

Divisions Affected -

EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 28th March 2025

2023-24 Virtual School Report

Report by Clare Pike, Acting Head of the Virtual School

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet Member/Committee is RECOMMENDED to:

1.1 Note the content and approve the Virtual School's priorities to secure further improvements to the educational outcomes of Oxfordshire's children we care for, previously cared for children and children with a social worker.

1.2 Raise any questions with the lead officer – Clare Pike, Acting Head of the Virtual School.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 This report provides an evaluative account of the work of the Virtual School from September 2023 to August 2024, informing priorities for the next academic year.

2.2 This report mainly relates to Priority 7 in the Council's Strategic Plan 2023 – 2025 – Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

3. Reporting

3.1 There is a statutory requirement of Virtual Schools to produce an annual report. This report details the work of the Virtual School over the last academic year (September 2023-August 2024) to improve educational outcomes for the following cohorts:

- Children we care for
- Previously cared for children
- Children with a social worker

3.2 It is important to note that the remit of the Virtual School was extended in September 2024 to include children in kinship care. This cohort will not be included in this report.

3.3 In addition to the presentation of the report to this committee, it is also presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and submitted to the library of evidence in preparation for any inspection.

3.4 The data presented in this report is based on the information recorded at the time of collection. It is important to note that the accuracy of the data is contingent upon the accuracy of the recorded information. Additionally, the cohort being analysed is fluid and subject to change. The Virtual School is actively working to align our data reporting processes across all of our cohorts to ensure consistency and reliability. However, due to the dynamic nature of the cohort, some variations may still occur.

4. Oxfordshire Virtual School

Context

4.1 The work of the Virtual School is guided by several key pieces of legislation and statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE). These documents outline the responsibilities and best practices for promoting the educational achievement of looked-after and previously looked-after children, as well as children with a social worker. The primary guidance and legislation include:

- [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children](#): This statutory guidance details the duties of local authorities and Virtual School Heads (VSHs) to support the educational outcomes of children in their care.
- [Children's social care: virtual school head role extension](#): This guidance extends the role of VSHs to include promoting the educational outcomes of children with a social worker and, since September 2024, those in kinship care. It provides direction on collaboration with education settings to improve these outcomes.

These documents form the foundation of the work carried out by the Virtual School, ensuring that all referred to children receive the support they need to achieve their full educational potential.

The Virtual School's Core Duty

4.2 The Virtual School's core duty is to promote the educational achievement of all Oxfordshire children we care for (CWCF), wherever they reside.

The Virtual School partners with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that Oxfordshire CWCF, aged 0-18, receive timely and stable access to education that meets their individual needs.

Our mission is to support our CWCF for in overcoming the unique challenges associated with their lived experiences, fostering a consistent and nurturing environment where they can thrive and realise their full educational potential.

We are committed to continuous improvement and the holistic development of each child, always striving to enhance educational practice for the benefit of the children and young people we serve.

4.3 Our vision is to ensure that every CWCF can:

- ACCESS: Has access to high quality educational provision
- ENGAGE: Can engage positively with education
- EXCEL: Makes excellent progress in all aspects of their education

4.4 Our aims are:

- To support every CWCF to secure a suitable educational placement which meets their educational and pastoral needs and enables them to thrive. 16–18-year-olds and care leavers are supported to access education, training and employment opportunities in-line with their future career aspirations.
- To ensure that CWCF can engage positively with their education and that barriers to education are removed.
- Through the delivery of a programme of support, guidance and training, develop the capacity of schools and Further Education (FE) providers to meet the needs of targeted vulnerable groups of children in Oxfordshire – CWCF, previously cared for children, children in kinship care and children with a social worker.
- To ensure that the gap in the attainment and progress of CWCF is diminished.
- To enable CWCF and care leavers to experience a range of cultural experiences to strengthen a sense of wellbeing and worth.

4.5 Care Leavers

The Virtual School has several duties to care leavers aged 18-25. We must ensure that these young adults receive ongoing support, including regular Personal Education Plan (PEP) reviews if they wish to continue their education. The Virtual School also provides advice, advocacy and signposting around education, training and employment opportunities. Additionally, we offer guidance and support to help care leavers navigate their transition to independent living, ensuring their educational and personal development needs are met.

4.6 The Virtual School's Extended Duties

In addition to the Virtual School's core duty, the Virtual School has extended duties. They are to:

- promote the educational achievement of previously looked-after children (statutory)
- champion children with a social worker and promote their education (non-statutory)

Since 2018-19, the Virtual School has had an additional statutory duty to [promote the education of previously looked after children](#) in Early Years provision and throughout the compulsory years. In Oxfordshire, we refer to this cohort as previously cared for children.

Since 2021-22, the Virtual School has had an additional non-statutory duty to [promote the education of children subject to a Child in Need plan or a Child Protection plan](#), aged from 0 up to 18, in educational settings and those who have

previously had a social worker. This includes children who are disabled and have, or have had, an allocated social worker.

The role of Virtual Schools expanded further in September 2024 to specifically include championing the educational attendance, attainment and progress of children in kinship care.

4.7 The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024 proposes several changes to the extended duties of Virtual Schools. It proposes:

- Making statutory the duty to children with a social worker and children in kinship care; and
- A potential role for Virtual Schools regarding children leaving custody.

