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Exploring school absences for children in care in England: systemic pressures, local challenges and admissions resistance

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ABSTRACT

Educational outcomes for children in care in England are significantly below national averages and addressing this is a high social justice and policy priority. One facet is this group's higher-than-average school absence rates and this paper begins by exploring data between geographical areas, highlighting important correlations with special educational needs and disabilities, exclusions and housing arrangements. We then draw on focus group discussions among 26 Virtual School Headteachers; senior leaders in local authorities with statutory responsibility for supporting the education of children in care through advocacy and engagement with local schools. These illuminate the reasons *why* children in care are disproportionately absent from school. First, there is widespread resistance to admitting children in care, with some schools also being quick to exclude. Second, limited capacity leads to administrative delays in resourcing support for special educational needs and disabilities. Third, there are shortages in high-quality specialist provision for young people with complex needs. We discuss these empirical findings as an issue of procedural justice in the wider policy context, highlighting the tensions between government discourses around inclusive education and a high-stakes accountability environment, where the majority of schools now have significant autonomy over admissions and behaviour policies with little democratic oversight.

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Introduction

The English school system is notable for tension between national policies promoting inclusion and a high-stakes testing and inspection regime that instils competition between schools (Hall 2023, 2024). This has been further complicated by the growth of 'academisation', whereby most schools have now acquired significant autonomy over admissions and behaviour policies by moving out of the control of their local authority (Pennington, Su, and Wood 2024; Ryan-Atkin 2025; Wilkins 2017).

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We draw on and develop the concept of 'exclusionary architecture' (Pennacchia 2024) to examine how inclusion is effectively being curtailed for a specific group of learners – those taken into the care of their local authority, usually due to neglect or maltreatment within the birth family. We explore how national policy is being enacted at a local level, focusing on the relationships and negotiations between local authorities and schools, as well as within and between local authorities. Specifically, we draw on novel empirical data from senior professionals leading 'Virtual Schools' – the principal policy vehicle for promoting educational outcomes for children in care (Department for Education [DFE] 2018).

Aside from tensions between national policy and local practice, our analysis addresses the spatial tensions between a children's social care system that remains geographically and politically grounded in the framework of local authorities and a school system where radical new spatial entities have emerged through academisation. We will come on to argue these tensions constitute an issue of procedural justice (Rawls 1999) by (a) generally working against the inclusion of children in care, and (b) leading to disparities in educational opportunities between areas.

Context: children in care

In England, a child is referred to as 'looked-after'[1] if they receive accommodation from a local authority for more than 24 hours or are subject to a relevant care order. On 31 March 2025, there were 81,770 looked-after children in England, 2% down on the peak in 2023 (DFE 2025a). This annual snapshot represents around .6% of the total population of children; the proportion spending time in care at some point in their childhood is around 2% (Harrison, Dixon, et al. 2023).

Accounting for around 79% of the total, the principal reasons for children being in care are neglect or maltreatment within the birth family or family dysfunction (DFE 2025a). The remaining instances reflect absent parenting, disability/illness (child or parental) and acute family stress; the young person's behaviour is recorded in fewer than 1% of cases. Care is offered in various settings, including foster care (50%), kinship care with extended family (17%), children's homes (12%) and supported accommodation for older children (9%). Children can enter care at any age, with peaks in infancy and early adolescence. The total time spent in care can vary from a few days to 18 years, potentially involving multiple periods and housing arrangements, but a period of several years is typical; young people can leave care through family reunification, adoption, guardianship orders or by 'aging out' at adulthood.

Care is, therefore, a diverse area of practice and young people's experiences are similarly diverse. While the primary aim of children's social care is to ensure their safety, policy concern about education has accelerated since the *Care Matters: Time for Change* White Paper (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2007) which argued that 'a high quality education provides the foundation for transforming the lives of children in care' (9) and explicitly linked education to long-term life chances, well-being and social justice. More recently, education has also become understood as a short-term protective factor (e.g. Zabern and Bouteyre 2017).

This policy concern derives from children in care in England having substantially poorer educational outcomes than their peers, at a national level; their outcomes are

among the lowest for any identified social group. For example, the average 'Attainment 8' score at age 16 for children in care for more than 12 months across eight school subjects is 18.3, out of a possible 90; the equivalent figure for all children is 45.9 (DFE 2025b). At age 11, the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics is achieved by 34% of children who have been in care for more than 12 months, compared to 61% of all children. Care-experienced young people are significantly less likely to access higher education (Harrison 2020; Nelson and Anderson 2021) and less likely to be in education, employment or training in early adulthood (DFE 2025a; Harrison, Dixon, et al. 2023). In a systematic review and meta-analysis, Luke and O'Higgins (2018) concluded there was little evidence that being in care is itself detrimental to the educational outcomes of children, with pre-care factors making the greater contribution. Indeed, those who spend longer in foster care tend to achieve better outcomes; extending foster care beyond age 18 is similarly associated with increased attainment (DFE 2025b; Sebba et al. 2015).

A key experience for many children in care is educational disruption, often tied to changes in care arrangements or reunification with birth families. In England, 11% experienced at least one school move during 2022/23, compared to less than 5% of the general population (DFE 2023a); such moves are associated with lower attainment (Sebba et al. 2015). Children in care for less than 12 months have substantially higher levels of school absence, suspension and permanent exclusion than other young people, although there is no such difference for those with longer periods in care (DFE 2025b). There is also a strong relationship between care and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which are identified in 57% of children who have been in care more than 12 months, compared to 16% of all children (DFE 2025b). The most common (51%) category of SEND among children in care was 'social, emotional and mental health', often reflecting trauma associated with adverse experiences before or during care.

Children's social care systems are globally ubiquitous, although the specifics of scale, emphasis and practice differ depending on the sociocultural, political and financial context (see Fernandez et al. 2025 for an overview). Children in care are reported to have poorer average educational outcomes than their peers in all countries that collect these data (O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke 2015). In the United States, for example, children living in foster care have a higher risk of academic failure (Pears, Kim, and Brown 2018). In 2022, 30–50% of those in foster care received special education services, as compared to 14% of other young people, while similar patterns in school moves and expulsions to England are reported (Alliance for Children's Rights 2020; American Bar Association 2022).

