



Department
for Education

Evaluation of the Extension of Virtual School Heads' Duties to Children with a Social Worker Final Report

August 2025

**Authors: Alice Tawell, Andrew Brown, Alun
Rees, Trinidad Moreno Silva, Ellen Froustis,
Nikki Luke, Julie Selwyn, Kathryn
Duckworth, Leon Feinstein**



Government
Social Research

Glossary

AATI Attachment Aware Trauma Informed

ACEs Adverse Childhood Experiences

AEO Attendance Entitlement Officer

AIO Attendance Improvement Officer

AD Assistant Director

AP Alternative Provision

ARC Attachment Research Community

ASYE Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

AVSH Assistant Virtual School Head

CAMHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

CCE Child Criminal Exploitation

CiC Children in Care

CIN Child(ren) in Need

CLA Children Looked After

CME Children Missing Education

CEO Chief Executive Officer

CTF Common Transfer File

CP Child Protection

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CSC Children's Social Care

CSE Child Sexual Exploitation

CWSW Children with a Social Worker

CYP Children and Young People

DCS Director of Children's Services

DID Difference in Differences

DLD Developmental Language Disorder

DSL Designated Safeguarding Lead

DT Designated Teacher

DVSH Deputy Virtual School Head

EBSNA Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

EBSA Emotionally Based School Avoidance

EH Early Help

EHCP Education, Health and Care Plan

EHE Elective Home Education

EP Educational Psychologist

Ever 6 CWSW Children with a Social Worker in the last 6 years

EWO Education Welfare Officer

FAP Fair Access Panel

FSM Free School Meals

GSP Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

GPS Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling

ICPC Initial Child Protection Conference

IDACI Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

ILACS Inspecting Local Authority Children's Service

IRO Independent Reviewing Officer

ITS Interrupted Time Series

LA Local Authority

MACE Multi-Agency Child Exploitation

MASH Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub

MAT Multi-Academy Trust

MIS Management Information System

NPD National Pupil Database

ONS Office for National Statistics

PEPs Personal Education Plans

PLAC Previously Looked After Children

PMR Pupil Matching Reference

PP Pupil Premium

PP+ Pupil Premium Plus

PRU Pupil Referral Unit

RCPC Review Child Protection Conference

RRP Relational and Restorative Practice

SEMH Social Emotional Mental Health

SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SENDCo/SENCO Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator

SGO Special Guardianship Order

SIP School Improvement Partner

SLCN Speech, Language and Communication Needs

SLT Senior Leadership Team

SRS Secure Research Service

SW Social Worker

SWIS Social Workers in Schools project

TAC Team Around the Child

TIP Trauma Informed Practice

ToC Theory of Change

UPN Unique Pupil Number

VS Virtual School (collectively the professionals working within the Virtual School)

VSH Virtual School Head (referring to the professional in the leadership role of the Virtual School)

Table of Contents

Glossary	1
Table of Contents	5
List of figures	7
List of tables	8
Acknowledgements	12
Executive summary	13
Rationale	13
Methods	14
Findings	15
Recommendations	19
Introduction	25
Background to the extension of duties	25
Background to the theory of change	29
Methodology	33
Research questions	33
Research design and methods	33
National survey of Virtual School Heads	35
Case studies	37
Analyses of national administrative datasets	39
Data integration	42
Limitations of the evaluation	43
Findings	47
The Virtual School Head role	47
The interpretation of the 'strategic' nature of the duty	48
VSH understanding of what is expected of them	49
Approaches taken to meet the extended duty to Children with a Social Worker (CWSW)	49
Progress towards theory of change outcomes	57
Improved data quality	59
Awareness-raising	70
Strategies in place for increasing schools' understanding of the needs of this cohort	74
Strategies in place for more inclusive practice in schools (directed by senior leadership team (SLT))	80

Strategies in place for increasing Children’s Social Care’s understanding of education and vice versa	90
Strategies in place for a strengthened partnership between school, social care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Virtual School (VS)	99
Strategies in place for increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	106
Early indications of progress towards longer term outcomes	111
Virtual School Heads’ perceptions of progress towards the theory of change longer term outcomes	111
Findings from analyses of national administrative datasets	116
Facilitators and barriers to implementation of the duties	124
Facilitators	125
Barriers	129
Future developments	135
Virtual School Head views on future guidance	137
Discussion and recommendations	139
Annex 1: Brief history of the Virtual School Head role	147
Annex 2: Case studies	148
Annex 3: Responses to VSH Survey 5	187
Annex 4: Technical Annex – Quantitative Evaluation	203

List of figures

Figure 1: Progress made towards 2023-24 ToC interim outcomes	58
Figure 2: VSHs views of useful information to have to monitor outcomes for CWSW	64
Figure 3: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Schools' increased understanding of CWSW needs	75
Figure 4: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)	81
Figure 5: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa	91
Figure 6: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans	98
Figure 7: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and the VS	100
Figure 8: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	107
Figure 9: Mean annual sessions missed due to absences, by group and year	117
Figure 10: Summary of regression results: Number of sessions missed due to absences a year, by plan type	118
Figure 11: Mean annual sessions missed because due to suspension, by group and year	119
Figure 12: Summary of regression results: Number of sessions lost due to suspensions annually, by plan type	120
Figure 13: Mean annual sessions missed due to absences, by group and academic year	217
Figure 14: Mean annual sessions missed because due to suspension, by group and academic year	223

List of tables

Table 1: Theory of change for the CWSW extension of duties: data component	31
Table 2: Theory of change for the CWSW extension of duties: awareness-raising component	32
Table 3: Timeline of data collection – Phase One and Phase Two Evaluations	34
Table 4: Overall response rate for each VSH survey	36
Table 5: Responses to VSH Survey 5 by region	36
Table 6: Characteristics of case study sites	37
Table 7: Interviews conducted for case studies, round 2	38
Table 8: Interviews conducted for case studies, round 3	38
Table 9: Data structure and coverage	40
Table 10: Sample sizes by outcome	41
Table 11: Historical completion of national VSH surveys	43
Table 12: Who does the VSH report to?	48
Table 13: Expectation of approach	49
Table 14: VSH approach to the extension of duties	50
Table 15: Access and quality of current CWSW data (n (%))	61
Table 16: Access and quality of Ever 6 CWSW data (n (%))	62
Table 17: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Schools’ increased understanding of CWSW needs	74
Table 18: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)	81
Table 19: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing CSC’s understanding of education and vice versa	91
Table 20: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans	97

Table 21: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and the VS	100
Table 22: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	106
Table 23: Early indications of progress towards long-term ToC outcomes	112
Table 24: VSH perception of difference on attendance due to extension of duties	113
Table 25: VSH views on whether the extension of duties has made a difference to suspensions and permanent exclusions	115
Table 26: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS1, by group	121
Table 27: Extent of responsibility fulfilled	124
Table 28: Priority outcomes for VSHs in current academic year	136
Table 29: Hoped for focus in future	137
Table 30: Job title and role within the Virtual School	187
Table 31: Responses to survey by region and total	188
Table 32: Who does the VSH report to?	188
Table 33: VSH background	189
Table 34: Please estimate the proportion of training for Social Workers, schools or other agencies	189
Table 35: Decision making panel membership	190
Table 36: Working with MATs	190
Table 37: Access and quality of Ever 6 CWSW data	191
Table 38: Access and quality of current CWSW data	192
Table 39: Availability of data improved joint working	192
Table 40: Have availability of data changed the practice of partners?	193
Table 41: VSH views on whether the extension of duties has made a difference to attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions	193

Table 42: Progress against ToC outcomes	195
Table 43: Partners where joint working has been a particular challenge	197
Table 44: Partners where joint working has been a particular challenge	198
Table 45: Early indications of progress towards long-term ToC outcomes	199
Table 46: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans	200
Table 47: VSH approach to the extension of duties	200
Table 48: Expectation of approach	201
Table 49: Preference of approach	201
Table 50: Extent of responsibility fulfilled	201
Table 51: Data structure and coverage	206
Table 52: Sample sizes by outcome	208
Table 53: Mean number of number of sessions missed due to absences, by group and academic year	216
Table 54: Summary statistics, by group and number of years subject to a plan	218
Table 55: Number of sessions missed due to absences per year since 2017 for children subject to a CIN plan	219
Table 56: Number of sessions missed due to absences a year since 2017 for children subject to a CP plan	220
Table 57: Mean number of number of sessions missed due to suspensions, by group and academic year	222
Table 58: Summary statistics, by group and number of years subject to a plan	224
Table 59: Number of sessions lost due to suspension by time since 2017 for children subject to a CIN plan	225
Table 60: Number of sessions lost due to suspension by time since 2017 for children subject to a CP plan	227
Table 61: Summary statistics for the KS1 sample, by group	229

Table 62: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS1, by group	230
Table 63: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS1 for children subject to a CIN plan	230
Table 64: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS1 for children subject to a CP plan	234
Table 65: Summary statistics for the KS2 sample, by group	235
Table 66: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS2 and average KS2 scores, by group	236
Table 67: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS2 for children subject to a CIN plan	237
Table 68: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS2 for children subject to a CP plan	239
Table 69: Summary statistics for the KS4 sample, by group	241
Table 70: Attainment at KS4, by group	242
Table 71: OLS regression for KS4 outcomes for children subject to a CIN plan	243
Table 72: Results of an OLS regression for KS4 outcomes for children subject to a CP plan	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table 73: Number of sessions missed due to absences in the same period before and after the VSH extension for children subject to a CIN plan	247

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to the Virtual School Heads and their colleagues in the Virtual Schools who contributed extensively to the Phase Two evaluation, in particular for their exceptional survey response. We would also like to thank NAVSH for supporting communication with VSHs.

We are also grateful to the Directors of Children's Services, Assistant Directors, data managers, designated safeguarding leads, and social workers who gave up their time to participate in interviews. Without these, the evaluation would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank colleagues in the DfE who have offered support, challenge, and guidance, in particular, Rachel Jones, Katharine Thorpe, Matthew Biggs, Claire Watkin, Chris Walton, and Andrew Baxter. Thanks must also be extended to members of the project working group for all their insights and feedback throughout the research.

We would also like to thank colleagues at the Rees Centre and Department of Education, University of Oxford including Ian Thompson and Nigel Fancourt who peer reviewed the interim report and Judy Sebba for reviewing both the interim report and an earlier draft of this report, as well as Georgia Hyde-Dryden for her input and feedback throughout the evaluation.

We are particularly grateful to Maria Christodoulou of Oxford Statistics Department and Christina Olympiou of Alma Economics for detailed comments, reflections, and insight on the statistics analysis.

We could not have completed this evaluation without the exceptional skills of our project administrator, Mady Buil and project manager, Heather Browning-Lee. Their patience and determination in facilitating survey distribution and follow-up was instrumental in having such a high response rate and consequently a rich set of data. We are also grateful for additional administrative support from Alice Willington, Sofia Hussain, and Claire Murray.

