



**ADCS**  
Leading Children's Services



**Joint Policy Paper**  
**The Educational Achievement of Children in Care**

---

**December 2015**

**The Association of Directors of Children's Services**

**National Consortium for Examination Results**

**The National Association of Virtual School Heads**



## The Educational Achievement of Children in Care

Improving the educational outcomes for children in care is a priority for national and local government. The evidence is clear – whatever else goes wrong in children's lives, their life chances are significantly improved when they achieve decent educational outcomes. Local authorities and their directors of children's services are the corporate parents for children in care, with moral and professional responsibilities to maximise their educational outcomes.

Building on evidence from recent research carried out by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), working with the Virtual School Heads Network and the National Consortium for Examination Results, wants to stimulate a national debate about improving support and ambition for children in care, and, through that, to improve educational outcomes and life chances for all children in care.

The relationship between being in care and poor educational outcomes is explained, in part, by the trauma of pre-care experiences such as poverty, maltreatment and neglect. The research findings suggest that care generally provides a protective factor, with early admission to care being associated with consistently better educational outcomes. Care also benefits those admitted into the care system later, but it does not fully reverse the damage that has already been done.

In this paper ADCS and its partners make a number of recommendations to the Department for Education, Ofsted, local authorities, and schools. The recommendations are based on findings from the research as well as previous work. These recommendations, if implemented, will improve significantly the educational outcomes for children in care.

A central recommendation is for the development and implementation of a new national system for monitoring educational outcomes and progress for children in care, based on the findings from the research about the factors that impact on educational outcomes for this particularly vulnerable group of children.

In the past the information and analysis available to national and local government has been patchy and has been used inconsistently. The relevant Statistical First Releases have provided a useful starting point, but what is proposed here is a consistent national evidence-based system that enables national government, local authorities, schools and Ofsted to assess, monitor and report on the educational achievement and progress of children in care nationally, locally, at institutional level, and individually, with four key aims:

- To identify and disseminate effective practice
- To enable all parts of the system to be held properly to account



- To improve the educational provision and outcomes for children in care both in aggregate and individually
- To inform future research.

This paper urges a national debate on how we can best achieve a shared ambition to improve educational outcomes and progress for children in care. The paper analyses the issues, drawing on both academic research and existing work in local authorities and schools, and makes proposals for a national approach that will meet these four aims. The proposals have been developed with a view to minimising complexity and cost, while maximising the utility of the information and analyses.

Once this paper has been considered by all partners, the next step will be to identify the necessary resources, and to develop and implement a detailed project plan. We would hope to have the new systems in place for September 2016.

Debbie Barnes  
Chair, ADCS Educational Achievement Policy Committee

Alan Clifton  
On behalf of the Virtual School Heads Network

John Freeman CBE  
Chair, NCER

December 2015



## The Educational Achievement of Children in Care

### Executive Summary

This paper is drawn from work carried out by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the Virtual School Heads Network and the National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER), supported by findings from research carried out jointly by The Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol, supported by the Nuffield Foundation. The paper makes a number of recommendations for all parts of the system – the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, local authorities, virtual schools, and schools.

ADCS, as the leadership organisation for local authority children's services professionals, wants to stimulate a national debate on the evidence and the recommendations set out within the paper, and, through that, to improve educational outcomes and life chances for all children in care.

The starting point for much further work will be the development of a national information management and analysis system that will enable practitioners at all levels to be able to analyse and report on performance against the significant factors identified through research, and it is proposed that such a system be commissioned and implemented as soon as possible.

### Key issues

- 1. While children in care typically achieve substantially less well than their peers on all educational measures, there is a strong association between the length of time in care and positive educational outcomes at age 16.** When the educational outcomes for children in care are compared with their peers with similar backgrounds, the achievement gap is very much smaller. Being in care is associated with improved educational outcomes when compared to children in need – those on the edge of care.
- 2. The cohort of children in care, while large nationally, is relatively small and heterogeneous locally.** Simplistic headline year-on-year metrics are not statistically valid when assessing performance at local authority or school level. The fluidity of the care population is another factor that makes year-on-year comparison difficult.
- 3. A number of factors have been identified through research and local practice that are closely linked to poorer educational outcomes.** Some of these factors are outside of the control of local authorities and schools, while other factors can be ameliorated through changing policy or practice. So, the damage to the brain associated with foetal alcohol syndrome cannot be changed, though the later effects can be reduced by appropriate support. Childhood trauma and neglect can cause both permanent and temporary effects. Attachment difficulties arising from childhood trauma significantly affect



learning [Reference 5]. The impact of all these difficulties can be mitigated by skilled practitioners.

An example of a variable factor would be the aggregate number of days missed from school for any reason.

Of course, statistical linkages are not necessarily causal, and continued systemic longitudinal research is needed to identify causal factors and to ensure that policy and practice are focused on minimising the detrimental impact of those factors identified as having the greatest impact.