4.8 Virtual School Team

The Virtual School's structure includes an Executive Leadership Team with a Virtual School Head (currently covered by the Deputy Head) and a Deputy Head. The Extended Leadership Team comprises leads from the Post-16, Secondary, Primary, Extended Duties and Business Support Teams. There is also a Participation and Engagement Team, which supports an apprentice post.

2023-24 Virtual School Headline Stats

4.9 Children We Care For (CWCF) and Care Leavers supported by the Virtual School Context (September 2024)

Key Stage	CWCF	Male	Female	EHCP	K - SEN Support	Number in County	Number Out of County	CWCF in Ethnic Minority Groups
EYFS*	41	20	21	1	14	30	11	12
KS1	35	16	19	7	17	27	8	8
KS2	95	48	47	34	40	58	37	27
KS3	145	77	68	72	49	77	68	26
KS4	156	87	69	65	49	97	59	42
KS5	268	191	77	70	44	175	93	145
Totals	740	439	301	249	213	464	276	260
Percentages		59%	41%	34%	29%	63%	37%	35%

Post-16	Care Leavers	Male	Female	EHCP	K - SEN Support	Number in County	Number Out of County	Care Leavers (aged 18-25) in Ethnic Minority Groups
Years 14, 15, 16, 17+	545	355	190	132	47	391	154	256 ⁺
Percentages		65%	35%	24%	9%	72%	28%	47%⁺

*40 x pre-F3's to be added in September as a result of DfE expectations that we host PEPs for CWCF in settings from 9-months of age

⁺ Estimated numbers based on the percentage of care leavers as at 23-09-2024 (Performance Data colleagues explained that this data cannot be pulled retrospectively)

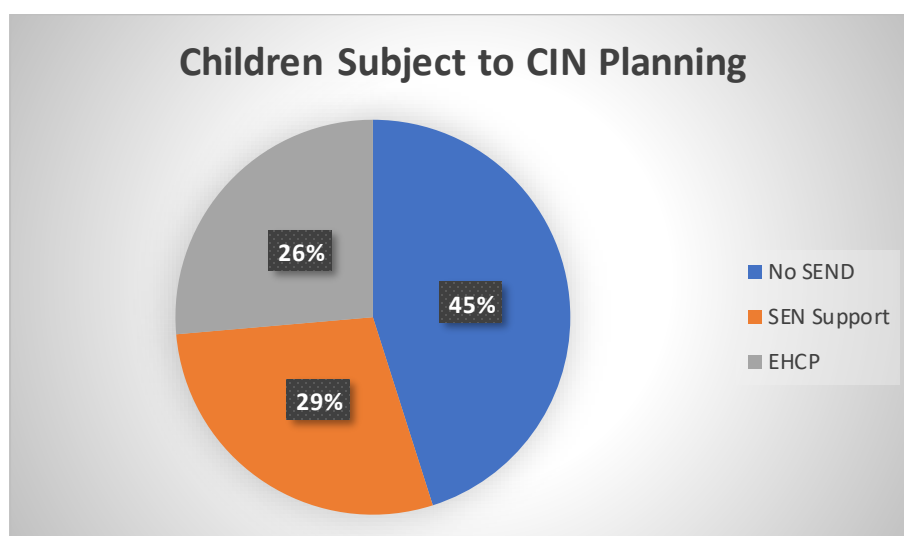
4.10 Extended duties cohorts supported by the Virtual School Context (January 2024)

Previously cared for children: 2,108

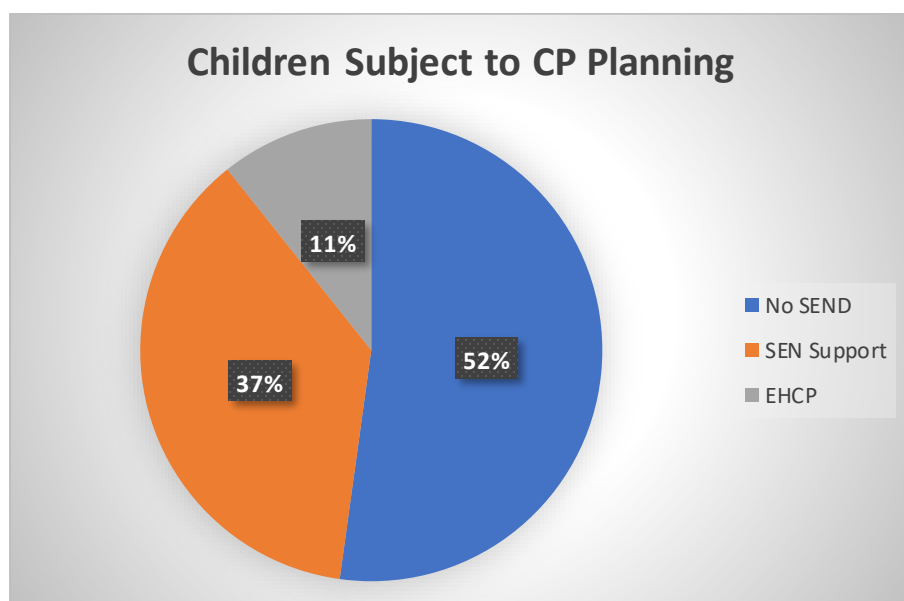
- Children subject to an Adoption Order: 491
- Children subject to a Special Guardianship Order: 369
- Children subject to Child Arrangement Order: 206
- Children subject to Other Arrangement Order: 1,042

