.

v) The virtual school's own data

The virtual school cohort receiving KS2 levels or GCSE and other grades and qualifications each Summer is not necessarily the same cohort that the DfE will use to calculate the end of key stage

measures described [here](#). It is that nationally available data that Ofsted inspectors will have access to and on which they will build any key lines of enquiry.

Therefore the VSH must recognise any differences between their local and the national data sets and the outcomes they show and make sure they can explain any discrepancy between local reporting and the nationally available data sets.

b) Aspirational Targets

There is an argument about the use of the word 'target' compared to 'estimates' and schools will use a variety of bought in or in house approaches to estimate a child's likely outcomes and setting aspirational targets based on them.

The VSH should ensure that children are being set aspirational targets and that expectations of them are high. They should challenge approaches that rely on prior attainment alone as this is often very low for children prior to entering care and can lead to low future expectations for attainment and progress.

Where a school is not setting explicit targets then the VSH should do so and inform the school. The VSH should hold the school to account against those targets until a more robust and challenging alternative is offered by the school.

c) Attainment and Progress

i) Primary phase – tracking without levels

Primary schools are no longer required to use national curriculum levels and complicates the tracking of attainment and progress. OfSTED view the change as encouraging schools and inspectors to take a broader view of attainment achieved through work scrutiny rather than narrow teacher assessment.

Such an approach is very difficult for a VSH as few have sufficient staffing capacity to enable detailed study of a child's work. Therefore, as much as is possible, VSH should seek to negotiate collectively with schools the use of summary measures of attainment and progress. VSH may wish to encourage primary schools continue to make use of national curriculum levels as a mutually understood formative measure of attainment and progress on the way to end of key stage summative measures.

VSH can incentivise agreement through the use or devolution of [Pupil Premium Plus](#) to schools.

Gaining similar agreement from out of area schools can be a challenge even though they may, themselves, have local agreements.

The lowest common denominator may be an agreement to inform the VSH of current attainment and progress on a simple scale: far below expectations, below expectations, in line with expectations, above expectation, and far above expectations. Such subjective measures require confidence in the way a school is estimating 'expectations' and what 'far' means.

ii) Secondary phase

The absence of any reporting of national measures of attainment across Key Stage 3 has meant that not all schools use the same systems for assessing attainment and progress through the Key Stage. This can make it difficult for the VSH to obtain comparable attainment and progress data from all the

schools serving the looked after children on their virtual school roll. Most VSH take this in their **stride and it offers hope that changed primary requirements will not be impossible to work with**. VSH could adopt the same approaches for Key Stage 3 as for [Key Stages 1 and 2](#).

Where schools make use of national curriculum levels, or GCSE grades, in Key Stage 3, and in Key Stage 4, schools can provide the VSH with the nationally understood quantitative measure they need and which they can use to assess progress if the school has not already done so.

iii) Further education

While the statutory guidance that shapes the work of a VSH makes little specific reference to care leavers or the tracking of post-16 progress in learning it is clear that some Ofsted inspectors are rightly interested in care leaver progression and are making assumptions about the role a VSH should fulfil. This is why it is important in this, and other areas of doubt, for the [VSH and DCS to mutually understand the role](#).

In this context it is difficult for a VSH to avoid some role in monitoring care leaver progress. Some VSH divide the monitoring of care leavers, retaining the tracking of young people in formal learning settings such as sixth forms and 'academic' college courses, while the tracking of engagement with vocational learning or learning in training settings sits with the care leaving service.

iv) PiVOTs

When a child has very [complex or multiple needs](#), the national curriculum scale of levels may never be appropriate as a way to capture their attainment and progress. PiVOTs, and similar measures, can provide parents/carers, social workers and the VSH, and the child themselves with an appropriate measure of progress.

d) Attendance

Children who do not value learning, or find the learning they receive inaccessible, will often absent themselves for school (truancy) or from particular lessons (internal truancy). The former must be recorded in school registers but schools have a variety of ways in which they record the latter. The VSH should expect issues around internal truancy to be logged in the [personal education plan](#).

Some local authorities continue to download sessional attendance data direct from school databases, though the growth of academy and free school numbers is impacting on this approach.

While the scale of a virtual school may not allow regular scrutiny of every session of attendance, carers can be required to inform the social worker, and through them the VSH, of periods when the child is not attending provision. Alternatively regular attendance monitoring can be commissioned by an outside provider.

The VSH must have confidence in systems for ensuring that Attendance Code 'B' (education off-site) is not being misused. Attaching a copy of the sessional attendance to date to the PEP allows the VSH to monitor the use of 'B'.

Whatever mechanism is used to obtain attendance data, the VSH must take care that they have the staffing capacity and capability to undertake swift analysis of patterns in attendance as they arise. Without that they cannot prompt schools to act, or act themselves, to address slippage in attendance. If they cannot do so they can risk the goodwill of schools which might see sessional

attendance data collection as an unnecessary bureaucracy without any concrete sharpening of the VSH response.

Alternatively VSH can make use of half-termly snapshots of attendance and agreed protocols which require schools to inform the VSH of attendance concerns. Some attach this requirement to [the devolution of Pupil Premium Plus](#) to schools. This approach trusts schools to undertake effective monitoring of attendance and act swiftly in response to patterns of absence, while providing a VSH with sufficient data to identify the current position of individuals and the cohort as a whole.

External Links:

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (2011). Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post primary school: Department of Education, Northern Ireland.

e) Exclusion

Happily many schools have altered their practice to make use of alternatives to exclusion and make exclusion a last resort. These can include ‘internal exclusion’ which continues to present the opportunity to learn but withdraws the benefits of social interaction with the child’s peers, or the use of varied curricula that motivate by playing to the child’s strengths. As long as the child continues to make progress in learning these are reasonable short term alternatives. However, the VSH should ensure there are systems in place to identify children who are placed in [long term ‘alternative’ education](#) by the school without appropriate school monitoring of attendance, attainment and progress. Monitoring of [personal education plans](#) can be an effective way to check on this.

The use of alternatives to exclusion means that the VSH can lack a consistent proxy measure for the child’s engagement with learning that they can utilise across schools. Instead the VSH must ensure systems are in place to identify children where engagement is dropping, before that has become apparent thorough the impact it will have on attendance, attainment and progress. Proper engagement by the virtual school with the [personal education planning](#) process can provide such an early warning system.

The VSH should ensure that social workers, IROs, admission officers for the schools maintained by the local authority and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) departments understand and comply with the [statutory guidance on school exclusion](#).

In line with this guidance, headteachers should, as far as possible, avoid excluding any looked-after child. VSHs should ensure that carers and social workers know where to seek advice about their role and responsibilities.

To support schools to avoid exclusion where it has concerns about a looked-after child’s behaviour, the VSH should be informed and involved at the earliest opportunity. Then the VSH, working with others, can:

- consider what additional assessment and support (such as additional help for the classroom teacher, one-to-one therapeutic work or a suitable alternative placement or funding through

the [Pupil Premium Plus](#)) needs to be put in place to address the causes of the child's behaviour and prevent the need for exclusion

- make any additional arrangements to support the child's on-going education in the event of an exclusion.

i) 6th day/1st day provision

Schools must provide a full-time offer of learning to children from the 6th day of a fixed term exclusion. The VSH should seek to convince headteachers that the difficulties experienced by looked after children are often exacerbated by exclusion from learning and encouraged to adopt best practice by making a full-time learning offer to looked after children from the 1st day of a fixed term exclusion.

ii) Permanent Exclusion

No looked after child should be subject to permanent exclusion before social workers, carers, IRO and VSH have had a chance to meet together with the school and consider alternatives.

If a headteacher does permanently exclude a looked after child then social workers and carers should be supported to attend the meeting of governors that must be called to either uphold or overturn the headteacher's decision. Where governors uphold the decision the VSH should advise on the likelihood of an independent review working to the child's advantage and support social workers/carers to state their concerns if appropriate.

f) Special educational needs

The proportion of looked after children with SEN/D is higher than among the non-looked after cohort and more of them have an education health and care plan (EHCP), or legacy statement of special educational needs. In these circumstances the VSH should ensure that:

- the [special educational needs and disability code of practice](#), as it relates to looked after children, is followed; and,
- the child's EHCP (or statement) is coordinated with the [PEP](#) and care plan to describe how the child's needs are being met. Professionals should consider how the EHCP adds to information about how education, health and care needs will be met without the need to duplicate unnecessarily the information that is already part of the child's care plan.

Some children may have undiagnosed special needs when they start to be looked after. As part of the PEP process there should be robust arrangements in place to ensure any undiagnosed special educational needs are addressed through the SEN/D Framework as soon as possible.

Using 'mainstream measures' of attainment and progress may not always be advised for children with the more complex and multiple needs. For these children [PiVOTS can be a helpful tool](#).

g) Emotional health & well-being

The [health and emotional well-being of a child has a significant impact on their attainment and progress](#).

Every looked after child is subject to an annual assessment of emotional well-being using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). While mental health professionals have varying opinions of the SDQ it is the only measure of emotional health applied to all looked after children.

The VSH should therefore ensure that SDQ measures are available to them, but that they treat it with some care.

The effectiveness of SDQ as a monitoring tool is greatly improved if it is completed by the school as well as the carer. Some VSH use the annual SDQ as a triage to identify those for whom a further school-based SDQ should be completed.

SDQ can provide a basis for a conversation with a mental health professional than provide answers. It should be shared with schools only after consultation with other professionals and then, perhaps, only in exchange for the completed school-based SDQ.

The VSH may wish to include the proportion of children with scores in the SDQ that raise concerns in the [virtual school performance profile](#).

External links:

Excellent resources to support understanding of the implications of the early abuse or neglect often experienced by looked after children include:

Support for schools wishing to become 'attachment aware': www.attachmentawareschools.com

Australian Childhood Foundation (2006). SMART: Strategies for managing abuse related trauma. Discussion paper Melbourne, Australia: www.childhood.org.au

Downey, L (2007). Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children. Melbourne, Australia: Child Safety Commissioner.

Works by Louise Bomber, Heather Geddes and Kate Cairns, include strategies for teachers regarding emotional, health and well-being.

h) Virtual school performance profile

The VSH must be able to relate the characteristics of their cohort to the cohort's performance. They should recognise the available evidence on [factors influencing looked after children's outcomes](#).

The VSH should ensure they can quickly summarise the current attainment, progress, attendance, exclusion and SDQ data on their school cohort at any point in the year. This handbook separates such a snapshot from [Monitoring & Tracking](#) and [Evaluation](#) of what works.

The performance profile should be based on the most recent data available from schools or other sources, and end of key stage measures or end of year totals/percentages, where they are available.

Typically the virtual school performance profile should include, as a minimum, the following analyses of attainment, progress, attendance, exclusion and SDQ, by:

- national curriculum year group
- SEN status
- legal status
- ethnicity and EAL status
- type of care placement

- location of care placement and education placement (in or out of area)
- number of care and education placements
- age into care and time in care
- type of school
- time at current school
- OfSTED judgements of schools

Analyses should detail gaps in attainment and progress between groups of looked after children and between looked after children and 'all children' locally and looked after children nationally and in statistical neighbour local authorities, where the data is [available](#).

The profile also presents an opportunity to identify links between [attendance](#), [exclusion](#) and [SDQ](#), and [attainment and progress](#).

i) Qualitative measures

Inspectors will be interested in the impact of the VSH on quantitative measures [of attainment](#), [progress](#), [attendance](#), [exclusion](#) and [emotional health](#).

Qualitative measures should therefore be used with caution as measures of VSH effectiveness.

However, they can support the journey towards quantitative improvement. None of these can be quickly or easily assessed but VSHs should consider how they gather intelligence on these qualitative measures. They can inform their own practice but also provide intelligence that local authority school improvement services can include in their assessment of a school.

Qualitative measures could include:

- Designated teacher understanding of the needs of, and best educational practice in relation to, looked after children
- Demonstrable Headteacher & Governor support for their school's Designated Teacher that empowers them to implement best practice
- Understanding of, and support in, implementing that best practice from all children service professionals
- Multi-agency collaboration in delivery of services to CLA which is pro-active, outcome focussed, and avoids duplication
- Parent/carer confidence and involvement with education
- Greater ambition and support across the corporate parent body, including among elected members, for looked after children and young people in the care of their local authority

4. What will the VSH do to improve attainment and progress?

Whatever actions the VSH contemplates they should consider how they will [evaluate the impact of what they do](#). In that way interventions can be planned with evaluation in mind. [Softer measures of impact](#) are considered separately.

a) Partnership working – the team around the child

The VSH needs to understand the roles of, and establish effective working relationships with, all the professionals and para-professionals likely to impact on the educational progress of a looked after child.

i) Senior School Leaders and School Governors

The responsibilities of headteachers and school governing bodies in state schools are the same whether their school is maintained, is an academy or a free school. Where a child is placed in a school that is not state funded then local authorities should expect similar levels of practice as they will be funding the child's place.