Despite this extensive list of those who offered support and made their views known, the content in this report remains the responsibility of the evaluation team at the Rees Centre. Alice Tawell, Andrew Brown, Alun Rees, Trinidad Moreno Silva, Ellen Froustis, Nikki Luke, Julie Selwyn, Kathryn Duckworth, Leon Feinstein, July 2025
Rees Centre, Department of Education, University of Oxford

Executive summary

Rationale

The Virtual School Head (VSH) was, until September 2021, the Local Authority (LA) officer statutorily tasked with promoting the education of children looked after (CLA) and previously looked after children (PLAC). In 2021, following the publication of The Children in Need Review (DfE, 2018b)¹ and subsequent research by the Universities of Bristol and Oxford (Berridge et al., 2020²; Sinclair et al. 2020³) the role of the VSH was extended to Children with a Social Worker (CWSW); defined as children currently or previously on a Child in Need (CIN) plan⁴ or Child Protection (CP) plan⁵. The extension of duties was introduced in response to evidence suggesting that as a group CWSW had poorer average educational outcomes at every stage of education than all other groups of children (DfE, 2018b)⁶.

The extension was introduced on a non-statutory footing and funding was allocated to VSHs in every LA in England until the end of the 2025 financial year. The non-statutory guidance (DfE, June 2022, updated in 2024) made clear that the extension of the VSH's duties is a strategic leadership role to champion the educational attendance, attainment, and progress of CWSW. The objectives of the duty were to make visible the disadvantages that CWSW could experience and enhance partnerships between education settings and LAs to help all agencies hold high aspirations for CWSW; promote practices that support children's engagement in education, recognising that attending an education setting can be an important factor in helping to keep children safe from harm; and to level up children's outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child reaches their potential. A key section of the guidance made clear that VSHs are not expected to conduct direct work with individual children and their families.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need>

² <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Report-Nuffield.pdf>

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cfs.12719>

⁴ As defined under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, a child is considered 'in need' if: they are unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services; their health or development is likely to be significantly impaired without such services; they are disabled. This legal duty forms the basis for a Child in Need (CIN) plan, which is a structured support plan created by the local authority to meet the child's assessed needs and support the family.

⁵ The legal basis for initiating child protection (CP) procedures is found in Section 47 of the Children Act 1989: 'Where a local authority... have reasonable cause to suspect that a child... is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the authority shall make, or cause to be made, such enquiries as they consider necessary to enable them to decide whether they should take any action to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.' If, following these enquiries, the child is found to be at risk of significant harm, a Child Protection Conference is held and a Child Protection (CP) plan may be put in place. This plan outlines how the child will be kept safe, what support will be provided, how progress will be monitored, and is reviewed regularly.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need>

The Rees Centre was commissioned to undertake a formative evaluation of Phase Two of the extension of VSHs duties to CWSW to understand how the VSH extension of duties has been implemented and to consider any potential effects of the implementation. This builds on the Phase One pilot conducted by Sebba et al. (2022)⁷ which covered the first six months of the extension. The Phase Two evaluation covers the period October 2022 to November 2024.

Methods

A theory of change (ToC) was developed for the Phase One pilot (Sebba et al. 2022)⁸, which included a data component (improved data quality) and an awareness raising component (see Tables 1 and 2). These components were understood as key activities feeding into five interim outcomes – strategies in place for: (1) increasing schools’ understanding of the needs of this cohort; (2) more inclusive practice in schools (directed by Senior Leadership Teams (SLT)); (3) increasing Children’s Social Care’s (CSC’s) understanding of education and vice versa; (4) a strengthened partnership between school, social care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Virtual School (VS); and (5) increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education – together with a series of longer term outcomes at child level, including, but not limited to, improved attendance, reduced school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), and improved attainment. The Phase One ToC was used as the basis for the Phase Two evaluation.

A mixed-methods research design was adopted for the Phase Two evaluation, including two rounds of interviews with practitioners working in six case study VSs and national VSH surveys. Statistical analysis of linked national administrative data has also been undertaken and is described in more detail in the Technical Annex (Annex 4).

For a number of reasons, caution must be exercised in the interpretation of the findings about the effects of the extended duties. The results are informative but will need replication and further study. Particularly acute reasons for caution are that: the duty is strategic and has been interpreted and implemented in different ways across the country; the impact of COVID-19 influences comparative analysis between different groups; and that the programme did not allow for randomisation.

⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_December_2022.pdf

⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_December_2022.pdf

Findings

Interpreting the ‘strategic’ nature and scope of the extension of duties

Different interpretations of the ‘strategic’ nature and scope of the extended duties were identified. In the final VSH survey all but one VSH reported an understanding that the duty expects them to undertake system level and therefore ‘strategic’ work. A small majority also believed the guidance includes an expectation of operational work, the definition of which included *involvement* in individual cases, but *not* direct work with the child.

When asked to describe the approaches recognised in their own work, in other words the implementation of the extended duties, the large majority of VSHs reported working at the level of the system, though a sizeable minority identified operational work as their main focus while even more VSHs reported that they were undertaking operational work, even if it was not their main focus. While a tiny minority of VSHs described direct work as their *main* focus, a sizable minority described direct work as an aspect, but not the main focus, of their work.

The guidance has created grey areas in the interpretation of the ‘strategic’ nature of the VSH role. Many VSHs have found those grey areas helpful in the early implementation of the extended duty. However, a flexible interpretation of ‘strategic’ has often led to a demand for more direct work, in particular from social workers, but also from schools. It is, though, VSHs’ understanding of their moral purpose that seems, most often, to blur the boundary between operational support to increase the expertise of other professionals and direct work with children.

In understanding the scope of the extended duties, some respondents also described adopting a broader definition of CWSW than children current or previously subject to a CIN or CP plan. As other children, outside those subject to CIN and CP plans, can and do have social workers, the use of the term CWSW to describe the scope of the extended duties is arguably slightly misleading.

Strategies used to implement the extension of duties

VSHs have invested significant effort and resources into improving the sharing of data between CSC and education and developing new systems to track and reconcile data. While the quality of data has improved in some areas through integrated data systems, inconsistencies and delays persist. Many VSHs reported improved access to data on attendance, school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), and persistent absence for current CWSW, however access to attainment and school moves data remains limited.

For Ever 6 CWSW (children who have had a social worker within the previous six years), access is significantly poorer across all data types, due to systemic issues, lack of statutory data-sharing requirements, and concerns over General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and data sensitivity.

VSHs see enhanced data access as vital for strategic oversight and collaboration, and expressed a clear need for better access to attainment and school moves data to enable timely intervention, resource allocation, and improved outcomes.

Training has, alongside more direct approaches to raising awareness, provided a significant benefit in increasing both schools and social workers understanding of CWSW and one another.

VSHs have made good use of the increasing body of evidence that suggests adopting different, more relational approaches, can make a difference to the educational experiences of CWSW. They have used this knowledge as the basis of their training offer and more operational offers of advice and support to schools, while providing social workers with the same understanding so they can better challenge schools. Many VS(H)s have implemented interventions following audits of current practice, offered post-training support, and facilitated professional networks.

Other key strategies to foster more inclusive practices in schools have included providing direct challenge to school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) practices, introducing dedicated attendance officers and heightening awareness of 'school attendance as a protective factor', and embedding early intervention through data tracking.

VSHs have also provided drop-in sessions, shared resources, toolkits and exemplar materials, and delivered and participated in multi-agency meetings to increase CSC's understanding of education and vice versa and to foster a unified understanding of responsibilities and improved joint working practices. VSHs have acted a bridge between services, effectively translating educational needs to social care and vice versa and ensuring a more cohesive and informed support system for CWSW.

Their efforts have improved the confidence of social workers to engage with schools, enhanced mutual understanding between agencies, and embedded education more firmly in CIN and CP planning. Evidence of progress includes clearer educational targets in plans and increased collaboration, though cultural and systemic challenges remain.

Joint working has been particularly effective in addressing issues such as school attendance, where multi-agency strategies have led to coordinated approaches and shared tools. However, more than half of VSHs reported difficulties in collaboration

with certain partners, especially health services, CSC, and some schools. These challenges are often due to staffing instability, limited capacity, and inconsistent understanding of trauma-informed, attachment aware, and relational approaches.

Findings on strategies for parental engagement reveal a mixed picture among VSHs. While some see this area as outside their remit, others have taken steps, often indirectly, to support parental involvement in education.

Most VSHs focused on strategic work, training schools and social workers to build relationships with parents, rather than direct engagement. In a few cases, dedicated staff or partnerships with external agencies supported direct engagement, such as home visits and parent workshops. Despite some promising individual initiatives, progress in parental engagement remains limited and inconsistent and is an ongoing aim and area of growth for many VSs.

Outcomes of the extension of duties

In the final national VSH survey (Survey 5), around 63% of respondent VSHs reported improvements in attendance, though several cited systemic barriers such as poverty, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision, and post-COVID-19 as challenges. Approximately 44% of VSHs also felt the extension had contributed to reduced suspensions and permanent exclusions, though others highlighted rising national trends and difficulties in data tracking as limiting factors. Few VSHs felt that progress towards improving attainment for CWSW had been made.

Many VSHs described focusing their attention on improving attendance and reducing suspensions and permanent exclusions, seeing this as foundational to improving attainment in the long-term and were not expecting to see changes to attainment in the short-term. Overall, our statistical results are in line with the expectations of VSHs, that they are making headway with engagement, but that attainment will take longer.

It is well known that there has been a substantial reduction in engagement post-COVID-19. Overall, absences have grown substantially, particularly on average for girls and for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). There have also been increases in suspensions. CWSW have also experienced these trends. However, we find that the deterioration in engagement is less for children subject to a CIN plan than would be expected given their other characteristics, in particular taking account of eligibility for FSM which has a big impact on trends. This result emerges both in relation to absences and suspensions.

However, we do not find the same result for children subject to a CP plan. This is puzzling and further evidence that the results must be interpreted with caution.

In relation to attainment, the general trend has been negative, particularly for children on FSM and there is no evidence yet that the impact of the extension of the VSH duties has been able to offset this trend on attainment. Estimated effects are small and negative or zero depending on the model. However, it is important to note that this null finding may be due to timing, with the evaluation only covering the first 18 months of the VSH extension. It is unlikely that this provides sufficient time to achieve impacts observable at population level on outcomes such as attainment which may require a long lead in time to achieve. Other research has highlighted the association between school attendance and attainment (e.g., DfE 2025⁹) and it may be the case that the improvements in attendance identified in this evaluation will have a longer-term knock-on effect on attainment for children subject to a CIN plan, though further research would be needed to confirm this.

Facilitators to implementation

Key facilitators supporting the extension of duties for VSHs included dedicated funding, joint working, senior leadership support, awareness raising, and access to data. Funding was the most frequently cited enabler, allowing for the recruitment of new staff, commissioning of training, and enhancement of data systems. Strong multi-agency collaboration and existing relationships with schools and social care teams were pivotal in fostering shared responsibility and driving change. Senior leader backing within local authorities provided necessary influence and visibility, especially where VSHs were positioned strategically. VSHs also highlighted the importance of raising awareness about CWSW as a vulnerable group, often through tailored training and audits. Access to accurate, real-time data was described as essential in identifying needs and targeting support effectively. Finally, the autonomy to design VS structures and employ experienced staff in cross-cutting roles helped build credibility and sustained engagement across services.

Barriers to implementation

Key barriers identified by VSHs include capacity constraints, as schools and social workers lacked time and resources to respond adequately to the needs of CWSW. Funding limitations were also widely reported, particularly the short-term, uncertain nature of the grant, which restricted recruitment, undermined staff retention, and hampered long-term planning. The non-statutory status of the duties weakened commitment from schools and local authorities, reducing investment in systems and collaboration. Conflicting national guidance further complicated implementation. Data

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/link-between-attendance-and-attainment>

challenges, including lack of access, inconsistent systems, and delays in updates, hindered oversight and planning. Differing interpretations of the duties' scope caused confusion and pressure for direct casework beyond VSH remit. Additional barriers included resistance from some multi-academy trusts (MATs), LA contextual differences, and variable senior leadership support, all of which added complexity to fulfilling the extended responsibilities.