Children with a social worker: 1,556

- Children subject to Child in Need planning: 1,064



- Children subject to Child Protection planning: 492



5. 2023-24 Virtual School Priorities, Actions, Impact and Recommendations

5.1 Children We Care For (CWCF) and Care Leavers – Priorities

In 2023-24, we identified the following priorities to help move us closer to our stated vision and aims:

- To ensure that all CWCF children have access to a suitable educational placement in a timely manner and without undue delays.
- To ensure that the needs of CWCF and care leavers are adequately met so that they can engage positively with their education. As a result, children and young people attend school regularly and exclusions of CWCF are minimised.
 - Increase pupil attendance and reduce persistent absence across all key stages and in all types of settings.
 - To ensure that no CWCF are permanently excluded from their educational settings and suspensions are significantly reduced.
- To ensure that all CWCF and care leavers can make good progress in their learning and achieve high levels of attainment across all key stages.
- To enhance the capacity of schools and other LA partners within Oxfordshire and beyond to better understand and meet the educational needs of our most vulnerable groups – CWCF, care leavers, children with a social worker and previously cared for children.
- To engage CWCF and care leavers in a range of cultural experiences to enhance the mental health, wellbeing and sense of self-worth.

5.2 Children We Care For (CWCF) and Care Leavers – Actions

During the last academic year, the Virtual School has undertaken much work to ensure that every CWCF can access high-quality educational provision, engage positively with education and excel in all aspects of their education. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Ensured all CWCF have a dedicated Virtual School Case Worker.
- Ensured that all CWCF have timely Personal Education Plan (PEP) review meetings, in-line with statutory guidance.
- Initiated and supported multi-agency professional meetings to find the best way forward to support education plans for individual CWCF with complex needs.
- Represented our children and Education Services at weekly Children's Resource Panel meetings and in weekly meetings to review children in unregistered placements.
- Promoted regular school attendance for CWCF.
- Captured Pupil Voice to inform practice across the school-system and Local Authority (LA).
- Facilitated training sessions and a conference to enable and empower education practitioners to utilise best practice working with our children, wherever they reside.

- Worked with partner agencies to ensure children requiring a school move were placed into a suitable school within 20 days.
- Worked with partner agencies to reduce the time taken to find a suitable school for children with an EHCP.
- Reviewed and strengthened our protocol on exceptional circumstances for term-time absence to ensure consistent practice that aligns with the needs and best interests of CWCF.
- Ensured alternative educational provision was put in place immediately when a new school placement could not coincide with a care move.
- Put in place timely interventions to support smooth transitions at key points in children's education journeys as well as interventions to stabilise school provision or support sustained reintegration back into school.
- Reduced the number of CWCF receiving suspensions and prevented permanent exclusions.
- Initiated the Relational Schools Programme to embed trauma-informed, relational and restorative practices in participating Oxfordshire settings.
- Participated in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) programme to redistribute unaccompanied children, ensuring they have timely access to suitable education.
- Commissioned a four-week English language and integration programme for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people to help them prepare for and transition into mainstream school placements.
- Promoted activities to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of CWCF.
- Organised engagement events for CWCF to ensure professionals are acutely aware of their feelings and wishes, wherever they reside.
- Facilitated Brookes and Beyond for Year 10 learners. Brookes and Beyond is an Oxford Brookes University access project designed to recruit students from under-represented groups. It involves regular experiential workshops throughout the year (Brookes Engage) and a residential summer school for CWCF and care leavers.

5.3 Children We Care For (CWCF) and Care Leavers – Impact

During the last academic year, the Virtual School has had the following impact on CWCF's access to high-quality educational provision, engagement with education and outcomes:

- Excellent collaboration between LA teams across Education Services and Children's Social Care, and strong professional relationships with schools.
- Increased the percentage of school moves completed within 20 days from 78.2% to 86.9%.
- Reduced the average number of days for a school move for CWCF without SEND from 16.6 to 5.4 days.
- Improved the average number of days taken to complete a school move for CWCF with an EHCP by 50%, from 70.8 days to 34.35 days.
- Used Pupil Premium Plus funding to support 84 children and young people in accessing interim provision while awaiting a suitable school place, and/or accessing timely interventions to support smooth transitions at key points in their

educational journey, as well as interventions to stabilise school provision or support sustained reintegration back into school.