Headteachers who prioritise the education and welfare of looked after children ensure that the governing body is able to fulfil its obligation to appoint a sufficiently senior and experienced designated teacher with sufficient time to undertake their duties and influence school policy. They also facilitate termly reports from the designated teacher to the governing body and a positive working relationship between the designated teacher and the designated governor for looked after children.

Governing bodies that prioritise the education and welfare of looked after children identify a governor to take particular interest in the work of the school in relation to looked after children, and to meet regularly with the designated teacher. The chair supports this 'designated governor for looked after children' by ensuring they have access to training to fulfil their function and advise the governing body as a whole. They also scrutinise, within the limits of appropriate confidentiality, the attainment, progress, attendance and engagement with learning of looked after children on the school role and act as a critical friend to the headteacher and designated teacher in developing high quality responses to the needs of looked after children.

ii) The Designated Teacher for Looked After Children

The designated teacher is responsible for championing the educational needs of looked-after children in their school, and ensuring they have good quality [Personal Education Plans](#) (PEP). They should be the main author and champion of the PEP within the school context.

The most important demand the VSH should make of designated teachers is that they have high expectations of looked after children and the time to understand their needs.

While the statutory guidance relating to designated teachers is subject to review it provides an excellent [summary of the designated teacher good practice](#).

The designated teacher works with the child, other teachers, the virtual school, social worker, independent reviewing officer, and the carer to focus on that child's needs and regularly reviews progress, especially when there are disruptions in the child's personal life. In particular, they identify specific, measurable actions and targets that will encourage and stretch the child, rewarding achievement appropriately. These actions and targets may be academic or related to extracurricular activities such as sport or the arts.

The designated teacher should take the lead in monitoring the achievement of the child's targets in the PEP, and implementing any actions on the school. They should call a review when there are significant educational issues, liaising closely with the virtual school and the social worker, who is responsible for reviewing the overall care plan.

The best designated teachers provide a regular report to the school governing body to highlight the progress that looked-after children in their school are making, and to outline the strategies employed when underachievement has been identified.

Designated teachers that work closely with a looked-after child's carer will find that this makes a big difference to how they are able to provide effective support for the child. How this is achieved will depend on the school's existing arrangements for engaging with those who have parental responsibility for a child. For children in residential settings this may mean liaising with a nominated key worker to ensure consistency of approach.

Carers should take an active role in personal education planning and schools should consider what they can do to encourage and support carers in supporting the education of the children they look after.

When children cease to be looked-after (for example, because they are adopted or are subject to a Special Guardianship Order or Residence Order) their educational needs are unlikely to have changed significantly simply because their care status has changed. Although they will no longer be required to have a PEP, designated teachers will wish to give consideration to the implications of continuity for meeting the child's educational needs.

The VSH should make sure the designated teacher knows whether the child is on a care order or is voluntarily accommodated and what responsibilities (such as going on school field trips) the local authority looking after the child has delegated to the carer.

The VSH should also ensure that [School Governing Bodies](#) understand their role with respect to the designated teacher, as summarised by statutory guidance.

iii) The child's Social Worker

All children in care have an allocated social worker. When a child is taken into care, their social worker exercises the local authority's parental responsibility. This includes making sure that the child's needs are met, that their welfare is safeguarded and that they are encouraged to develop to their full potential.

The most important demand the VSH should make of a social worker is that they prioritise the child's education alongside their care and that a child will be safer and emotionally more secure if they have a secure school placement.

Social workers have a legal duty to make sure that the child is being properly cared for emotionally and physically. This includes:

- ensuring that the welfare of the child or young person is safeguarded
- ensuring that they are receiving care that meets their day to day needs
- checking that they are receiving appropriate education
- making sure they are having regular medical checks
- ensuring that contact is maintained with the child's family and friends
- making decisions regarding the child's care plan and future

The child's social worker will visit the child and their carers regularly to carry out these responsibilities. Legally, the social worker must visit the child within one week of the placement and then at intervals of not more than 6 weeks for the first year. After this, social work visits should not be longer than 3 months apart. Foster carers can also request additional visits.

The social worker ensures that a care plan is in place. This care plan must include information about any educational needs that the child has, and the actions needed to meet those needs. This usually takes the form of a Personal Education Plan, which remains active throughout the time the child is looked after. Section 2.4 outlines PEP's and how to make these effective.

iv) The child's Foster Carer

The responsibilities of a foster carer can vary according to the length of time the child is placed with them, the age of the child, the depth of experience of the Foster Carer, and the involvement of the child's parent is in their life. However, in general, the Foster Carer is responsible for:

- the day to day care of the child
- ensuring that the child's physical, health and emotional needs are met
- ensuring that they attend their education provision

With particular reference to education, Foster Carers should ensure that the child has appropriate access to learning and is encouraged to make best use of it and fulfil their potential. Though not always explicitly stated in the placement agreement this should include:

- working closely with the child's school or other educational placement.
- taking an active interest in the child's homework.
- encouraging a child to value learning.
- supporting a child's attendance at school.
- advocating for the child's individual needs.
- The most important demand the VSH should make of a foster carer is that they have high expectations of looked after children and the engage meaningfully with the child's learning by explicitly raising the child's aspiration and developing an effective working relationship with their school.

v) The Supervising Social Worker

Each foster carer has a supervising social worker. Sometimes these are known as family placement workers or link workers or fostering officers. Senior supervising social workers are responsible for managing the fostering resources of their fostering service, including recruitment of and assessment of new foster carers.

The responsibilities of supervising social workers working directly with foster cares include:

- liaising with child's social worker
- helping foster carers identify training needs

- providing support to foster carers when they have practical or emotional needs arising from fostering children and young people

Sometimes, to the external observer the child's social worker and the supervising social worker can appear at odds. The most important demand the VSH should make of a supervising social worker is to remember that the end point is the positive development of the child, not simply a happy carer.

vi) The child's Residential Carer

The responsibilities of residential care workers match those of a foster carer in terms of [supporting the health, education, welfare etc.](#), of a looked after child. Though the context is different residential care workers should ensure that the child does not feel they are living in an institution, but in a shared home.

The most significant difference is that any residential care home must have a registered manager who is responsible for meeting the minimum standards set out in law and guidance.

The best residential homes delegate appropriate responsibility to care workers so similar arrangements for [parental and delegated authority](#) are put in place.

The most important demand the VSH should make of a residential carer is that they have high expectations of looked after children and they engage meaningfully with the child's learning by explicitly raising the child's aspiration and developing an effective working relationship with their school.

vii) The Independent Reviewing Officer

In many ways the roles of VSH and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) are similar. While the IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration they must, to be successful, be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment.

An effective IRO service should enable the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children.

It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, supervise the social worker or devise the care plan. Although it is important for the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child, this should not undermine or replace the relationship between the social worker and the child.

IROs are well placed to assess the quality and effectiveness of local authority planning and support for children. The IRO has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as a 'corporate parent' for all the children that it looks after. The IRO should ensure that the child is offered stable care that is sensitive and appropriate to each individual's personal needs so that the child is able to flourish and achieve. The plan for each child must demonstrate how the services provided have fully taken account of the child's wishes and feelings.

However, the IRO is a social worker who may have a varied experience of recent education or its settings. The VSH should therefore offer IROs effective support and guidance to help them interpret the PEP and any related commentary.

The most important demand the VSH should make of an independent reviewing officer is that they invest the time and effort needed to understand the child's learning as well as they understand the child's care and safety, and use what they learn to inform their challenge to all parties working to ensure the child is learning effectively.

[The IRO Handbook](#) provides a thorough description of the role and how it should be implemented.

b) Partnership working – the broader network

i) Local Headteacher Groups

There are no statutory collective responsibilities of local headteachers in relation to looked after children, beyond an understanding of their corporate parenting responsibilities. Even these have been blurred by the shift of governance of academies and free schools. While 'local authority maintained schools' are legitimately part of the local authority caring for the child, some academy headteachers and governors may say that their distance from the local authority means they are no longer part of the 'corporate parenting' body.

This is a sterile argument and the VSH may be better advised to stress the moral purpose to deliver the best outcomes for all children irrespective of background or vulnerability.

This is easier where the VSH develops credibility with local headteacher organisations and groups. It is often much more effective and efficient to agree collective arrangements in this way than through many individual conversations.

The relationship with headteachers can be enhanced by attending their local meetings and regularly reporting of and collective challenge relating to, outcomes of the looked after children cohort.

The VSH should use access to headteachers to ensure that they (and their governors) understand:

- the local authority's duty as a corporate parent to promote a looked after child's educational achievement
- the main reasons why, as a group, looked after children underachieve
- the importance of specific professional development for school leaders and designated teachers in supporting the achievement of looked after children
- the powerful role they can play in significantly improving the quality of life and the educational experiences of looked after children
- their responsibility to ensure that designated teachers have had the appropriate training to undertake their role as set out in the statutory guidance for governing bodies on the role of the designated teacher for looked after children.
- the training and advice the VSH can offer schools in an effort to help them understand that looked after children, including those who remain looked after but have been placed for adoption, are not a homogenous group and that their individual needs will be different.

Finally the VSH should ensure that schools understand that statutory guidance requires the VSH to have an understanding of the policies that schools in their area have in place to support the education of looked after children and that it is proper for them to seek information on this from all schools.

ii) Commissioning services

The VSH can ensure, through commissioners, that providers of fostering services and residential care have a robust evidence base that demonstrate how they promote the educational achievement of looked after children and help them to achieve. They must also ensure that, when commissioning education services for a looked after child from independent providers, commissioning decisions are based on the quality of the educational support provided and evidence that demonstrates it.

The level of VSH involvement will vary but should provide them with the opportunity to influence the specification being commissioned against. Consideration should be given to including specific requirements on the commissioned provider that will enable the VSH to better monitor the child's progress, particularly where they are placed outside the home authority's boundary.

The VSH should also seek to be involved in commissioning support services related to the child's health and well-being

iii) SEN and Educational Psychology Services

A significantly larger proportion of looked after children are placed on SEN registers than their peers, so the VSH should expect the assessment and planning for additional education needs (up to a including an education health and care plan) to be prioritised for children in the care of the authority, or those children looked after by other authorities but 'belonging' to the host LA.

The VSH may or may not have access to a specialist Educational Psychologist, but even if they do not they should expect consultation and advice relating to looked after children to be prioritised.

iv) Alternative and Vocational Learning Providers

Schools are responsible for the placement and safeguarding of children on their school roll that are placed in off-site alternative or vocational learning. Some VSH have agreed protocol with both schools and alternative/vocational providers (including FE colleges offering pre-16 programmes) that ensure that the social worker or carer must sign or show their agreement to such a placement.

The case made to schools in such cases is that given that looked after children have been demonstrated to be at greater safeguarding risk when not on school sites and in lessons, it is in their best interest to obtain the permission of the corporate parent to off-site provision that will leave the looked after child less closely monitored than if they were on the school site all day.

v) Early Years and post-16 providers

While some VSH have a responsibility for the education of children from the early years foundation stage, through to higher education, their statutory responsibilities are limited to the ages of compulsory schooling, and exclude any consequences of the raising of the participation age.

