

The role of the Virtual School in supporting improved educational outcomes for children in care

Abstract

In England, 'Virtual Schools' oversee and support the educational progress of children in care. This paper reports on the analysis of 16 interviews with Virtual School Head Teachers that were part of two mixed methods research projects on the educational progress of children in care (Sebba *et al.* 2015; Sebba *et al.* 2016). These interviews explored their role; the types of support they offer young people in care; what they see as the key factors about a young person's individual characteristics and care experiences that influence their educational outcomes; how schools support young people in care; and the influence of the foster carer/residential staff on the educational outcomes of these children. The interviews were analysed using NVivo and emerging themes were identified informed by the literature on the education of children in care. The paper draws out the main findings which explore the status and role of Virtual Schools in England, their functions, strategies and what they see as their contribution to improving the educational outcomes of children in care.

Background

Poor outcomes of children in care

Internationally, children in care generally experience poorer educational outcomes than their peers. In Australia, those in out-of-home care scored 13–39 percentage points lower than all school students (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015) and only 45% of those in foster care complete Year 12 schooling compared with 77% of the general population (Harvey *et al.* 2015). Tideman *et al.* (2011), in Sweden, have shown that children in foster care have lower performances than their peers with similar cognitive capacity. Similarly, Okpych and Courtney (2014) in the US reported that former foster youth have a much lower employment rate than young adults matched on prior educational attainment. In Wales in 2017, 12% of those in care achieved five GCSEs Grade A*- C including English/Welsh and mathematics (the benchmark for 16 year olds), compared with 55% of all students (Welsh Government, 2018).

In England, in 2017 (DfE, 2018a) the average attainment at age 16 for children in care¹ across eight school subjects was 19 (out of a possible 64). For children who have been adopted², on average it was 30, and for all children, 44. At age 11, the expected level in English, mathematics and science was achieved by 32% of children in care, 39% of children previously in care and 61% of all children.

¹ In England, the term children looked after is used to describe children in the care of a local authority if a court has granted a care order to place a child in care, or has cared for the child for more than 24 hours.

² The adoption statistics are experimental as they only include the 30% or so of parents who declare that the child is adopted – which attracts additional resources.

The much higher levels of special educational needs of children in care need considering, but still the differences are evident.

Young people in care experience other outcomes that are much poorer than those of their peers including fixed-term exclusions from school which are five times higher (11% compared with 2%, DfE, 2018a). Access to higher education is at least seven times higher in the general population (more than 50% rather than 7%, DfE, 2018b) though improves using data for young people in their late 20s rather than at aged 18 (Harrison, 2017). Rates of offending are much higher (5% compared with 1% of the general population) and 40% of 19-21 year old care leavers were not in education, training or employment in 2017, compared with 13% of their peers (DfE, 2018b).

What is a Virtual School?

England introduced Virtual Schools as a pilot in 2007 to support the education of children in care. The Virtual School model was introduced in Victoria, Australia³ in 2017 but no research as such has been undertaken on them in that context. A Virtual School is not a physical school, but a team mainly of teachers in a local authority (LA) who work predominantly through the schools and other services to improve the education of children in care. However, Rivers (2018) describes the Virtual School team she leads as including many other professionals including education welfare, youth offending and those with integrated services backgrounds, which might reflect a future trend. The Children and Families Act 2014 amended the Children Act 1989, to require local authorities in England to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH), thus making it one of only seven statutory roles in the LA.

The functions of VSHs were set out in Statutory Guidance for LAs in February 2018⁴ on promoting the education of children in care, adopted or subject of a Special Guardianship Order⁵ with the role including the following:

- Creating a culture of high educational aspirations
- Ensuring children in care access high quality education placement options
- Ensuring children in care have effective Personal Education Plans (PEPs – a required plan which states the child's needs and how they will be met)
- Monitoring the attendance and progress of children in care
- Ensuring that a 'Children in Care Council' - young people in care representing the interests of those in care - report on their educational experiences.

The LA must ensure that the VSH has the resources, time, training and support to fulfil these functions. With just over 50,000 children in schools in England, who are in care or have been so previously, schools have an average of 2.5 children on roll. This creates a challenge for the Virtual School in getting the commitment and investment of time from schools in the education of a small minority of their pupils. Every school, even those with no such children at a given time, must identify a designated teacher (DT) for children in care whose role it is to promote their children's education (when they are in school).