- Attendance of primary-aged CWCF was 95.78%, above the national average of 92.8%.
- Reduced the number of CWCF receiving more than one suspension.
- Oversaw notable improvements in the percentage of children reaching expected standards across all key stages.
- In the Summer Term, 74% of primary-aged children made 'Good' progress, 73% of secondary-aged children, 85% of Year 12 young people and 80% of Year 13 young people, as recorded in their Personal Education Plan (PEP).
- We supported 111 young people through their Year 11 studies, with 82 in the reported cohort. 92% of Year 11s achieved one or more qualifications, up from 87.7% in 2022-23.
- Four of our young people achieved eight or more GCSEs at Grade 4+. Two unaccompanied young people achieved above a Grade 4 or above in English.
- Successfully supported 73 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people from 9 different countries in accessing and graduating from the Orientation Programme and progressing into educational settings. 100% success rate.
- 80% of CWCF and care leavers aged 16-18 were engaged in employment, education and/or training, a 3% increase on the previous year
- Increased the number of Oxfordshire care leavers starting, attending and graduating from university. We supported 10 care leavers in starting university – adding to the 34 in Higher Education at this time. 4 care leavers graduated in July 2024: two with a First-Class Honours, one with Second-Class Honours and one from the University of Oxford.
- One of our care leavers, who had been pursuing an undergraduate degree in Fine Art, was selected to collaborate with John Lewis and their unique designs now feature on John Lewis brands.
- Facilitated access for 15 Year 10 learners to the Oxford Brookes University access project: Brookes and Beyond.
- Facilitated 31 training sessions and a conference, with high satisfaction rates among participants. 210 agencies and 409 professionals accessed Virtual School training in 2023-24. The average rating out of 10 (re: knowledge and understanding) for delegates before training was 5.46 and 8.68 after the training.
- Early indicators for the Relational Schools Programme showed improved attendance, reduced behaviour incidents/suspensions and improved staff well-being in participating schools. One participating secondary school saw external suspensions reduce from 200 in 2021/22 to 191 in 2022/23 to 96 in 2023/24. In 2023-24, one participating primary school saw behaviour incidents reduce from 379 in Term 1 to 222 in Term 5, attendance increase from 93.29% to 94.15% and suspensions reduce from 14 days in Terms 1/2 to 2.5 days in Terms 5/6.
- The Virtual School has promoted, arranged or facilitated a range of activities designed to improve the emotional health and wellbeing of CWCF. This includes access to:
 - Youth Voices;
 - The Music for Wellbeing Programme;
 - Welcome Packs for all children new into care;
 - BookTrust Letterbox parcels;
 - Dolly Parton's Imagination Library;
 - Phoenix Comics for all children in Key Stage 2;
 - Good luck cards for all Year 11s;

- Year 6 to 7 transition packs for secondary starters, and much more.
- Our team is represented on the Fostering Care Panel and Lifelong Links Steering Group.
- Our Participation and Engagement Officer and Apprentice organised and facilitated a number of engagement events over the year involving 204 children.
- From Pupil Voice captured via PEPs, Youth Voice engagement events/interventions, the Bright Spots Survey feedback, CYP&F comments/feedback at/after events, professional feedback and one-off testimonials, we have a wealth of feedback from children, carers and other professionals. For example:
 - “I achieved a first-class degree as a care leaver, which required a lot of motivation, independence and resilience. I was fortunate to have a close relationship with my previous foster parents, who always supported me and provided temporary accommodation when I needed a break from university life. The academic support I received from university was amazing. Having access to a mentor at university every week was incredibly beneficial. Both the Virtual School and my leaving care personal assistant supported me through university checking in with me. After graduation, I struggled to find a job related to my field. The Virtual School has been a huge help for tailoring my CV and cover letter and sending me vacancies and opportunities.” – Care Leaver Graduate
 - “I think the Orientation Programme (OP) is such an unbelievably invaluable resource that we are so lucky to have for our Oxfordshire based young people. It allows us an invaluable opportunity to have educators assess their learning style and needs so that we can consider which is the best provision for them to move on to one of the colleges and schools in Oxfordshire. Staff from the OP share a report on the child which we pass on to colleges who have themselves shared how helpful this is for getting to know the child.” - Social Worker
 - “My English is much better, I learnt many things and a lot of vocabulary... I wasn't able to sleep early, and I tried the method (no phone and fizzy drinks) and now I can sleep better, it was helpful” – Young Person who accessed the Orientation Programme

Here are some more headlines for CWCF based on the 2024 attainment data and findings:

Strengths

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Attainment:

- CWCF cohort is closer to the national average compared to other vulnerable groups, indicating effective targeted support.

Year 1 Phonics:

- CWCF cohort performed 1% above statistical neighbours, showing some success in targeted interventions.

Year 2 Phonics:

- Exceptional performance, far exceeding national average and statistical neighbours, highlighting highly effective support and interventions.

Attendance:

- High primary attendance rate at 95.78%, indicating good engagement at the primary level.
- Very low primary unauthorised absence rate at 0.20%, suggesting effective attendance management.
- Secondary attendance was 82.97%, above the national average of 78.4%.

Suspensions:

- Recent decrease in suspension rates from 14.8% in 2022/23 to 8.83% in 2023/24, suggesting that recent interventions may be having an impact.

Focus for Future Efforts**Year 1 Phonics:**

- Comparison with statistical neighbours shows slight underperformance.

KS2 Attainment:

- Performance significantly below national average and statistical neighbours, indicating a need for enhanced support and interventions. That said, we know that 79.1% of our Year 6s had identified SEND needs, 51.2% had an EHCP. We know that 100% of Year 6s made 'Good' progress from their starting points and 69% made marked improvements in attainment.

KS4 Attainment 8 Point Scores:

- Performance 4% below national average and 5% below statistical neighbours.

KS4 English & Maths 9-5 Attainment:

- Performance 4.1% below national average and 1.1% below statistical neighbours. There are many factors that could explain the slight dip in GCSE results. 17 children experienced a school move in Year 11, 11% were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children compared to 4.6% in 2022-23 and 42% had EHCPs compared to 35% in 2022-23.