Despite these differences of local arrangements every VSH should take the same interest in ensuring that children in the EYFS are as well prepared as possible for primary learning as possible. As well as an Early Years PEP

vi) Youth Offending Teams/Youth Justice Providers

If a young person who has previously been accommodated under section 20 of the 1989 Act is remanded in custody he or she is no longer looked after under this section of the 1989 Act. This is because the child is no longer being voluntarily accommodated by a local authority. However,

looked after status may need to be resumed on release or, depending on the child's age, he or she may be a 'relevant' care leaver. Prior to release, the authority that will be responsible for the child's future care, along with the assigned young offenders institution (YOI), should:

- make arrangements with the local authority secure children's home (LASCH), secure training centre (STC) or YOI to ensure that the child's needs have been re-assessed to inform arrangements for their future accommodation and care
- ensure that the assessment includes up-to-date information about the child's educational needs so that the PEP can be revised as part of the new care/pathway plan

Under section 104(1) of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPOA), children remanded to youth detention accommodation become looked after children. During the period of remand the child will have a detention placement plan. That plan should include information about:

- the arrangements made by staff in the youth detention accommodation for the child's education and training. This should include the name and address of the educational or training institution the child was attending immediately prior to detention and details about the local authority that maintains any statement of special educational needs or EHC plan
- the name of the VSH responsible for discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of the children looked-after by the authority

Children who offend and receive custodial sentences remain looked-after if they were under a care order immediately prior to conviction. The authority therefore has a continuing responsibility to review their PEP as part of the care plan and to ensure the child's access to education and training is consistent with their statutory entitlements. In these cases the local authority should:

- have procedures in place to know where these young people are placed and how long they are likely to be held
- have access to information about the child's educational progress
- plan ahead in sufficient time so that a suitable educational or training placement can be arranged wherever the child will live following release from custody
- work with their LASCH, STC or YOI, in partnership with the YOT supervising officer, to ensure:
 - that care planning reviews are continued and facilitate access to education while the young person is detained
 - information on a child's education and training needs is passed to the STC/LASCH or YOI, usually through the most up-to-date PEP, as quickly as possible
 - ensure that the learning needs of the individual are being met
 - that there is proper planning to maintain the continuity of education and/or training experience once the young person is released from custody

Where a looked after child is placed in secure accommodation for their own welfare (section 25 of the 1989 Act) local authorities should liaise directly with the secure unit to ensure that they meet their statutory responsibilities to promote the educational achievement of the child.

c) Risk and protective factors

Most VSH can provide anecdotal evidence for the factors they associate with those children likely to struggle to make progress in learning and tend to identify their flip sides as protective factors. There is a [growing body of evidence](#) that is beginning to add rigour to those judgements.

The VSH should be supported by the DCS to influence practice beyond the virtual school to reduce risks and encourage protective factors.

[Raising the aspirations and educational outcomes of looked after children: a data tool for local authorities , July 2011](#) provides a helpful approach to [risk and protective factors](#).

d) Pupil Premium Plus

Pupil Premium Plus must be managed by the VSH to improve the attainment and progress of looked after children.

The VSH, working with education settings, should implement pupil premium plus arrangements for looked after children in accordance with the [latest conditions of grant published by the DfE](#) and any supplementary departmental advice it issues.

To support the implementation of the Pupil Premium Plus arrangements the DfE have also published some 'Frequently Asked Questions'.

i) Allocation of Pupil Premium Plus (2014-2015)

Paragraph 16 of the regulations states that in April of 2014, the Department for Education made a provisional allocation of £1,900 for each child looked after by the local authority for at least one day as recorded in the March 2013 Children Looked After Data Return (SSDA903) and aged 4 to 15 at 31 August 2012. This allocation will be updated and finalised in October 2014 based on the number of children looked after for at least one day as recorded in the March 2014 Children Looked After Data Return (SSDA903) and aged 4 to 15 at 31 August 2013.

The March 2013 data will then inform the provisional allocation in April 2015, and so on.

ii) Working with the Finance Team

Different VSH have different relationships with the local finance team depending on the model used to manage the Pupil Premium Plus. However, whatever the model the VSH is the officer responsible for managing it.

Therefore they need to either hold the budget themselves so they can build an effective relationship with their own finance officer or, if the budget is held by their line manager, work closely with them to ensure the finance team understand the VSH vision for Pupil Premium Plus distribution and use.

Each local authority has different ways of distributing Pupil Premium Plus to schools and this is often linked to the model of managing it. The following are examples:

- Some make automatic payments into local school budgets alongside the rest of the school's pupil premium – beware Pupil Premium Plus being lost in the larger sum and 'lost'. Seek to

ensure the Pupil premium Plus goes in separately along with a letter making clear the VSH expectations of how it is spent;

- Some delegate the distribution of the funding entirely to the VSH – beware taking on the function without the capacity. Seek to identify sufficient administrative/finance support to make this practical particularly where there are large numbers of children in out of area placements;
- Some work closely and effectively with the VSH – this is the ideal which ensures the finance officers understand what Pupil Premium Plus is for and how the VSH is managing it so that together they can achieve best value. Seek to inform finance teams of the underpinning aims so they begin to see Pupil premium Plus as a tool not simply a number

The VSH needs to ensure they have a strategy for distributing any surplus Pupil Premium Plus they have retained centrally before 31 March annually, or it will be clawed back by the DfE. Ensure the strategy includes regular updates on spend and predictions of a surplus so that the decision to distribute or spend any possible surplus can be processed before the end of March.

Ministers will take a dim view of the VSH community if they fail to spend the large funds they have been entrusted with.

iii) Use of Pupil Premium Plus

Paragraph 17 of the regulations says that the grant allocation for looked after children must be managed by the designated Virtual School Head in the authority that looks after those children to be used for the benefit of the looked after child's educational needs as described in their Personal Education Plan (PEP).

It adds that the Virtual School Head should ensure there are arrangements in place to discuss with the child's education setting – usually with the designated teacher – how the child will benefit from any pupil premium funding.

Finally, paragraph 17 makes it clear that the local authority is not permitted to carry forward unspent funding from the 2014-2105 allocation into the 2015-2016 financial year.

iv) VSH Strategy for Pupil Premium Plus

Schools where looked after children are on roll should be informed annually, swiftly after the conditions of the Pupil Premium Plus grant are published, of the strategy the VSH will adopt. It should be clear:

Whether the VSH will be devolving any of the pupil premium plus to schools and, if so, practical arrangements for the transfer of funds that may require bank information etc.

Whether there are conditions that the school must meet if they are to receive funding and if so how their compliance will be assessed, such as against the [advice offered by Ofsted](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/pupil-premiumhow-schools-are-spending-funding-successfully-maximise-achievement) on the effective use of pupil premium by schools found at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/pupil-premiumhow-schools-are-spending-funding-successfully-maximise-achievement>

How any funding retained centrally will be spent to support the learning of looked after children on the roll of the virtual school

Where funding is devolved to a school the strategy should make it clear:

- whether the funding will be transferred as a single allocation or in instalment's and when they will be transferred
- the arrangements if a child changes school after the payment is made or between instalments
- that the allocation of pupil premium plus does not alter the schools responsibilities to the individual child. It is intended as a way to supplement provision and provide additional support, not replace support a school is funded to provide through its budget. The pupil premium plus grant should not, therefore, be used to pay for services or support that another child would receive from the schools general budget
- how pupil premium plus spend should be recorded in the child's [personal education plan](#)

Recognising that the existing availability of services may not match the needs profile of the CLA cohort the virtual school could encourage schools to pool their pupil premium plus resources and jointly create or commission additional support as necessary. It would have the option to contribute to that pooled budget from centrally retained resources if it judged the collective needs of the looked after cohort required it.

Some VSH have priority access to an educational psychologist, specialist school improvement advice and support etc. Sometimes this is provided from core children's service's budgets in other cases it is commissioned by the VSH from other arms of the LA, or beyond.

Where funding is retained centrally by the VSH to allocate the strategy should make it clear:

- if a school can apply for additional funding to support the child, and if so how.
- how the allocation of additional funding to a school should be recorded in the child's [personal education plan](#)
- how the impact of allocated funding will be assessed

e) Personal Education Planning

This Handbook draws a distinction between the related personal education planning process and the tool to capture the process, the personal education plan (PEP).

Personal education planning must be used by the VSH, social workers, designated teachers, independent reviewing officers, and carers as a vehicle to deliver improved attainment and progress.

Effective personal education planning does this by regularly identifying trends in a child's attainment and progress; the underlying needs they illustrate; how those needs will be addressed to improve attainment and progress; and whether Pupil Premium Plus could be spent to support those improvements. It uses the PEP to capture these trends, needs, planned interventions, and funding implications.

Too often the personal education plan, the PEP, can become a document that is produced according to a calendar, but shelved between statutory care reviews. One of the most important roles of the VSH is to shift PEP practice away from this administrative process to one that reflects best school education planning practice. This includes making the plan a living document that captures the

child's journey through learning, and is responsive to the changing needs of the child when they change irrespective of the calendar of care reviews..

i) The Personal Education Plan (PEP)

The PEP is a statutory component of the care plan and an up-to-date PEP should be written, or if already in place reviewed, in time for a new PEP to be available in advance to all those attending the care review.

A local authority must draw up a care plan of all the children it looked after, and ensure that it is reviewed at the intervals defined by the statutory guidance. The care plan identifies intended outcomes and objectives for the child, and provides the framework to work with the child and carers in relation to his or her emotional and behavioural development, identity, relationships and self-care skills. As well as the PEP the care plan must also include a health plan developed and reviewed in partnership with relevant professionals.

The PEP, in addition to being part of the overall care plan, is part of a looked-after child's official school record. If the child moves school, the PEP should be forwarded, along with other school records, to their new school and to the main contact (usually the child's social worker) in the local authority that looks after the child.

ii) Who needs a Personal Education Plan (PEP)?

Every looked after child, including [eligible children](#), from pre-school to age 18 MUST have a PEP. Some VSH simplify matters by also including [relevant children](#), though this is not required by statutory guidance. Most VSH design the PEP to take account of the different ages of children.

iii) How often must the PEP be reviewed?

VSHs must ensure that they review PEPs each school term to ensure that they have an up-to-date picture of each child's educational needs and progress.

Though the statutory guidance relating to VSH required them to ensure that PEPs are *a 'living', termly comprehensive and enduring record of the child's experience ...* it is not the intention of the statutory guidance to alter the statutory intervals between care reviews, or even PEP reviews. The obligation is for the VSH to take a view termly of the current validity of the PEP relative to termly updates on the child's attainment, progress, etc.

This may not require a formal meeting, it can be undertaken by the VSH as a desktop exercise based on the most recent PEP and a termly return showing current attainment, progress, attendance and exclusion etc., from the child's school.

The PEP will continue to be formally reviewed in advance of statutory care reviews, though the VSH, or any other relevant professional, could call a formal PEP review when the needs of the child, or the child's circumstances change significantly.

Some VSH treat the PEP as a working document which is modified each time a professional meets with the school to discuss education, ensuring that IRO, social worker, and carer are sent updates whenever necessary. In this model the PEP is genuinely a living document that is then formalised in advance of the care review through meeting of all the relevant professionals, the carer, and parent, as appropriate.

iv) The quality of PEPs

The quality of the PEP is the joint responsibility of the local authority that looks after the child and the school. Social workers, carers, VSHs, designated teachers and, as appropriate, other relevant professionals will need to work closely together. All of those involved in the PEP process at all stages should involve the child (according to understanding and ability) and, where appropriate, the child's parent and/or relevant family member.

However, it is the duty of the VSH to quality assure the PEP, and their [termly reviews](#) provide a means to meet this duty.

v) The importance of PEPs

The personal education plan captures a snap-shot in the personal education planning process which enables the VSH, and other educational professionals, keep track of educational attainment and progress for every looked-after child.

The PEP allows the VSH to promote and then monitor access to suitable interventions using the [pupil premium plus](#), which should also be included in the PEP.

The PEP is important to the child too, especially when they are fully involved in agreeing and reviewing actions and targets.

In addition to being part of the overall care plan, the PEP is part of a looked-after child's official school record. If the child moves school, it should be forwarded, along with other school records, to their new school and to the main contact (usually the child's social worker) in the local authority that looks after the child.

vi) The content and format of a PEP

PEPs must contain the high-level information required by the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. There is no agreed national format for a PEP but while the format varies between authorities, the [contents are broadly similar](#).

vii) The role of the VSH in personal education planning

While effective personal education plans are vital tools for driving the attainment, progress and emotional health and well-being of looked after children, they are too often simply snapshots taken at a point in time, rather than a living document.

Therefore the VSH should:

- make all schools aware of the procedure for arranging PEP meetings
- make all schools aware of the procedure for chairing PEP meetings
- make all schools aware of the procedure for writing up and disseminating the agreements arising from PEP meetings
- ensure that social workers know how important it is that every looked-after child has an up-to-date PEP
- insisting that social workers always attend PEP meetings and take responsibility for making sure that the PEP is prepared in advance or created promptly when a child is taken into care, and then sent on to the designated teacher in a timely fashion.