³ <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/lookout.aspx>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/683556/Promoting_the_education_of_looked-after_children_and_previously_looked-after_children.pdf

⁵ A Special Guardianship Order is made by the Family Court which places a child or young person to live with someone other than their parent(s) on a long-term basis.

In England, school spending has risen substantially since 2009, but fallen per pupil (Belfield *et al.* 2018). The education of children in care receives additional funding through a centrally allocated Pupil Premium Plus grant, allocated to the VSH for every child in care for at least one day during that academic year to be spent in accordance with their needs stated in their Personal Education Plan. This grant was £1,900 per pupil at the time of the studies reported in this paper, but has since increased to £2,300 per pupil. The education inspection agency Ofsted, is required to inspect the expenditure in order to ensure it is being spent in accordance with the Personal Education Plan, but other than that, little is known about how it is spent and to what effect.

Previous research on the educational support of children in care

There is a paucity of robust research on the efficacy of interventions for children in care. Forsman and Vinnerljung's (2012) review of the evidence concluded that the strongest empirical support from evaluations with rigorous designs of interventions, involved tutoring and structured individualised support. They concluded that the evidence base was limited and of poor quality. Liabo *et al.*'s (2012) systematic review of educational interventions for children in care identified four UK evaluations (Harker *et al.* 2004; Connelly *et al.* 2008; Finn 2008; Berridge *et al.* 2009) that reported significant findings. Mannay *et al.*'s (2015) review similarly concluded that the evidence base was too limited and of poor quality. Incidences of discrepancies in the LA data collected on educational outcomes of children in care were noted. Data monitoring is a specific function of the Virtual School, so may have improved since the time of these reviews.

A recent survey of teachers in England (Become, 2018), found 87% (of 447 respondents) said they had received no training about children in care before they qualified as a teacher; 31% identified 'not enough support from children's services' as their biggest challenge in working with children in care; and 87% of respondents said they had had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care.

Research specifically on VSHs

There has been almost no research specifically on the VSH and their impact on the outcomes of children in care. Berridge *et al.* (2009) evaluated the pilot VSH scheme which ran between 2007-9 in 11 LAs and noted that VSHs were senior educationalists, some part-time in post, mainly located in education services with variable sized teams. They found that the more senior and experienced VSHs were able to exert more pressure on school headteachers about admissions and exclusions. There was limited evidence that those LAs with VSHs had better outcomes (but small numbers, large cohort variations and other methodological caveats should be acknowledged). More recently, Rivers (2018), in a personal account of the Virtual School that supports over 1,000 children in care, reported that permanent exclusions of these children have been eliminated and fixed-term exclusions reduced by a quarter, though she is careful not to attribute this to the Virtual School alone.

Teachers and social workers in the Berridge *et al.* evaluation showed a high level of uncertainty about how to support the education of children in care, compared with designated teachers and foster carers who understood the VSH role better. The children themselves were more concerned about school placement and moves than outcomes and this anxiety tended not to be addressed through the support they received. Data management was noted to be a significant challenge for VSHs.

Ofsted's (2012) review of Virtual Schools concluded that there was some evidence of effective support for individual children, enhanced stability and well-being but outcomes were variable. Financial constraints limited staffing resources (Pupil Premium Plus cannot be used for core funding of the Virtual School). Roles and responsibilities were unclear and there was too much variability in data systems and Personal Education Plans. Ofsted also noted that children placed outside the LA were less likely to receive effective support than those living within it.

Transitions in education were the focus of research by both Driscoll (2013) and Drew and Banerjee's (2018) studies. Driscoll interviewed 12 designated teachers and four VSHs focusing specifically on the support provided at 16 years of age, at that time the statutory school leaving age in England. She concluded that the main effort by Virtual Schools was on support for subsequent employment at the expense of further and higher education opportunities for those young people who might benefit. Other challenges that emerged were the difficulties in 'turning things around' when such a high proportion of young people enter care in their mid- and late teens and the negative impact of multiple moves.

Drew and Banerjee (2018) surveyed 29 VSHs about how they supported education and well-being. They noted that the VSHs provided enhanced learning opportunities directly through one-to-one tuition, mentoring, case workers and extra-curricular activities. They also undertook specific transition support such as accompanying a child to school, nurture sessions, providing transition mentors or places in residential holiday camps. The VSHs in their survey offered support for well-being and relationships through attachment training in schools, linkages with other services and interventions such as *Thrive*⁶. A major role in the work of the VSH was raising awareness through specific training for teachers and social workers.