Secondary Attendance:

- Year 11 attendance was down from 79.02% to 74.72%. We know that 17 CWCF experienced a school move in Year 11 which will have impacted these figures.
- High secondary persistent absence rate at 43.42%, highlighting a critical area for intervention.
- High secondary unauthorised absence rate at 5.59%, suggesting a need for ongoing attendance monitoring and bespoke support.

Exclusions:

- In 2023/24, we had our first permanent exclusion of an Oxfordshire CWCF. This child attended an out-of-county secondary school. The Virtual School advocated for the child at the Governors' Disciplinary Committee (GDC) but the Headteacher's decision to permanently exclude was upheld.

Consistency in Suspensions:

- Fluctuation in suspension rates suggests a need for consistent and sustained efforts to manage and support CWCF pupils effectively.
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Please refer to the Annexes for more data and graphical presentations.

5.4 Ofsted

Feedback on the Work of the Virtual School from the [Ofsted Inspection \(12 to 23 February 2024\)](#)

The February 2024 Ofsted inspection of Oxfordshire local authority children's services provided positive feedback on the work of the Virtual School. It mentioned that the Virtual School demonstrated high ambition, aligned with its vision, 'Access, Engage, Excel' and that this ambition is reflected in the significant benefits children have experienced through the strong partnership between the Virtual School and local schools. Partnerships have been instrumental in helping CWCF remain in education and reducing suspensions and exclusions. Stakeholders expressed high regard for the Virtual School's efforts, particularly valuing the support provided to school staff, the robust lines of communication and the extensive training opportunities available. The involvement of the Virtual School in the creation and timing of personal education plans was also greatly appreciated.

Additionally, the inspection highlighted the effective support provided to care leavers who arrive in the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. It commented that the collaboration between the Virtual School and education providers is crucial in helping these children and care leavers develop their talents and achieve their career aspirations.

5.5 Children We Care For (CWCF) and Care Leavers – Recommendations

In 2024-25, we have been working on the following recommendations to further enhance the support and educational outcomes for Children We Care For (CWCF) and care leavers:

- Continue to ensure that all CWCF have access to suitable educational placements in a timely manner. Aim to further reduce the average number of days for school moves, particularly for those with an Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The reduction in average days for school moves for CWCF without SEND in 2023-24 demonstrates the effectiveness of current strategies. Further improvements will minimise disruptions in education.
- Implement targeted interventions to increase pupil attendance and reduce persistent absence across all key stages, particularly secondary. Focus on strategies to prevent permanent exclusions and significantly reduce suspensions.
- Ensure that all CWCF and care leavers make good progress in their learning and achieve high levels of attainment across all key stages by supporting effective Personal Education Plans (PEPs) - regular reviews, targeted (SMART) interventions and collaboration with educators and caregivers to address individual needs and promote academic success.
- Continue to utilise Pupil Premium Plus funding effectively to support interim provisions and smooth transitions.

- Enhance the capacity of schools, other education settings and partners to better understand and meet the educational needs of CWCF and care leavers. Continue to provide ongoing needs-based training and professional development opportunities.
- Reduce the number of NEET 16–18-year-olds and care leavers by providing targeted support and interventions, and to increase the number of CWCF starting, attending, and graduating from university by fostering a culture of high aspirations, offering comprehensive guidance and ensuring access to necessary resources and opportunities.
- Engage CWCF and care leavers in a range of cultural experiences to enhance their mental health, wellbeing and sense of self-worth. Promote activities that improve emotional health and organise engagement events to capture pupil voice.
- Maintain robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the impact of interventions and identify areas for further improvement. Use data-driven approaches to inform practice and policy decisions.
- Find creative ways to celebrate best practice in all settings that meet our children's needs, wherever they reside.

5.6 Previously Cared for Children - Priorities

In 2023-24, we worked on the following duties to improve educational outcomes for previously cared for children:

- To respond to parental requests for advice and information for previously cared for children.
- To respond to requests for advice and information from early education and compulsory education providers in respect of previously cared for children.
- To make general advice and information available to early education and compulsory education providers to improve their awareness of the vulnerability and needs of previously cared for children.

5.7 Previously Cared for Children – Actions

During the last academic year, the Virtual School has undertaken numerous initiatives to improve educational outcomes for previously cared for children. These efforts include improving school attendance by bringing together professionals and offering comprehensive training and support to social workers, school staff and other stakeholders. We have actively promoted ways to access Pupil Premium Plus funding for previously cared for children, guiding schools on its appropriate use to enhance offerings for this cohort. We have ensured we have up-to-date webpages to provide accessible information and resources to address frequently asked questions. We utilised Section 31 funding to increase capacity for providing advice and support to parents/carers, educational settings and other professionals by part-funding a Senior Educational Psychologist who specialises in care-experienced children.

Additionally, we have maintained termly registers of children subject to adoption, special guardianship and other child arrangement orders. We have collaborated with

other Virtual Schools in the South-East to co-produce guidance documents for schools and caregivers of children who have left care through a permanency order.

5.8 Previously Cared for Children – Impact

During the 2023-24 academic year, the Virtual School made significant contributions to the support of previously cared for children. Our webpage saw a notable increase in engagement, with 279 unique hits, up by 37 from the previous year.