This overview demonstrates the policy imperatives around education for children in care. They constitute a group with exceptional challenges and associated needs, for whom outcomes are persistently low when viewed at the national level. We now explore the developing policy framework designed to address these challenges, before placing this in a wider policy context.

Education policy for children in care

Policy development around the education of children in care originates in the mid-2000s, with DfES (2007) including commitments 'ensuring children in care have access to the best schools through priority in admissions arrangements and a presumption that they

will not move schools' and 'taking targeted action on poor attendance and . . . making it clear that [exclusion] should be an absolute last resort' (65). This highest priority for admissions persists (DFE 2021b) and is supported by the legal power of 'direction' – that schools can be required to admit children in care even when oversubscribed. This power is held by the local authority for schools under its control, but by the Secretary of State for Education for schools outside their purview (via the School Adjudicator), necessitating a lengthy process.

Supporting these – and wider – aims, England has developed a model of Virtual Schools – a team within each local authority,[2] comprising teachers and other practitioners who work closely with 'physical' schools and local services to improve educational provision for children in care and advocate on their behalf. The appointment of a Virtual School Headteacher (VSH) became a statutory requirement from 2014, following a positively evaluated pilot (Berridge et al. 2009). Informed by the English model, similar arrangements have since been introduced in Victoria (Australia) in 2017, Scotland in 2018, and Wales in 2021.

Government guidance has set out the role of Virtual Schools in promoting the education of children in care (DFE 2018, 2021a). It requires them to create a culture of high expectations, ensure access to high-quality learning opportunities, and facilitate a Personal Education Plan (PEP) setting out how each child's educational needs will be met; every school is required to identify a 'designated teacher' to promote the education of these children (Become 2018). A centrally-allocated Pupil Premium Plus grant (£2630 per pupil in 2025/26) for every child in care is provided to meet the needs identified in their PEP. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the government regulator for schools, is required to check that it is appropriately spent on implementing the PEP, but relatively little is known about how it is spent and to what effect (Carroll, Black, and Bettencourt 2019; Read, Macer, and Parfitt 2020; University College London 2018).

There has been little research on the impact of Virtual Schools to date. Ofsted's (2012) early review identified evidence of effective support, including enhanced stability and wellbeing, but outcomes were variable and children housed outside the local authority area were less likely to receive effective support. Hyde-Dryden et al. (2024) found that Pupil Premium Plus funding for children in care aged 16 to 18, managed by Virtual Schools, had led to greater educational engagement. Other studies (KilBride et al. 2025; McIver and Bettencourt 2024; Sebba and Berridge 2019) have tended to find that Virtual Schools are well respected, but the evidence base for their impact on outcomes is still developing.

Given the high proportion of children in care with identified needs, the policy context around resource allocation for SEND support is salient. This is currently marked by extreme financial pressure among local authorities and widely-held perceptions of unfairness (Dewes 2025; Marsh, Gray, and Norwich 2024). A government review (DFE 2022a) concluded that much greater geographical consistency was needed and that services should address individual needs rather than reflecting local resources. Also mentioned were difficulties for carers in navigating the system, insufficient appropriate school places, and poor financial sustainability. In 2023, the government published an Improvement Plan outlining increased investment, new special 'free schools' (outside of local authority control) and national standards of provision (DFE 2023b). However, the standards have not yet been published, and the planned investment is widely held to be

insufficient (Schools' Week 2024), leading ongoing assertions of a 'crisis' (Adams 2024; House of Commons 2025); a new White Paper (DFE, 2026) seeks to address this. The Improvement Plan (DFE 2023b) contains a particular focus on expanding and professionalising 'alternative provision' – a diverse collection of often unregulated and privately-run organisations that are intended to flexibly re-engage learners after periods of absence or disruption (Pennacchia et al. 2025). There are enduring questions about the purposes of alternative provision and its impact on outcomes (House of Commons 2018; Power et al. 2025; Sinclair, Luke, and Daniels in press), as well as the often-vexed process of reintegration into mainstream schools (Malcolm 2025; Owen, Woods, and Stewart 2021).

The last 20 years have thus seen a resolute policy focus on ensuring children in care are fully engaged within the school system, with a focus on admissions, attendance, and needs-based support, enjoying cross-party endorsement. It sits within a wider policy discourse of 'inclusive education', which has appeared regularly in policy documents throughout the period; for example, recent White Papers (DFE 2022b, 2026) invoke 'inclusive education' in ways that echo international uses of the term (United Nations 2022). We will come on to explore the resilience of inclusion discourses when faced with marketised reforms.

Wider policy context

The persistent and tenacious marketisation of publicly-funded schooling in England began in earnest in the 1980s, reflecting a neo-liberal inflection of public service reforms more generally (Hall and Gunter 2016). The intensity has been such that this national context, alongside Australia, Chile and the United States, have been identified as an international 'laboratory' for neoliberally inspired reforms (Hall and Gunter 2016; Levin and Fullan 2008; Sahlberg 2023). Via marketisation or, more accurately, quasi-marketisation (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993), schools have been increasingly refashioned as business units, encouraged to compete for parental favour via school choice (Ball 2013). Schools gaining favour have been better able to survive and/or thrive, whilst those struggling become less financially viable and face closure or merger with schools deemed more successful. Whilst the ferocity of market forces faced by schools can vary between geographic locations, markets have become increasingly high-stakes affairs for schools and the basic logic of marketisation has relentlessly become a mainstay of schooling; it is now largely a taken-for-granted dimension (Hall 2023).

Closely allied to this marketisation process have been attempts to diversify school types. One has emerged to an extent such that, perhaps ironically, it has come to overwhelmingly dominate the schooling landscape. 'Academies' first emerged as a modest-in-size intervention focused upon a small number of urban locations with marked levels of socio-economic disadvantage. They were deliberately established outside of local authority control; businesses were strongly encouraged to be directly involved in their financing and governance (Ball 2009). This intervention was seized upon by subsequent governments as part of a turbo-charged effort to further marketise schools in England (Gunter 2012). Academisation has accelerated such that over 80% of secondary schools and over 40% of primary schools have converted to academies (DFE 2024). Since 2010, multi-academy trusts (MATs) have increasingly been favoured as the

preferred model for organising individual academies into groupings of schools, with the promise of inter-school collaboration, specialisation and economies of scale under a single leadership team. Many MATs are operated by private businesses as well as by religious, third sector and other organisations (Wilkins 2017). Local authorities have often been marginalised from involvement, with what is argued to be a concomitant loss of democratic oversight, local intelligence and professional input (Pennington, Su, and Wood 2024; Ryan-Atkin 2025). Importantly, there are no spatial constraints on MATs; while some are contained within a single local authority area, others operate across boundaries or at a national scale.