The limited evidence about what support children in care are getting, the role of the VSHs, planning and funding mechanisms in improving outcomes, led to the need for further research.

Aims

This paper draws on 16 semi-structured interviews with VSHs in England, in 2015, the year in which their role became statutory. These interviews were completed as part of two different studies⁷:

Study 1: The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: linking care and educational data, see: <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/educational-progress-of-looked-after-children/>

The overall aim of Study 1 was to identify care and educational factors associated with the progress and attainment of children in care between the ages of 11 and 16. It did this by linking data from two national datasets, the National Pupil Database and Children Looked After in England. Alongside this quantitative analysis, interviews with young people and those who provided them with educational and social support were undertaken, including in-depth interviews with the VSHs of the six LAs which participated in the study. These interviews explored their role; the types of support they offer young people in care; what they see as the key factors that influence their educational

⁶ <https://www.thriveapproach.com>

⁷ Study 1 was funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Grant: EDU/ 41524), but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. We acknowledge the funding support of the Greater London Authority Schools Excellence Fund for Study 2.

outcomes; how they work with schools to support young people in care; and the influence of designated teachers and foster carers on the educational outcomes for these children.

Study 2: Evaluation of the London Fostering Achievement Programme, see:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/education/evaluation-london-fostering-achievement-programme/>

The overall aim of Study 2 was to evaluate the London Fostering Achievement Programme, which was designed to improve educational outcomes for children in foster care in 31 London boroughs. The four main components of the Programme were: training focusing on education; 'masterclasses' in topics such as attachment and special educational needs; direct work with schools and 'education champions' who were experienced foster carers supporting other foster carers to improve the educational experiences of the children. The evaluation of the Programme included 10 semi-structured interviews with VSHs that asked them about the Programme but also explored their role, functions, access to funding and strategies used to support the education of children in their care.

This paper focuses specifically on the 16 interviews undertaken with the VSHs in order to identify their role; the types of support they offer young people in care; what they see as the key factors that influence educational outcomes; how schools support young people in care; and the influence of the foster carer/residential staff on the educational outcomes of these children.

Methodology

The interviews were undertaken in 2015 by three interviewers; the two authors of this paper and an additional researcher who himself had been a VSH. Two semi-structured interview schedules were used, both of which covered the role and functions of VSHs in supporting the education of children in care. In addition, Study 1 asked about young people who had done better or worse than expected in their school leaving examinations and who were also interviewed in the study (Berridge, 2017). Study 2 asked additionally about specific aspects of the London Fostering Achievement Programme. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Ethical approval had been obtained from Bristol and Oxford Universities.

NVivo 11 for Macs was used to analyse the interviews. The transcripts were read through several times and 'nodes' created in NVivo reflecting the emerging themes which provide the structure for reporting the findings. Constant comparison (Glaser, 1965) was used whereby each interpretation and finding is compared with existing findings as it emerges from the data analysis.

Sample

The 16 interviewees by chance included eight females and eight males. Four had been what one described as a 'real' headteacher previously, managing and leading a school, often within the same LA. The length of time that they had undertaken the VSH role specifically ranged from less than a month (one respondent) to 7 years (three respondents) since the time that the role of VSH was introduced as a pilot, with a mean of around 3-4 years. Two of the VSHs were also the Head of Inclusion and a third VSH managed the Educational Psychology Service in addition to his VSH role.

Key Findings

Size and Structure of the Virtual School

There was considerable variation in the ways in which Virtual Schools are structured and work as noted in Berridge *et al.* (2009) but as one VSH noted, little sharing of these practices: *We sort of come together at various meetings, and there's an assumption that somehow, we're all operating in the same way, and we're not.* The size of the Virtual Schools varied from three to 13 full-time equivalent staff. Where there were only three, the services needed were commissioned from elsewhere. A few LAs have more than 40 staff in the Virtual School, but these were not in the sample. The size of the team did not seem to reflect either the number of children in care in that authority or the size of the authority. However, in some cases, it did reflect the reported level of priority given to the education of children in care and in others, the extent to which they commissioned services from outside the Virtual School. As one VSH explained:

No Virtual School team as such because the team could never be big enough. With a school of 800, I'd need a staff of about 70, or 80. So instead, we govern by consent using a working protocol that defines good practice and the service for which we are all prepared to be held to account, and therefore the required staffing... with educational psychology, clinical psychology... Everything else [other than Pupil Premium Plus and Personal Education Plans] is commissioned out or it's done through protocols. One-to-one support service is commissioned out.