**4. Far too many children in care do not make 'expected progress' from the point they are taken into care. The national ambition must be for children in care to make *better* than expected progress, and to provide appropriate support to ensure that this ambition can be met.** Too often there is an underlying assumption that simply being in care leads to poor outcomes. This assumption is strongly refuted by the research evidence. This incorrect assumption leads to educational targets being set too low, and not being sufficiently challenging. This can have the further consequence that appropriate remedial and support action is not taken, as it is not required to help children in care meet the unchallenging targets. Since children entering care have often had very poor experiences up to that point, the reality is that it is entirely appropriate that accelerated progress targets should be set on entry to, and during their journey through, care, accompanied by appropriate educational support.

**5. The educational needs of individual children in care should be properly assessed by schools, with accelerated targets for educational progress, with the professional and care-based support needed to achieve those targets.** For example, the benefits of schools actively contributing to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and using Personal Education Plans to provide a framework for improving emotional wellbeing and resilience, should not be underestimated. Additional resources such as Pupil Premium Plus should be targeted precisely, in order to provide the appropriate support for individual children in order to help them achieve their accelerated targets. Additional resources should *not* be used generically, as the additional needs of children in care are individual, and vary greatly from child to child.

**6. Local authorities and virtual schools should have access to all relevant information about *all* children in care educated locally, whatever their 'home' local authority, in order to provide integrated support and challenge for local schools.** Virtual school heads have two roles – first, as corporate parents of all their local authority's children in care, wherever placed or educated; and second, to ensure that local schools, settings, and other services provide a good service for all children in care, wherever they are from. Virtual school heads need to collaborate when children in care have educational placements outside their 'home' local authority, however, the key responsibility remains with the Virtual School Head from the 'home' local authority.

**7. Local authorities, virtual schools, and schools should all have ready access to easy-to-use information analysis to assess and improve both their own performance in respect of children in care overall, and of individual children in care.**



The information management system should enable both retrospective analysis and analysis of current learning activity.

8. **An information management and analysis system is proposed that will enable educational tracking of children in care, reporting on performance at national, local and institutional level.** The system, working name '*Circe*', will, for economy, be built around the existing NCER data architecture, and will enable sophisticated analysis of the factors that impact on educational achievement, and will also provide a rich source for further longitudinal research to inform policy and practice improvement.



## The Educational Achievement of Children in Care

### 1. Introduction

This paper has been prepared on behalf of:

- The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the local authority leadership organisation for children's services professionals
- The Virtual School Heads Network, representing local authority virtual school provision specifically aimed at children in care. The Virtual School Heads Network is in the process of becoming a charitable trust, the National Association of Virtual School Heads
- The National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER), the not-for-profit community interest company mutually owned by all local authorities and which carries out national analysis of educational performance for local authorities and schools.

The proposals for action and recommendations are based on the work of the ADCS Educational Achievement Policy Committee, the Virtual School Heads Network, and the NCER, and are informed by The Rees Centre literature review, and the conclusions of the research jointly undertaken by The Rees Centre at the University of Oxford and the University of Bristol, supported by the Nuffield Foundation.

Local authorities have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare and educational achievement of children in their care. Typically, children in care achieve at a significantly lower level than their peers and too often make less progress than would be expected for other children. As leaders responsible for ensuring that the local authority discharges its duty, directors of children's services and lead members for children's services must ensure that closing the attainment and progress gap between children in care and their peers is a priority for action. Local authorities must develop appropriate local policies and practices both to create a culture of high aspiration and to improve educational outcomes and life chances for children in care.

National government and local authorities have been working in this direction for many years, for example through the creation of virtual schools. The most recent statutory guidance was published by the Department for Education in July 2014 [Reference 3], and Statistical First Releases on children in care have been published annually [Reference 4]. These documents have proved very helpful in promoting understanding of the issues and development of good practice. However, there has been a paucity of secure evidence both on linking practice to outcomes, and the factors that influence educational achievement for this particularly vulnerable group.

As a starting point, children in care must have access to a suitable range of high quality education placement options which will promote their educational achievement. Since the implementation of the Academies Act 2010, the education system has radically changed and we have seen, and continue to see, the development of an increasingly autonomous school system. In light of this, it is appropriate that the sector reviews the critical roles which local authorities, schools and academies, multi-academy trusts, academy chains,



regional school commissioners, and Ofsted play in closing the attainment and progress gap and their respective roles in creating a culture of high aspirations and ambitious targets for these learners.

In February 2015, improving the educational achievement of children in care was identified as a key issue as an area for investigation and action by the Association of Directors of Children's Services' Council of Reference. The challenge has been taken on by the Educational Achievement Policy Committee, which over recent months has worked with the Virtual School Heads Network, the National Consortium for Examination Results (NCER), and the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education at Oxford University.

The Rees Centre and the University of Bristol have been undertaking research into educational achievement and progress of children in care, and researchers have visited two ADCS policy committee meetings in recent months to discuss the remit of this study and share an overview of their early findings. A literature review has been published [Reference 1], and the main research report was published on 30 November 2015 [Reference 2]. This paper incorporates the key findings from the research.