Future developments

Looking forward, nearly all VSHs hoped future guidance on duties to CWSW would prioritise system-level work, such as strategic leadership and influencing whole-school practice. A majority also supported a focus on operational work, including training and advice for professionals.

Although only a minority hoped that direct work with children or families would be expected, some VSHs expressed a moral desire to intervene directly in cases where need was clear. However, others cautioned that such work was impractical within current funding and staffing limits, suggesting that direct support is better delivered by schools or CSC with appropriate resourcing. These findings reflect both ambition and realism within the VSH community about the scope of their role.

Recommendations

On the basis of these observations and the many more in-depth findings about implementation described in full in the report we make 34 recommendations:

Recommendations for DfE

Name and scope

1. **Consider an alternate name/acronym for CWSW** to better describe the children in scope.
2. **Consider if it is necessary to explicitly include those children previously subject to a CIN or CP plan (Ever 6 CWSW)** in the scope of a strategic duty intended to move policy, practice, and culture in a direction that will benefit them and all disadvantaged children, alongside those currently subject to a plan.

Data

3. **Ensure the specification of school management information systems** enables separate flagging of children subject to a CIN or CP plan so that any

subsequent school is made aware of their status through their Common Transfer File (CTF).

4. **Make use of a single pupil identifier to simplify the integration of data and promote the timely publication of comparative outcomes** for children subject to a CIN or CP plan and allow local and national monitoring of the longer-term impact of the system level duties.
5. **Having already added it to the published National dataset, add 'school type' to the LA-level dataset on the permanent exclusion and suspension of CLA, CINO¹⁰, and CPPO¹¹** to enable LAs to undertake a more nuanced comparison of their performance with other LAs and regions, and to allow direct national and local comparisons to be made.
6. **Further refine the categories of children included in CINO cohort data**, to ensure it refers only to children subject to a CIN plan and excludes those awaiting, or subject to, assessment *towards* a CIN plan, to match the scope of the extended duties.
7. **Place a duty on local authorities and schools to ensure the VSH has timely access to the data necessary** for them to fulfil their system level duties to children subject to a CIN or CP plan.
8. **Recognise that the enormous churn in this cohort makes the routine monitoring of attainment and progress a much less useful focus** for the VSH than the regular monitoring of the cohort's attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions.

Guidance

9. **Publish a single statutory guidance document requiring local authorities to promote the education of CLA, PLAC, those subject to a CIN or CP plan, and those in kinship care.**
 - a. Within that core statutory guidance, **describe the specific duties of the VSH**, to clarify their role within the broader local authority duties.
10. **Replace 'strategic' with 'system level'** in describing the expectations of the VSH with respect to children subject to a CIN or CP plan and make meanings clear with examples that clearly distinguish between 'system level', 'operational' and 'direct work' when describing the work of the VSH with different cohorts of children. Within these examples recognise that

¹⁰ CINO: children in need, excluding children on a CP plan and CLA, but *including* those awaiting, or subject to, assessment towards a CIN plan.

¹¹ CPPO: children on a CP plan, excluding CLA. For more information see: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/data-guidance>.

'operational' engagement with the team around the child is a valid, though temporary, approach to build practitioner confidence and implement longer-term system level change.

11. Revise the suite of statutory and non-statutory guidance related to the groups of children to whom the LA (and through them the VSH) has a duty, including:

- a. **A statutory duty on schools**, through their Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), to promote the education of children subject to a CIN or CP plan (in line with updated guidance to Designated Teachers (DTs) regarding CLA, PLAC, and children on the school roll who are in kinship care), and to provide data the VSH needs to fulfil their duties to these children in a timely manner irrespective of school ownership or governance models.
- b. **Identifying children subject to a CIN or CP plan as a priority** within behaviour, suspensions and permanent exclusions, attendance, SEND, and mental health statutory and non-statutory guidance to schools, stressing the impact school policy and practice can have on their safeguarding risk.

12. Ensure that 'Attendance and Behaviour Hubs' are informed of, and required to take note of, any statutory or non-statutory guidance to 'promote the education of children subject to a CIN or CP plan' and that their advice on best practice responds positively to it.

13. Revise guidance on CIN and CP assessments and plans to:

- a. Ensure that **a child's attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions are considered as safeguarding risks** when assessing the child's vulnerability and the progress of plans.
- b. Ensure that the **voice of the child in relation to home and school are captured** in the planning and monitoring process.

Funding

14. Extend Pupil Premium to children on a CIN or CP plan who are ineligible for the FSM or Service Children Pupil Premium, so that schools are better resourced to meet their needs.

15. Ringfence funding in support of the VSH duties to ensure they retain financial management of the resource provided for those duties in the face of LA funding challenges.

Inspection framework

16. **Ensure that Ofsted inspection guidance highlights this cohort of children and their needs.**
17. **Ensure that any Ofsted 'report card'** links the admission, attendance, suspensions, permanent exclusions, and isolation of these children to any inclusion or safeguarding judgements.
18. **Ensure that Ofsted's local authority inspection guidance highlights this cohort of children** and takes account of their educational as well as safeguarding context.

Training frameworks

19. **Revise the social work training framework** to ensure there is sufficient understanding of actions that support 'school attendance as a protective factor' in the preparation of newly qualified social workers to work with schools and families.
20. **Revise national social work practice guidance** to ensure social workers understand how they can maximise the impact of 'school attendance as a protective factor'.
21. **Revise the teacher training framework** to include explicit and effective understanding and experience of relational approaches and the additional emotional needs of children subject to a CIN or CP plan and other children subject to adverse childhood experiences.

Recommendations for local authorities

Data

1. **Ensure there are robust systems in place to provide the VSH with timely cohort level education and social care data** on children subject to a CIN or CP plan so they can fulfil their duties effectively and efficiently.

Structures and system level support

2. **Ensure the VSH is empowered to lead the system level change expected of them** and has sufficient access to those senior leaders responsible for education and social care to ensure they support appropriate system level change.
3. **Ensure that the duties to this cohort are highlighted in broader LA strategies, policy, and practice** relating to, for instance, the voice of the child, SEND, attendance, Elective Home Education (EHE), inclusion, admissions, parental engagement, attainment and progress.

4. **Revise the terms of reference of the relevant group or committee with oversight of the Virtual School** to ensure they take account of the broader duties of the LA and VSH.

Inductions

5. **Revise the induction programme of social workers**, both newly qualified and experienced, to include input from the Virtual School that raises awareness and understanding of the expectation the LA has of its social workers with respect to the education of vulnerable children and how the Virtual School can support them.

Recommendations for Virtual School Heads

1. **The VSH should satisfy themselves that the LA has the following systems in place** and, where they do not, acts to stimulate their development:
 - a. **Education settings are promptly informed** when a child on, or arriving on, their roll becomes (or is already) subject to a CIN or CP plan.
 - b. **That this same information reaches relevant LA teams** such as those dealing with, for instance, the voice of the child, SEND, attendance, EHE, inclusion, admissions, parental engagement, attainment and progress.
2. **The VSH should maintain a training offer to social workers** in relation to 'school attendance as a protective factor' and 'understanding of schools and school processes'.
3. **The VSH should maintain a training offer to education settings** that encourages the awareness and adoption of relational practice.
4. **Extend the training offer to partner services to encourage more consistent and supportive work with the parents and carers** of children subject to a CIN or CP plan.

Recommendations for schools

1. **Schools should ensure they become full partners in the team around the child subject to a plan** and recognise in their policy and practice the safeguarding risk that absence, suspension, and permanent exclusion constitutes for these (and other) vulnerable children.
2. **Schools should recognise the benefits to attendance, inclusion, attainment, and progress that the adoption of more relational**

approaches to learning can have and take advantage of any training offered by the Virtual School.

3. **Empower the school's DSL** to enable them to fulfil their role and provide them with sufficient time to fulfil it effectively.
4. **Include children subject to a CIN or CP plan as a separate category in reporting to governors and trustees.**

Introduction

The Virtual School Head (VSH) was, until September 2021, the Local Authority (LA) officer statutorily tasked with promoting the education of children looked after (CLA) and previously looked after children (PLAC) (see Annex 1). In 2021, the role of the VSH was extended to Children with a Social Worker (CWSW); defined as children currently or previously on a Child in Need (CIN) plan¹² or Child Protection (CP) plan¹³. The extension was introduced on a non-statutory footing.

Background to the extension of duties

In 2018, the Government commissioned a review into the educational outcomes of Children in Need (defined as children on CIN plans, children on CP plans, CLA, and disabled children). The Children in Need Review (DfE, 2018b)¹⁴, reported on the characteristics, experiences, and educational outcomes of children subject to a CIN plan or CP plan. The review identified that CWSW constituted 1 in 10 of all children between 2012 to 2013 and 2017 to 2018 and that as a group they had poorer average educational outcomes at every stage of education than all other groups of children. The government set out a response to the review that identified gaps in research and the need to address some of the systemic challenges of supporting the education and broader needs of CWSW. The report highlighted the need for closer work with schools to identify evidence-based practices that would support the improvement of the educational outcomes of CWSW.

Subsequent research by the Universities of Bristol and Oxford (Berridge et al., 2020)¹⁵ identified that the 1 in 7 children in school who had a social worker (between Year 1 and Year 11) had lower average attainment and progress at each Key Stage of schooling than children who never needed a social worker. Research by Sinclair et al. (2020)¹⁶ investigated the development of the educational gap between Children in Care, Children in Need (defined in the research as those receiving social work

¹² As defined under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, a child is considered 'in need' if: they are unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services; their health or development is likely to be significantly impaired without such services; they are disabled. This legal duty forms the basis for a Child in Need (CIN) plan, which is a structured support plan created by the local authority to meet the child's assessed needs and support the family.

¹³ The legal basis for initiating child protection (CP) procedures is found in Section 47 of the Children Act 1989: 'Where a local authority... have reasonable cause to suspect that a child... is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the authority shall make, or cause to be made, such enquiries as they consider necessary to enable them to decide whether they should take any action to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.' If, following these enquiries, the child is found to be at risk of significant harm, a Child Protection Conference is held and a Child Protection (CP) plan may be put in place. This plan outlines how the child will be kept safe, what support will be provided, how progress will be monitored, and is reviewed regularly.

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need>

¹⁵ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Report-Nuffield.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cfs.12719>

services – usually supported by a CIN or CP Plan – due to concerns over their health or development, or because they are disabled), and other pupils. They found that at age 7, the average attainment of children in care and those in need was approximately 1 standard deviation lower than the average and predicted attainment of their peers at 16. Children that were in need earlier and longest had the lowest attainment in comparison with others, which further declined during secondary school, a likely result of the early environment, special educational needs (SEN), and poor relationships with secondary school.

- The final report (DfE, 2019)¹⁷ of the Children in Need Review, and two literature reviews on effective interventions (DfE, 2018c¹⁸; DfE 2018d¹⁹) for children subject to a CIN or CP plan, identified measures that could address the challenges of lower attainment, decline in secondary school, effects of SEN, and poor relationships with school. The most frequently cited principles and recommendations from studies on CLA, who shared similar levels of disadvantage before entering care, suggested the following recommendations would be effective in supporting CWSW:
- Increased joint working and improved collaboration between agencies to tighten support around CWSW, particularly during key transitional stages in a child’s education (Beauchamp, 2015²⁰; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012²¹; Sebba et al., 2015²²; Stratham, 2004²³). This could best be facilitated with a key staff member liaising between agencies (Stratham, 2004²⁴).
- Improved information sharing between key stakeholders across education, health, Children’s Services, parents and carers, using data linkage approaches to collect robust information on the educational experiences and progress of CWSW (Beauchamp, 2015²⁵; Brewin & Statham, 2011²⁶; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012²⁷; Sebba et al., 2015²⁸).