The staff often had specific responsibilities either for phases of education – primary, secondary, further education, 18-21, 21 plus, or for specific groups such as unaccompanied asylum seekers. Several mentioned case workers, mentors or teaching assistants attached to more senior Virtual School staff. Social workers and youth workers were also mentioned by one VSH and two mentioned having data analysts on the team.

Quality of staff was seen as critical by several VSHs, sometimes because they had 'inherited' staff whom they felt had shortcomings, but one VSH described a demanding system for selection of the Virtual School staff:

We have a very, very rigorous interview and recruitment process, which includes young people, which includes a full day of round robin interviews, young people, tasks, presentation, panel with head teachers from school. It's quite challenging.

Functions and strategies used to support the education of children in care

Overall

Almost all the VSHs reported that their functions were primarily to support those adults who come into direct contact with children in care. Their role in supporting other adults was variously described as training, informing them about education and helping them to speak up for the young people. The DT in each school was one main target population for their work. They also supported and trained social workers and foster carers, mostly separately, though four VSHs mentioned bringing them together for training or planning to do so for topics of common interest such as mental health services, the Personal Education Plans or how the Pupil Premium Plus could be used to better support the child.

Working with DTs

Fourteen of the 16 VSHs mentioned working with DTs, running fora, organising annual conferences, running training sessions on for example, the Personal Education Plans or attachment and trauma. Investing in DTs was well worth the effort as they were key to establishing quality relationships in school for the children in care. One VSH felt it was important for the Virtual School to do school-based training in for example, attachment, that might engage all staff, to facilitate the DT to support the staff thereafter.

Working with social workers

Twelve VSHs spoke about the work they do with social workers and many described their challenging or, less often, highly collaborative relationships with them (see next section). There were many references to social workers giving insufficient priority to education and one VSH described an 'awayday' for the social workers that had focused entirely on encouraging the social workers to get to know the children's educational needs better. In most of the local authorities, the social workers, rather than the Virtual School were responsible for leading the PEP which was associated with greater priority being given to social care than education, leading to some very critical comments:

[In this local authority] it's the social worker's responsibility to do the PEPs so they write the document, they have to facilitate the meeting. ...good social workers, the quality of their PEPs is good. The ones where I would say they're weak practice, absolutely no focus on education whatsoever, their PEPs are appalling, very basic and almost it's that attitude of, "I don't really think it's my responsibility. I'm a social worker, I'm not an educator."

It is possible that in these LAs the 'risk averse' culture of the social care service prioritises safeguarding issues even in the school context and thereby expects social workers to lead (Munro, 2011). Others reported more positively on the role of the social worker in leading the PEP, noting that social workers deferred to them on details that required educational specialist knowledge and one VSH described the social workers as "knowing what they don't know". One VSH recounted having embedded good practice in the PEP process by retraining every social worker to use the on-line ePEP, incorporating the quality standards for the education of children in care.

Working with foster carers

The importance of the role of the foster carer in education and raising their aspirations for the young person was mentioned by almost all the VSHs:

...the next place to raise attainment is foster carers – has to be... They're there 24/7, so they are key, and we need to keep skilling them up and giving them... that confidence for them to go into the school and have a conversation, because they don't have it in the main.

There were positive examples of the difference this could make to the young person. One VSH spoke of how a foster carer had set much clearer expectations regarding homework during the PEP at which the young person was present and remarked: *you know my mum's never done anything like that.*

Thirteen of the 16 VSHs described their work with foster carers, in particular training and supporting foster carers on admissions, exclusions, reading, careers' advice and the PEP process. These were provided through running weekly support groups, organising an annual education conference, running a weekly surgery and book clubs. One VSH visits each foster carer at home when the pupils are in the final two years of compulsory schooling in order to prepare them for examinations and transition but most seemed not to have the capacity to do this.

A few VSHs spoke of the engagement of more experienced foster carers in training and supporting other foster carers, akin to The Fostering Network's Education Champions⁸ which was one strand of the intervention in Study 2. Others described ways in which foster carers are engaged in the training of social workers or less often, teachers.