One important conclusion from the research is that simply being in care does not, of itself, lead to substantially worse educational outcomes. Of course, this is good news, but the research then identifies a number of important factors that impact negatively on educational outcomes and which are too often associated with being in the care system. The recommendations and proposals in this paper are designed to help minimise the negative factors and their effect, and to enable local authorities and schools to monitor and assess the impact of improvement measures both individually and in the aggregate, so that further evidence-based improvement measures can be implemented.

This paper proposes a standardised national and local authority information management and analysis system, and how this system should be designed in the light of the evidence. There is much innovative practice at local authority and school level, and one of the benefits of a national information management system will be that the outcomes of effective local practice will be more easily identified and disseminated. So, for example, the use of 'Pupil Premium Plus', the deployment of counsellors and educational psychologists, and the provision of training and support for foster carers and social workers, are all areas ripe for further evidence-based research. The paper notes a number of areas where further work on practice development could be taken forward.

As a general observation on the information management and analysis systems proposed, and indeed on virtual school practice more generally, the intention is absolutely *not* to explain away failure by identifying factors that lead to underachievement. Rather, the aim is to provide all concerned – particularly virtual school heads and designated teachers, foster carers and social workers, and of course children and young people themselves – with the information necessary both to set accelerated targets for progression and achievement, and, vitally, to provide the targeted support necessary to make these targets achievable. Finally, the aim is to provide information that will enable the whole system, at every level, to be held to account for its performance in improving outcomes for children in care, through a shared ambition to be aspirational.





National systems and processes are in place for assessing and reporting on the educational achievement of all children. However, these systems are continuing to evolve, and the analysis and proposals in this paper relating to the educational achievement of children in care will need to evolve in the light of the broader national changes. However, the proposed information management system builds on the architecture of the existing analytical system (Nexus) developed by NCER for local authorities; Nexus is already being developed to respond to these national changes.



## 2. The Present Position

The DfE focus on outcomes for children in care, reflected in the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework, is limited to the achievements of this cohort at the end of Key Stages (FSP and 1- 4). A focus on outcomes at Key Stage 4 is important and must be retained, as achievement at age 16 is a vital gateway to future learning and employment. However, the adoption of this single focus does not, by itself, provide the DfE, Ofsted, local authorities, schools, academies, multi-academy trusts, academy chains, and regional school commissioners with a comprehensive picture in order properly to assess their various impacts on educational progress of children in care. Even more importantly, a singular focus on outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4 does not enable a better understanding of those factors which impact, positively and negatively, upon progress and achievement.

Some children in the care of the local authority take longer to fulfil their educational potential than those not in care, especially those who enter the care system relatively late. Taking life-influencing public examinations at age 16 is just too soon for some young people, especially those who have been taken into care during Key Stage 4, and an assessment of their achievement at a later age may be more appropriate, especially in light of the raising of the participation age to 18 in September 2015 and the ongoing duties of local authorities towards care leavers.

While ADCS, the Virtual School Heads Network and NCER can develop and implement more sophisticated and helpful metrics and methodologies, it would be helpful if the national accountability framework was updated to take these developments into account.

An effective dataset and associated analyses would enable local authorities, schools, academies, multi-academy trusts, academy chains, and regional school commissioners to understand their own relative performance better. This, in turn, would help local authorities to take improvement action, and help them, as corporate parents, to make more informed choices about schooling for individual children in care.

The improved dataset would enable the Department for Education and Ofsted to develop accountability measures for local authorities and schools which integrate overall educational outcomes, educational progress, and relate these to the factors which are most likely to have a positive impact on the progress and achievement of children in care into a single narrative. This would also facilitate the identification and sharing of excellence.

### Recommendation 1

**ADCS, DfE and Ofsted should work together to develop a more comprehensive set of metrics and analyses to enable a better assessment of local authority and school performance, including the consideration of longer-term outcomes post-16, post-18 and post-25.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 18 for further details.)**



### 3. Methodological Considerations

The issues surrounding the educational progress and achievement of children in care are complex, and oversimplification is not helpful, particularly when a wide range of factors are known to affect overall outcomes. Children in care are a heterogeneous group. In addition, the overall performance of local authorities, schools and other agencies has many dimensions.

While this paper argues for a more sophisticated and evidence-based dataset and associated analyses, this should not be taken as attempting to find factors to explain away – and therefore, implicitly, to accept – failure to support children in achieving the best possible outcomes. Rather, having a more complete view of the factors impacting on educational progress and achievement, and specifically on underachievement and lack of progress, will enable local authorities, schools and other agencies either to ameliorate or to reduce or remove negative factors, and for schools and virtual schools to set individual children realistic but challenging progress targets along with the provision of appropriate support.