¹⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/809236/190614_CHILDREN_IN_NEED_PUBLICATION_FINAL.pdf

¹⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/915661/What_works_to_improve_the_educational_outcomes_of_Children_in_Need_of_he....pdf

¹⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/915661/What_works_to_improve_the_educational_outcomes_of_Children_in_Need_of_he....pdf

²⁰ <https://apo.org.au/node/58403>

²¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740912000576>

²² <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

²³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2004.00472.x>

²⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2004.00472.x>

²⁵ <https://apo.org.au/node/58403>

²⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02667363.2011.624301>

²⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740912000576>

²⁸ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

- Individualised support for CWSW to better target their individual complex needs (Luke, 2014²⁹; Sebba et al., 2015³⁰).
- A comprehensive approach to training all school staff to ensure consistency in understanding and support for the educational difficulties experienced by CWSW (Sebba et al., 2015³¹; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012³²; Beauchamp, 2015³³).
- Using evidence-based practices and interventions with a strong theoretical foundation, such as attachment and social learning theories, to strengthen adult-child relationships and protect the mental health of vulnerable youth with a social worker (Luke, 2014³⁴). Consistent relationships with adults and having at least one trusted adult to whom young people could express their needs and feel heard, valued, understood, respected, and cared for were believed significant in enhancing their educational experience and progress (Martin & Jackson, 2002³⁵; Luke, 2014³⁶; Sebba et al., 2015³⁷; Frederick et al., 2023³⁸).
- Including the voices, perspectives, and recommendations of CWSW about what helps or hinders their educational experience when making decisions about them (Luke, 2014³⁹; Sebba et al., 2015⁴⁰).
- Establishing a continuum of support for children with complex needs with well-designed and implemented interventions, based on whole school approaches, to strengthen children's social-emotional competencies for long-term benefits on their academic, behavioural, and socio-emotional functioning (Clarke et al.,

²⁹ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Works-in-Preventing-and-Treating-Poor-Mental-Health-in-Looked-After-Children.pdf>

³⁰ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

³¹ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

³² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740912000576>

³³ <https://apo.org.au/node/58403>

³⁴ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Works-in-Preventing-and-Treating-Poor-Mental-Health-in-Looked-After-Children.pdf>

³⁵ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1046/j.1365-2206.2002.00240.x>

³⁶ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Works-in-Preventing-and-Treating-Poor-Mental-Health-in-Looked-After-Children.pdf>

³⁷ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

³⁸ <https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/53/6/3129/7091809>

³⁹ <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/What-Works-in-Preventing-and-Treating-Poor-Mental-Health-in-Looked-After-Children.pdf>

⁴⁰ <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:49b64928-4808-4898-911c-30e8981b2ffb>

2015⁴¹; Durlak et al., 2011⁴²; Sklad et al., 2012⁴³; Taylor et al., 2017⁴⁴; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011⁴⁵; Weare & Nind, 2011⁴⁶).

Based on these, and other conclusions from the Children in Need Review, local authorities in England were offered the opportunity to sign a memorandum of understanding, as part of a pilot extension of the role of the VSH to include a strategic duty to promote the educational outcomes of CWSW and those children who had *previously* been a child with a social worker; on average 1 in 7 children across their compulsory school life. The Memorandum of Understanding stated that the extended VSH role would:

- Make visible the disadvantages that CWSW could experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities to help all agencies hold high aspirations for the children.
- Promote practice that supports children's engagement in education, recognising that attending an education setting could be an important factor in helping to keep children safe from harm.
- Level up children's outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child reaches their potential. This would include helping to ensure that CWSW benefitted from support to recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Every local authority signed the memorandum, which provided additional funding to facilitate the pilot extension of duties between September 2021 and March 2022. The funding was provided as part of the Section 31 Grant to each local authority. Most local authorities (71%) received £100k, 28% of local authorities received between £116 and £173k due to their size, while two local authorities (approximately 1% of the total number) received only £30k due to the smaller scale of their CWSW cohorts (Grant determination letter, DfE, August 2021 for the 2021-2022 financial year).

This initial six-month period comprised Phase One of the programme and was evaluated by the Rees Centre, using a formative, mixed methods process, reflecting the early stage of development of the programme. The findings from the Phase One evaluation (Sebba et al. 2022)⁴⁷ suggested that the additional resources were used by VSHs strategically to influence practice through, for example, better use of data,

⁴¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a809c17e5274a2e87dbaca5/What_works_in_enhancing_social_and_emotional_skills_development_during_childhood_and_adolescence.pdf

⁴² <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

⁴³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pits.21641>

⁴⁴ <https://srcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12864>

⁴⁵ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11292-010-9109-1>

⁴⁶ https://academic.oup.com/heapro/article-abstract/26/suppl_1/i29/687644?redirectedFrom=fulltext

⁴⁷https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_December_2022.pdf

training of social workers and Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), supporting social workers to work more closely with schools, and creating a culture of high aspirations. Barriers to implementing the extended duties included the short lead in time and very limited, six-month, duration of the pilot, lack of access to accurate data, social worker turnover, and issues related to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) among the cohort. Recommendations included longer-term funding commitments, making the CWSW duties of the VSH statutory, providing statutory guidance related to CWSW for schools, improving the systems for data-sharing, and extending Pupil Premium (PP) to all CWSW.

In March 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) announced that the initial six-month pilot would be extended until March 2025 (raising the total funding provided to £20.5million) and would comprise Phase Two of the programme. The Rees Centre was commissioned to undertake the evaluation of Phase Two, as described in this report.

Phase Two was supported by non-statutory guidance (DfE, June 2022, updated in 2024) which took note of the Phase One evaluation. During the Phase Two evaluation, the guidance was updated, with the scope of the duties to children who had 'previously been CWSW' refined to those who had 'been a CWSW within the previous six years' (Ever 6 CWSW). Section 31 Grant Funding to local authorities, and its distribution, remained the same for each of the succeeding financial years of Phase Two, though the 2023-2024 grant determination letter (DfE, June 2023) provided an added level of predictability by confirming the same level of funding for the 2024-2025 financial year.

Background to the theory of change

The Phase One evaluation included two stakeholder workshops attended by a total of 19 VSHs (or their representatives), during which they were asked to consider:

- the activities they thought would be necessary for the successful implementation of the extension of duties;
- the outcomes that might reasonably be achieved by the end of that academic year (2021-2022) and by the end of the following two academic years;
- the longer-term (by July 2025) outcomes they hoped would show some signs of improvement; and,
- how those signs of improvement might be assessed or measured.

Their thoughts and observations were distilled into a theory of change (ToC) by the evaluation team. That ToC was circulated to all those who had attended with a

request for comment before the final version of the ToC was agreed as the basis for the evaluation.

The ToC comprised two broad components that VSHs believed would lead to improved long-term outcomes for CWSW. One component was related to data (Table 1) and the other component to awareness raising (Table 2).

In Phase Two, the established ToC was used to evaluate progress made by VSHs towards the ToC outcomes. This final report is based on national online surveys of VSHs, case studies in six LA sites from Phase One, and national administrative dataset analyses.

Table 1: Theory of change for the CWSW extension of duties: data component

Inputs	Activities	Short-term outcomes (by the end of 21/22)	Interim outcomes (by the end of 22/23)	Interim outcomes (by the end of 23/24) <u>Strategies in place</u>	Longer-term outcomes (by the end of 24/25)
<p>Virtual School Designated Teachers Extension of Duties – work to be done on clarifying the link between strategic and operational Implementation Grant Learning from existing local practice</p>	<p>Work with schools and CSC around data access and quality New/increased analyst capacity</p>	<p>Ongoing activity</p>	<p>Improved data quality</p>	<p>Increasing schools' understanding of the needs of this cohort More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT) Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa A strengthened partnership between school, social care, CAMHS, and VS Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education</p>	<p>Improved attainment Improved achievement Improved attendance Improved punctuality Improved engagement with education Reduction in NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training] Sustained outcomes Improved behaviour Reduced exclusions Improved well-being/ resilience Improved transitions Reduced in-year transitions Young people feel valued and understood Children have more voice and agency in the process CIN and CP plans include education objectives</p>

Table 2: Theory of change for the CWSW extension of duties: awareness-raising component

Inputs	Activities	Short-term outcomes (by the end of 21/22) <u>Early signs of:</u>	Interim outcomes (by end of 22/23)	Interim outcomes (by the end of 23/24) <u>Strategies in place for:</u>	Longer-term outcomes (by the end of 24/25)
Virtual School Designated Teachers Extension of Duties – work to be done on clarifying the link between strategic and operational Implementation Grant Learning from existing local practice	Training and awareness-raising for social workers, schools, other council agencies	Increased understanding of CWSW Development of a common language Better joint working	Ongoing activity	Increasing schools' understanding of CWSW needs More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT) Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and VS Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	Improved attainment Improved achievement Improved attendance Improved punctuality Improved engagement with education Reduction in NEET Improved behaviour Reduced exclusions Improved well-being/resilience Improved transitions Reduced in-year transitions Young people feel valued & understood Children have more voice and agency in the process CIN and CP plans include education objectives

Methodology

The Rees Centre was commissioned to undertake a formative evaluation of Phase Two of the extension of VSHs duties to CWSW to understand how the VSH extension of duties had been implemented and to consider the effects of the implementation. The methods and sequencing of data collection continued from the Phase One evaluation. The Phase Two evaluation sought to evaluate progress made towards the interim ToC outcomes set out in the original ToC, and to test early indications of progress towards the longer-term ToC outcomes (see Table 1 and Table 2). We assumed that there would be a wide range of approaches and not only one way of providing effective support. Our aim was to support shared learning about potentially effective practice, rather than to conduct an effectiveness trial.

Research questions

The Phase Two evaluation aimed to address the following research questions:

RQ1. How, and to what extent, have the theory of change outcomes been addressed?

RQ2. What are the trends in educational outcomes of the CWSW cohort before and after the extension of the VSH role and with statistical modelling what is the evidence of impact?

RQ3. What have been the barriers and facilitators to the implementation of the extension of VSH duties to CWSW?

Research design and methods

A mixed-methods research design was adopted for the Phase Two evaluation to address this range of formative evaluation questions. This was a continuation of the design adopted in the Phase One evaluation. To address Research Questions 1 and 3 we undertook research in six case study areas and conducted national surveys of VSHs. In addition to a final national survey, we undertook an analysis of linked national administrative data to address Research Question 2. Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Education, University of Oxford Departmental Research Ethics Committee (Ref: CIA-22TT-147). Table 3 outlines the data collection sequencing and timeline for the Phase One and Phase Two evaluations.