- influence social work and school practice to make the PEP a living document that not only captures a snapshot just before a care review but is updated to take account of events between care reviews, so that it is a living document; a process not just an event.
- [ensure that each child has an effective PEP](#) either through direct quality assurance or through members of virtual school staff, regular and representative sampling of PEPs, &/ or through agreed quality assurance approaches taken by independent reviewing officers (IRO) who should expect to see a PEP in advance of any care review.
- ensure that training and/or guidance is provided to all interested parties

Some VSH have sufficient staffing capacity to attend most if not all PEP meetings and even lead and manage the production of PEPs. While this can ensure a high quality of PEP and a high level of consistency, the VSH must take care not to allow the social worker or designated teacher feel like passengers. They must develop a close understanding and effective working relationship. The PEP is a significant opportunity to do that.

viii) The Early Years and post-16 PEP

Most VSH have designed PEPs that better suited the needs of younger and older looked after children, but the principles around which these PEPs are designed, [their content and the rigour with which they are reviewed and acted upon should be the same, irrespective of the age of the child.](#)

ix) Supporting transition to adulthood

The duty to promote the educational achievement of a looked-after child extends to looked-after young people aged 16 or 17 preparing to leave care. These are referred to in the Children Act 1989 as 'eligible children'.

Local authorities should ensure that:

- the PEP is maintained as part of the preparation and review of the pathway plan¹² and builds on the young person's educational progress;
- each pathway plan review scrutinises the measures being taken to help the child prepare for when he or she ceases to be looked-after by considering: the young person's progress in education or training; and, how he or she is able to access all the services needed to prepare for training, further or higher education or employment.
- links are made with further education (FE) colleges and higher education (HE) institutions and that care leavers are supported to find establishments that understand and work to meet the needs of looked after children and care leavers;
- each eligible care leaver knows about the 16-19 Bursary Fund
- each eligible care leaver receives a bursary of £2,000 when going on to study a recognised HE course and that arrangements for the payment of the bursary are agreed by the young person as part of the overall package of support that a local authority provides to its care leavers.

f) Interventions

[The VSH must expect to be accountable](#) for the funding and other resources they control, and the impact it has, to the DCS, elected members, looked after children, and inspectors. They must therefore use the available research to identify the evidence-based practice that will have the largest and most cost-effective impact on outcomes.

The [Education Endowment Fund Toolkit](#) is an essential resource and the [Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education](#) publish regular updates on their own research and reviews of other research findings.

i) What works - learning support

The fundamental role of the VSH is to ensure that, when a child's attainment or progress slips the virtual school is able to ensure a coherent response that minimises any loss of progress. Equally when a child is making expected progress the VSH must be able to identify this and ensure the child is stretched beyond baseline expectation.

Examples/References:

ii) What works - readiness to learn

To make progress and attain their potential any child must be 'ready to learn'. If they are not then they will find ways to avoid school, or lessons, or engineer circumstances that lead the school itself to remove them from learning.

Looked after children are more likely to be excluded than other children and the role of the virtual school head is to increase awareness among headteachers, senior leaders and governing bodies of the difficulties they face. Schools need to be encouraged to adopt more flexible exclusions policies for looked-after children based on individual needs. VSH should advocate a policy of 'no exclusions for looked-after children'.

Sometimes, there are mitigating factors that the school is unaware of, and it is the virtual school's role to intervene appropriately to prevent exclusions, preferably before they happen but also by attending any meetings called to discuss them. In all cases, the virtual school head would normally liaise directly with headteachers.

There is an overlap between readiness to learn and [emotional health and well-being](#).

Examples/References

iii) Emotional health and well-being

Perhaps the single most important thing that a VSH can do is to stimulate a professional dialogue with headteachers about the reasons why children and young people behave as they do.

This can, in turn, raise awareness of the physiological and psychological effects of early abuse, trauma and loss, on attachment and resilience, in particular, and through them relationships with peers and adults.

Some VSH commission therapeutic support &/or clinical or counselling psychologist support. Others have close working relationships with Child and Adolescent mental Health (CAMHS) services.

Sometimes it makes most sense to commission support that enhances the capacity of carers or headteachers to create an emotionally healthy home &/or school environment, respectively.

There is always a risk that VSH and other headteachers can become fixed on a single response to behaviours that assumes their root in attachment or other 'conditions'; medicalising the child's

issues. The best preventative of this risk is a well-rounded understanding of the issues and an informed view of strategies to address them.

[Attachment Aware Schools](#) is a partnership between Bath Spa University, Bath and North East Somerset Council, the National College for Teaching and Leadership, a range of third sector organisations, attachment specialists and schools. It provides a range of awareness raising/training resources, and links to others, that can be a significant aid to a VSH.

Examples/References

g) Models of service

Some VSH have sufficient resource to intervene directly with individual children who are not making appropriate progress in learning, intervening to provide the learning support they need.

This intervention need not be through a static Virtual School team, but could be commissioned when the need arises. Examples include catch-up or supplementary tuition commissioned from a commercial provider of cover teachers, or in partnership with a local charity or higher education provider. The same approach can be applied to mentoring support, or such provision as after school study support etc.

Some virtual schools are convinced of the efficacy of specialist ‘looked after children staff’ who they feel can reach looked after children due to their experience and understanding of the issues many looked after children face.

In pursuing a strategy of direct work with children the VSH must be convinced that their virtual school is not undertaking work that a school or other service is funded for.

Some VSH are either not resourced for, or do not believe a virtual school should undertake, direct work with children. Instead they use fewer, more influential, staff to advocate on behalf of the children and to challenge schools over the progress of individual children.

Such an approach challenges the school to make use of universal, targeted, and specialist services as necessary to meet the needs of children from the schools budget. Where the needs are outside that framework then they would be expected to either spend distributed pupil premium plus &/or apply to any centrally retained PPP for additional individual support for the child.

Some VSH focus on a strong challenge and support approach but retain a small very specialised direct work capacity to respond to extreme need through direct work

h) Challenge, support and mediation

Aspects of challenge have been addressed [elsewhere](#), but in addition the following should be considered.

i) Challenge and Support to Children’s Services

Effective VSH have a role as advocate for looked after children across children’s services and beyond. In much the same way as effective school system-leaders have authority and influence beyond their own school boundaries, the most effective virtual school heads are able to achieve shifts in the integration of support around looked after children.

They should:

- challenge services that might otherwise become narrowly fixated on 'care' to consider the impact that changes in care placements can have on the educational outcomes of children
- reinforce the centrality of educational outcomes on the child's later life chances, and raise expectations of care staff on the potential of looked after children
- challenge school improvement services to look beyond 'quality teaching for all', to inclusion and other school practices that can narrow the attainment gap for not just looked after children, but other vulnerable groups of children

ii) Challenge and support to Schools

Effective VSH sit alongside headteachers, and be considered a member of that community, with equal status. From that position they can challenge pre-conceptions in the headteacher community and act as a bridge between increasingly autonomous school leaders and the local authority.

Some local authorities have either seconded successful school leaders into the role of VSH, or commissioned a headteacher to undertake the role on behalf of the local authority. The change in the statutory basis of the VSH makes the latter approach difficult to justify, but the former approach has had benefits in both helping a headteacher better understand local authority services, and bringing the most up to date practice from school into the heart of the local authority.

Seconded headteachers are can also achieve rapid change if empowered to act as a headteacher rather than an officer constrained by local authority 'processes'.

Other local authorities have sought a virtual school heads from lower tiers of school senior leadership but offered the opportunity to work at a high level within the local authority as a way to develop professionally as senior leaders before returning to a role in school.

Not all school leaders can challenge their peers and the best VSH can balance the challenge they offer peers with the relationship necessary to maintain headteacher respect and engagement. The knowledge base necessary to support for the professional development of social workers, other local authority staff, other heads, governors and designated teachers requires a broad understanding of the specific needs many looked after children may have and the challenges they may face as a result of their early life experiences, or of the care system itself.

This is most effective when combined with understanding, and successful application, of good general inclusion practice. This can be a challenge to even the best school leaders, but can significantly enhance their ability to be effective and influential within an integrated children's service.

The virtual school must be able to provide authoritative and accurate advice and training to all the partners working with looked after children. Alternatively it must be sufficiently well-informed to sign-post high quality local professional development.

Finally, it is important to note that some local authorities, in order to obtain sufficiently well qualified candidates with senior experience and credibility combine the role of virtual school head with broader inclusion responsibilities. This can help so long as the virtual school head retains sufficient time to dedicate to looked after children without being spread too thinly across a wide

range of responsibilities. That is accompanied by an inspection risk as the virtual school head can lack sufficient grip on the virtual school to offer a convincing narrative to inspectors.

iii) Mediation on behalf of the child

The VSH should ensure that there are arrangements in place to: take account of the child's views according to age and understanding in identifying and meeting his/her educational needs; and mediate on behalf of a looked after child when he or she faces problems at school or any other education setting in collaboration with teachers, social workers and carers.

To make a success of this the VSH must establish not only good relationships with designated teachers but also with [senior leaders in schools including the headteacher](#).

i) Training and Professional Development

The VSH should be the authoritative voice of the learning needs of looked after children and how they can be met. They should, therefore:

- take a lead in supporting/training social workers to understand schools, and school staff to understand social work and the needs of looked after children
- provide regular professional development for designated teachers and, by setting up a local network, encourage designated teachers to exchange their best practice.
- be a routine contributor to social worker induction programmes as well as providing examples of good practice to inform social work supervision arrangements
- seek opportunities to bring together the professionals working with looked after children to
- challenge all targeted and specialist services, and service providers, to prioritise professional development that takes account of the children's needs
- develop an effective working relationship with local Training School Alliances, and any other brokered providers of school improvement, to ensure they have sufficient capacity to address the needs of schools with respect to the learning needs of looked after children
- develop similar links to local teacher training providers so they can provide authoritative training on the needs of looked after children, and the far larger number of children on the edge of care

VSH should also ensure that training includes, among other things, information about:

- school admission arrangements
- special educational needs
- attendance and exclusions
- homework
- choosing GCSE options
- managing any challenging behaviour in relation to education settings
- promoting positive educational and recreational activities and supporting children to be aspirational for their future education
- progression to training and employment.

It is important that training moves beyond the factual to include strategies for inter-agency working and the establishing of good routine working relationships between schools, cares and social workers.

5. How will the VSH know their actions have impact?

Virtual School Heads should adopt a rigorous and self-critical approach to assessing the impact of their school on the educational outcomes of looked after children.

a) Monitoring & Tracking outcomes

i) Virtual School Management Information System

However the virtual school learns of changes to a child's progress or care context it must be able to log and track those changes, along with changes to social worker, carer, address etc. The social care database holds all the required information but is rarely structured to enable education outcomes to be tracked. All virtual schools either create their own, or buy, a management information systems that mirrors the capabilities of those in schools, modified to the demands of the 'virtual' context.

VSH will need to be able to call upon sufficient technical expertise, as well as software solutions, to make effective use of any software solution. The basic specification for such a software solution is that it is:

- User friendly
- Comprehensive
- Readily and easily accessible
- Single source
- Accurate
- Up-to-date
- Automated

b) Obtaining and sharing information

Without a regular supply of information on attainment, progress, attendance and exclusion the VSH must rely on the school to identify children at risk of falling behind.

i) Secure exchange of data

The VSH must ensure they understand their duties regarding the sharing of information under sections 10, 11 and 12 of the Children Act 2004.

VSHs should have access to a secure email account (such as GCSX) that enables them to exchange information securely with other VSHs in whose local authority they have placed children.

VSH should also encourage schools to adopt compatible and secure email systems so that information can be easily exchanged.

The VSH should set out clear arrangements for the sharing of information that define:

- who has access to what information and how the security of data is ensured
- how children and parents are informed of, and allowed to challenge, information that is kept about them
- how carers contribute to and receive information
- mechanisms for sharing information between the virtual school (and other local authority departments) and schools

- how relevant information about individual children (including the PEP and the child's education record) is passed promptly between authorities, departments and schools when young people move.

In most cases VSH should expect their local authority to support them in developing a safe and robust information sharing protocol that appropriately balances the risk of data loss with the immediate safeguarding and learning needs of the individual child.

ii) Direct relationship with the school

Some virtual schools use a staffing intensive model to make 1, 2 or 3 visits per year to each school and undertake a thorough professional discussion with relevant school staff of each looked after child on roll. These meetings supplement data collection with a 'challenge and support' approach to the child's progress. Most importantly it enhances the quality of the [relationship between school and virtual school](#), increasing the willingness of the school to raise concerns earlier. This approach also allows the virtual school to identify and disseminate good practice.