Tight regulation of schooling is embedded via two processes. First is an intense focus upon the collection, analysis and dissemination of data on performance in national tests at 11 and 16. This international trend of high-stakes testing forms a key basis for the marketisation turn, offering a reductive snapshot of institutional- and system-level performance (Williamson 2021). Consequentially, the monitoring of performance data has been key to the management of individual schools and their external scrutiny and accountability (Gewirtz et al. 2021; Ozga 2009). Second is a system of inspection that has been weakly informed by collegiality and strongly based upon formal criteria and processes, inspectorial judgement and a single overall grade. A key consequence is that schools widely experience Ofsted inspections as prescriptive, demeaning and time-consuming, constituting a further high-stakes dimension of their work (Mortimore 2023). More recent iterations of the inspection framework (Ofsted 2019, 2025) have moved to include wider engagement with school policies, practices and educational experiences, although critique of the overarching approach continues (Calvert et al. 2025; Jeffreys 2025; Perryman et al. 2023).

Interestingly, in this heavily-regulated environment, MATs and individual academies find themselves with 'freedoms' in relation to how they meet performance targets and inspection demands as part of a much-vaunted shift towards 'autonomous' schools (West, Wolfe, and Yaghi 2023). One consequence is that scope for significant differences have emerged in areas of schooling, including admissions, behaviour policies and limited aspects of the curriculum. School and MAT leadership teams thus have latitude to mould everyday practices around market logics and regulatory frameworks.

To summarise, contemporary schooling in England is now based upon a well-established policy environment of high-stakes testing, high-stakes inspection and high-stakes markets (Hall 2024). We will explore how these logics play out with respect to the inclusion of children in care and interrogate evidence that they may be driving resistance to admissions, exacerbated by systems that are compromised by resource shortages, patchy coverage, weak regulation and/or complex bureaucracy.

Conceptual framework

We frame this paper with the premise that there is an urgent social justice need to address the disparities in educational outcomes for children in care. This group consistently attains less highly, on average, which has ramifications for employment, well-being and wider life chances in adulthood; educational engagement is an important protective factor in reducing risks (Harrison, Dixon, et al. 2023; Nicodemo, Giordano, and Cardinali in press; Sulimani-Aidan et al. 2022). Successive governments have prioritised

educational opportunities to ameliorate the impact of childhood experiences. However, such *distributive justice* aims (i.e. who should get what) can be undermined by unfair practices that effectively prevent individuals or groups from getting that which national policy intends. This lens of *procedural justice* (Rawls 1999) is important in understanding how policy intentions can be blunted or susceptible to localised tensions and resource pressures.

To this end, we draw on Pennacchia's (2024) concept of 'exclusionary architecture' – an assemblage of contradictory policies, competing logics and deliberate tactics that coalesce to exclude some learners from educational opportunities. She explores how some schools are motivated to game local 'fair access' arrangements to avoid admitting young people who are constructed as 'risky' to market success – especially those returning from permanent exclusion or with SEND. She argues that 'a policy move to increase self-governing schools has served to minimise the power and scope of the local authority for undertaking local inclusion work and heightened the positioning of schools as individual, competitive entities' (324).

This is echoed in other work. Malcolm (2025) reports similar practices with respect to young people being reintegrated from alternative provision, while Rayner (2017, 30) describes how freedoms afforded by admissions policies can be deployed to avoid becoming (in the reported words of school staff) a 'dumping ground' for children with SEND. McIntyre and Hall (2020) discuss how a marketised school system undermines inclusion for refugee and asylum-seeking children by incentivising leaders to prioritise metrics over professional values. More broadly, exclusionary architectures can be identified in the phenomenon of 'off-rolling' (England) or 'grey exclusion' (Australia) through pressuring parents to home educate or move children to another school, isolating children from class for lengthy periods or exaggerating infractions to justify permanent exclusion (Done, Knowler, and Armstrong 2021; Power and Taylor 2020; Timpson 2019). This is not to suggest that such practices are universal among academies or MATs; rather, the freedoms they enjoy make these practices possible.

At the inception of Virtual Schools, academies were still relatively uncommon and MATs rarer still; local authorities still enjoyed significant control over school admissions and other practices within a clearly-defined geographical purview. However, Virtual Schools have had to assert an increasingly ambitious and detailed national policy (DFE 2018, 2021a) across a local patchwork of schools and MATs, without the direct influence they once enjoyed. In other words, there is a policy tension between the geography of children's social care (still firmly based on local authorities) and the geography of schools (either standalone or as part of MATs which are not constrained by local authority boundaries). These shifts mean that Virtual Schools are increasingly compelled to negotiate with school leadership teams who may not prioritise inclusion. Virtual Schools wield little direct power, even when they become aware of practices that are inconsistent with national policy; relationships become central to how national policy is expressed at the local level. Ball et al. (2011) argue that policies are generally enacted in this way, refracted through the values, motivations and actions of chalkface practitioners, such as VSHs and school leaders (also see Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2011).

We now turn to explore how local resistances and disputes can conspire to prevent many young people from getting a timely and appropriate school place alongside the

necessary support. We will consider the equitable distribution of opportunities between geographical areas, including whether young people's life chances are dependent, in part, on which local authority has responsibility for them. Pennacchia (2024, 324) argues that 'in England, children without a school place are some of the most marginalised in the country'. Pursuant to this, we seek to address three research questions:

(1) What disparities in educational inclusion exist for children in care at the local authority level and how do they correlate with other salient factors?
(2) How do the local professionals charged with ensuring the inclusion of children in care understand and negotiate the challenges of their role?
(3) What exclusionary architecture can be inferred, if any?