We were proactive in publishing and promoting educational advice widely, ensuring that parents, carers and professionals were well-informed. Our termly Parents' and Carers' Newsletter was published and promoted, enhancing communication and support. We responded to seven enquiries from parents and carers, and an additional 16 enquiries from education settings and eight from other professionals.

Our termly Designated Teacher (DT) Newsletter provided valuable updates and information to professionals working in education settings. Participation in the South-East Virtual School Network facilitated collaboration and the sharing of best practices. Furthermore, our work to establish a network of relevant Virtual School colleagues across the Adopt Thames Valley region strengthened regional support structures.

Training provided by the Virtual School was accessed by 210 agencies and 409 professionals, with high satisfaction rates reported. This training was crucial in equipping professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to support previously cared for children effectively. Our collaboration with the ATTACH Senior Educational Psychologist continued, with funding for 1.5 days of support dedicated to promoting the educational achievement of previously cared for children.

A new training course, 'Best practice for schools on working with adoptive and special guardian children and families', was attended by 31 professionals, all of whom reported 100% satisfaction. To raise awareness of the vulnerabilities and needs of previously cared for children, we attended relevant education forums to cascade key messages. The Relational Schools Programme, accessed by 22 settings and 12 professionals within the first two cohorts, showed early positive impacts, indicating the programme's potential for fostering supportive educational environments (as outlined in Section 5.3).

The 2024 Virtual School Conference was a notable success, with 162 professionals in attendance and 100% satisfaction reported. We specifically invited colleagues from The Rees Centre to share findings from their 2021 research into the work of Virtual Schools, which we contribute to annually.

5.9 Previously Cared For Children – Recommendations

In 2024-25, we have been working on the following recommendations to further enhance the support and educational outcomes for previously cared for children:

- Continue to respond promptly to parental requests for advice and information. Increase the capacity to handle enquiries by leveraging additional resources and training.
- Maintain and expand the publication and promotion of educational advice through newsletters, updated webpages and other communication channels to ensure that all stakeholders are well-informed about the vulnerabilities and needs of previously cared for children.
- Increase the frequency and reach of training sessions for social workers, school staff and other stakeholders. The success of the new training course for schools working with adoptive and special guardian children proves the importance of our professional development offer.
- Continue to focus on best practices for supporting previously cared for children and promoting effective use of Pupil Premium Plus funding.
- Continue to strengthen collaboration with other Virtual Schools and regional networks to share best practices, and co-produce guidance documents and tools.
- Continue with monitoring and evaluating mechanisms to track the impact of interventions and identify areas for further improvement. Use data-driven approaches to inform practice and policy decisions.
- Find creative ways to celebrate best practice across Oxfordshire.
- Promote activities and programmes that enhance the emotional health and wellbeing of previously cared for children. Organise engagement events to capture pupil voice and ensure their needs and wishes are addressed.

5.10 Children with a Social Worker – Priorities

In 2023-24, we worked on the following duties to improve educational outcomes for children with a social worker:

- To make visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience.
- To promote practice that supports the engagement of children with a social worker in education.
- To level up outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child with a social worker can reach their potential.

5.11 Children with a Social Worker – Actions

See below summary of the work undertaken by the Virtual School to champion children with a social worker and promote their education.

During the last academic year, the Virtual School has focused on:

a) Making visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience with the aim to enhancing partnerships between educational settings, local authority agencies and associated partners where everybody holds high aspirations for these children.

This has been made possible by finalising and promoting a revised training and support programme for schools and CEF professionals and exploring innovative additions to our training programme (e.g. Virtual Reality headsets). We also updated and widely promoted the 'Children with a Social Worker' webpage and gathered termly web statistics from Google Analytics, alongside feedback from service users.

We attended the termly Schools' Safeguarding Forum meetings to inform Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) about the disadvantages that children with a social worker experience and engaged with a sample of DSLs for feedback on how we could better collaborate. We reviewed and re-promoted guidance for DSLs, presented at the Autumn OSCB Safeguarding in Education Sub-Group on our work, and produced an Engagement Plan for a "You Said, We Did" project. Furthermore, we consistently attended and presented at key forums to update stakeholders on this workstream.

b) Promoting practice that supports children's engagement in education

This has been made possible by the Virtual School participating in the South-East Virtual Schools' Sub-Group for children with a social worker to share, learn and cascade practices that support children's engagement in education. We share best practices through our training and support programme, through our termly newsletter for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and the various local school networks and forums. We continue to work hard to foster a collaborative and aspirational environment within Oxfordshire that enhances educational outcomes for children with social workers.

We track attendance, suspensions/exclusions, elective home education (EHE) and the use of reintegration timetables for children subject to Child in Need (CIN) and Child Protection (CP) plans. We are exploring ways to extend this tracking to children who have previously had a social worker (Ever6 CWSW).

Restorative enquiry into the lived experiences of children with social workers (CWSW) with 0% attendance shed light on their perspectives, thoughts, feelings and needs. This enquiry highlighted the ripple effects of their experiences and identified necessary actions to improve their engagement. Indeed, it informed guidance for social workers. Regular attendance and input at the Oxfordshire Strategic Attendance Board has established a clear system-wide strategy on attendance and engagement for CWSW in Oxfordshire, emphasising that it is everyone's responsibility.