In turn this offers the virtual school the chance to encourage school staff to engage with colleagues that have similar issues but less experience, moving towards a system-led, school-to-school, model for professional development.

When appropriately integrated into broader learning improvement processes the virtual school is well placed to contribute to assessments of school vulnerability/risk of inspection failure, particularly as that relates to the school's general inclusion practice.

As well as staffing capacity this approach requires significant staff expertise to challenge in a way that enhances the relationship with a school. It also requires the staff carrying out visits to have credibility and understand current best practice. It is also a very expensive model to apply to schools outside the local area.

iii) Indirect relationship with the school

Other virtual schools use cost-effective, secure, electronic, data exchange to obtain the information they need. Virtual schools with good working relationships with schools often delegate this to a single administrative/data officer who pursues schools for the data required.

This approach limits the opportunity for any face-to-face relationship to develop. At worst the only meaningful contact between the school and the virtual school can be when problems arise. At that point it is often too late to do anything about the issues that have arisen.

iv) Out of area schools - use of intermediaries

Some virtual schools outsource data collection and this can be a cost effective to do this so long as the data the virtual school needs, is matched by the data an external provider is set up to collect.

Some virtual school combine these two approaches, restricting the use of the external provider to schools outside the local authority with which they have no regular contact and therefore no close working relationship.

Some virtual schools expect social workers, through their regular statutory visits to the child, and the personal education plan they lead on, to collect and pass on appropriate data and information. This

allows the virtual school to concentrate on the analysis of available data and challenge or support, rather than the data collection task itself.

c) Evaluation of impact

i) The DIY Evaluation Guide

The Education Endowment Fund publishes a [DIY Evaluation Guide](#), an accessible resource for teachers which introduces the key principles of educational evaluation and provides guidance on how to conduct small-scale evaluations in schools.

It is equally valuable to a VSH and lays out a helpful rationale for evaluation:

- **Evaluation indicates whether or not an intervention is effective.** Without evaluation, it is impossible to know whether an intervention is having a positive impact on learning. It can be tempting to implement plausible-sounding strategies which, in reality, don't benefit students.
- **Evaluation saves time.** It is often easier to start doing something new than it is to stop doing something which has been running for a number of years. The evaluation strategies in the Evaluation Guide show how data can be used to obtain an estimate of the impact of a particular intervention. VSH can then put their time and effort into the most effective things and avoid pursuing approaches that do not work.
- **Evaluation guides future action.** By investing a little time in carefully recording what is being done and by measuring its outcome, it is easy to identify improvements for the future.

ii) Evaluating Pupil Premium Plus spending using the Guide

The [guide](#) presents a three stage approach to evaluation:

- **What do you want to achieve?:** Determine your priorities using internal data and professional judgement. What are your ambitions for improvement? In which particular areas do pupils need more support?
- **How can you get there?:** Having identified what your goal is, education research can be useful in providing information about what has worked elsewhere, therefore highlighting the important features of implementing a particular approach. [The Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) is one resource which provides summaries of education research for this purpose.
- **Did it work and should you continue?:** Once a decision to adopt a new strategy has been made, it can be evaluated using the information in the [DIY Evaluation Guide](#). The information from this evaluation can be used to inform decisions in future years and shared with other schools.

iii) Small cohorts

Many VSH have relatively small schools with only a handful or two of looked after children in each year group. Even VSH with larger year groups may find that, by the time they identify only those subject to a particular intervention, the cohort shrinks significantly.

Where the size of the group being analysed is small any statistical analysis, even simple averaging, can be misleading. One or two individual outcomes can bias the understanding of what is happening with the group as a whole.

Some VSH overcome this difficulty by putting together measures from the same year group accumulated over several years, building up a larger group size for more robust analysis.

It might be valid to aggregate outcomes from different year groups subject to the same intervention, but care should be taken not to overstate this approach to analysing the impact of an intervention on outcomes.

6. Who is the VSH accountable to?

a) The Director of Children's Services

VSH function best if DCS has a strategic vision that sees education, health and social care teams working together across their authority to protect and champion the educational needs of looked after children.

For a virtual school head to be most effective they must have status, influence and authority. In most local authority structures this will require the virtual school head to have a senior position in the line management structure of Children's Services. Without the access this offers to the DCS/Assistant Director team it can be difficult for the VSH to influence policy and practice across the Children's Service Directorate and beyond.

All local authorities are different but this can be achieved by ensuring that the VSH is sufficiently senior to make decisions quickly and efficiently. This approach can also ensure that the VSH has direct access to key senior officers and members across the authority, so they can influence policy at a high level.

At whatever level in the organisation the VSH sits they should understand the difference between governance and line management and the range of their internal and external accountabilities.

b) Line management

The educational needs of looked-after children are best served by education, social care, health and other professionals working closely together on individual cases. This is best facilitated when the virtual school head has sufficient seniority and senior links with social care and health leaders to make this happen. It is important to clarify which decisions can be taken at an operational level, and how senior managers can assist with difficult cases.

Effective challenge and support within Children's Services is often associated with a VSH who has high level of access to both Assistant Director (Learning), Assistant Director (Social Care) and, when necessary, to the DCS. All three must both appreciate, and support, the virtual school's development so it can influence the strategic direction of all the arms of children's services, and the council in general. The VSH should have at least 'visiting membership' of both Learning and Social Care senior teams, as well as more informal access to both Assistant Directors and, were cross-service issues to present a barrier, the Director of Children's Services.

Although it takes time and diplomacy to build bridges between groups of professionals, the best interests of these vulnerable children takes precedence over everything else.

i) Through the Assistant Director (Learning/Education)

This arrangement makes the learning focus of the VSH explicitly clear and may enable existing strong relationships with schools to be used by the VSH in their work. This is particularly important where the VSH is seen as an arm of the school improvement service with a principle role in improving the quality of the education offered to all children, from which looked after children will then benefit.

While theoretically sound it can be a risk to have the VSH distracted by more general school improvement functions and approaches. The best VSH models involve the individual holder of the post having a similar view of the virtual school cohort as they would have of pupils in a bricks and mortar school of which they were head. This requires them to have systems in place to improve the outcomes of individual children through direct and swift intervention rather than focussing on the more general improvement of the school as a whole.

If the decision is made to place the VSH within the Learning/Education Service it is very important to find ways to give them access to, and influence with, safeguarding/child-protection services. This might be through a 'visiting membership' of the senior social work team. Co-location with senior social workers can also help with this.

ii) Through the Assistant Director (Safeguarding/Child Protection)

A senior education professional can be expected to have a good understanding of how a Learning/Education Service works, but few have such an understanding of the Safeguarding/Child Protection Service, other than from a school-centred point of view. While helpful this can be too limited a view to build effective relationships with social workers. Placing the VSH in the safeguarding/child protection service is therefore likely to present them with challenges as they will have to learn quickly how social care operates. While a challenge it will, with application, produce education professional with the capacity to build bridges with social workers, and to help schools do the same.

The risks of this option are that a VSH can feel distanced from the levers of school improvement. It is important, therefore, to facilitate those links through 'visiting membership' of the senior education team &/or direct access to the relevant assistant director.

c) Governance

Governance differs from line management in that it brings together a range of stakeholders with an interest/involvement in the outcomes and progression of looked after children, rather than the direct one-to-one relationship with a line-manager. Line management is about 'direct professional accountability'; governance is more often about 'critical friendship'.

i) Structures

Some virtual schools are governed through a body modelled on a school governing body. Others make use of properly constituted corporate parenting boards. Still others are structured as part of the local authority Children's Trust arrangements.

What characterises effective virtual school governance is breadth of membership that is sufficiently senior to make decisions and influence the agencies, services, and stakeholder groups represented.

The VSH and their line manager should beware governance arrangements that require the VSH to report the same thing to a variety of separate bodies. The VSH has a very broad role and time best spent making a difference to looked after children can be eroded by duplicate reporting and governance arrangements.

ii) Elected members

Ofsted inspection regimes take a particular interest in the role of elected members in relation to services to looked after children. The effectiveness of the VSH can be enhanced by having a cross-party group of corporate carer elected members (which may or may not include the lead member), that can support and scrutinise the VSH and act as critical friends in the manner of an effective governing body.

Elected members should, as democratically elected representatives take their role as corporate parents very seriously. VSH should raise elected members' awareness of the issues facing looked after children and seek their support and influence in delivering improvement. There are various ways of involving elected members.

They could be given specific corporate parent responsibility for a group of specific children: SEN, Early Years Foundation Stage, higher education and so on; or all those in their ward area.

They should always consider the question, "would this be good enough for my child?", when assessing the quality of services to looked after children.

iii) Looked after children - assuring the impact of 'pupil voice'

The VSH should ensure that the authority's Children in Care Council regularly addresses the educational experiences raised by looked after children and responds effectively to such issues. This can be an effective means of ensuring that the educational experiences and outcomes of the authority's looked after children, including those placed out of authority, improve.

The VSH should ensure there are systems in place to respond to the views of children and to that such responses are logged and fed back to the Children in Care Council, while being filed for later examination by [Ofsted](#).

iv) Senior local authority officers

While all officers, school staff and other children's workforce professionals and para-professionals have a role as corporate parents there are advantages in bringing the key senior officers together, perhaps as a multi-agency looked after partnership (MALAP). This can help develop and progress the VSH strategic vision. The VSH can table inter- or intra-agency/service issues/barriers and seek to resolve them if the officers present have sufficient seniority to deliver solutions.

The MALAP may include representatives of Early Years Foundation Stage/14–19 teams, educational psychologists, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), data management experts, housing and health. It is also helpful to invite representatives primary/secondary headteachers and foster/residential carers into the group.

d) Annual Report of the Virtual School Head

Reporting on the progress, performance and development of the virtual school is a key activity; the Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher (VSH) is required by Ofsted during their Inspection.

The purpose of the report is to improve readers' knowledge and understanding of a number of key areas. When accessed by inspectors it will influence key lines of enquiry in for the inspection.

In completing this report, consideration should routinely be given to the impact of the actions taken by the VSH and the place of those actions in the pupil's journey through care. The principle of 'We did this and the impact was...' should inform reporting. The addition of case studies as appendices would add a narrative flavour to this document.

Equally VSH should beware raising issues and concerns without making clear the plan they have to address them. Not to do so is to invite inspectors to ask the implied question: 'if this is a concern what have you done about it?'.

[An outline Annual Report can be found here.](#)

e) Inspection

In creating an Ofsted ready virtual school the VSH must have regard to the most recent [framework of inspection](#), and related Ofsted documents.

The headings of the VSH Annual Report provide a helpful checklist for a VSH preparing for inspection, which in turn mirrors the significant sections of this Handbook.

i) Who is on the roll of the virtual school, where do they live and go to school

See also [Section 1](#) & [Section 2](#).

- School roll and [characteristics](#)
- Number of pupils by phase and location
- Number of pupils placed and educated in Out Of Authority placements
- Number of pupils forming the cohort of having been looked-after for 12 months as at 31 March in line with the Outcomes for Looked After Children Statistical First Release published each December
- Pupils with disrupted education and remedial/management action
- Number of pupils in Virtual School attending a 'good' school as recognised by recent Ofsted judgment.
- Status of schools which do not come into this category where children in care to LA are placed
- Pupils not attending school and details of their alternative provision, including DfE registration, and number of hours accessed
- Details of all pupils receiving alternative education and individual plans for their return to mainstream education (if applicable)
- Details of all pupils missing from education and management action to locate and place them

ii) How well are children on roll doing?

See also [Section 3](#).

- Performance profile to include summative and formative information across the cohort from Early Years to post 16 (this should be a succinct summary as evidence will have been

available throughout the year. Alternatively, more detailed information can be provided in appendices)

- Destination pathway of Year 11 pupils
- Attendance
- Exclusions
- Admissions and number of pupils admitted within statutory 20 school day timeframe
- Admissions: number where a direction was made by the local authority, number where direction was upheld by the Schools Adjudicator, number of academies where a request to the Secretary of State to direct was made, number of academies where the Secretary of State upheld the request.
- Time taken to access education for those placed within and outside LA (within statutory 20 school day timescale)

iii) What has the VSH done to improve outcomes?

See also [Section 4](#).

- Interventions
- Evidence of collaborative working in cross service/LA groups
- Communications with other agencies, locally, regionally and nationally – establishment of website, early learning packages etc
- Progress and development of Personal Education Plans
- Training (by audience) delivered and planned

iv) How effective has the work of the virtual school been?

See also [Section 5](#).