Relationships within the local authority

The VSH's relationship with other sections of the LA was a major challenge for them in most cases. The Virtual School was more often located within education and, specifically, the school improvement section both structurally and geographically: *social care is on the third floor; we're on the fifth floor*. While VSHs welcomed this as it positioned educational outcomes of children in care within school improvement, they noted that the day-to-day work of the Virtual School was often related to social care.

The way that the VSH was regarded by their LA colleagues and managers was often related to their perceived status, both historically and currently, within the LA as noted by Berridge *et al.* (2009). The minority of VSHs who had been headteachers or senior managers in the same or other LAs, started at an advantage since they commanded more respect from senior colleagues than did the majority who had been advisory teachers or senior teachers in schools. For the few of them who were members of the Senior Management Team in the LA, as the national guidance suggests that they should be, this was critical in their 'clout' in decision-making.

Some noted that when the post of VSH became statutory in 2015, their image and status improved and they were able to command a more strategic role across the LA. The priority given to children in care by the Director was another factor often related to the seniority bestowed on the VSH.

Relationships between the Virtual School and Social Care

The dominant perception was that the culture of social care in general, and social work in particular, was very different to that of education, as one VSH noted: *...they are worlds apart, really, and they have very different priorities, understandably*. But the importance of working closely with social workers in the best interests of the child was acknowledged by all interviewees:

...when you're trying to protect a child, education can come very low down on the list because you're wanting to make sure that child's going to be alive. So, you're considering their care placement, and that has to take the priority. So, there's work to be done domestically here, I think, to try and bring those two together.

The VSHs described strategies designed to improve their effective working with social workers. Several VSHs felt that co-location was important as it encouraged more interaction over decisions and a third of them were co-located with social care:

...we're co-located with social care so I have half my team sitting over with the social workers. I attend all of the LAC management meetings, the children's leadership meetings... Where possible, they will work with me... I have to approve all education for residential placements and if I'm not happy, I will say no. I sometimes get overridden if there is no other option.

⁸ For more information on Education Champions see: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/improving-educational-outcomes/fostering-potential>

One noted that when discussions with social workers focused on individual children and their needs rather than on working processes, better decisions were made. Another seconded a member of the Virtual School to work in the social care team in order to try and bring a stronger education perspective into discussions about children changing placements/schools. Another VSH met weekly with the social care team to maximise effective co-working. However, Rivers (2018), noted that most of her colleagues are located in education and many of the VSHs we interviewed regarded the advantages of this in terms of prioritising educational provision as outweighing the disadvantages.

The main area of conflict was over children moving schools. Our earlier research (Sebba *et al.*, 2015) showed the damaging effects of moving schools on the educational outcomes for children in care, in particular for those in the last two years of schooling. Most VSHs referred to their anxieties about their role in any school change arising from social workers' decisions on changes in care placements.

In 2018, the national statutory guidance⁹ stated that the Virtual Head must be consulted before a child is moved out of the LA and that the VSH's view should be considered very seriously in this decision. VSHs reported that this helped tighten-up the process:

...we [now] have a system that is really well understood by everybody, that if a social worker requests a change of placement, it goes to the commissioning team, [who] immediately email us with the referral, we get in touch with the social worker and then joint-planning takes place.

Others acknowledged that some Heads of Social Care were overruling them even when the 'chosen' school was rated 'inadequate' and that there were still problems:

Sometimes you get consulted and you know darn well they're going to do it anyway... "Oh, we've moved them." First time you hear is when a school contacts you... it's not misconception, it's ignorance really.

In some local authorities, if social care attempted to overrule the advice of the VSH, the decision was deferred to the Director of Children's Services. Several VSHs reported regular meetings with the Director at which the educational progress of children in care is reviewed and the Director tries to unlock barriers.

Relationships with schools

Four of the VSHs referred to their membership, or in one case Vice-Chair role of the headteachers' forum in their LA. Where the VSH had been a headteacher in the area, it gave them greater influence over the heads on such issues as admissions and exclusions. The VSH was trusted to provide the necessary support for a challenging child threatened with exclusion or for a child they were reluctant to admit, because of the perceived additional burden that the child might place on the school. As one VSH put it:

I'm part of the Headteachers' Group, so that means that young people get into the right school, get in there quickly and stay there.