Table 3: Timeline of data collection – Phase One and Phase Two Evaluations

Data Collection Method	Phase One: Oct 2021	Phase One: Feb 2022	Phase One: March 2022	Phase Two: Oct 2022	Phase Two: March 2023	Phase Two: Oct / Nov 2023	Phase Two: March 2024	Phase Two: Oct / Nov 2024	Phase Two: Sept 2024 / March 2025
National VSH Survey	Survey 1	-	Survey 2	Survey 3	-	Survey 4	-	Survey 5	-
Case Study Interviews	-	Case Study Round 1	-	-	Case Study Round 2	-	Case Study Round 3	Focus Group	-
Analyses of National Administrative Datasets	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Analysis

Phase Two followed a broadly cyclical pattern of data collection and analysis, alongside analysis of national administrative datasets. Three national surveys of VSHs were conducted (Surveys 3-5), with case study interviews taking place half-way between each survey (case study rounds 2 and 3). Further detailed information on CWSWs' experiences of school and relationships with key adults such as teachers, school staff, and social workers was also collected through an additional focus group with LA practitioners in one case study site. Each of the methods of data collection are described below. National dataset analyses were conducted in the latter stages of the evaluation to explore how trends in attainment, attendance (absence), and suspension for CWSW had changed since the introduction of the extended duties.

National survey of Virtual School Heads

In Phase Two, we continued to use surveys as an accessible means to elicit information from the 152 VSHs across England on the extension of duties. Online surveys using the Qualtrics® platform were devised to further reduce the burden on VSHs when responding and to enable efficient distribution and data analysis. An invitation to participate was sent to each VSH via email that contained an anonymous link to the survey and an information sheet outlining the evaluation. The information sheet was also available to view at the start of the online survey. Informed consent was obtained at the start of the survey, if a VSH declined consent, the survey session was closed. In response to feedback, for Surveys 4 and 5, VSHs were able to download and save a printable version of their responses before submitting.

The surveys contained open and closed questions that covered the following areas: activities implemented under the extension of duties (e.g., training delivered, meetings convened), progress towards the ToC outcomes, the strategic nature of the role, barriers and facilitators, and future directions. Survey items were developed to reflect the stage of programme implementation at the point of data collection and in response to feedback from previous surveys. For ease of completion, multiple choice items were used where possible, but opportunities for open-ended responses were provided where additional context would facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the data. Throughout the evaluation, each survey received a very high overall response rate, as highlighted in Table 4.

Table 4: Overall response rate for each VSH survey

	Survey 1 <i>n (%)</i>	Survey 2 <i>n (%)</i>	Survey 3 <i>n (%)</i>	Survey 4 <i>n (%)</i>	Survey 5 <i>n (%)</i>
Overall response rate	115 (77.7)	120 (81.1)	122 (82.4)	125 (84.5)	107 (72.3)

Source: VSH Surveys 1-5

Response rates by region for Surveys 3 and 4 are provided in the Phase Two interim report (Brown et al. 2024)⁴⁸. Table 5 shows the response rates for Survey 5. Representativeness across each region was very good, ranging from 50% (North East) to 100% (South East and the East of England).

Table 5: Responses to VSH Survey 5 by region

LA Region	Frequency <i>n</i>	Response by region %	Response of total %
London	20	64.5	18.7
South East	18	100	16.8
North West	17	70.8	15.9
Yorkshire	8	53.3	6.5
West Midlands	10	71.4	9.3
South West	9	71.4	8.4
North East	6	50.0	5.6
East of England	13	100	12.1
East Midlands	7	77.8	6.5

Source: VSH Survey 5

The quantitative data collected in the surveys was analysed using SPSS (v30) to generate descriptive statistics on, for example, numbers of VSHs who had completed training activities with DSLs and social workers. The open-ended questions were analysed by using a deductive Framework Analysis approach with NVIVO (v1 or v14).

Significance testing using paired t-tests were used for the comparison between survey responses where appropriate. Where there was not repetition of both

⁴⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b61984d8bb7378fb6c3a4/Evaluation_of_the_extension_of_virtual_school_heads_duties_to_children_with_a_social_worker_-_phase_two.pdf

question wording and response options across the surveys, we did not conduct significance testing because the difference is not directly informative.

Case studies

This report updates the case studies from the Phase One evaluation (Sebba et al. 2022)⁴⁹ and the Phase Two Interim Report (Brown et al. 2024)⁵⁰, which aim to provide detailed narratives of how six different LAs have met the responsibilities of the extension of duties to CWSW. Responses to the first VSH survey informed the selection of the sites, those selected had reported promising practice on CWSW including on data, raising the awareness of CWSW, attendance, training or working with other services. The names of the LA sites retain the pseudonyms applied for confidentiality in the Phase One report and the Phase Two Interim Report. Characteristics for each case study site are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Characteristics of case study sites

Pseudonym	Geographic footprint	Urban to rural balance	Overall number of CWSW	Rate of CWSW per 10,000 children
Alsbury	Large	Rural	4,001 – 9,000	401 - 800
Braddeleton	Large	Mixed	4,001 – 9,000	401 - 800
Earlham	Large	Mainly rural	4,001 – 9,000	<400
Filton Cross ⁵¹	Small	Urban	<4,000	401 - 800
Keldbeck	Small	Mainly urban	4,001 – 9,000	>800
Redbury	Large	Mainly rural	4,001 – 9,000	401 - 800

Source: [Local Authority Information Tool]

The case studies used interviews with LA professionals as the main source of data, the VSH surveys were used to provide additional context and information where appropriate. To provide continuity we attempted to interview the same participants from previous rounds; where this was not possible (due to availability or change of role) a suitable substitute was identified. An invitation to participate, a participant information sheet and consent form was emailed to each VSH of the case study

⁴⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_on_December_2022.pdf

⁵⁰https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b61984d8bb7378fb6c3a4/Evaluation_of_the_extension_of_virtual_school_heads_duties_to_children_with_a_social_worker_-_phase_two.pdf

⁵¹ Filton Cross withdrew before the final round of interviews in March 2024 due to capacity issues.

sites. We also asked the VSHs to act as gatekeepers and forward the invitation to relevant LA professionals (i.e., Directors of Children’s Services (DCS), Assistant Directors (ADs), DSLs, social workers (SW), data managers (DM)). All interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams by one of the research team. Informed consent was taken prior to the interview or online at the start of the interview. In total, 53 interviews were conducted in Phase Two (Table 7 and Table 8).

Table 7: Interviews conducted for case studies, round 2

Case study site	DCS/ AD	VSH/ CWSW Lead	DSL	SW	Total
Alsbury	2	1	-	1	4
Braddleton	1	1	2 ^a	1	5
Earlham	-	1	2	2	5
Filton Cross	1	1	1	1	4
Keldbeck	1	1	1	-	3
Redbury	1	2	1	-	4
Total	6	7	7	5	25

Note 1: ^aOne DSL was in a lead role across a MAT

Table 8: Interviews conducted for case studies, round 3

Case study site	DCS/ AD	VSH/ CWSW Lead	DSL	SW	Data Manager(DM)	Total
Alsbury	1	1	4	3	1	10
Braddleton	1	1	2	1	-	5
Earlham	1	2	3	-	-	6
Keldbeck	1	1	1	-	-	3
Redbury	-	1	2	-	1	4
Total	4	6	12	4	2	28

Additional views on CWSWs’ experiences of education and relationships with key adults were collected through an opportunistic focus group of six LA workers responsible for facilitating discussions between schools, children, and other relevant adults in one of the case study sites [Braddleton]. The aim of the focus group was to better understand the current issues that CWSW raise during discussions with LA workers, particularly about their experience of school and relationships with key adults such as teachers, school staff, and social workers. The data from this focus

group was analysed using the same Framework Analysis method as the case studies and findings drawn on in the main report as appropriate.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and anonymised. The Framework Analysis approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994⁵²; Gale et al., 2013⁵³) was used to analyse the interview data in NVIVO (v1 or v14). A deductive approach allowed data to be organised thematically, building on the items from the interview schedule and analyses from previous rounds, whilst also allowing coding to new themes. Five out of the six case studies are presented in full in Annex 2. Filton Cross withdrew from the evaluation before the final round of case study interviews in March 2024, therefore a full case study for Filton Cross has not been included. However, an earlier write up of the Filton Cross case study is available in the Phase Two Interim Report (Brown et al. 2024⁵⁴). Views and informative examples of practice from the case studies are also highlighted in the main body of this report to illustrate findings.

Analyses of national administrative datasets

The Technical Annex (Annex 4) details the quantitative findings from the Phase Two evaluation. Here we provide an overview of the data used and the analysis conducted.

The central aim of the quantitative piece of the evaluation is to better understand the trends in attendance (measured in terms of absences), suspensions, and attainment of the CWSW cohort before and after the extension of duties and estimate the possible effects of the VSH programme on these outcomes.

Data

We do this by linking two national administrative datasets which track the care-related and, separately, the educational outcomes of children in England:

Children in Need (CIN) Census return: The CIN Census covers all children referred to CSC Services in England. It includes children's demographic characteristics, referral dates, actions and outcomes of assessments.

National Pupil Database (NPD): The NPD is a longitudinal database linking pupil and student characteristics and attainment information for all children in state-funded schools in England. It holds pupil and school characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, Special

⁵² <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203413081-10/qualitative-data-analysis-applied-policy-research-jane-ritchie-liz-spencer>

⁵³ <https://bmcmmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>

⁵⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b61984d8bb7378fb6c3a4/Evaluation_of_the_extension_of_virtual_school_heads__duties_to_children_with_a_social_worker_-_phase_two.pdf

Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND), as well as annual detail on absences and suspensions matched to pupil level attainment data.

The extension of VSH duties was introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic which also saw periods of school closure and the cancellation of key stage assessments. This means there are gaps in the coverage of available data. Moreover, data from the NPD was only available to the end of the 2022/23 academic year, meaning that the quantitative evaluation was only able to cover the first 18 months of the VSH extension (see

Table 9).

Table 9: Data structure and coverage

	2012-2016	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
VSH Extension						•	•
CIN Census	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
NPD		•	•	No data due to COVID-19 restrictions	No data due to COVID-19 restrictions	•	•

Groups

Data from the CIN Census was used to create the key groups of interest:

- a Child in Need (CIN) Plan; or
- a Child Protection (CP) Plan.

We compared these two groups across two time periods: before (2017/18-2018/19) and after (2021/22-2022/23) the extension of the VSH programme. Where possible, and for context particularly in relation to the broader trends over time, we also compare these groups with children who were **not** on any such plan.

The sample sizes from the linked datasets are detailed in Table 10, shown by group.

Table 10: Sample sizes by outcome

Outcome:	CIN plan	CP plan	Not on a plan	Total
Absences	79,230	7,360	-	86,590
Suspensions	93,420	8,510	-	101,930
Educational attainment in KS1	57,000	11,430	2,106,820	2,175,250
Educational attainment in KS2	75,980	8,210	1,997,720	2,081,910
Educational attainment in KS4	90,110	5,930	1,795,380	1,891,420

Source: ONS.

Outcomes

We focus on two sets of outcome variables.

School engagement measured as:

1. the number of sessions missed due to absence
2. the number of sessions missed due to suspension

Attainment assessed at:

1. Key Stage 1 (age 7)
2. Key Stage 2 (age 11)
3. Key Stage 4 (age 16)

Analysis

Because of the structure of the available data, we were able to apply different types of analysis to different outcomes. For engagement (absences and suspensions), we have data per year for each pupil, which allows the generation of panel datasets. For academic attainment, most pupils had only had scores for one key stage assessment within the time frame of the study as the initial extension of the VSH was introduced in September 2021. This means the available data for attainment are largely cross-sectional and typically only contain Key Stage scores for a single point in time. Unlike the panel data for absences and suspensions which can look at the same student before and after the VSH extension, the available attainment data can only provide a “snapshot” of the population of interest at one specific moment.