Methodology

The article combines quantitative and qualitative elements in a 'fully mixed sequential dominant status' mixed methods design (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009). The first comprises a quantitative analysis of published statistics at the local authority level. Specifically, it aims to evidence relationships between 'authorised' school absence and other factors associated with educational outcomes for children in care, given the well-attested relationship between school attendance and educational outcomes (e.g. Dräger, Klein, and Sosu 2024; Weathers et al. 2021). The second comprises a qualitative analysis of focus group data in which 26 VSHs discussed factors influencing the effectiveness of Virtual Schools. This is used to explore the relationships revealed in the quantitative analysis further and posit a model for how exclusionary architectures are created in this context.

Quantitative element: local authority data

We drew on data published by the DFE through their *Local Authority Interactive Tool* (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-interactive-tool-lait). This repository of aggregated educational statistics is presented at the local authority level for comparative purposes. We identified variables (Table 1) that we felt were relevant to our research questions and calculated 3-year averages to smooth year-on-year variation, using 2017 to 2019 as a convenient period prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in which local authority boundaries remained constant. Four local authorities were excluded due to having low numbers of children in care or substantial missing data, leaving 147 in the analysis.

In earlier analysis (Harrison, Sebba, et al. 2023), linear regression highlighted the importance of school absence on educational outcomes for children in care. Here, we used bivariate correlation to focus on potential explanatory variables for school absence, providing a contextual framing for our qualitative element.[3] In particular, we focused on 'authorised' school absence as the variable of interest.[4] This includes periods of illness, but also – importantly – periods where the young person is without a school place or otherwise not attending school.[5]

Table 1. Variables used in analysis.

	Name	Definition	Minimum	Maximum
1	Attainment	Mean score for children in care on the 'Attainment 8' measure of attainment at 16 (the maximum was 87 in 2017 and 90 from 2018 onwards)	13.17	34.80
2	Absences	% of half-day school sessions missed for authorised reasons by children in care	2.20	5.97
3	EHCP	% of children in care with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), representing high levels of SEND or other needs	14.03	43.63
4	Out-of-area	% of children in care living more than 20 miles from their local authority	5.67	34.00
5	Exclusions	% of children in care having one or more fixed-term exclusions (also referred to as 'suspensions')	7.06	28.11
6	Placements	% of children in care having three or more housing placements	4.00	19.00
7	Spend	Mean annual spend per child in care by the local authority	676.67	2320.00
8	SDQ	Mean score on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire used to assess well-being and mental health	5.87	18.63
9	Care rate	Number of children in care per 10,000 children in the general population	25.00	188.33
10	FSM	% of secondary aged children who received free school meals in the last 6 years (as a proxy for areal deprivation)	14.13	67.50

Qualitative element: focus groups

This element draws on data collected for an earlier study (Harrison, Sebba, et al. 2023), but is presented here in greater depth; this was informed by the 2018 British Educational Research Association guidelines and approved by the relevant ethics committee at the University of Exeter. We arranged online focus groups through contact lists held by the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH). Invitations were sent to all VSHs, with a request to e-mail the research team if they were interested in participating; two reminders were sent. Those making contact were sent an information sheet and asked to complete a consent form. We pragmatically arranged focus groups based on the limited diary availability of the VSHs who volunteered to participate; no specific criteria were used to assemble the groups. In total, 26 VSHs participated across six focus groups, comprising around one-sixth of the total role-holders. The focus groups were held using Microsoft Teams and were scheduled for 1 hour. They were video-recorded, with an automated transcript being produced; this was manually checked before analysis.

Focus groups were chosen as they offer the opportunity to directly gauge (dis)agreement within groups who share common professional experiences and to readily separate shared/divergent components. We listened to groups of senior practitioners discussing core features of their professional lives; something they were used to doing with collegiality and openness. Our questions focused on understandings of 'effectiveness' for Virtual Schools and were informed by earlier phases of quantitative analysis and stakeholder interviews (see Harrison, Sebba, et al. 2023 for more detail).

We used *framework analysis*, which specifically lends itself to exploring issues of practice and policy (Goldsmith 2021). This differs from other techniques in its focus on factual content, albeit filtered through subjective experience, rather than the identification and interpretation of latent themes. Principally deductive in approach, the areas of interest are specified in advance from the research objectives and our analysis was focused on extracting data to illustrate points of agreement or divergence. In this article,

we foreground three areas: *admissions resistance*, *delays with SEND support* and *availability of specialist provision*.

We are conscious that our sample was self-selecting, which leaves open the possibility that particular voices are absent from the data. Our participants were drawn from all nine English regions and broadly reflected the diversity of local authority types and demographics. Consistent with the use of focus groups and framework analysis, we were not seeking formal representativeness in our sample, but rather a broad understanding of where professional experiences were congruent and the bases on which they diverged. We discussed our initial findings at the May 2023 meeting of the NAVSH Board of Trustees, which comprises experienced VSHs elected to represent the profession. We subsequently presented our findings to wider groups of VSHs via a webinar (November 2023) and the NAVSH Annual Conference (March 2024). We received only confirmatory feedback from these events, giving us confidence that our findings reliably and authentically reflect the range of experiences within the profession.

Findings: local authority data

Table 1 details the variables extracted for analysis from the *Local Authority Interactive Tool*, with their minimum and maximum values for the 3-year average spanning 2017 to 2019 across 147 local authorities.

There is a considerable variation between local authorities in the variables used, including for authorised absences, which vary between 2.20% and 5.97%. We explored the suitability of several other variables (e.g. social worker turnover rates), but these did not correlate significantly with school absence; we have not reported them for reasons of space. Spearman's rho (ρ) was calculated across the 10 variables, reflecting that some were not normally distributed (see Table 2).