- Using data to inform and drive progress
- Give evidence of the use of and impact of funding on pupil achievement
- Provide case studies to exemplify the use of funding and its impact

Any analysis should take account of the groups of pupils within Ofsted designated categories:

- Children out of authority
- Children with a plan for adoption
- Children in foster care
- Children in residential settings
- Children with a plan to return home
- Children with disabilities
- Unaccompanied Asylum seeking Children and Young People
- Care leavers (if their attainment, progress or EET status is the responsibility of the VSH rather than the care leaving service)
- Children in the early years foundation stage (if their attainment and progress is within the scope of the VSH role)

v) Virtual School structure and resources

- Staffing
- Staffing structure & line management

- Staff CPD and training opportunities summary
- Current funding streams (including Pupil Premium Plus) and whether externally or internally generated

Acknowledgements

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The ‘Ministerial Expert Group’ convened by the NCTL on behalf of the DfE in the Autumn and Spring of 2014 were also a stimulus to this project, and those members made a significant contribution to shaping this Handbook. Among them, Pat Finnegan (Dudley VSH), Peter McNamara (Salford and Leicester City VSH), Tony Clifford (Stoke-on-Trent VSH), and Mike Gorman (Bath and North East Somerset) made significant contributions to the work of the groups which this Handbook has benefitted from.

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Despite the support offered, any errors or omissions – and there will be plenty, I am sure – are the sole responsibility of the author.

Alun Rees, December 2014

Appendix 1 – Advice a VSH might offer schools &/or requirements the VSH might have of schools if they are to receive the funding

Monitoring and tracking achievement

Ofsted described effective schools as having in place a system that allowed for the thorough analysis of outcomes & solid tracking, to identify which pupils underachieve & why.

The virtual school will therefore expect the school to:

- share attainment, progress, and attendance data, and information on the child’s engagement with learning, termly and more often if requested;
- collaborate in the creation and implementation of an effective personal education plan.

Use of the funding by schools

Ofsted found that the most effective schools clearly identified the target group and ring fenced pupil premium to spend on them. They intervened using evidence-based, high-impact approaches and used achievement data to check interventions were having an impact. Where there was insufficient impact schools made in-year adjustments to improve the impact.

The virtual school will therefore expect the school to:

- ring-fence pupil premium plus allocated to them for the looked after children on roll. This doesn’t mean that the pupil premium needs always to be ring-fenced to the *individual* child, but to the group of looked after children on roll. Alternatively the school should be able to demonstrate the impact on the outcomes of looked after children benefitting from interventions aimed at a broader cohort of children and funded by pooling the Pupil premium Plus with other school budgets.
- have in place effective rigorous measures of in-year of attainment and progress which it shares with the virtual school and uses to modify the personal education plan within the usual 6 monthly review cycle, if necessary.

Staff professional development

Ofsted found that in the most effective schools support staff were highly trained. They also found that teachers in effective schools knew who the pupil premium cohort were and had consistent high expectations of them. Those schools also had strong senior leadership oversight of how pupil premium funding was spent and the impact it was having.

The virtual school will therefore expect the school to:

- prioritise the professional development of its Designated Teacher for Looked After Children, ensuring they have sufficient time and influence to carry out their duties as described in statutory guidance.
- provide effective professional development that helps all staff working with looked after children to understand the particular challenges looked after children (and indeed all children who have suffered early trauma, loss or attachment difficulties) may face in learning and in developing relationships. [Attachment Aware Schools](#) provides support to schools wishing to develop staff understanding.

- Does this imply standards are fully aware. What does developing standards for schools mean in the world of school autonomy and who will enforce them. Local standards or national standards?

The role of governors

Ofsted found that in effective schools, governors understood pupil premium and were involved in the school strategy to implement it. In those schools headteachers invested time to explain what the schools was doing and why, as well as regularly demonstrating the impact.

The virtual school will therefore expect the school to:

- identify a Designated Governor for Looked After Children and facilitate regular time for them to discuss the schools approaches with the Designated Teacher for Looked After Children.
- enable the Designated Teacher and Designated Governor to make a joint annual report on the work of the school in support of looked after children and the impact the approaches adopted were having.

Schools will also find the Ofsted report: 'Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on', helpful reading. It can be found at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/unseen-childrenaccess-and-achievement-20-years>

Encouraging positive responses to looked after children

Some virtual schools have embodied these expectations, or similar ones, into a quality standard. If a school earns the quality standard then they will receive the pupil premium plus, or more of the pupil premium plus, automatically.

Buying Equipment with Pupil Premium Plus

Ownership and use of equipment

Mainstream schools can decide who owns any equipment purchased with the pupil premium and how it is used. When non-mainstream schools receive pupil premium funding, they should ensure that issues of ownership, insurance and use are clear and understood by all parties.

In most cases, any equipment purchased for the child should become the property of the child and stay with them if they move school or leave care.

There may be individual cases where a different arrangement would be appropriate, for example, a long-term loan of equipment. In this instance, schools are advised to have a written agreement with the child and their social worker or carer/parent. This agreement should set out any requirements placed on the child and their carers, and the support that the school is committed to providing. It should also state, if appropriate, the circumstances when the equipment would be taken back from the child.

In any event, for high-value items and/or devices that enable the child to access the internet, schools should ask the child and their carer to sign an agreement that should set out the responsibilities of the child, the carer and the school in relation to the item. This is likely to include a requirement for

the child and carers to look after the equipment and to use it safely, as well as issues around maintenance, repairs, support, ownership and insurance.

Schools should note that, for audit purposes, they should be able to provide evidence of the purchase of the equipment, the terms on which the equipment is provided to the child and details of who now has ownership. The aforementioned agreement should satisfy this requirement. It is essential, therefore, that the wording of the agreement is comprehensive and accurate.

Purchase of laptops, computers and other internet-enabled devices

Mainstream schools can decide what make and model of laptop or computer, software and peripherals to purchase. However, it is recommended that Microsoft Office, a robust anti-virus package, robust parental controls (which may already be included in the anti-virus software), and a suitable carry case, are included in the purchase.

If funds are available, you may also wish to consider insurance, an extended warranty or a support contract.

Schools should find out if the young person will be able to connect to the internet at home (for example via the carer's network) and whether there are any concerns relating to internet safety. The local authority should provide guidance on all of these issues.

Appendix 2 – The personal education planning cycle

Initiating the PEP

Wherever the child is placed, his/her social worker, supported by his/her managers, should take the lead to:

- initiate a PEP, as part of the Care Plan, even where a looked after child or young person is without a school place. This includes meeting with appropriate education providers and the carer
- ensure that where a child is placed in an emergency the PEP is initiated within 10 working days of his/her becoming looked after, wherever he/she is placed
- ensure that every child and young person looked after by the authority has an effective, high quality PEP which is available for the first statutory review meeting of the Care Plan (that takes place after 20 working days). As a minimum at this stage the PEP should indicate who needs to contribute to the PEP, that meetings have been or will be arranged to discuss appropriate needs and that there has been some initial analysis of the child's educational needs
- ensure that the PEP gives details of who will take the plan forward, specifies timescales for action and review and identifies sources of funding for implementing the PEP

To ensure that the PEP fully meets the education needs of looked after children and helps them to achieve their full potential, social workers, designated teachers, carers and other relevant professionals will need to work closely together.

The designated teacher leads on how the PEP is used as a tool in school to make sure the child's progress towards education targets is monitored. All of those involved in the process should:

- involve the child (according to understanding and ability), the child's parent and/or relevant family member
- use the PEP as a tool to support the personalised learning of the child, reflecting his/her educational needs, views and educational ambitions, such as a wish to go on to higher education
- ensure that the PEP sets clear objectives or targets which relate to academic achievement and out of school activities, learning activities/study support as well as other personal and, if appropriate, behavioural targets.
- ensure that all stakeholders in the PEP receive a copy of the document following a review.

Calling and chairing a PEP meeting

In some cases, it may be the designated teacher who chairs the PEP review meetings; in some it may be the social worker who does this; in other cases a member of the virtual school may chair. The important thing is not who chairs PEP, but that the PEP is reviewed and kept up to date. The VSH must ensure that the personal education planning cycle works well and produces plans that meet the needs of the child.

While it can sometimes be convenient to have different parties complete different section of the PEP in advance of the PEP meeting/review a face-to-face meeting is essential if all parties are to develop the relationship necessary to understand and trust one another's views.

Local authorities should have clear, published, procedures for arranging and chairing PEP meetings. In some cases, it may be the designated teacher who chairs the PEP review meetings; in other cases, it may be the social worker who does so. The important thing is not who leads on the PEP review, but that the PEP constitutes a living document that is reviewed, kept up to date and is available in advance of the care review meeting.

Virtual heads should have the support of social work manager in insisting that social workers always attend PEP meetings and take responsibility for making sure that the PEP is prepared in advance or created promptly when a child is taken into care, and then sent on to the designated teacher in a timely fashion. Close liaison between social workers, designated teachers and the virtual school is essential.

All the participants in the PEP meeting, including the child, should receive the updated PEP within 5 working days of the PEP meeting/review.

Effective and high quality PEPs

The VSH should assure themselves not only that the following is covered within a PEP but that the quality of the components is appropriate. They should apply the best practice in school individual learning plans to PEPs to ensure they are rigorous and robust and that, during an inspection the VSH could confidently display them to inspectors.

The best PEPs:

- enable the VSH to collect the information on the [care placement](#) and [education placement](#), as well as the [child's current outcomes](#), that they need to do their job
- summarise the child's current attainment and progress relative to robust and demanding targets
- summarise attendance and engagement with learning, including any behaviour issues up to and including those triggering exclusion
- provide an opportunity to note the child's broader development, emotional health and well-being, relationships with peers and adults, and engagement with activities beyond the curriculum s
- be a comprehensive and enduring record of the child's experience, progress and achievement (academic and otherwise)
- be linked to information in other education plans, including education health and care plans and individual education plans
- identify short and long term developmental, and educational, needs in relation to skills, knowledge, subject areas and experiences (and where these include SEN, refer to the SENCO)
- set short term targets, that are SMART, including progress monitoring against each of the areas identified against development and educational needs

- set long term plans and educational targets and aspirations in relation to homework, public examinations, further and higher education, work experience and career plans and aspirations
- document identified actions for specific individuals intended to support the achievement of agreed targets, including homework or private study requirements
- identify whether the child would benefit from support through the Pupil Premium Plus if so how it will be used to support the targets set in the PEP
- highlight access to one-to-one tuition and how this will make/has made a difference to achievement levels.

Implementing the PEP

Social workers, carers and school staff should ensure that the actions and activities recorded in the PEP to meet the educational needs of the looked after child, wherever they are placed, are acted on by:

- working in a joined-up way with other appropriate education professionals (e.g. looked after children education team, the virtual school for looked after children, education psychologist) at local authority level and with other relevant persons and agencies (e.g. the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)
- ensuring that there is no delay in implementing actions agreed in the PEP, such as access to out of school learning opportunities or providing help for a child to catch up with school work
- ensuring any actions regarding the spending of the Pupil Premium Plus are taken promptly.
- Clearly allocated responsibilities for the actions/interventions planned to deliver the targets

Reviewing the PEP

The PEP should be an active document and should evolve as part of the Care Plan throughout the period for which the child is looked after. It should be reviewed at the statutory intervals at a meeting of all involved in the child's education. The social worker with responsibility for the child should:

- not take significant decisions about a looked after child's education without reviewing the PEP in consultation with the child, his/her school and other local authority staff with responsibility for the education of looked after children (such as the looked after children education team and/or the virtual school for looked after children)
- ensure that the PEP is formally reviewed and that its effectiveness is scrutinised as part of the statutory review of the Care Plan (i.e. after 20 working days, 3 months, 6 months, and 6 monthly intervals thereafter, and at other times if necessary)
- ensure, where a child has a statement of special educational needs, that the PEP review is linked with the annual review of the statement
- ensure that all relevant information about the child's educational progress and support needs is up-to-date and recorded in the review record before the statutory review meeting
- act on any changes required to meet the child's education needs identified by the IRO in the review record

- alert the IRO to any significant changes to the child’s PEP such as the breakdown or change of an education placement.

Assuring compliance

The personal education plan is the principal way by which the virtual school head, and other educational professionals, can keep track of the educational needs of the child, the response to those needs, and the impact of the plan on educational attainment, progress, attendance and engagement with learning.

Therefore the VSH should seek the cooperation of social work managers in ensuring that they have easy and immediate access to a child’s current PEP at any time.