Therefore, we used two different sets of analytical approaches for estimating the possible effects of the programme's extension on the two sets of outcome variables.

Our main interest lies in understanding whether the extension of the VSH duties led to changes in outcomes for CWSW. Because the extension of duties is primarily a strategic role that is defined across a broad population of CWSW ever in the last six years, there is no one-to-one connection between a specific child and a service. To try and capture the possible effects of the extension of duties in child level data, we require a variable which can distinguish children based on their likelihood of receipt of the impact of the strategic role. To do this we use a measure of the length of time children are subject to either CIN or CP plans, both before and after the extension of VSH duties, and any observable impact on engagement and attainment.

Our analysis also takes into account other important factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Further detail on the data and methods and the strengths and weaknesses of the analysis is available in the Technical Annex (Annex 4).

Data integration

Data integration refers to the stage(s) at which data are mixed (e.g., data collection, data analysis, interpretation). In this evaluation, integration took place at the interpretation and reporting level with data being integrated through a narrative weaving approach. This involved drawing together qualitative and quantitative data on a theme-by-theme basis (Fetters et al., 2013⁵⁵). The findings are presented in five sections. In the first findings section, survey data are used to explore the positioning of VSHs in the wider LA system and VSHs' interpretation of the strategic nature of their role. In the second findings section, data from the three VSH national surveys and two rounds of case study interviews are used to explore progress towards the interim ToC outcomes (RQ1). In this section, quantitative results from the surveys, predominantly the final survey (Survey 5), are used to provide a 'macro' picture, with data from the case study interviews and open-ended survey questions then drawn on to provide further exemplification. Where appropriate and possible, developments over time are presented in the main text and in the case studies in Annex 2. In the third findings section, data from Survey 5 and the national administrative dataset analyses are drawn on to explore early indications of progress towards the longer-term ToC outcomes, namely attainment, absence, and suspensions (RQ 2). In the fourth findings section, the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the extension of VSH duties to CWSW (RQ3) are discussed. The final findings section explores

⁵⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24279835/>

VSHs’ priorities for the 2024/25 academic year and what they hoped any future guidance would expect of them with respect to CWSW.

Limitations of the evaluation

Throughout the evaluation there have been some VSHs who have not submitted a survey response (Table 11). While this might indicate that there is a cohort of opinion and data that the evaluation has not captured, the number of persistent non-responders has been gratifyingly small.

Table 11: Historical completion of national VSH surveys

Surveys completed	0	1	2	3	4	5
Number	4	8	8	26	35	68
Percent of total Virtual Schools	2.68	5.37	5.37	17.45	23.49	45.64

Only four VSHs (2.68%) have never returned a survey response. While the absence of any VSH’s opinion is a concern, the very small numbers suggest that if they had returned their surveys the overall outcomes may not have been greatly affected.

The survey mainly sought the professional opinion of VSHs and there is an element of subjectivity in their responses. Where there was a change in VSH during the evaluation window, or where the VSH delegated the completion of the survey, or parts of the survey, to a colleague (e.g., CWSW Lead), then further variation in judgement may have been introduced. The same is true where a case study site nominated different people for different rounds of interviews.

It is also possible that when questioned about the ‘CWSW cohort’, not all VSH were responding with the same cohort in mind, with some, for example, adopting a broader definition and including children for example who are being assessed and do not yet have a CIN or CP plan.

While the case study sites were identified to provide a range of different LA contexts, their inclusion in the evaluation relied on their willingness to take part and, in particular, to act as gatekeeper for interview recruitment. While not, therefore, self-selecting, they are also not *randomly* selected from among LAs with similar characteristics. One of the case study sites, Filton Cross, withdrew from the evaluation before the final round of case study interviews in March 2024 for reasons relating to changes in senior leadership and staffing capacity issues.

The same is true of the individual interviewees that provided much of the case study evidence base. The evaluators relied on individuals within the LA being identified by

the VSH and agreeing to participate. In the case of some categories of interviewee, particularly social workers, this proved challenging to achieve, despite considerable efforts of the evaluation team and VSHs. The national VSH surveys identified social worker workload and staffing churn as a barrier to progress. It seems likely, therefore, that those factors also influenced the ability of social workers to free up time in their schedules to participate.

Originally it was hoped that the evaluation would include a strong element of engagement with the children and families most influenced by the VSH model. However, this evaluation has not been able to directly gather the voice of CWSW. In part this is because there are no existing systems in place in LAs to consistently capture the voice of this cohort. CWSW differ in this respect from CLA for whom every LA has long established 'children in care councils' through whom that cohort's voice can be heard. It is also true that while LAs hold parental responsibility for CLA, that responsibility remains with the families of CWSW, making it more complicated and difficult to obtain consent, thus limiting recruitment for data collection activities.

To try to address this limitation, a scoping review of existing literature exploring CWSWs' experiences of education was conducted and used to help highlight some of the issues faced by CWSW that the extension sought to address. The review formed part of the background to the evaluation and is not used as evidence in the evaluation. The review examined academic studies and grey literature from reports, policy documents and briefings in the UK between 2014-2024, and earlier seminal research where relevant. Sources were only included if the views of CWSW were presented and excluded if they reflected only the views of CLA. A total of 13 articles were found and reviewed. Ten articles investigated the educational attainment or academic progress of CWSW in relation to CLA and children not in care. Three of these had a mixed methods design and included interviews with CWSW. Three qualitative studies explored relationships with social workers. One study was found that interviewed CWSW on their relationship with teachers and their experience of school. This review strongly identified the need for more studies that capture the voice of CWSW about their experience of school and the quality of their relationships with school peers and adults that support their educational journey.

In addition to the scoping review, a group of LA workers within one of the case study sites who support schools and families of CWSW using a Solution Circle approach, were invited to participate in a focus group with the aim of sharing their experiences of working with CWSW. While they were able to describe the issues CWSW raised in those Solution Circles, this was ultimately secondary reflection from a single case study area. Findings from this small sample are unlikely to be representative of the views of a greater population of LA workers in similar roles supporting CWSW or CWSW themselves, and therefore a limitation. Adult perceptions of youth perspectives cannot be generalised beyond this sample. However, the findings did

raise some important issues and provide a basis for conducting further research with children with a CIN or CP plan, which currently is understudied.

There are strengths to the quantitative element of the evaluation, not least the use of population level data with sufficient sample size – and hence statistical power – to test reasonable effect sizes. In the case of absences and suspensions, we have longitudinal data, spanning the period before and after the extension of VSH duties, enabling the use of highly robust quasi-experimental techniques.

We also have good measures of attainment, including data for a comparison group of children without experience of CSC, and rich individual and area-level data so the statistical models can account for other important characteristics known to affect educational outcomes. These are substantive advantages. However, there are also substantial limitations:

- The first and most immediate weakness of research design for estimating programme impacts is that the extension of duties was rolled out universally and so there is no formal randomisation or quasi-randomisation of treatment.
- In addition, the VSH extension of duties is not an intervention treatment in a classic impact evaluation sense. Rather it is primarily a strategic intervention and so not provided to the same extent and intensity in all areas for all children. This variation in treatment, that is who receives support, is not observed.
- This also imposed difficulties applying the ‘Ever 6’ inclusion criteria – children who have been subject to a plan in the last 6 years – because there is no one-to-one connection between a specific child and a service.
- To try and identify children based on their likelihood of receipt of the impact of the strategic role, we focused on CWSW who were ‘currently’ subject to a plan across each of the years they were observed in the data, limiting our potential of who is included in the sample, but tightening the scope of ‘treated’ individuals who might actually have benefitted from the impact of the extension of duties.
- The ‘treatment’ period also includes the disruptions brought about by COVID-19. Because of the conflation of timing of the extension of duties with the post-COVID period, in a simple comparison of outcomes before and after the extension of duties, we are simultaneously and unavoidably also picking up the effects of changes brought about by the pandemic. For many children, including those on CIN and CP plans, the transition back to “normal” schooling may not have followed a straightforward path.
- We cannot distinguish changes in outcomes resulting from the new activity under the extension of VSH duties from the impact of other policy changes

that might particularly influence CWSW following from the Children in Need Review. Other policies and programmes during and following the COVID-19 lockdowns may also have influenced the changes in outcomes observed, for example CWSW were entitled to attend school during the partial-school closures (though the data on the percentage that did is unclear) and attendance programmes were introduced following the pandemic to tackle falling attendance rates. However, no firm conclusions can be drawn without further study.

- The time frame included in the evaluation was only able to cover the first 18 months of the VSH extension, from 1st Sept 2021- 31st March 2023. It is unlikely that this provides sufficient time for the programme to have been fully and universally rolled out effectively and to have started to achieve impacts observable at population level on outcomes such as attainment which may require a long lead in time to achieve.
- Finally, while the methodologies used do their best to impose experimental paradigms on the available data, the analytical approaches used are not without flaws. Therefore, although we are using quasi-experimental techniques that address some forms of bias in estimation of causal effects, the assumptions on which these are based may not apply here and so the analysis can at best only provide an early indicator of improvements rather than a firm measure of impact.

Findings

The evaluation findings are reported in five sections. The first section explores the positioning of VSHs in the wider LA system and VSHs' interpretation of the strategic nature of their role. The second section explore progress towards the interim ToC outcomes. In the third section, early indications of progress towards the longer-term ToC outcomes are reported including the statistical analysis. In the fourth findings section, the barriers and facilitators to implementation of the extension of VSH duties to CWSW are explored. The final findings section sets out VSHs' priorities for the 2024/25 academic year and explores what VSHs hope any future guidance would expect of them with respect to CWSW.

The Virtual School Head role

Key findings

Current guidance has created grey areas in the interpretation of the 'strategic' nature of the VSH role. Many VSHs have found those grey areas helpful in the early implementation of the extended duties. However, a flexible interpretation of 'strategic' has often led to the demand for more direct work, in particular from social workers, but also from schools. It is, though, VSHs' moral purpose that seems, most often, to blur the boundary between operational support to increase the expertise of other professionals and direct work with children.

VSHs operate in a variety of LA contexts and within different service structures. The VSH role is explicitly a strategic duty with the implication that the VSH can influence the front-line practice of social workers and teachers. This means that VSHs are required to straddle boundaries between education and Children's Social Care (CSC). This requires them to either have the refereed influence of senior leaders in Children's Services or to be a relatively senior leader themselves. In this first section, the positioning of VSHs in the wider LA system is explored and VSHs' interpretation of the strategic nature of their role are discussed. These findings provide context to the following section on progress towards the ToC interim outcomes.

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to identify who they report to within their LA's structure. Table 12 shows that while a small number of VSH respondents (6.5%) reported directly to the Director of Children's Services (DCS), the majority (64.4%) reported to an Assistant Director (AD), presumably from their position as a 'Head of Service'. This leaves a significant minority (28%) as 'team leaders' reporting to a Head of Service within either the 'Education' or 'Children's Social Care' arms of Children's Services.

Table 12: Who does the VSH report to?

Response	n (%)
DCS	7 (6.5)
AD – Education	58 (54.2)
AD – CSC	12 (11.2)
Other head of service	30 (28.0)
Total	107 (100)

Source: VSH Survey 5

The interpretation of the ‘strategic’ nature of the duty

Since its inception, the non-statutory guidance has made it clear that the extension of the VSH’s duties is ‘a strategic leadership role to champion the educational attendance, attainment, and progress of children with a social worker’.