Many VSHs stated that they would like to be more involved in direct work in schools, but staffing constraints and prioritising statutory work such as PEPs limited this, although as PEPs are usually

⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/683556/Promoting_the_education_of_looked-after_children_and_previously_looked-after_children.pdf

held in schools, their attendance at PEPs facilitated contact. Their main activity with schools was training for DTs or whole school staff. The VSHs described numerous phone calls with schools and much correspondence/e-mails.

Another key area of contact with schools was over exclusion of children in care. Many VSHs had worked hard to reduce or eradicate the permanent exclusion of children in care and several reported having been successful in reducing fixed-term exclusions, in one LA by a half. The quality of the VSH's relationships with schools, in particular their headteachers, was crucial in this process, helping schools to find other ways of dealing with these children's behaviour. They argued that lack of understanding by the schools of the behaviours was the greatest challenge, and often school staff were too busy and/or did not understand the kinds of problems faced by, for example, teenagers who were late entrants into care.

Training whole school staff in *Bath Spa University's Attachment Aware Schools Programme*¹⁰ was mentioned by several VSHs as addressing this by providing better understanding of why the children in care behaved as they did and providing some of the strategies to address this. One LA using this programme reported that schools had evidenced a great deal of improvement in behaviour, but noted that attachment work involved the whole school in cultural change which was a major undertaking.

Support for children

While all the VSHs regarded their core functions as working through other adults, they still identified part of their role as direct work with individual children mainly on one-to-one tuition, but also on school admissions, exclusions from school, school changes, monitoring and evaluating progress, identifying support needed through the PEP and transitions – primary to secondary school and post-16 transitions. A few mentioned homework clubs run directly by the Virtual School.

One-to-one tuition and individual support

Eleven VSHs identified the provision of one-to-one tuition as part of their role as noted by Drew and Banerjee (2018). This was almost always commissioned externally with around 70% or more of the children in care receiving tuition at some time. However, there were sometimes concerns about the quality of the tuition and in these cases, some was provided in-house by members of the Virtual School staff or by commissioning a teacher from the school to provide it during out-of-school hours. Several VSHs mentioned a key adult in school, not necessarily the DT, who had been identified to provide the young person with specific extra support.

Several VSHs also talked about study support clubs or centres run by the Virtual School in which extra tuition was provided and this increased for children as they approached their GCSEs. Some provided learning mentors and others described what was essentially behavioural support:

...this young man was living with his sister who wasn't much older than he was, attending an out-of-authority school, and I met him in his peer group... They were 16, but would go around the school making faces at the windows and poking each other and generally just being 12 year olds. We put on a lot of extra support and we required the school to keep him in, not on study leave. He did better than his peer group did, he got to college. His GCSEs were far better.

¹⁰ <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/projects/attachment-awareness/>

School admissions

The national policy requires children in care to be placed in schools that are rated by Ofsted as 'good' or 'outstanding'. We are aware from a confidential piece of research that we conducted for one fostering agency, that many children in care (maybe between a fifth and a quarter) are attending schools deemed to be *requiring improvement* or *inadequate*, thereby not meeting these requirements. (Of course, we cannot assume that a pupil should transfer if a school's rating deteriorates as continuity can also be important.)

In general, the VSHs welcomed this policy and saw their role as ensuring that others, in particular the headteachers of the schools, implemented it. Five VSHs raised issues relating to admissions to schools:

Making sure that any educational placement is good or outstanding and the right one for the child, and that there is no delay in that, and that we absolutely get the school that we want for the child. Most days I have to negotiate with some headteacher or other to try and get a child into their school.

When a child moved school, many VSHs reported attending the school as soon as possible, as one put it, to 'broker the deal'. Children and young people, often teenagers, being out of school for weeks or even months was a major concern. This occurred when the initial care placement was made, or when a placement disrupted and another foster carer could not be found in the same area. It also happened in relation to the increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who particularly at aged 15 or 16 and speaking little English, were unpopular with some schools, as headteachers were concerned about how this might reflect in their results – though they are not included in the published examination figures for two years following admission.¹¹

PEPs

Reviewing the quality of the PEPs was regarded by all VSHs as a key responsibility and challenging the social workers where the quality was seen to be too low, was often mentioned by them. One VSH was invited by their line manager to conduct a full review of the PEPs:

We scrutinised 80 PEPS and that confirmed what the gut feeling was [that they were insufficiently focused on education] so we shared this with [line manager] who then shared it with the director and very quickly we were having a meeting with ...the director who said, "I'm quite happy for the virtual school to take over the writing of the PEPs." Thank you very much but there's a bit of an implication here, but we got an admin assistant out of it.