There is strong research evidence that the following factors are associated with the educational achievement of children in care. The changing, child-centred, and inter-related nature of these factors is not conducive to simplistic analysis. It should be noted that while some of these factors are fixed, in that they have already occurred, others can be affected by policy and practice:

- Whether the child has additional learning needs and the nature of those needs if so, and in particular the nature of any developmental problems since conception
- The length of time the child has been in care
- The age of the child when they entered the care system
- The number of care placements the child has been in and when the changes took place, noting that changes can have positive effects – maintaining a unsuitable placement to avoid a change would, of course, be a perverse decision
- The number of school placements the child has had, and when these took place, again noting that changes can have positive effects
- Whether the child is or has been eligible for free school meals
- The type of school the child attends (in-area or out-of-area / mainstream or special / pupil referral unit)
- The Ofsted rating of school that the child attends
- The number and length of any exclusions
- The aggregate amount of school absence for any reason, whether through sickness, fixed-term exclusions, permanent exclusions, failure to secure a school place, or otherwise
- The number of social workers the child has had whilst in care.



#### 4. Conclusions from Research Evidence and Practice Outcomes

Discussions between ADCS, virtual school heads and The Rees Centre researchers have led to some important general conclusions:

- While the overall population of children in care is statistically significant, at a local level, the relatively small numbers in each age cohort (perhaps only one child for a school, or fewer than 20 per cohort in a typical local authority) and the unique characteristics of each child lead to a high level of variation in the cohort from year to year. These variations include fluctuating percentages of pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan), the prevalence of English as an additional language, and free school meal eligibility. Whilst the whole school population is subject to some variability, this becomes much more pronounced in this very small and heterogeneous cohort.

##### **Recommendation 2**

**Year-on-year cohort outcome analysis has no statistical validity at local authority or school level and should not be used to assess or compare local authority or school performance over time.**

**The DfE and Ofsted should end the use of year-on-year cohort outcome analysis.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 1 for further action.)**

- The DfE methodology for assessing local authority performance on 'closing the attainment gap' at each key stage is based on performance of the whole cohort of children in care where they have been in care longer than 12 months, excluding certain groups of pupils from the measure, such as pupils who attend special schools. Pupils with an EHC Plan attending a special school, or an enhanced resource centres attached to a mainstream school, whose additional needs exclude them from access to the national curriculum should therefore be excluded from this indicator. Any analysis should be considered in the light of the cohort size, as above.

##### **Recommendation 3**

**The DfE should review and update the methodology for aggregating and reporting on performance on 'closing the attainment gap' so that all comparisons are made on a like-for-like basis so as to avoid perverse comparisons, placements and incentives.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 1 for further action.)**



- The most critical measure of impact is educational progress while in care. It is the progress a child makes whilst in the care of the local authority that most accurately reflects the impact of the school and the local authority, and this should form the basis of a national benchmark for effectiveness. Ensuring that achievement targets are based on accelerated progress, and then maximising progress by providing support to meet the challenging targets, must be the key strategy. So progress at all key stages, including from early years Key Stage 1, should be considered and assessed against the whole school cohort and also against the different factors influencing progress, such as eligibility for free school meals (FSM) / English as an additional language (EAL) / additional education needs (AEN). This would enable a greater understanding of the impact of social care interventions by enabling local authorities to take into account the child's starting point at entry into care and of the impact of teaching in achieving accelerated progress relative to their peers. This should be complemented with an assessment of the starting point and relative progress against pupils with otherwise similar characteristics who are not in care.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network should develop measures to assess the progress of individual children in care, with reference to their starting point on entry to care, with a view to targets for progress being accelerated with reference to the population not in care, with explicit learning support provided to support the meeting of accelerated targets.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 1 for further action.)**

- A related conclusion concerns the sometimes-limited levels of aspiration schools have for learners who are in care. There are two particular areas revealed by the research and practice reviews. First, there is evidence that some special schools, and in particular schools for emotional and behavioural difficulty, sometimes do not enter pupils for qualifications that they should be capable of attaining based on Key Stage 2 attainment and general progress in Key Stages 3 and 4, due to a lack of aspiration and the level of additional support required. Secondly, local authority analyses have shown that some schools consistently fail to set aspirational targets or predictions based on better-than-expected progress for this vulnerable cohort. There is evidence that some schools where these concerns have been raised have been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted. If we are to have a national ambition, this must be consistently applied.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**Secondary schools, alternative provision and other settings should always set appropriate targets for progress, and provide appropriate support, with a view to entering children in care for the qualifications that they are capable of attaining.**



**Virtual school heads should monitor and support schools and other providers through the mechanism of the Personal Education Plan (PEP).**

**Virtual school heads should support and challenge schools to set ambitious targets for every child immediately on entry to care, and to provide appropriate learning support, with clear escalation processes to the local authority for maintained schools, regional schools commissioners for academies, and Ofsted where problems persist.**

**Local authorities, Ofsted and regional schools commissioners should identify where pupils are not being entered for appropriate qualifications and where schools and other settings are failing to set appropriate targets for progress.**

Those responsible for the PEP should work to agree what qualifications each child in care is 'capable of attaining', and support should be provided to ensure that a child has the opportunity to gain these qualifications.

Many children in care are educated by schools or other providers located in local authorities distant from their home. Conversely, many schools educate children in care from several different local authorities. In order to monitor and support schools, it is important that the 'local' Virtual School Head knows all the children in care being educated in a school, even though the 'corporate parent' responsibility remains with the 'home' local authority.