The 'You Said, We Did' engagement project with school staff, parents/carers and CEF professionals further strengthened our work. Reviewing our consultation referral form, collating termly consultation impact summaries and offering Virtual School consultations for CSC professionals working with children subject to CIN and CP plans has ensured timely targeted support.

The implementation of Phase 1 of the Relational Schools Programme - in partnership with the SEND Transformation Theme Group, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) and The Restorative Lab (TRL) - was a significant step forward.

The Relational Schools Programme

The Virtual School initiated the Relational Schools Programme in Oxfordshire because we knew it would disproportionately benefit our cohorts. This programme (which commenced in July 2023) aims to embed trauma-informed, relational and restorative practices in schools, promoting a whole-school culture of accountability, understanding and love. By fostering a sense of belonging, the programme benefits all children, especially those with SEMH needs or other SEND.

The 18-month programme includes leadership training, online modules, reflective sessions and comprehensive implementation support. As a result, we are seeing reduced conflict, suspensions and exclusions, along with increased attendance, attainment and schools that foster social learning and development.

In 2023-24, the Virtual School successfully wrote a business case to create a full-time, permanent post to lead this project from within the SEND Early Intervention Team. The Virtual School are now working strategically in collaboration with SEND Early Intervention colleagues to promote this programme, aiming to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of our children, build confidence among mainstream school staff and enhance parental trust in mainstream education.

This programme encapsulates the recommendations of the Rees Centre following Phase One of its research into best practices for promoting children's engagement in education.

c) To level up children's outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child can reach their potential

This has been made possible by the Virtual School participating in the South-East Virtual Schools' Sub-Group for children with a social worker to share, learn and cascade practices that support improved outcomes. We share best practices and impactful interventions through our training and support programme, through our termly newsletter for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and the various local school networks and forums. We continue to work hard to foster a collaborative and aspirational environment within Oxfordshire that enhances educational outcomes for children with social workers. We have started to track attainment and progress for this cohort. We are exploring ways to extend this tracking to children who have previously had a social worker (Ever6 CWSW).

We strategically collaborate with the Early Years Advisory and School Improvement Teams, School Improvement Officers from Oxfordshire Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and the Educational Psychology Service. This has been crucial in developing a cohesive strategy to ensure that every child can reach their potential by addressing educational disparities.

5.12 Children with a Social Worker – Impact

During the last academic year, the Virtual School has achieved the following in relation to our duty to promote the education of children with a social worker:

- The Virtual School attended relevant forums to raise awareness of the disadvantages faced by CWSW.
- We identified Oxfordshire schools with the lowest and highest attendance of children with a social worker, undertook a Deep Dive and produced findings to inform future actions.
- In partnership with colleagues from across the school-system, attendance started to increase for children with a social worker. Overall attendance for children subject to CIN planning increased during 2023-24 from 73.6% to 76.3% and attendance for children subject to CP planning increased from 67.7% to 67.81%.
- The Virtual School offered consultations to social workers, supporting 40 professionals and 48 children, improving attendance for 56% of these learners.
- 210 agencies and 409 professionals accessed the Virtual School's Training and Support Programme. Feedback showed high satisfaction rates and positive impact on knowledge and understanding.
- The Virtual School participated in the South-East Virtual School network, supporting collaboration and best practice sharing.
- The Virtual School ensured teams across Children, Education and Families hold high aspirations for CWSW and co-produced guidance to support colleagues in knowing what to do to support improved educational outcomes for this group.
- In 2023-24, the Virtual School supported 22 settings and 12 professionals in accessing the initial rollout (Cohorts 1 and 2) of the Relational Schools Programme which showed early indicators of success (as outlined in Section 5.3).
- The Virtual School's annual conference was attended by 162 professionals, with 100% agreeing the content met the aims of nurturing identity and belonging in CWSW.
- Seed funding from the Virtual School's Section 31 grant support the EET Team in successfully supporting 85% of NEET 16-18-year-olds with a social worker to re-engage in education, employment or training.
- We continued to promote the Early Years Early Language Pathway which is positively impacting outcomes.
- Shared best practices via our termly newsletter for DSLs, forums, training and consultations.
- Up-to-date webpage and DSL guidance promoted widely, with increased engagement.

See below headlines based on the 2024 attainment data and findings:

Strengths

Child Protection Plan (CPP):

- Year 1 Phonics: Performing in-line with the national average and 6% above statistical neighbours.
- Year 2 Phonics: Performance above national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS4 Attainment 8 Point Scores: 1.1% above the national average and 2.1% above statistical neighbours.

- KS4 English & Maths 9-5 Attainment: 3% above national average and 7% above statistical neighbours.

Children in Need (CIN):

- Year 2 Phonics: Performing significantly above national average and statistical neighbours (6% and 8% higher).

Section 47:

- No specific strengths highlighted in the provided data.

Focus for Future Efforts

Child Protection Plan (CPP):

- KS2 Attainment: Performance notably lower than national average and statistical neighbours.

Children in Need (CIN):

- Year 1 Phonics: Significantly below both the national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS2 Attainment: Performance significantly below national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS4 Attainment 8 Point Scores: 5% below national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS4 English & Maths 9-5 Attainment: 5% below national average and statistical neighbours.