The PEP meeting was seen to provide a forum for considering the young person's engagement in school extra-curricular activities, clubs and sports or represents the school in these. These activities sometimes involve different transport arrangements from school which foster carers can find challenging but they can also contribute to academic engagement, because of their contribution to confidence, self-esteem and friendships as noted by Gilligan (1999). This VSH worked with social care to arrange taxis to pick them up or persuading carers to make alternative arrangements, so that the young person can live a more 'normal' life.

¹¹ When schools are provided with their results for checking, students whose first language is not English and who arrived from overseas and entered school for the first time after the start of the academic year preceding the year of the examinations can be discounted from the results.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748497/Secondary_accountability_measures_guidance_-_October_2018.pdf

Several VSHs mentioned being keen to develop more interactive ways in which young people can participate and express a view in the PEP process, which they felt was currently too limited or tokenistic. Rivers (2018) noted that the ePEPs had achieved this in her LA. Mannay *et al.* (2018) describe a range of creative techniques to better facilitate the engagement of young people in care in educational decision-making.

Resilience

As Drew and Banerjee (2018) note, given our previous findings on the positive influence of earlier entry into care and placement- and school stability on subsequent outcomes and the role of significant adults in this, it is helpful to consider the role of the VSH through the lens of resilience. Resilience is defined as the capacity to achieve positive outcomes despite living in adversity (Ungar, 2013). VSHs stressed the need to build up trust, in order to get young people to engage and open up, so that they can access learning. One VSH observed the importance of providing support by assisting with coursework, exam preparation and employment to enable the young person's resilience to translate into capability. This resilience was described as key by many of the VSHs, who referred to young people's capacity to survive in the face of adversity:

If I think about one young lady who's now 25, she's in her final year at university and taking a Masters next year. We worked with her and she [now] works with some of our professionals to try and educate them and her voice went through to Ofsted recently.

One referred specifically to the resilience of UASC, giving an example of a young person who was driven by a personal desire to do well, which overrode their problems. Another specific example given was a choir whose members were all in care, set up by the Virtual School. The VSH noted how the choir attracts universal admiration, they had become a resilient group of young people who supported each other and learned from each other. This was a strong example of how extra-curricular activities can build confidence, skills and social networks (Gilligan, 1999).

Transition to post-16 provision

Nine VSHs identified post-16 provision as a major priority. Most had at least one member of staff designated with responsibility for post-16, who ensured that the good work done by schools was not undone and that those children in care that needed it, were given a further chance before transitioning into adulthood. In one LA, the VSH had negotiated for a local premier football club to provide mentoring and employability services in collaboration with the Virtual School, to try and ensure better transition experiences. One VSH described the Virtual School staff accompanying young people on university 'taster days'. Both Driscoll (2013) and Brady and Gilligan (2018) note the importance of providing these *second chance* activities in relation to subsequent employment.

Out of area placements

Percentages of children in placements out of the LA we reported to be high, over 50% in one LA though their placements were mainly in neighbouring LAs. Where the VSH reported numbers more than 20 miles (and in some cases more than 250 miles) away it was more like 10% of their children in care – this creates a significant challenge in terms of trying to support those children's education. One VSH described the LA policy as *bringing them back in* and suggested that as these were the children with the most complex difficulties, the VSH had responsibility for finding them school places and training the foster carers in their new placements.

Funding – the Pupil Premium Plus (PPP)

PPP, introduced in 2014, is controlled by the VSH. VSHs allocate some or all of it to schools but are able to retain part or all of it for strategic purposes providing they can show how the children in care benefit from it. Across the 16 VSHs interviewed the amount held back varied between £0-650.

...Pupil Premium Plus has transformed what we are able to do. Because it is not just the amount, it is the leverage you have got with it. Because it is not just having the money it is the fact that we are in control of it.

Most of the PPP budget is spent on one-to-one tuition and training of foster carers, school staff and social workers. One VSH described having a resource panel, from which items such as laptops and the costs of gym membership are allocated but suggested that it can be an issue for other children (not in care) who have no access to such resources but similar or more extensive needs. Most VSHs reported that they released it to schools on receipt of a PEP that justified how it would be used. Ofsted checks whether the PPP is being used to support the child but accepts that contributions to whole staff training can be justified.