The Children and Families Act 2014 amends section 22 of the Children Act 1989 to require every local authority in England to "*appoint an officer employed by the authority, or another authority, to make sure that its duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children is properly discharged. For the purpose of this guidance that officer is hereafter referred to as the Virtual School Head*". In this context, local authorities may make arrangements to 'employ' virtual school heads to act on their behalf with respect to children in their care being educated in schools in other local authorities.

### **Recommendation 6**

**Virtual school heads should have access to all support plans and targets for children in their care, wherever they are educated. Where children in care are not being educated in the 'home' local authority, the 'home' virtual school head with corporate parenting responsibilities will need to liaise with the 'local' virtual school head who works with local schools.**

**ADCS should agree with the DfE a form of words that will enable such arrangements to operate.**



### Recommendation 7

**Ofsted should consider making the failure to enter children in care for appropriate qualifications, to set accelerated and challenging targets, or to provide appropriate learning support, a limiting judgment in school inspections.**

### Recommendation 8

**As representatives of corporate parents, ADCS should initiate a national conversation with the DfE, regional schools commissioners, Ofsted and other national partners to agree a nationally-agreed ambition for children in care.**

The choice of school for children in care has been identified as a key issue, as has prompt admission to the chosen school. Local authorities and schools need to take steps to ensure that the Admissions Code is followed, and that social workers and foster carers are aware of their responsibilities and that ambitions for children in care are not muted. There is anecdotal evidence to the effect that statements have been made along these lines *"It wouldn't be fair to make XX unhappy by placing them in a school which will stretch them."* Along with improving school admissions, managing exclusions from school, both fixed term and permanent, is an important responsibility for schools, foster carers and social workers to avoid children in care missing education.

### Recommendation 9

**Children in care should, so far as possible, have unbroken educational placements in good or outstanding schools that meet their educational needs. To this end:**

- **Local authorities and virtual school heads should work with foster carers and social workers to develop an understanding of the admissions and exclusions processes, and their responsibilities in these areas.**
- **Virtual school heads should agree any change in education placement except in an emergency, in which case the Virtual School Head should be notified without delay.**
- **Local authorities, through virtual school heads and, for academies, regional schools commissioners, should be able to direct any school to admit a child in care without delay.**
- **Regional schools commissioners should work with virtual school heads and take any necessary action to ensure that children in care are admitted promptly to academies.**



- **Virtual school heads, local authorities, schools, regional schools commissioners and academies should collaborate to reduce to a minimum both permanent and fixed-term exclusions.**

## 5. Wider Contextual Issues

The Rees Centre research clearly sets out the wider contextual issues which impact most significantly on the educational attainment and progress of children in care. These issues should be considered when determining a single standardised dataset in order to help social workers, teachers, mentors and foster carers to understand, and carry out effectively, their personal and professional roles and responsibilities in improving attainment and progress in learning. A dataset which combines accountability measures (as above) and wider contextual factors will help all concerned, at every level from the national to the individual child in care, to understand better what constitutes good practice.

The research shows that the following factors have a significant impact on the educational attainment and progress of children in care:

- ***The research shows unequivocally that the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children in care has a significant impact on their learning.*** This is entirely unsurprising, so it should be universal and routine practice for schools and foster carers, as well as social workers, to undertake the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) with the child. The findings of this exercise should then feed into the Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP should set out how the school, working with foster carers, the local authority and others will put in place strategies which will positively impact on mental health and in turn learning outcomes. Research published earlier this year by the NSPCC reinforced the value of the SDQ and highlighted that not all authorities use this tool comprehensively, or in a small number of cases, at all. It should, however, be remembered that the SDQ is only an initial assessment of underlying issues, and the provision of appropriate support requires the underlying issues to be fully assessed. For example, NICE has published guidelines on attachment, with recommendations for the actions that schools should take to support children with attachment difficulties. [Reference 5]

### Recommendation 10

**ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network should actively promote:**

- **Understanding of attachment difficulties and trauma on learning**
- **Comprehensive and effective use of the SDQ**
- **The development of explicit strategies, recorded in PEPs, to address issues highlighted by SDQ scores.**





**Ofsted and the DfE should include compliance with regard to completion of the SDQ by schools and foster carers in regulatory and inspection activities. Ofsted should sample SDQ quality as part of inspection.**

- ***The evidence is that stability of education and social care placements are critical factors in achieving good outcomes.*** As discussed above, children in care should not be subject to delays in obtaining a school place and nor should they be excluded without a discussion with the local authority first taking place to ensure that there is suitable alternative provision immediately available. The evidence is that gaps between school placements set back progress, and can also cause safeguarding problems. It is common for schools to 'manage move' pupils rather than exclude them and this may be appropriate, though virtual school heads should be involved at all stages. These issues highlight that using permanent exclusions as a single metric is misleading. Fixed term exclusions or aggregate time out of school would provide more information. Every day away from learning has a detrimental effect on learning and social integration, and any delays in placement should be subject to external scrutiny and rapid action. There is some limited evidence that a small number of fixed term exclusions does not have a significant detrimental effect. Further work needs to be undertaken on this point, but the proposed metric of 'total time away from learning for any cause' seems a good starting point.
- ***The Personal Education Plan (PEP) is the most important tool to monitor, challenge, and support schools, and to track progress and effectiveness at pupil level.*** The PEP reflects the importance of a personalised approach to learning which secures good basic skills, stretches aspirations and builds life chances. The PEP is the joint responsibility of the local authority and the school. However, PEPs vary across the country, and consideration should be given to standardisation.