Section 47:

- Year 1 Phonics: Considerably lower than both the national average and statistical neighbours.
- Year 2 Phonics: Performance below national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS2 Attainment: Performance considerably lower than national average and statistical neighbours.
- KS4 Attainment 8 Point Scores: 3% below national average and 4% below statistical neighbours.
- KS4 English & Maths 9-5 Attainment: 4% below national average and 5% below statistical neighbours.

Please refer to the Annexes for more data and graphical presentations.

5.13 Children with a social worker – Recommendations:

In 2024-25, we have been working on the following recommendations to further enhance the support and educational outcomes for children with a social worker:

- Continue to make visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience by enhancing partnerships between educational settings, local authority teams and associated partners. Look into innovative training tools that can enhance understanding and empathy among educators and professionals.

- Strengthen practices that support the engagement of children with a social worker in education by sharing best practices through role modelling, training programmes, newsletters and forums. Review the guidance document for social workers and put together a comprehensive training programme for social workers.
- Extend tracking of attendance, suspensions, exclusions and reintegration timetables to include children who have previously had a social worker (Ever6 CWSW).
- Through newly appointed Education Officers, continue to utilise restorative practices to better understand the educational experiences of children with social workers with severe and persistent absence to identify necessary actions that will overcome barriers to engagement in education.
- Maintain regular attendance and input at the Oxfordshire Strategic Attendance Board to ensure a system-wide strategy on attendance and engagement.
- Support the expansion of the Relational Schools Programme to more settings.
- Continue to collaborate with Early Years Advisory and School Improvement Teams, MATs and the Educational Psychology Service to develop cohesive strategies that promote best practice.
- Work with educational settings, representative forums (such as the Schools Forum), and partner agencies to consider innovative approaches to offer opportunities for children with social workers to gain cultural capital throughout the year, enriching their educational experiences and supporting their overall development.
- Maintain robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the impact of interventions and identify areas for further improvement. Explore methods to capture data for children who have been subject to child in need and child protection planning within the last six years.
- Find creative ways to celebrate best practice across Oxfordshire.

6. Financial Implications

This report does not propose any new or additional financial implications. All actions and initiatives discussed are expected to be funded within the funding allocations already agreed. There are no new revenue or capital resources required beyond those currently allocated.

Comments checked by:

Jane Billington, Strategic Finance Business Partner
Jane.billington@oxfordshire.gov.uk

7. Legal Implications

Other than our legal duty to uphold the Virtual School Head duties as outlined in *Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children* and *Children's social care: virtual school head role extension*, we are unaware of any additional legal requirements.

Comments checked by:
Leanne Schrouder
Locum SEN and Education Solicitor
leanne.schrouder@oxfordshire.gov.uk

8. Staff Implications

At this time, there are no new or additional staff implications regarding the submitted report. However, it is important to note that we do not yet have the full details of the government's ask regarding the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which may impact future staffing considerations.

Comments checked by: Michelle Higgs, HRBP Schools and Education
michelle.higgs@oxfordshire.gov.uk

9. Equality & Inclusion Implications

In planning, delivering, monitoring and evaluating our work, equality and diversity issues are appropriately considered from the outset. The Virtual School Head has a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children we care for, previously cared for children and children with a social worker. This includes ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, have equal access to high-quality education and support.

New proposals are screened for relevance against our statutory duties to promote equality, and where relevant, an Equality and Community Impact Assessment (ECIA) is completed to ensure that our actions do not inadvertently disadvantage any group. This ensures that equality and diversity considerations are integral to our work, supporting the educational success of all children under our care.

10. Sustainability Implications

This report does not propose any new budget, policy, strategy, project or programme that would have a material impact on the council's ability to meet its climate and ecological commitments. Therefore, there are no direct sustainability implications related to climate action arising from this paper.

While the primary focus of the Virtual School Head's duties is on educational outcomes and wellbeing, the role also involves promoting practices that can indirectly support sustainability, such as fostering inclusive and supportive school environments that contribute to the overall resilience and sustainability of the community.

11. Risk Management

In developing this report, risks and opportunities to the Council have been carefully considered, particularly in relation to the duties of the Virtual School Head. The Virtual School Head has a statutory responsibility to promote the educational achievement of children we care for, previously cared for children and children with a

social worker. This involves ensuring that these children have equal access to high-quality education and support, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Summary of Risk Assessment:

- Educational Placement Delays: Mitigated by ensuring timely access to suitable placements and alternative educational provisions when necessary.
- Inadequate Support: Addressed through regular PEP reviews, multi-agency meetings and targeted interventions.
- Lack of Awareness: Mitigated by promoting educational advice widely and providing comprehensive training to professionals.
- Disengagement and Poor Outcomes: Addressed through tracking attendance and progress, promoting best practices and implementing programmes like the Relational Schools Programme.

A more detailed risk assessment for major changes or complex proposals can be provided upon request. This approach ensures that potential risks are identified and managed effectively, supporting Priority 7 in the Council's Strategic Plan 2023 – 2025 – Creating opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

12. Consultations

In-line with our commitment to thorough and transparent consultations, we will ensure that all substantive points raised by respondents are carefully reported and addressed.

LISA LYONS

Director of Children's Services

Annex: See 'Annual report data annex 2023-24' and '2023-24 Extended Duties data annex'.

Background papers: Various – available on request.

Other Documents: Nil.

Contact Officer: Clare Pike, Acting Head of the Virtual School

February 2025