There is a significant negative relationship (ρ = −.320) between attainment and absence; unsurprisingly, attainment for children in care is lower in local authorities where absences are more common. Absence rates are significantly higher in areas where more young people have an EHCP (ρ = .369), are housed out-of-area (ρ = .218), have had disruption to their living arrangements (ρ = .241), have higher scores on the SDQ questionnaire (ρ = .214) and/or have been excluded (ρ = .504); these variables are themselves highly intercorrelated.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations (N = 147, except for exclusions where N = 146 due to missing data for one local authority).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Attainment	–									
2. Absences	−.320**	–								
3. EHCP	−.313**	.369**	–							
4. Out-of-area	−.096	.218**	.355**	–						
5. Exclusions	−.177*	.504**	.252**	.218**	–					
6. Placements	−.177*	.241**	.215**	.228**	.236**	–				
7. Spend	−.077	.210*	.458**	.603**	.252**	.212**	–			
8. SDQ	−.203*	.214**	.349**	.214**	.321**	.049	.059	–		
9. Care rate	.121	−.308**	−.591**	−.441**	−.217**	−.251**	−.665**	−.128	–	
10. FSM	.197*	−.306**	−.453**	−.225**	−.144	−.077	−.082	−.381**	.489**	–

* Significant at 5% level; ** significant at 1% level.

Slightly harder to interpret is the positive relationship with spending (ρ = .210). As it seems implausible that greater local authority spending on children in care could *cause* school absences, we suggest that it is rather that school absences are associated with circumstances that increase costs for local authorities, including housing young people out-of-area (ρ = .603) or meeting their needs through an EHCP (ρ = .458).

The care and free school meals rates are closely correlated with each other (ρ = .489); a higher proportion of young people are in care in local authorities where more families are in poverty. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, school absence levels are negatively correlated with the care rate (ρ = −.308) and free school meals rate (ρ = −.306). Explaining this finding is not possible through the data available here, but one possibility is that schools in areas of high deprivation are more successful at inclusion.

In summary, our quantitative analysis reveals a substantial variation in absence rates between local authorities and demonstrated that these were strongly correlated with factors that showed substantial variation between local authorities. This suggests the educational experiences and outcomes of children in care have a strong localised component of the type sometimes referred to as a 'postcode lottery'. Importantly, school absences were closely linked to exclusion rates, unstable or distant living arrangements and higher instances of SEND. In the next section, we will use qualitative data to explore these relationships further.

Findings: focus groups

Resistance around admissions

A significant element in the working lives of VSHs was the relationships they had with headteachers of physical schools in their area. These varied widely and specific efforts had been made by many VSHs to integrate themselves into the local school ecosystem, for example, by joining headteacher committees or partnership boards.

Nevertheless, there was consensus among VSHs that there was a widespread reluctance to admit children in care. This was unevenly distributed between geographical areas. Some VSHs talked about having issues with 'one or two' schools, with the remainder being supportive around the inclusion of children in care. However, others reported that this resistance was effectively universal within their locale. They empathised about the prevailing pressures on school funding and examination results, but also expressed frustration that schools were not more accommodating of the needs of young people experiencing profound difficulties in their lives: 'To say "no" without real justification is far too easy'. VSHs reported that this resistance often manifested in what they felt were questionable or exaggerated reasons for why a young person could not be admitted, for example, recounting conversations with schools around being overwhelmed or the capacity of buildings.

Negotiating with schools therefore constituted a major task for VSHs. They discussed having to 'push' for the 'right school' for a young person's needs or aspirations, despite resistance from the school. The alternative was to default to schools that were further afield, which created additional problems with travel time and costs. Such negotiations

caused uncertainty that could undermine the young person's engagement with learning, such as in this case:

> A child that knew we were battling to get him in a particular school [. . .] Almost three months passed and by the time we got him in, he refused to go and said, "They don't want me" [. . .] For a child who's experienced that level of rejection, I mean, how bad is that?

A particular touchstone in the relationship between VSHs and physical schools was around behavioural expectations. VSHs felt that many young people needed a flexible, empathetic and relational approach that engaged with the trauma and upheaval that they had experienced before or during care, making the young person feel safe and reengaging them with learning. However, this was not universally available. For some, this was reflected in individual schools, whether academies or under local authority control, that were viewed as inflexible:

> We know the schools where we would not place our children and I think those headteachers are getting away with that. We have a school where their default position is, "If the child can't manage the behaviour policy, then don't send them." If you're a community school, that shouldn't be permitted, but it happens.

However, it was particularly problematic in those instances where inflexible behaviour policies were shared across a MAT. These approaches were seen to be 'what's in vogue at the moment' for some MATs, with little freedom of action for individual schools, due to fixed policies and central policing of admissions decisions. Worryingly, as one VSH recounted,

> The executive headteacher said, "Don't think they're going into any other school either, because I'm going to effectively blacklist this child and stop you from placing them at any other school".

In some instances, MATs accounted for most or all the schools in an area, severely curtailing the options open to the Virtual School. One VSH explained that over 60% of their children in care of secondary school age were being educated in other areas as a result of entrenched resistance from one dominant local MAT. Another explained how their area was covered by two national MATs that both adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, but, they explained, 'our children don't naturally fit into that'. Often the resistance was framed around there being 'better' options for the young person.

As noted, there are legal powers to require schools to admit children in care, referred to as 'direction'. However, several VSHs recounted direction requests that had taken months to resolve, such as in this example,

> Governments put the wrong types of pressures on schools, which may mean that leaders have developed a system of frustrating [Virtual Schools] so that you would go away. I'm doing the direction, but that is no good to that child who is sat at home now for eight weeks and I'm still going to wait another three or four weeks before a decision is made by the Secretary of State.

The need to seek directions was a substantial source of frustration for VSHs, who were concerned about the impact on a child who is out of school and likely falling behind with their learning. They also signalled the contradictions between the realities of resistance and how resisting schools portrayed themselves in public:

> Every school that I have to 'direct' will tell me on their website how inclusive they are and all these wonderful words that they use about meeting the needs of all their children and all of their children being happy.

A related challenge for VSHs was to question what they felt were unwarranted suspensions and permanent exclusions from schools. Many VSHs had adopted a 'no exclusions' principle in their area, working closely with schools to troubleshoot difficulties and put additional support in place to avoid a cycle of educational disruption wherever possible. However, it was commonly felt that some schools who *did* admit children in care – especially after direction – were not able to meet their social, emotional and mental health needs and were therefore intolerant of minor behavioural infractions. A significant time commitment was therefore embodied in negotiations to maintain the young person's presence in the school.