Both social care and education placement stability are important. However, some placement changes are well-thought-through and positive, and are designed to improve outcomes.

### **Recommendation 11**

**ADCS, with the Virtual School Heads Network, and in consultation with the DfE, should develop a standardised dataset for PEPs and the extension of the proposed tracking tool to incorporate PEPs.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 1 for further action.)**



### Recommendation 12

**Ofsted should consider incorporating in the school inspection framework an assessment of:**

- **The time it takes for a school to accept a child in care onto the school roll from the day the request for a placement is received from the local authority**
- **Fixed term exclusions for children in care, as well as total days spent out of school for any reason**
- **The completion and quality of Personal Education Plans.**

### Recommendation 13

**The DfE should, in consultation with ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network:**

- **Amend the national dataset to include measures of education progress and the stability of social care and education placements**
- **Update the stability indicator to remove the disincentive with regard to positive placement moves.**

**(Refer to Recommendation 1 for further action.)**

### **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**

The evidence shows that children in care have disproportionately high levels of special educational needs, so it must be a priority to ensure that the recent SEND reforms have the most positive impact for this vulnerable group. ADCS and partners believe that the reforms will deliver improved services generally, but there remain a number of issues in terms of practice and process which would benefit from further consideration.

The joining-up of assessment processes, and the planning for and delivery of services, around social care needs, health needs and education needs through a single planning framework is the right approach. However, in practice, and in part due to the heavily regulated care planning requirements, several different regulatory frameworks apply to the development of EHCPs and reviews for children in care. In order to support children in care who have special educational needs more effectively, these assessment processes need to be better integrated and aligned. This paper does not make proposals in this respect, which is left as an area for further discussion.

A caring and supporting foster or residential placement is also critical to helping children learn. Placements which make learning a priority enable children to develop a sense of



belonging which makes it more likely that the placement will be stable and that the child will achieve. Foster carers and residential social workers should be supported in this respect, with appropriate training.

The educational placement itself, usually a school, needs to be attuned to the needs of children in care. For example, as noted previously, many children in care suffer from pre-existing attachment difficulties and this can cause them to exhibit difficult behaviours. The best schools are 'attachment friendly' and work explicitly to ensure that children with these difficulties, not just children in care, are well-supported and nurtured.

We need to develop an agreed 'education offer' for our children in care so they are aware of what they have a right to expect from schools, carers, health professionals and their corporate parents. Conversely, information about such an agreed 'education offer' will be of great value to schools, carers, health professionals and corporate parents as they develop their services.

#### **Recommendation 14**

**ADCS should work with partners, including children in care councils, to develop an agreed 'education offer' for children in care so that they are aware of what they have a right to expect from schools, carers, health professionals and their corporate parents, and so that professionals and carers working with children in care know what is being expected of them.**

#### **Recommendation 15**

**The DfE should:**

- **Work with ADCS to explore system re-design to achieve a more integrated approach to assessing, planning, delivering and monitoring the education, health and care needs of children in care**
- **Consider requiring local authorities to provide training and support on education issues to foster carers and residential social workers**
- **Issue the NICE guidance on attachment [Reference 5] to all schools, with particular, but not exclusive, reference to supporting children in care.**

#### **Data returns**

At present, the DfE uses data returned directly from schools in official statistics, and does not check returns with local authorities or virtual schools. The accuracy and reliability of school returns is of significant concern to virtual school heads. The quality of data returns to the DfE could be improved by requiring virtual school heads to check relevant school



data returns before they are sent to the DfE, in order to ensure they are accurate and up to date, or alternatively to submit the relevant data directly, on behalf of all schools.

The Virtual School Heads Network is in the process of developing a set of agreed standards for use across the country. This would provide all schools with a practice framework against which to self-assess, and which would enable all schools to be ready to work positively from the start with a new child in care, minimising delay in placement and any negative impacts of a placement move.

#### **Recommendation 16**

**The DfE should work with ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network to deliver an improved set of data returns with appropriate quality assurance.**



## 6. Driving Improvement

As well as setting out the case for alternative measures including accountability measures and influencing measures, this paper highlights the need for a greater understanding of which interventions are effective. Pupil premium research confirms that there needs to be a relentless focus on the quality of teaching and learning, and the match of intervention strategies to pupils' needs, with evaluation embedded at all points. However, there remains a dearth of evidence on what strategies and approaches work best for children in care.

Further research is clearly needed, as indicated by the research recommendations. The proposed information management and analysis tools (see below) will provide a rich resource for longitudinal research.