Data collection, analysis and use

VSHs spoke about the need for reliable and accurate data on progress of the children in care. Two mentioned having data analysts in the team and several described the priority as getting in-depth data for the children that informs the PEPs and decision-making. They did not want to be judged on year-on-year test or exam results because of fluctuations in cohorts. . For this reason, and in order to work towards more consistent results, they wanted robust data.

Those that had robust data either shared it with a colleague in the school improvement team or used it as a basis for discussion about the progress of children in care. They spoke of tracking the data to 'hold everyone to account' or using it in the PEP meeting to argue for further resources or commitment. Some reported on data being used more strategically, to demonstrate that those who stayed in care longer with fewer placement changes did better (confirming the findings of Sebba *et al.*, 2015) in order to direct resources to factors that contribute to stability.

Limitations of this study

The data reported are drawn from two separate pieces of research undertaken with different aims. Study 1 was a mixed method exploration to identify the factors that seem to contribute to the poorer educational outcomes of children in care. Study 2 was an evaluation of an intervention designed to improve these educational outcomes. Within both studies, VSHs were interviewed and this paper reports on the analysis of the responses to questions common across both studies addressing their role, how it fits into the LA structure and what contribution they thought foster carers make to children's outcomes. However, Study 1 covered only secondary education whereas Study 2 covered both primary and secondary schooling. In both studies, data were collected from a range of other sources (e.g. quantitative outcomes, interviews with designated teachers, foster carers and social workers) and triangulated but this paper focuses only on the perspectives of VSHs which could be seen as a limitation.

Discussion and conclusion

The status of the VSH in the LA emerged as key to the influence they command, as it had in Berridge *et al.* (2009). Those who knew the headteachers could persuade them not to exclude or to admit a young person. The tensions in the relationships between the Virtual School and the social care teams emerged as a key challenge for many, though not all. Those co-located were often able to interact

without pre-arranged meetings and tackle problems before they escalated. Other VSHs only found out that children had moved schools when the new school contacted them or disputed with their colleagues over each placement change. Only two VSHs reported that they were always involved in decisions to move children to a residential placement even if no school change was implied. This might reflect the well-documented pressure on social workers whose capacity is reported to be a significant obstacle to good practice in the children's social care field (Munro, 2011).

Most VSHs considered foster carers and specifically their aspirations and expectations, to be critical and invested time and support in training and assisting them. Mannay *et al.* (2015) have shown the negative impact on children in care of low aspirations held by professionals in the services purporting to support them. This investment in the adults who spend most time with the children was seen as crucial to achieving a step-change though to date there is little research evidence of whether and how this happens.

Many Virtual Schools are cutting back on staffing. This has implications for direct work and support with individual children that are labour-intensive, or regular contact with headteachers and schools. Inevitably, a reduction in core staffing would lead to prioritising statutory work, which in turn, might mean relationships suffer between the Virtual School and children, schools and social care. In contrast to funding for core staffing, the Pupil Premium Plus has increased, currently to £2300 and extended to adopted children and those subject to Special Guardianship Orders, though the funding attached to these two groups is distributed directly to schools so cannot contribute to the VSH's budget for strategic work.

How do the VSHs support the education of children in care

Very little is known to date about exactly whether, and if so how the work of the VSH contributes to the education of children in care as cohorts are small in many LAs, year-on-year cohorts vary significantly and there are no national data linking interventions to outcomes. We know from previous research (e.g. Sebba *et al.*, 2015) that earlier entry into care and placement stability are important in contributing to better educational outcomes. Identifying the processes by which the VSHs contribute to this, for example, by minimising school changes and reducing exclusions, might support the development of greater resilience. In addition, the VSHs seldom referred to support for children in residential care who emerged from our earlier research as having particularly poor outcomes.

The population being supported by VSHs is expanding with the recent addition of children previously in care and those subject to Special Guardianship Orders. Some of the adults caring for these additional children have had less access to preparation, training and support in the past and struggle to navigate the education system, especially special education support (Selwyn *et al.*, 2014). Yet the children in their care have experienced trauma, abuse and/or neglect as have those still or previously in care.

The lack of appropriate data (e.g. on interventions) make it difficult to say whether the presence of the VSH improves outcomes. The new role of VSH seems to have been generally welcomed and received cross-government support. Some strong anecdotal evidence was provided by those interviewed. However, currently the variations in their status, relationship with both education and social care and the ways in which their PPP budgets are spent, all need greater attention and more detailed research.

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