This was seen as an escalating problem. VSHs suggested it was partly due to systemic pressures on schools with insufficient or delayed funding to meet young people's needs and partly due to a growth in inflexible behaviour policies focused on trivial offences around uniform or timekeeping. The impact was a radical increase in the use of sanctions, but VSHs reported success in negotiating against these: 'We've noticed a huge increase in suspensions and exclusions that we're fighting against and the number of rescinded exclusions is going through the roof.' The consequence of these time-consuming and frustrating interactions was that many VSHs had regretfully conceded that some schools/MATs were effectively 'no-go areas' for children in care:

> There are schools that we avoid because we know they won't work with us, they won't do what we need them to do. They won't make exceptions and [have] zero tolerance policies, [so] we say, "I'm not going to place my child there because they won't get the time, they won't get the resources, they won't get the consideration".

This was seen as fundamentally unfair, to both the young people *and* the MATs or individual schools who did 'give them a go and [. . .] don't exclude them at the first hurdle'; this was often framed around 'getting away with it' by failing to serve the whole community. We conclude this section with a quote from a VSH about the wider policy ramifications of accepting that some schools are effectively discriminating against children in care:

> If we know that there are schools in our authority where we are not sending: what's Ofsted's view about them safeguarding children? And when do they have those communications with local authorities about schools that we've identified [that] we won't send our children to?

Delays with SEND support

Supporting children in care can constitute an administrative challenge for local authorities, where young people may live in a different jurisdiction and, potentially, be schooled in a third. Each has unique procedures, working practices and budgetary pressures. VSHs in our study provided numerous accounts of this working to young people's disadvantage, with support getting mired in bureaucratic systems with varying levels of efficiency and empathy. This was particularly marked in geographically-small

local authority areas (e.g. in London), where boundaries were readily crossed when a young person needed to move housing arrangements or school.

Nowhere was this more notable than with respect to support for SEND. This is administered by a separate local authority team which assesses individual needs and processes payments – e.g. for assistive technology or a dedicated teaching assistant. Most VSHs felt they enjoyed positive relationships with the SEND team in their own local authority, sometimes supported by arrangements for co-located or embedded staff to encourage smooth processes for children in care. However, this was not universal, with some VSHs reporting difficulty in ensuring that young people received timely help. With over half of children in care assessed as needing support (DFE 2024), this was a key tension between policy and practice.

More significant problems commonly emerged when the young person's accommodation and/or school was in a different local authority area. This necessitated collaboration *between* local authority SEND teams and this was reportedly much more frequently vexed by conflicts over processes or funding. It was almost universal among VSHs to have experienced difficulties of this nature: 'It just consumes my team's time absolutely exponentially.' Another explained,

> You end up with an impasse of two SEND departments fighting each other, refusing to place a child until you've promised you'll pay [. . .] At the middle of it, there's a child who's being de-schooled, [then] somebody will ask us, "Why is that child not achieving?"

The EHCP was often at the centre of these disputes, for example, where one local authority refuses to accept the needs assessment undertaken by another or where one offers a higher level of support than the other. Delays were commonplace and exacerbated by the various national regulations governing which local authority should meet the costs (colloquially known by VSHs as the 'belonging regs', but referring to multiple overlapping and conflicting documents).

One VSH specifically described the interplay between EHCP disputes and school admissions:

> It's a slow, slow process [. . .] You have to get the EHCP transferred to the other local authority, which can be a mission in itself and involves lots of chasing up while it gets lost between local authorities. Then the local authority has to adopt it, then they have to identify schools to consult. Then all those schools are full. And that's what we're finding more and more.

The consequence was that young people with an EHCP could experience lengthy periods outside of school, while negotiations were ongoing. This was acutely problematic where local schools or MATs were already resistant to admitting them.

Availability of specialist provision

Our final area of concern comprises differential access to specialist provision, by which we mean special schools (for young people with SEND) and various forms of 'alternative provision' including pupil referral units. VSHs viewed these as essential tools in their armoury to ensure that children in care had appropriate access to rich learning environments that enabled them to maintain their education even during challenging or

disruptive periods of their life. However, all VSHs felt that there was insufficient specialist provision available on a national scale for the level of demand.

Many VSHs discussed how provision was often 'full to capacity' and 'like gold dust', with 'all chasing a small number of places'. This formed 'a huge barrier' to learning, especially for 'young people with really complex trauma and significant mental health difficulties' and children housed out of the local authority area. This dearth of learning opportunities was not evenly distributed, however. While some VSHs reported having reasonable local provision, others explained that there were simply no nearby options available to them, so the only way in which they could access specialist provision was by educating the young person at a significant distance from their home – with all the concomitant difficulties outlined above. Even then, the provision available might not fit the young person's needs well.

There was a marked difference of opinion about the purpose and value of specialist provision among VSHs. A smaller group was positive about what it offered young people in terms of meeting their needs and reintegrating them with learning. As one explained,

> I'm a real, strong advocate of good alternative provision. Good, strong therapeutic trauma-informed alternative provision can make such a difference to the life of a vulnerable child.

Another saw specialist providers as offering a generally more inclusive environment, with

> Pupils who refused to go back to mainstream school because they would much rather be at the [pupil referral unit]. They didn't want to go back to mainstream because they had a bad experience of a number of mainstream schools. [. . .] Where alternative provision is effective and the right thing for the child, then actually the outcomes could be better.

However, a larger group were sceptical about what specialist provision *currently* offers to children in care. This was largely driven by concerns about the educational value of what was available, due to the shortages outlined above:

> I did steer away from alternative provision [but] that probably because we didn't have the quality. They said the right things, but actually their outcomes were not good either [. . .] If we were to get that quality provision, of course I'd want them to be in smaller settings with the therapeutic high standards of care [and] teaching and learning.

In particular, specialist provision was often seen as having low expectations of what young people were able to achieve, which did not match the needs of children in care. Importantly, some VSHs felt that they were effectively forced into using unsuitable and expensive providers due to the admissions' resistance found in mainstream schools:

> We might fight for a place, but what's the quality? [We're] paying through the nose, ridiculous amounts of money. What would you pay for them if you weren't desperate? And it wouldn't be the amount of money that we are paying for them.

Finally, VSHs noted that, despite their purpose, many providers were not inclusive or flexible, sometimes making them as swift to exclude young people as mainstream schools: 'One would expect that to be illegal, but seemingly special schools can suspend children – it seems remarkable considering that's their *modus operandi*.'