In addition to implementing the proposed information management and analysis systems, and considering the recommendations above, there are a number of other areas which would benefit from a national discussion across the sector, and with the DfE and Ofsted. These areas are outlined below:

- **The role teaching schools could play** in driving improvement for the educational attainment and progress of children in care and the potential role for virtual schools in this area, one possibility being that the Virtual School Heads Network be allocated Teaching School resources to operate peer review and challenge
- **Minimising placement moves, especially at Key Stage 4** during examination courses, by, for example, requiring that the Director of Children's Services should formally approve a placement move during critical Key Stage 4 level studies
- **A nationally-funded training programme to help foster carers** better understand and deliver their role in supporting learners and improving educational outcomes, noting that the Rees Centre research indicates carers can be a strong positive influence
- **More research on how foster carers and residential social workers can best work to improve educational outcomes**, as well as the impact of specific interventions
- **Assessing the effectiveness of virtual schools** through a peer review mechanism building on the emerging sector-led models being introduced into the education sector
- **A significant number of children in care already attend good or outstanding schools, yet this is not reflected in the results achieved by individual learners.** This suggests that there may be a disconnect between Ofsted education and social care frameworks which would merit further consideration



- Given the disproportionate numbers of **children in care with special educational needs**, a statement of educational need or an EHC Plan it is important that:
  - the **different regulatory frameworks are better integrated and aligned**
  - the **framework for the new SEND inspections** pays particular attention to children in care.

### Recommendation 17

**The DfE, ADCS, Ofsted and the Virtual School Heads Network should work to stimulate a national discussion on areas of activity, other than those considered in detail by this paper, that would support improved educational outcomes for children in care.**



## **7. Proposal for a National Information Management System for the Education of Children in Care – working title 'Circe'**

The national dataset and data management and analysis processes should focus on the child's whole journey in education – their progress and their outcomes – not just the period in care, and, equally, not simply the outcomes at the end of schooling.

Considering progress and outcomes over a longer period of time will provide a more sophisticated and helpful view of the impact of care and educational support. Using the Rees Centre research, and based on good practice from the Virtual School Heads Network, a national data management framework should be developed which would enable the key information to be collected in order to:

- Support virtual schools in their work with schools in setting accelerated targets, and implementing support, for children in care
- Support directors of children's services and regional schools commissioners in holding all schools and academies, including virtual schools, to account
- Provide comparative information and analysis, both to promote effective practice and peer support and to improve outcomes for individuals directly
- Provide metrics for every part of the system from DfE, Ofsted, local authorities, virtual schools and schools to enable proper accountability systems.

The creation of a national data management and analysis system will enable individual schools to raise expectations and will encourage policy shifts that will improve outcomes.

The required information is largely held in the National Pupil Database although this may need to be supplemented by other national data and local authority data that is not collected nationally. Another benefit of such a national system would be that local authorities would be able to identify both their own children in care, wherever they are educated, and also all children in care being educated in their local area. As part of their normal operations, virtual school heads will need to ensure that the data for children in care educated in schools outside their home local authority is maintained accurately.

Any information relating to children in care is, inevitably, very sensitive. NCER systems already have security features in place to avoid potential misuse of personal information. These security features will need to be reviewed and extended as necessary to ensure that only properly authorised access to sensitive data is possible.

DfE support will be needed to access the necessary sensitive information on an ongoing basis. The National Pupil Database is updated termly.

There are two separate aspects to the analyses that could be made available, reporting and tracking. Reporting essentially looks back at performance over time, while tracking will



enable also such features as target-setting. The 'background' data processing is not discussed here but there will be significant overlap between these two functions.

It is vital to note that children in care are a highly heterogeneous group, and that age cohort analysis at local authority and school level requires careful analysis against a number of factors. When considered as a whole population however, the research indicates that there are enough children in care overall and within each grouping to draw at least tentative conclusions. All conclusions from statistical analysis must be considered tentative until appropriate scrutiny and mediation has been undertaken. And conclusions about individual children in care need to be considered locally by virtual school heads and schools.

The general proposals below for the information management and analysis systems have been developed under the working title 'Circe'.

## Reporting

Nexus, the existing NCER reporting tool, could be extended to enable authorised users to filter on any of these factors, or any combination of these factors, as well as existing factors used within Nexus such as gender and term of birth. This would enable a wide range of analyses for the local authority, schools and individual children, and would enable virtual school heads and school designated teachers and others to assess performance at every level in the system, particularly with a view to identifying local or national factors that have particularly negative effects, and which therefore require specific interventions.

The primary users will be local authorities (virtual school heads) and schools (designated teachers), and each would only have access to the information and analyses required by that user. So, for example, designated teachers in schools would be able to compare their school and their children in care with other schools in the local authority and nationally, but only to access individual pupil data as it relates to their school. By contrast, virtual school heads would have access to all the data, including pupil-level data, for their local authority, but only be able to compare their local authority with other aggregate local authorities and national figures against specific factors, singly or in combination.

Subject to discussion with DfE and Ofsted, and with academic researchers, and appropriate arrangements for secure data access in accordance with DfE data access agreements where the data derives from DfE sources, access to aggregate and anonymised data could, in principle, be made available beyond local authorities and individual schools.