They should also ensure that systems exist for reporting on the proportion of children with an up-to-date PEP at any time.

Quality Assuring the PEP

The PEP allows the virtual school head to promote and then monitor access to suitable interventions and the way in which the pupil premium plus is being spent, which should also be included in the PEP. Ideally, the PEP brings together the whole team around the looked-after child at regular intervals to focus on the child’s educational progress and personal educational needs.

While the process of creating the PEP can be integrated it usually falls to one person to capture the outcomes of the initial PEP meeting or subsequent review. Where that person is insufficiently experienced or has insufficient time then a very good EPP process can still lead to a poor quality plan.

PEPs must contain the high-level information required by the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the statutory guidance. The format of PEPs varies between authorities and often between early years, the 4 key stages, and post-16 provision. There is no need for a school that already has individual education plans, pastoral support plans, or any other plan in place for its pupils to duplicate them in a personal education plan for their looked after pupils. So long as the social worker, carer and other relevant professionals, and the child, are engaged with the creation of the plan it can be designated a PEP by mutual agreement.

Whatever its form, the best PEP includes:

- Key information from about the care placement, including the names and contact numbers/ emails for key members of the team around the child such as carer, social worker, designated teacher and virtual school head;
- Key information about the education placement, including the names and contact numbers/emails for key members of the school team, including the designated teacher, relevant senior members of staff/pastoral care staff, SENCO, and front office/reception;
- Details of access to a nursery or other high quality early years provision that is appropriate to the child’s age (e.g. pre-school playgroups) and meets their identified developmental needs
- Details of the provision of suitable education where a child is not in school (e.g. because of temporary or permanent exclusion)

- Special Educational Needs status, key dates relating to SEN Reviews. Copies of any SEN statement and related documents should be attached to the PEP;
- Key educational outcomes from Early Years Foundation Stage through the Key Stages of compulsory schooling in the form of termly snap-shots of the child's current attainment, and progress against realistic but stretching targets, in all the subjects/areas of the curriculum
- Details of teachers if not available through a printed timetable sent to all parents/carers;
- A clear and up-to-date snap-shot of the child's attendance, and engagement with learning, including their response to learning. They also provide a current view of the child's emotional health and well-being, from the point of view of the school, their relationships with adults and peers, and their involvement with extracurricular learning and activities;
- Clear evidence of the child's view of their schooling, its strengths and weaknesses and their view on what they believe would help them, as well as opportunities for them to refine or revise their aspirations for the future;
- An agreed view of what the snapshot says about the effectiveness of the actions/ interventions described in the previous PEP in meeting the needs of the child, lowering any barriers hindering their educational development and stimulating improved educational outcomes;
- Clearly stated SMART targets that will allow the next PEP review to judge whether the reviewed/revised plan is effective in lowering barriers, meeting needs and stimulating improved educational outcomes;
- The allocation of Pupil premium Plus to support the child's needs;
- Support, including details of the planned use of effective intervention strategies, to help:
 - those who have fallen behind with school work,
 - the child realise their short and long-term academic achievements and aspirations.
 - them achieve expected levels of progress for the relevant national curriculum key stage and to complete an appropriate range of approved qualifications
 - ensure effective transition, such as when a child begins to attend a new school or returns to school (e.g. moving from pre-school, primary to secondary school or following illness or exclusion) or when a child has a plan for permanence (e.g. placed for adoption) and may change schools as part of that plan;
 - information, advice and guidance, and financial information, about further and higher education, training and employment
 - out-of-school hours learning activities, study support and leisure activities
 - school attendance and, where appropriate, behaviour support
- For children from the lower secondary age onwards it should also set out the longer term aspirations of the child in relation to future education, employment or training, and the details of how the school and local authority together will meet their obligations to provide the child with effective information, advice and guidance leading to the construction of a Pathway Plan prior to the child's 16th birthday.

Best practice uses the PEP as a living document that is subject to review and revision when needed, not only as required by the statutory framework. Some local authorities ensure that where concerns arise between PEP meetings the school and social worker refine/revise the PEP to ensure it.

Appendix 3 – Guidance on the Designated Teacher

‘The designated teacher for looked-after children - Statutory guidance for the governing bodies of maintained schools and academies and designated teachers on their roles and responsibilities’ (June 2014) details the role of the Designated Teacher. Some VSH use this as the basis of a generic job description they offer to schools and, where they adopt it count that against any [quality standard](#) they operate. The statutory guidance says:

The designated teacher should be a central point of initial contact within the school. This helps to make sure that the school plays its role in making sure arrangements are joined up and minimise any disruption to a child’s learning.

The most effective designated teachers have a leadership role in promoting the educational achievement of every looked-after child on the school’s roll. This should involve promoting a whole school culture where the personalised learning needs of every looked-after child matters and their personal, emotional, academic and vocational needs are prioritised.

The role of designated teachers is to act as a source of advice and expertise so that all relevant staff:

- have high expectations of looked-after children’s learning and set targets to accelerate educational progress;
- are aware of the emotional, psychological and social effects of loss and separation (attachment awareness) from birth families and that some children may find it difficult to build relationships of trust with adults because of their experiences and how this might affect the child’s behaviour;
- understand how important it is to see looked-after children as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group, not publicly treat them differently from their peers and show sensitivity about who else knows about their looked-after status;
- appreciate the central importance of the child’s PEP in helping to create a shared understanding between teachers, carers, social workers and the child of how he or she is being supported;
- understanding the role of social workers, virtual school heads and carers and how the function of the PEP fits into the wider care planning duties of the authority which looks after the child; and
- are familiar with what other relevant statutory guidance, particularly on [school admissions](#) and [school exclusions](#) requires in relation to looked-after children.

Designated teachers should also:

- contribute to the development and review of whole school policies and procedures to ensure that:
 - they do not unintentionally put looked-after children at a disadvantage;
 - there is effective induction for looked-after children when joining the school and support for those new to care;
 - there are effective procedures in place to support a looked-after child’s learning;

- there are no barriers to looked-after children accessing the general activities and experiences the school offers to all its pupils (i.e. taking into account possible transport difficulties and the arrangements for looked-after children to attend meetings).
- promote a culture in which looked-after children:
 - are able to discuss their progress and be involved in setting their own targets, have their views taken seriously and are supported to take responsibility for their own learning;
 - are prioritised in any selection of pupils who would benefit from one-to-one tuition and that they have access to focused study support;
 - are encouraged to participate in school activities and in decision making within the school and the care system;
 - believe they can succeed and aspire to further and higher education and get equal access to high quality carers information, advice and guidance;
 - can discuss difficult issues (such as SEN, bullying, attendance) in confidence with a sympathetic adult.
- be a source of advice for teachers about:
 - differentiated teaching strategies appropriate for individual pupils who are looked-after;
 - the use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) approaches to improve the short and medium term progress of looked-after children;
- work directly with looked-after children and their carers to:
 - promote good home-school links;
 - support progress by paying particular attention to effective communication with carers;
 - ensure they understand the potential value of one-to-one tuition and are supported to engage with it wherever it takes place;
 - ensure carers are aware of how the school teaches key skills such as reading and numeracy;
- have lead responsibility for the development and implementation of the child's PEP within school in partnership with others as necessary;
- communicate relevant information on care changes on a 'need to know' basis, and ensure staff understand the confidentiality which a child in care should expect from them.

Designated teachers should also make sure that:

- there is an agreed process in place for how the school works in partnership with the child's carer and other professionals, such as the child's social worker, in order to review and develop the child's educational progress and how each person will contribute to driving up the child's educational achievement;
- school policies in relation to, for example, home-school agreements, time-keeping and attendance, homework diaries and parents' evenings are communicated to carers and social workers and, where appropriate, birth parents, so that looked-after children are not disadvantaged;
- the child's teachers know the most appropriate person to contact when necessary. For example, in some cases authority to sign permission slips for school trips will be delegated to the carer by the social worker but for some children permission will be needed from the child's social worker

Appendix 4 – Guidance on the role of Governing Bodies

‘The designated teacher for looked- after children - Statutory guidance for the governing bodies of maintained schools and academies and designated teachers on their roles and responsibilities’ (June 2014) details the role of the Designated Teacher.

Some VSH use this as part of any [quality standard](#) they operate. The statutory guidance says:

The way in which designated teachers operate varies from school to school. It will depend on the number of looked-after children on roll and their individual needs as well as, for example, whether the school caters for primary or secondary age children.

Not all aspects of the role of the designated teacher need necessarily be carried out by a single individual or by a qualified teacher. While lead responsibility for raising attainment of looked-after children on roll must rest with a qualified teacher, schools decide how functions within it, including pastoral and administrative tasks, are most appropriately delegated to suit their own circumstances.

Governing bodies should, through the designated teacher, hold the school to account on how it supports its looked-after children and their level of progress. In some schools designated teachers do this by providing the governing body with a regular report.

Appendix 5 – Parental Responsibility and Delegated Authority

Parental responsibility

Section 3 of the Children Act 1989 defines parental responsibility as “All the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which, by law, a parent of a child has in relation to a child and his/her property. “

This means that a person with parental responsibility is responsible for the care and well-being of the child and, unless a court order says something different, that person, and anyone else that also has parental responsibility, can make important decisions about the child's life.

Local Authorities share parental responsibility with the birth parents for children in care under a Care Order, Interim Care Order, or Emergency Protection Order. Where necessary, the local authority may limit the extent to which the parent may exercise parental responsibility and can veto some parental decisions.

If a child is subject to a Care Order, his or her parents or guardians cannot remove them from care unless the local authority agrees. A child's parents or guardians, and a child themselves, have the right to apply to the court to end a Care Order. All Care Orders end when a child reaches the age of 18, although some may be ended before this.

Delegated Authority

When a Local Authority has parental responsibility for a child who is in care, the child's social worker exercises parental responsibility and makes decisions about the child. However, local authority may agree for some of their responsibilities to be met by the Foster Carer. This is called ‘delegating authority’.

Many children and young people in care have expressed a wish to grow up as part of ‘normal’ families without the rules and bureaucracy which can limit their opportunities, lead to unnecessary delays, and make them feel different to their peers. The 1989 Children Act issued in 2013 was amended to strengthen the statutory guidance on delegated authority outlining three types of decisions:

Day to day parenting

All day to day decision making (e.g. decisions about health, leisure, or such education decisions as permission slips for school trips and activities) should be delegated to the child's carer (and/or the child if they can make these decision for themselves) unless there is a valid reason not to do so. Where day to day decisions are not delegated to the carer, exceptions and reasons should be set out in the placement plan. Where risk assessments have been routinely carried out by organisations organising/supervising the activity e.g. school trips or breaks, there is not an expectation that local authorities should duplicate risk assessments.

Routine but longer term decisions (e.g. school choice)

This level of decision making includes the choice of school. Ideally this choice is collaborative and will depend on the child's permanence plan. If the plan is for long term foster care then, where possible, the school choice should fit with the foster carer's family life as well as be appropriate for

the child. The placement plan must record clearly who has the authority to take particular decisions about choice of school.

Significant events (e.g. surgery)

Legally, foster carers may 'do what is reasonable in all the circumstances of the case for the purpose of safeguarding or promoting the child's welfare'.

This means that in an emergency, if no agreement has been made about what to do, the foster carer may do what is 'reasonable' in order to safeguard the child. Statutory guidance states that what is reasonable will depend upon the urgency of the situation and how practical it is to consult a person with parental responsibility.

Where significant events are known about in advance, the decision making process for these should be detailed in the [placement plan](#).