Summary

We have outlined three interlocking components of the system that wraps around educational outcomes for children in care: (a) admissions resistance in schools, (b) challenges in supporting SEND, and (c) constrained supply of high-quality specialist provision. VSHs report that all are manifest nationwide, but that the pressures that they exert have a strong localised element, reflecting, *inter alia*, the distribution of MATs, relationships between local authorities and geographically uneven provision.

Discussion

The springboard for this article was the discovery of a clear set of correlates for school absences at the local authority level. Children in care miss significantly more school in areas where there are high rates of exclusion, a higher proportion of EHCPs, more young people being housed away from their home area, and/or more moving home frequently. This cannot be attributed to areal deprivation as authorised absence rates are actually *lower* in areas where rates of free school meal eligibility are higher. This is important as absence rates are themselves correlated with attainment at age 16. In other words, one route to improving educational outcomes is to reduce absences from school and our analysis offers clarity about relevant levers, answering our first research question.

As outlined above, Virtual Schools were conceived as a chalkface policy initiative to improve educational outcomes for children in care. However, we have presented rich accounts from VSHs about how their work in facilitating admissions, avoiding moves and ensuring timely support can be hampered on-the-ground; these respond to our second research question. From these accounts, we have inductively theorised how systemic pressures combine and reinforce each other, ultimately leading to many young people missing substantial amounts of school. This model is represented in Figure 1.

Foremost among these pressures is the resistance that schools exhibit to admitting children in care or their undue haste in seeking exclusion; similar strategies have

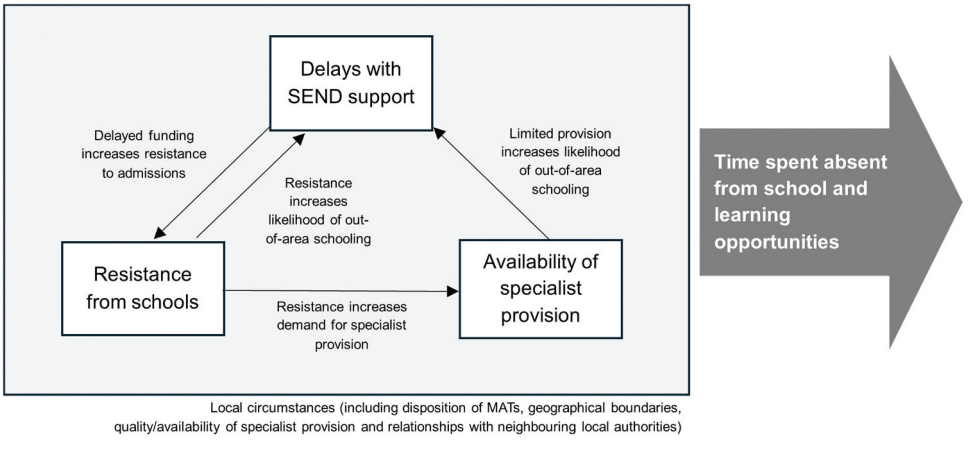

Figure 1. Proposed model of systemic pressures.

previously been reported with respect to young people returning from alternative provision (Malcolm 2025), refugee and asylum-seeking young people (McIntyre and Hall 2020) and disabled children (Done, Knowler, and Armstrong 2021; Rayner 2017). This resistance was universally acknowledged by VSHs, much of whose time is dedicated to negotiating with schools. While it could appear among local authority schools, the additional 'freedoms' afforded to academies could empower them to resist more forcefully, knowing that the only recourse for VSHs was an application to the Secretary of State; within MATs, this resistance could be amplified across a wide area (West, Wolfe, and Yaghi 2023). It is important to note, however, that VSHs did also mention individual academies and MATs who were explicitly and successfully *inclusive* of children in care.

Within our proposed model, admissions resistance from schools has two interlinked consequences. First, it increases the likelihood that young people need to be schooled out-of-area, eroding their time for study, straining their social networks and increasing costs. Second, it increases the demand for specialist provision, which is already under extreme pressure, with wide variations in quality and value-for-money (Pennacchia et al. 2025, Power et al. 2025; Sinclair, Luke, and Daniels in press). Indeed, this scarcity of specialist provision also leads to more young people being schooled (and potentially housed) at a distance in pursuit of supportive learning environments.

The final element in our model is the role of SEND support, linked to the high proportion of children in care with EHCPs. The current crisis in SEND funding in England is well-documented (e.g. Adams 2024; House of Commons 2025; Schools' Week 2024) and children in care are prominent among the groups whose education is negatively impacted. However, accounts from VSHs illuminated a specific concern whereby contradictory government regulations can lead to lengthy disputes and delays. These are, in turn, implicated in more school absences and more resistance from schools to take young people without the necessary SEND funding in place.

With respect to our third research question, we assert that this model embodies an 'exclusionary architecture' as described by Pennacchia (2024). We see competing logics at a national policy level being played out through professional practice at a local level, exacerbated by funding shortages and uneven distribution of specialist provision. Admissions' resistance can be a deliberate tactic to meet external accountabilities, but the model illustrates how choices (and the negotiations surrounding them) can have far-reaching consequences for the inclusion of individual young people. We advance two arguments to support this assertion.

Our first argument is that the inclusion of children in care is a complex policy space, where distributive justice aims, sustained over multiple governments, are inexorably entangled with wider policy agendas. Our model, theorised inductively from the qualitative data, is consistent with – and helps to explain – the results of our quantitative analysis. We find clear links between school absence, school moves, exclusions, SEND support and specialist provision. These are not entirely new and our findings corroborate those of previous studies (e.g. Berridge et al. 2020; Harrison, Dixon, et al. 2023; Sebba et al. 2015), albeit using a different approach. At a national policy level, the desire to improve outcomes for children in care can thus be blunted or thoroughly undermined by educational policy in other areas.

Our second argument is that these relationships manifest in unique configurations at the local level, which contribute to wide differences in school absences; the rates in some

local authorities are three times higher than those in others. For example, some VSHs talked about 'one or two' schools who were resistant to admitting children in care, whereas others were wrestling with large MATs where a resistive disposition spanned all the area's schools (West, Wolfe, and Yaghi 2023). Similarly, most VSHs described an acute shortage of local specialist provision, with only a minority reporting that they could regularly access high-quality opportunities.