A number of factors that impact specifically on the achievement of children in care have been identified through research. These are listed below, alongside an analysis of whether they are 'fixed' or relate to decisions made within the education system. There is an overlap with some factors, such as additional needs.

Further work needs to be undertaken to identify the precise definitions of each of the factors, so that the maximum useful information can be extracted from the analyses, and





so that the analyses can be carried out without unnecessary and time-consuming further data collection.

Factor	Primary data source	Fixed/variable
Time in care	NPD	Fixed
Key Stage at start of care	NPD	Fixed
Number of placements	LA	Variable (minimise)
Number of school changes	NPD	Variable (minimise)
Additional Needs	NPD / LA	Hybrid
Free School Meals	NPD	Fixed
School type	NPD	Variable
Exclusions	NPD	Variable (minimise)
Attendance	NPD	Hybrid (maximise)
Ofsted rating of school	Ofsted	Hybrid
Number of social workers	LA	Variable
Language where not English	NPD	Fixed
Prior performance	NPD	Fixed
End of Key Stage performance	NPD	Fixed
Destination at ages 16 and 18	LA	Hybrid
SDQ score	NPD	Fixed
Type of placement	LA	Variable

## Tracking

In addition to the analyses that could be generated above based on previous data, it is vital that virtual school heads have access to a consistent national online tracking tool. This will enable virtual school heads to identify future educational targets and to assess these targets for aspiration and ambition, and for achievability. So, for example, virtual school heads could identify children (with or without additional needs) whose school is not targeting ambitious levels of improvement, leading to a conversation about the individual child with the school; or children whose attendance pattern is poor, leading to a conversation with the school and foster carers.

The tracking system will provide a datafeed to the reporting system, and will be used only by virtual school heads and their staff. In order to support children in care educated out of their 'home' local authority, and to be able to monitor schools' performance with all children in care, virtual school heads will:

- Have access to, and updating rights for, *all* children placed in care from their local authority, *wherever educated*
- Have access to, but *not* updating rights for, *all* children in care placed in educational provision located in their local authority by another local authority.



## Process for moving forward with this work

Discussions need to be held with the DfE and Ofsted to secure their general support for the approach being proposed. The analysis set out above needs to be agreed and finalised and constructed into a project definition. This work should be undertaken by a group that includes representation from ADCS, the Virtual School Heads Network, The Rees Centre, and NCER (and possibly DfE and Ofsted).

The detailed analysis in this paper should be reviewed against The Rees Centre research report to ensure that the reporting and tracking factors are securely based in research evidence.

NCER should then be commissioned to specify and cost the development work, and to scope any data collection that does not derive from standard data sources. The cost should then be discussed with the DfE and ADCS, with a view to funding development as a one-off cost and ongoing delivery as part of NCER packages.

Once funding has been agreed, the project will need detailed project planning and governance arrangements that meet the needs of both ADCS and DfE. Access to Nexus, perhaps in a limited form, could in principle be made available to DfE (and Ofsted, and other national and local partners) though this has not been the practice to date.

A reasonable timetable would be that new systems could be developed during the remainder of the present academic year, with some national testing in advance of 'going live' in September 2016.

### Recommendation 18

**ADCS, supported by the Virtual School Heads Network and the DfE, should commission from NCER a national evidence-based data management and analysis tool to improve the tracking and reporting of the educational achievement of children in care from birth through to age 25, and to enable all parts of the education system to be held to account for the effectiveness of their support for children in care.**

**ADCS should convene a steering group with ADCS, DfE, the Virtual School Heads Network and NCER representation.**

**ADCS and the DfE should identify the resources needed to implement the national data management and analysis tool.**



## 8. References

### 1. Literature review

*What is the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review* (September 2015)  
Aoife O'Higgins, Judy Sebba and Nikki Luke  
The Rees Centre, University of Oxford

[http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ReesCentreReview\\_EducationalOutcomes.pdf](http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ReesCentreReview_EducationalOutcomes.pdf)

### 2. Cohort study

*The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England – Final Report* (November 2015)  
Judy Sebba<sup>1</sup>, David Berridge<sup>2</sup>, Nikki Luke<sup>1</sup>, John Fletcher<sup>1</sup>, Karen Bell<sup>2</sup>, Steve Strand<sup>1</sup>, Sally Thomas<sup>2</sup>, Ian Sinclair<sup>1</sup>, Aoife O'Higgins<sup>1</sup>  
The Rees Centre, University of Oxford (1), University of Bristol (2)

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/educational-progress-of-looked-after-children/>

### 3. Statutory guidance

*Promoting the education of looked after children – Statutory guidance for local authorities* (July 2014)  
Department for Education

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

### 4. Statistical First Releases

*Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2015* (October 2015) (example)  
Department for Education / National Statistics

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>

### 5. NICE Guidelines on Attachment

*Attachment difficulties in children and young people overview* (November 2015)  
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

<http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng26>



**ADCS**  
Leading Children's Services



# **The Educational Achievement of Children in Care**

© Copyright 2015

**The Association of Directors of Children's Services**

**National Consortium for Examination Results**

**The National Association of Virtual School Heads**