Appendix 6 – The broader responsibilities of the foster carer

Every child's foster carer should receive a foster placement agreement when they begin to care for the child. A typical foster placement agreement includes the expectations that the foster carer will:

- promote the welfare of the child/young person and to treat them as a valued member of the family. Though not always explicitly stated this should include behaviours that will promote the child emotional health and well-being, such as:
 - seeing the child as an individual.
 - promoting a strong sense of identity in a child.
 - spending time with a child one on one.
 - offering the child an opportunity to develop a secure attachment to them.
 - building the child to self-esteem.
 - promoting trust through a mature and consistent approach.
 - Encouraging the child to make friends, socialise and build support networks through joining clubs or groups of peers
- keep the child safe including NOT providing or allowing access within the home to dangerous, illegal or inappropriate items, such as weapons, adult films, drugs
- NOT use any form of corporal punishment or inappropriate sanctions
- arrange for the child/young person to receive medical/dental/optical attention when needed and allow him/her to be examined when required by the responsible authority
- ensure that the child/young person has access to a balanced diet and opportunities for exercise commensurate with their abilities
- ensure that the child/young person is encouraged and facilitated to:
 - understand their family history and value their heritage & ethnicity
 - follow cultural traditions and speak their first language
 - practice their religion
 - maintain contact with family members and any others significant to them (unless stipulated otherwise in the placement agreement)
 - acquire skills and knowledge to prepare them for adult and independent life, including their capacity to look after themselves
- ensure that any information given to the Foster Carers regarding a child/young person is kept confidential
- keep a diary of events related to the child/young person
- attend relevant child protection conferences, planning meetings and CLA reviews concerning the child/young person and provide written reports if requested, and help prepare the child/young person attending reviews and other important meetings

External links:

Fostering Network (2009) Foster care placement: regulations and guidance. London: Author. Leaflet available for order from www.fostering.net

The Fostering Network also has links to numerous legislation summaries that detail the expectations of Foster Carers: www.fostering.net/resources/subjects/standards-and-legislation

The Placement Plan

The law requires local authorities to ensure that the placement plan, which sets out the arrangements for the child to live with and be cared for by the [foster carers](#), should include any arrangements for [delegation of authority](#) from the local authority to the foster carer. The placement plan should help the foster carer and the school understand what decisions foster carers can make.

It is therefore vital that schools are familiar with the child's placement plan, so that they are clear which decisions can be made by the foster carer, and which need to be made by the child's social worker

External Links:

Fostering Network (2012). Supporting placement planning: Handbook on delegated authority.

London: Author. Available from:

http://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/public/resources/good-practice-guidance/delegated_authority_handbook_2011.pdf

Appendix 7 – Trauma, Loss and Attachment difficulties

The experience of trauma, loss and attachment difficulties can have long lasting effects on how children and young people relate to others, even if these new relationships are with people who are safe and positive. These experiences can lead to behavioural, emotional and mental health difficulties.

The key role of the VSH is not to diagnose, or prescribe, in response to these issues; this section deliberately avoids suggestion response to these complex issues as 'a little knowledge being a dangerous thing'.

VSH can use these section to raise awareness among local authority and school staff in advance of pressing for specialist training and support for practitioners working directly with the child.

Trauma

Many children have experienced trauma or multiple traumas over a long period of time. Common causes include

- Violence in the home
- Drug and/or alcohol dependence of the care giver. (It is estimated that this is an issue in two thirds of care proceedings)
- Loss of a carer giver (death, abandonment or imprisonment)
- Stressful environment due to housing or financial problems
- Experiences of war or disaster
- Carer ill health (physical or mental health issues)
- Child ill health which may have meant long separations from their care giver due to hospitalisation.
- Parental neglect or abuse. Especially damaging as the person who should be providing safety and care to the child is dangerous and frightening.

Trauma has been linked to a number of behaviours which can be challenging in school including lack of emotional control, poor organisational and planning skills, problems with working memory and difficulty beginning new activities or transitioning between activities. None of these are consciously controlled or deliberate on the part of the child, they are a response to their previous experience. This is not to excuse such behaviours but to seek to explain them.

Children can overcome trauma with support from loving care givers and an effective, secure, nurturing educational placement.

Loss

Before they come into care looked after children may have experienced loss as a result of the difficult relationships with their care givers and the challenging circumstances in which they lived. They may have frequently felt abandoned and feared that they had lost their care giver forever. Alternatively, the child may have experienced inconsistent care, and felt loss and sadness during those times that their needs were not being met.

Being taken into care represents a further loss for the child, even if the attachment that they had to their birth parent was insecure or disorganised. The child loses all that is familiar to them, even if their experiences are far from ideal. Instability in foster placements leads to further experiences of loss.

Thus, looked after children have often experienced multiple losses.

Kubler-Ross (1969) suggested that there are stages that people experiencing loss or grief go through. The stages are

- Shock and denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Despair and depression
- Acceptance/understanding.

Each individual will go through the stages at their own pace, and in different orders.

Attachment

Attachment is the term used to describe the relationship an infant develops with their primary care giver(s). The attachment relationship is an affectionate bond that endures through time and it connects the infant with their care giver(s) physically and emotionally (Bowlby 1969). The attachment relationship develops by care givers responding appropriately to a baby or child's needs. For example, when a baby cries, care givers comfort the baby, feed them or change their nappy, and hold them. The care giver is fulfilling the baby's physical and emotional needs. As the baby gets older and is crawling or walking, they need to see their care giver as a 'secure base' from which they can explore their environment. If the baby gets distressed, they return to their care giver to have their emotional needs met. They are then able to leave their secure base again and learn more about their environment.

Bowlby suggested that these early experiences between an infant and a care giver created the child's 'internal working models'. These models influence what the child thinks about themselves

("am I loveable?"); what they feel about others ("are other people reliable and do they meet my needs?"); and how they experience the world ("is the world out there a safe place to be explored and learn from?").

Ainsworth and others have identified 4 main attachment styles with characteristic behaviours of both the infant and the care giver. It is important to note that insecure ambivalent and insecure avoidant infants do have an attachment to their care giver: as many as 40% of young people in school may have these types of insecure attachments. . "

Appendix 8 – When will boarding be best for vulnerable young people?

From Annex 1 of 'Boarding provision for vulnerable children – pathfinder, DCSF (2009).

The young person

The over-riding concern in any case of a young person who is unlikely to be able to remain 'at home'(with birth family, extended family, foster family) for fifty two weeks a years is what is going to be best for that young person.

A boarding school placement, termly or weekly, as part of a package of support to the young person and his/her carers, might be the best option for a percentage of children on the edge of care. For more troubled children, or those for whom consistent out-of-term arrangements cannot be sustained, boarding in a 'mainstream' school (state or independent) is unlikely to be the best option.

The moral case

We know that at present there are many vulnerable children, young people and families who, for a variety of reasons, do not get the support they need soon enough. As a consequence, children often end up in situations where they achieve poor or limited outcomes. We want to be able to offer different types of placement to meet very different needs. The most important view here is that of the child. Two thirds of looked after children said they would have liked to have been given the option of a boarding place. That's an important message for us. We need at least to consider it with children or young people during and after any assessment of need.

The social case

Boarding will not be the right option for every child and most parents want their child to be supported in their local communities and local day schools. However, for some this will not always be the most effective way to ensure that their individual needs are met. And there will be young people for whom a move out of their home area could be beneficial.

Boarding schools have great potential as an additional option in meeting the needs of these young people and to prevent family breakdown or a move into the care system.

The educational case

12% of looked after children received 5 A*-C at GCSE in 2005, up from 7% in 2000, but the national average is over 60% and rising faster so the gap is widening. The educational outcomes of vulnerable children play a crucial part in determining their future opportunities and prospects. We want to break the pattern of a child's profile and past limiting their progress and prospects.

We are changing the way we think about and deliver education for vulnerable children, recognising that all children have individual learning needs and need stability to thrive. We want to give these young people access to an achievement culture and the cultural and enrichment opportunities that we know can make a real difference to their lives and those of their families.

The business case

The pathfinder is aimed at supporting a future reduction in the number of looked after children, which nationally is currently some 61,000 at any one time and up to 85,000 in the course of the year. We believe that there is already enough evidence to show that boarding schools can provide the stability and continuity of education which will reduce the need for a child to be taken into care and offer better outcomes for those for whom this is a suitable option.

For an authority this option could help to reduce costs overall. This will, of course, depend on the circumstances of the individual child, for example, whether foster care would be needed during the holidays. But typically a boarding place will cost up to £20,000 compared with the average cost of placement with foster families or children's homes of £30,000. Part of the pathfinder's aim is to help young people before they develop the complex problems which necessitate more expensive care options (up to £127,000 per year for example for a place in a children's home) and to offer a way to keep families together.

Local authorities will also be able to work with schools and educational charities to identify additional financial support that can be used to meet the needs of individual children.

Appendix 9 – Powers of direction (looked after children)

From School Admissions Code - statutory guidance for school leaders, governing bodies and local authorities, February 2012. In this extract (para 3.19 – 3.22) the term 'local authority' is the local authority with whom the child is in care, not the host authority where the school may be.

Local authority powers of direction (maintained schools)

A local authority has the power to direct the admission authority for any maintained school in England to admit a child who is looked after by the local authority, even when the school is full. The local authority must not choose a school from which the child is permanently excluded but may choose a school whose infant classes are already at the maximum size.

Before deciding to give a direction, the local authority must consult the admission authority of the school it proposes to direct. The admission authority must tell the local authority within 7 days whether it is willing to admit the child. If, following consultation, the local authority decides to direct, it must inform the admission authority, the governing body (if the school is a voluntary controlled or community school), the local authority that maintains the school, and the head teacher. The admission authority can appeal by referring the case to the Schools Adjudicator within 7 days. If the child has been permanently excluded from two other schools and the most recent exclusion was within the previous two years, the governing body (if the school is a voluntary controlled or community school) may also refer the case to the Adjudicator. The admission authority or governing body **must not** refer the case unless it considers that admitting the child would seriously prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of

resources. If the admission authority or governing body does refer the case, it **must** notify the local authority that looks after the child. The local authority **must not** make a direction until the 7 days have passed and the case has not been referred.

If the case is referred to the Adjudicator, the Adjudicator may either uphold the direction or determine that another maintained school in England **must** admit the child. The Adjudicator's decision is binding. The Adjudicator **must not** direct an alternative school to admit a child unless the local authority that looks after the child agrees, nor if the child is permanently excluded from that school, nor if the admission of the child would seriously prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources.

Secretary of State's power of direction (academies and free schools)

Where a local authority considers that an academy will best meet the needs of any child, it can ask the academy to admit that child but has no power to direct it to do so. The local authority and the academy will usually come to an agreement, but if the academy refuses to admit the child, the local authority can [ask the Secretary of State to intervene](#). The Secretary of State has the power under an academy's Funding Agreement to direct the academy to admit a child, and can seek advice from the Adjudicator in reaching a decision.

Appendix 10 - Virtual School Headteacher Report Headings

These are suggested, not exclusive, headings based on creating an 'Ofsted ready' Virtual School.

Achievements

Summary of achievements of the Virtual School over the last academic year

- Training (by audience) delivered and planned
- Evidence of collaborative working in cross service/LA groups
- Staffing
- Staffing structure
- Staff CPD and training opportunities summary
- Performance summary to include summative and formative information across the cohort from Early Years to post 16 (this should be a succinct summary as evidence will have been available throughout the year. Alternatively, more detailed information can be provided in appendices)
- Communications with other agencies, locally, regionally and nationally – establishment of website, early learning packages etc
- Progress and development re Personal Education Plans

Pupil issues

- School roll and [characteristics](#)
- Number of pupils by phase and location
- Number of pupils placed and educated in Out Of Authority placements
- Number of pupils forming the cohort of having been looked-after for 12 months as at 31 March in line with the Outcomes for Looked After Children Statistical First Release published each December

- Destination pathway of Year 11 pupils
- Attendance
- Exclusions
- Admissions and number of pupils admitted within statutory 20 school day timeframe
- Admissions: number where a direction was made by the local authority, number where direction was upheld by the Schools Adjudicator, number of academies where a request to the Secretary of State to direct was made, number of academies where the Secretary of State upheld the request.
- Time taken to access education for those placed within and outside LA (within statutory 20 school day timescale)
- Pupils with disrupted education and remedial/management action
- Number of pupils in Virtual School attending a 'good' school as recognised by recent Ofsted judgment.
- Status of schools which do not come into this category where children in care to LA are placed
- Pupils not attending school and details of their alternative provision, including DfE registration, and number of hours accessed
- Details of all pupils receiving alternative education and individual plans for their return to mainstream education (if applicable)
- Details of all pupils missing from education and management action to locate and place them

Use of funding available to the Virtual School

- Identify current funding streams (e.g. Pupil Premium) and whether externally or internally generated
- Give evidence of the use of and impact of funding on pupil achievement
- Where possible provide case studies to exemplify the use of funding and its impact

Impact of the Virtual School

- Using data to inform and drive progress

Taking account of the groups of pupils within Ofsted designated categories:

- Children out of authority
- Children with a plan for adoption
- Children in foster care
- Children in residential settings
- Children with a plan to return home
- Children with disabilities
- Unaccompanied Asylum seeking Children and Young People
- Care leavers if their attainment, progress or EET status is the responsibility of the VSH rather than the care leaving service)

Case Studies

Individual, anonymised, case studies will be helpful to evidence the work of the VSH.