A young person's ability to engage successfully in learning is therefore shaped by the exigencies of the area in which they live and the local authority that has responsibility for them. Rather than a straightforward implementation of a national policy with clear aims grounded in distributive justice, VSHs reported the importance of local relationships in shaping which children are enabled to engage fully in education. Policy was thus enacted (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011; Ball et al., 2011; Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2011) in a discursive space between professionals in the Virtual School and, variously, schools, MATs, other local authorities or others in their own local authority. Despite national policy (e.g. DFE 2021b), the admission and inclusion of children in care was never procedurally guaranteed. Conflicting logics were surfaced and eventually reconciled through the legal proceedings, bureaucratic resistance, bargaining or tenacity. Even where a young person was admitted, there was often a sense that they were being set up to fail by inflexible school policies (Malcolm 2025). Given the well-established relationship between attendance and attainment (e.g. Dräger, Klein, and Sosu 2024; Weathers et al. 2021), this leads to a procedural injustice that we argue needs policy action.

This phenomenon is partly driven by the spatial tensions outlined earlier in this article. While Virtual Schools have always had to engage with geographical challenges (e.g. young people living at a distance), VSHs report that these have increased markedly as schools' connections to their local authority have declined. As schools have been afforded more autonomy over admissions, Virtual Schools have been forced to engage further afield to secure appropriate and inclusive educational opportunities.

Placing these concerns in a wider context, we turn to interrogate *why* schools might resist the admission of children in care in the ways reported by VSHs. As described above, publicly-funded schools in England operate in a policy environment strongly shaped by market forces that foreground high-stakes testing and inspection regimes (Mortimore 2023; Perryman et al. 2023). This environment offers schools and their leaders significant incentives to raise levels of academic performance (Gewirtz et al. 2021). Children in care risk being positioned as posing a challenge to this objective, given their low attainment, high levels of additional needs and historically high exclusion rates, based on national averages (Berridge et al. 2020; DFE 2025a, 2025b; Sebba et al. 2015; Timpson 2019).

Meanwhile, policy discourses that emphasise 'inclusive' approaches to education have emerged, not least so that groups of children who have been historically associated with lower levels of attainment should not be excluded from attending and thriving in mainstream schools (Schuelka 2018). One interpretation of this policy tension is that it offers a reasonable balance between exerting appropriately demanding pressures upon schools and the need to avoid overtly resistive practices that act against the interests of vulnerable learners. This interpretation would stress the continuing importance of the professional values of teachers in this process, alongside their professional and institutional agency in

promoting inclusive approaches linked to prominent official policies (e.g. DFE 2022b). A more critical interpretation would stress the relative frailty of official appeals for 'inclusion' when set against the principal tenets of the policy environment, raising critical questions about schools' capacity and willingness to consistently and reliably adapt their practices in ways that are inclusive (Rayner 2017). Furthermore, the logics of academisation empower academies (and MATs) to choose less inclusive approaches to admissions, sanctions and support (Pennington, Su, and Wood 2024; Ryan-Atkin 2025; Wilkins 2017).

Our evidence aligns more strongly with this latter interpretation, in which forces counter to inclusion flourish in many schools due to 'impossible to ignore' policy pressures and incentives that relegate more vulnerable groups of learners; in this case, children in care. As noted above, VSHs did also mention schools (including academies and MATs) with *strong* inclusive practice that responded positively and flexibly to young people's needs; this emphasises the range of school leadership choices available.

In light of this, it is also important to note potentially positive policy developments including the most recent manifestations of the Ofsted inspection framework (Ofsted 2019, 2025). These have seen a turn away from a high-stakes, metrics-driven approach to one with an increased focus on well-being and inclusion, with a raised profile for children in care and other vulnerable learners; the so-called 'single word' judgements on schools have also been dropped. Furthermore, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 has several provisions designed to support the education of children in care, including reviewing 'direction' and strengthening the role of the VSH (DFE 2025c), alongside a new Schools White Paper focusing on inclusion (DFE, 2026).

Conclusions

We have presented evidence of systemic pressures that lead many children in care in England to miss substantial amounts of school and, therefore, learning opportunities that affect their attainment and successful transition into adulthood. From a procedural justice perspective, we have highlighted how the chances for young people are strongly tied to the educational and governmental ecosystem where they live. We have positioned our findings within neoliberal educational reforms that have instilled negative market logics and afforded some schools with significant autonomy over admission and behaviour policies. We have found, consistent with previous studies of vulnerable learners (e.g. Done, Knowler, and Armstrong 2021; Malcolm 2025; McIntyre and Hall 2020; Pennacchia 2024), that many are using this latitude to resist the admission of children in care. We have also demonstrated how this is exacerbated by systemic failures around SEND support and the limited availability of high-quality specialist provision, constituting an 'exclusionary architecture' (Pennacchia 2024) that undermines government efforts towards improving educational outcomes.

We conclude by making several recommendations to the DFE for modest policy realignments that would mitigate some of the worst consequences of the current situation. First, the assumption that schools can resist admissions should be reversed. In practical terms, rather than VSHs being expected to make a case for why a young person should be admitted, the onus should fall onto the school to demonstrate why they should not. Second, the SEND 'belonging regulations' should be reviewed and simplified to

avoid lengthy (and costly) disputes between local authorities. Third, Ofsted's inspection framework should be evaluated to ensure that its new focus on inclusion for children in care is effective, with appropriate sanctions for schools who exhibit poor practice. Fourth, there should be meaningful investment in high-quality specialist provision to ensure that sufficient is available to Virtual Schools, as well as ensuring that the sector is appropriately regulated through Ofsted. Finally, the autonomy of academies to adopt punitive sanction policies that disproportionately disadvantage children in care should be reviewed in light of research evidence.

Notes

1. 'Looked after children' or 'children looked after' are the most common terms in policy documents, but we have used 'children in care' as this tends to be preferred by young people themselves.
2. A small number are delivered as commissioned services or shared teams between multiple local authorities.
3. Regression analysis was not possible due to high levels of multicollinearity.
4. Unauthorised absence (i.e. without the school's consent) shows relatively little variation between local authorities and was therefore not analytically useful.
5. We are aware that there are subtly different reporting practices between local authorities, but this measure provides the best currently available for analysis.

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