A key section of the guidance makes it clear that VSHs are *not* expected to:

- work directly with individual children and their families – including tracking and monitoring of individual educational progress, providing academic or other interventions.
- respond to requests from parents or carers to offer advice, intervention, and support in relation to individual children with a social worker.
- take responsibility for children with SEND who do not require or need a social worker, as defined above.

Round 2 of the case study interviews confirmed a view expressed during the Phase One evaluation (Survey 2) that ‘strategic’ was open to a broader interpretation than those who drafted the guidance may have expected. To explore the ways in which VSHs were interpreting their ‘strategic’ role and to what extent they were influenced by what the guidance said they were *not* expected to do, Survey 5 included the evaluation team’s understanding of three possible levels of work which avoided the use of ‘strategic’ but included concrete examples it was hoped VSHs could relate to. These were:

‘System Level’ work: e.g., LA level activity; organisation of resources; general training; attending panels; working with headteacher groups; influencing teams (e.g., LA SEND, inclusion, attendance).

‘Operational’ work: e.g., signposting to other services; targeted training; attending CIN/CP review meetings; joining informal meetings between school and CSC to facilitate understanding/agreement.

‘Direct’ work: e.g., working 1-1 with children and young people (CYP)/parents; providing specific resources or activities e.g., horse riding, equipment, tutoring.

VSH understanding of what is expected of them

Table 13 summarises the responses to the Survey 5 question, which asked what VSHs across the country believed was expected of them by the guidance:

Table 13: Expectation of approach

Approach	Yes	No	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	95 (100)	-	95
Operational	55 (62.5)	33 (37.51)	88
Direct	1 (1.1)	88 (98.9)	89

Source: VSH Survey 5

All but one respondent clearly understands that the guidance expects them to undertake system level and therefore ‘strategic’ work.

However, a small majority (62.5%) believes the guidance includes an expectation of operational work, the definition of which included *involvement* in individual cases, but *not* direct work with the child.

It is clear, therefore, that ‘strategic’ is being interpreted differently, both in the reading of the guidance (Table 12) and in the operation of the extension (Table 13).

Approaches taken to meet the extended duty to Children with a Social Worker (CWSW)

Survey 5 asked VSHs which of the described approaches the VSH recognised in their own work. Table 14 makes clear that the large majority (85.3%) of VSHs are working at the level of the system, though a sizeable minority (37.9%) identified operational work as their main focus while even more VSHs (58.9%) reported that they were undertaking operational work, even if it was not their main focus. While a tiny minority (4.3%) of VSHs described direct work as their *main* focus, a sizeable minority (38.3%) described direct work as an aspect, but not the main focus, of their work.

Table 14: VSH approach to the extension of duties

Approach	Yes, and is the main focus	Yes, but it not the main focus	Not doing this	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	81 (85.3)	14 (14.7)	-	95
Operational	36 (37.9)	56 (58.9)	3 (3.2)	95
Direct	4 (4.3)	36 (38.3)	54 (57.4)	94

Source: VSH Survey 5

The following sections describe the types of system level, operational, and direct work that VSHs mentioned undertaking.

Stimulating system level change

Approaches taken to stimulate system level change have focused on raising the profile of the education of this cohort of children. A principal driver for this has been the improvement in the quality and availability of education data on these children.

The timely availability of attendance data, in particular, has enabled the VSH to provide senior LA leaders with evidence that has informed LA wide policy and practice and sharpened it with respect to the education of CWSW. In some cases, such ‘data dashboards’ have added impetus to existing initiatives, but in others they have stimulated greater focus on these children across Children's Services.

VSHs have also been able to influence the system directly by bringing data on CWSW to the attention of those groups, panels, and working parties making decisions about children and families. With this data they have been able to encourage social care teams to take account of a child’s education context and education teams to consider the child’s safeguarding context. In doing this, there are signs that they are influencing systems towards a broader, mutually beneficial, understanding of the needs of the child and the barriers to meeting them.

Equally, ensuring that schools receive timely information on children currently subject to a CIN or CP plan has increased the visibility of CWSW in schools. While DSLs will have had knowledge of individual cases, VSHs have been able to use their data to provide headteachers with a strategic overview of the cohort. This has helped schools recognise the over-representation of CWSW in absence, suspension, and permanent exclusion statistics. With that overview in mind, schools can be stimulated to take account of the child’s safeguarding context as they seek to address their poor attendance or engagement with learning. Equally, schools can be more effectively challenged when those statistics do not improve.

VSHs have paired the distribution of authoritative data on CWSW, and an associated challenge to the systems around the child, with a widespread training offer to support schools, in particular, to respond positively to that challenge. While they have been pressing schools to adopt more relational approaches for some time, the extension of duties has increased the potential benefit schools could expect from following their advice. While they may previously have been advocating on behalf of a handful of individual CLA in a school, VSHs are now prompting schools to notice 5 or 10 times as many CWSW with similar needs and facing similar challenges. VSHs have used the extension as an effective force multiplier in influencing school policy and practice. Ways in which VSHs have worked to improve data quality and awareness raising are further described later in the report.

Operational engagement to achieve strategic aims

An example of operational engagement was ‘surgeries’ at which individual cases could be discussed; and advice offered to those doing the direct work, including parent/carers:

Individual case work surgery offered weekly for professionals and carers. Individual case work meetings to support school practice.

[VSH; South East; Survey 5]

In another example, the VSH for the Braddleton case study site has set up what they describe as ‘Solution Circles’ to bring together children, social workers, schools, and parents to address issues. Operational engagement at the level of an individual case, such as this, is not obviously system level work so not obviously ‘strategic’. However, a focus group of the workers involved made it clear that these circles had helped build relationships and encourage dialogue in a way that a set of strategic guidelines to schools and social worker are less likely to achieve. Operational engagement can teach by demonstration, modelling, or by working alongside members of the team around the child to build sustainable understanding and practice.

The Redbury case study site VSH also offered weekly surgeries for social workers focusing on school attendance to which the VSH reported good take up. The Redbury CWSW Lead added that they enabled the discussion of individual case issues. Again, though, the VSH justified this clearly operational intervention in cases as a necessary step in building social worker capacity to intervene without the VS support in future; operational work in support of the strategic aim of increased social worker confidence.

Redbury offered a similar operational approach to schools, of which a local DSL was very complimentary:

I've got a named person at the Virtual School so I can contact them and they will help me and I've had a meeting with them just to look at all of my children with a social worker. *[DSL; Redbury; Round 2 Case Study Interview]*

Some VSHs reported finding it helpful to agree to more operational, case based, work in pursuit of longer-term strategic change. By taking an operational stance, VSs were able to signpost to partner services or settings to deliver the direct work (e.g., removing barriers to attendance and other school level interventions) necessary to achieve the strategic objectives of the extended duties, as exemplified in the following case study vignettes.

Alsbury – Being Strategic

... a lot in our project is a cohort discussion. And if it's a cohort discussion I'm happy... if that moves on to giving an individual social worker, individual advice, that's fine as long as it stops there. The minute that my team feel that they are being given an action and that they're holding that, no, we pull away and we say no, that's not what we're doing. We can't possibly do that with these numbers. So I think that we have over the past couple of years, got a better sense of what is a cohort discussion...

If it feels like a panel, if it's a cohort discussion, if it's advice and information at that time... and at whatever level that that is, we're absolutely happy with that. And... quite often it does get quite operational. So if we're in a meeting with a DSL and we can go on to... our information system and we can give them a summary of the latest worries, you know that is operational...

So we're in there, we're putting people together, we're making sure they've got all the information and then we expect them to get on with it...we expect them [social workers] to take their tools into school and use them. You know, they've got all the systemic knowledge. They've got the signs of safety and they are the ones who know that child. So they are the ones that go into the school and have those really rich conversations and we might give them a skeleton conversation... ask them about this, you should expect this, has that been done?... you know all that kind of advice but then you know we're leaving it to them. *[Alsbury; VSH; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

Braddleton – Being Strategic

...I think we're trying really hard not to get down to doing direct work around individual children, but we are still very clearly identifying individual children where we think action is needed, so we're kind of flagging those individual children up...

I think some of our Solution Circles got very close to doing individual child rather than strategic work but I think that's part of the cycle. I think we'll be moving away from that. But it's a bit like the previously looked after duties, we found that sometimes, as hard as we try to be strategic... you'll sometimes find there are parents because of where you come from as a virtual school, you just think if I get into this, we'll probably do quite a lot of unpicking. But they typically take half a day at least, don't they, by the time you have the conversation getting there?

But yes, but strategic for me, I try to think about as a whole authority, the whole system about actually I can't appoint one person to be a strategic lead, I need my team to influence the system, so about how we... I think it's when we said when it comes to commissioning, when it comes to the social care as a whole, when it comes to the kind of schools and the county as a whole right from early years to post-18 is trying to really get the team to think about so raising attainment to disadvantaged youngsters is important, relational, restorative. How do we do it? Where do we need to get to?' *[Braddleton; VSH; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

Direct work driven by moral purpose

Despite the clear guidance statement placing direct work beyond the scope of the extended duties, only a slight majority of VSHs (57.4%) said they do not do such direct work. This may reflect the strong moral purpose among VSHs to do what they can when they can, as exemplified by this comment:

This work is needed, partners reflect that it is needed, it is inevitable that some individual casework responses are going to be provided because Virtual Schools feel strongly about the moral obligation to intervene if a child is not in education and requires that advocacy.

[Staff responsible for CWSW; Yorkshire; Survey 5]

Such responses reflect a view held by a number of VSHs that they and their teams have the skills to make a much bigger difference, though not always the resources:

Difficult not to use skills of Virtual School team to address individual child education issues. *[VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

[The Virtual School is] uncovering issues but not having capacity for doing the direct work *[VSH; London; Survey 5]*.

This defence of direct work, from a VSH seeks to make a distinction between 'direct work' and 'case management':

We have included direct work as part of our understanding of strategic. We are strategically engaging with specific schools or cases where need arises. This is as opposed to case management throughout the year. *[VSH; London; Survey 5]*

Guidance vs. Moral Purpose

The following extended example highlights the effort by a VS to implement strategic, system level, change at the same time that their moral purpose drives them to offer direct support.

The Education Advisor begins by describing the VS's system level efforts before outlining some more operational interventions. They describe how one of the main challenges with the extended duties is the balance between the strategic overview and individual case input and make an impassioned plea to be empowered to undertake direct support:

We have sought to run interventions, share advice, signpost services, monitor data for the CP and CIN cohort, lead training sessions, commission external training sessions, lead a South West Virtual School regional group to share best practice, create tools and regular communication such as our newsletter which we send out to colleagues across the county regularly. These actions are really important in raising the profile of the cohort and supporting a relational and restorative approach within education and social care. *[Education Advisor; South West; Survey 4]*

... we do not want to spend all our time and energy on these activities at the expense of direct support and involvement with individual young people for whom there are very real and significant issues right now, which we can relieve in some way. We want to be able to say 'yes' to social care colleagues who have tried a number of avenues and who then reach out to us in the VS Extended Role and say, "please can you help, we're really stuck!". We do run a 'surgery' each week when any education or social care colleague can contact us and seek advice/ signposting/ direct support.

We still go into schools, meet with young people face to face and sometimes parents. This is vital in moving things forwards for individual young people and in keeping us informed about the very specific and unique complexities, challenges and barriers facing many of our young people. Our actions, priorities and planning must be informed by the data as we seek to use our time and resources wisely, however we must still be available to support individual young people. *[Education Advisor; South West; Survey 4]*

Direct work driven by lack of understanding

An alternate explanation of the proportion of VSHs embarking on direct work was provided by another VSH. They described a lack of understanding by LA Leaders as leading to direct work:

... lack of understanding by LA leaders can sometimes pull us into direct work that the guidance says we shouldn't be doing - nor have capacity to do. *[VSH; East Midlands; Survey 5]*

This lack of understanding was seen to extend beyond leaders:

Lots of colleagues think we have the capacity to do case work and this can sometimes cause issues, especially if we have a YP [young person] who has the possibility of being permanently excluded. *[Assistant VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

Some described increased demand for more direct work, in particular from social workers, but also from schools, which fell outside the scope and capacity of the VS.

In the following section, the strategies used by VSHs to enact their extended duties and work towards the theory of change outcomes are discussed.

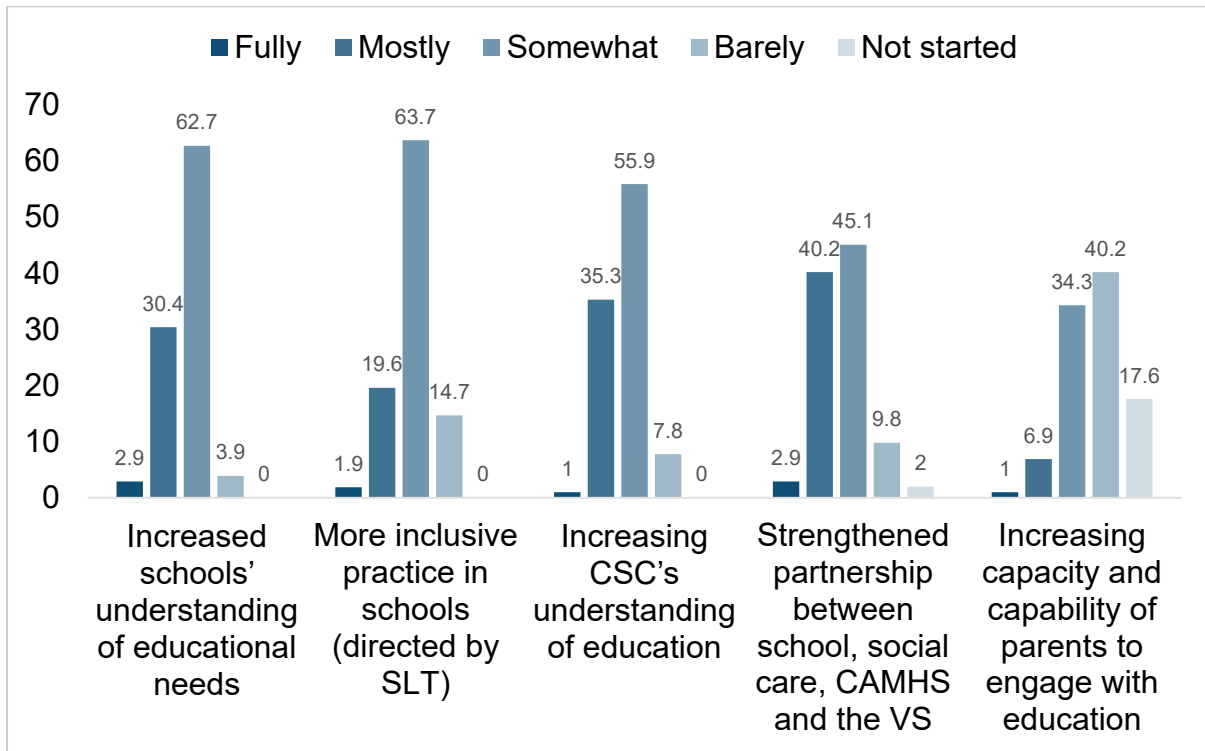
Progress towards theory of change outcomes

This section draws together data from the VSH national surveys and case study interviews to report findings on progress towards the ToC outcomes (Table 1 and Table 2). First, we report findings on progress towards the ongoing data component (Improved data quality) and the awareness raising component, which were understood as key activities feeding into the interim outcomes, before reporting on the strategies in place for the interim outcomes:

- Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs
- More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)
- Increased CSC's understanding of education and vice versa
- Strengthened partnership between school, social care, CAMHS, and the VS
- Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to rate their perception of progress towards each of the five (2023/2024) interim outcomes listed in the ToC. The majority of VSHs who responded to the survey are making some progress towards each of the outcomes.

Figure 1: Progress made towards 2023-24 ToC interim outcomes



Source: VSH Survey 5

Improved data quality

Key findings

VSHs have invested significant effort and resources into improving the sharing of data between CSC and education. While many VSHs reported improved access to data on attendance, school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), and persistent absence for current CWSW, access to attainment and school moves data remains limited. For Ever 6 CWSW, access is significantly poorer across all data types, due to systemic issues, lack of statutory data-sharing requirements, and concerns over General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and data sensitivity. Many LAs have had to develop new systems from scratch to track and reconcile data across CSC and education. While the quality of data has improved in some areas through integrated data systems, inconsistencies and delays persist. VSHs see enhanced data access as vital for strategic oversight and collaboration and expressed a clear need for better access to attainment and school moves data to enable timely intervention, resource allocation, and improved outcomes.

While education and social care data is collected annually by the Government, prior to 2022, the closest published proxy to CWSW was the broader 'Children in Need' cohort which includes many children who have not been subject to a CIN or CP plan. There is no national data collection for Ever 6 CWSW. Therefore, though the non-statutory extension of duties guidance has never made the collection of pupil level items of education data a requirement, many VSHs feel they have had no alternative but to do so if they are, in the words of the guidance, to 'use data and analysis to understand and monitor the cohort's needs'. While some VSHs described how in their LAs they had been able to utilise pre-existing tools that had been introduced prior to the extension to monitor for example the attendance of vulnerable children during the pandemic, to begin tracking the attendance of CWSW, most had found existing data and monitoring tools insufficient when the extension was introduced and systems had to be established from scratch. VSHs have also found themselves having to establish systems to link data held on CSC, school, and LA education databases and ensure those sources are reconciled and accurate. In some cases, this has required the VSH to negotiate, sometimes unsuccessfully, the collection of data from individual schools or trusts. In the latter stages of the evaluation there has been some indication that the availability of data is catching up to the scope of the extension of duties.

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to report on the extent to which they felt their VS has access to the data needed to maintain effective oversight of the current and Ever 6 cohorts.

Accessing data for the current CWSW cohort

Table 15 shows that by October/November 2024, the majority of VSHs who responded to the survey either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they had sufficient access to attendance, persistent absence, suspension, and permanent exclusion data for current CWSW. However, access to data on attainment and school moves for current CWSW varied, with more VSHs reporting that they either somewhat or strongly disagreed that they had access to this data.

Table 15: Access and quality of current CWSW data (n (%))

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	Total n
Attendance	4 (3.8)	11 (10.5)	6 (5.7)	41 (38.3)	43 (41.0)	105
Persistent absence	5 (4.8)	9 (8.6)	7 (6.7)	41 (39.0)	43 (41.0)	105
Attainment	18 (17.1)	33 (31.4)	16 (15.2)	22 (20.6)	16 (15.0)	105
Suspension	6 (5.7)	13 (12.4)	10 (9.5)	38 (36.2)	38 (36.2)	105
Permanent exclusions	3 (2.9)	11 (10.5)	9 (8.6)	35 (33.3)	47 (44.8)	105
School Moves	23 (21.9)	25 (23.8)	20 (19.0)	24 (22.9)	13 (12.4)	105

Source: VSH Survey 5

The case study evidence suggests that attendance has been a much higher priority for LAs who often quote the impact of the pandemic on attendance across numerous pupil cohorts. VSHs also understand that attainment will not improve if the child is not in school and explicitly or implicitly have focused on the former to see longer term improvement in the latter. Additionally, increasing attendance at school was the most obvious factor a VSH could seek to influence in reducing the safeguarding risk that had led to the child being subject to a plan in the first place.

Moreover, while the Children in Need Review made clear that increasing the educational attainment and progress of CWSW must be a national priority, the evaluation suggests it may not be the most immediate priority for VSHs. They have reported significant system level issues in accessing this data held by schools who have no statutory obligation to share anything but end of key-stage data with either the DfE or LA.

Accessing data for the Ever 6 CWSW cohort

In contrast to current CWSW, VSHs reported difficulties in accessing the data they feel they need to main effective oversight of the Ever 6 CWSW cohort. Table 16 shows that many more VSHs strongly disagreed that they have access to attendance, persistent absence, attainment, suspension, permanent exclusion, and school moves data for Ever 6 CWSW.

Table 16: Access and quality of Ever 6 CWSW data (n (%))

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	Total n
Attendance	34 (32.4)	23 (21.9)	9 (8.6)	32 (30.5)	7 (6.7)	105
Persistent absence	33 (31.4)	24 (22.9)	9 (8.6)	31 (29.5)	8 (7.6)	105
Attainment	43 (41.0)	34 (32.4)	12 (11.4)	10 (9.5)	6 (5.7)	105
Suspension	29 (27.6)	24 (22.9)	11 (10.5)	29 (27.1)	12 (11.4)	105
Permanent exclusions	24 (22.9)	25 (23.8)	12 (11.4)	28 (26.7)	16 (15.2)	105
School Moves	44 (41.9)	25 (23.8)	16 (15.2)	14 (13.3)	6 (5.7)	105

Source: VSH Survey 5

VSHs were asked to offer an explanation if they reported poor access and quality of Ever 6 data. The main reasons reported included systemic issues with data systems, challenges in identifying the cohort, being too focused on current CWSW to address Ever 6, and capacity in the VS or LA to address the task given the potential size of the Ever 6 cohort. Others reported that there is no directive for schools to continue to monitor pupils who no longer have a social worker, making it hard to routinely track this cohort:

Our systems don't easily allow tracking and reporting of previously known - so much is based on Nexus data which is only ever currently open/open as of 31st March. To look back, you'd need to do a lot of data cleansing too. Schools still aren't routinely tracking the cohort and tend to remove children from their vulnerable list once [they are stepped down from a plan], making it difficult for them to track. Moving between settings also leads to lost information. Our LA has no robust system of tracking and reporting on school moves for any cohort, so identifying Ever 6 CWSW I think would be impossible. These children are not required to be flagged in the government attendance returns or on MIS [Management Information System], so until that is a requirement, we will spend excessive amounts of time trying to make the best of the data we have got.'

[CWSW lead; East of England; Survey 5]

‘There is no directive to schools to continue to monitor this group of pupils when they no longer have a social worker. It is therefore not reflected in the data and makes it difficult to obtain... Further work needs to be done to ensure this cohort of children is collected through existing reporting mechanisms e.g., creating a flag within Wonde [a data platform used in some LAs], within the school and pupil census and an ability to report on this cohort at a national and local level for attainment to start reliably capturing data for this cohort. *[CWSW Lead; Redbury; Survey 5]*

Other VSHs, in consultation with their legal advisors, are concerned that there are GDPR issues relating to the collection or sharing of data on Ever 6 CWSW. While they are confident that they can share data that needs to be shared while a child is at risk and subject to statutory support by Children’s Services (as described in Working Together to Safeguard Children, DfE, 2023⁵⁶), they *are* concerned that once the child has ceased to be subject to a plan, their rights to hold and share data is significantly reduced. When asked about potential barriers to sharing data a case study data manager observed that:

I've not looked into it to be honest, but it is on my mind. I think... even at transition between primary and secondary... do I have the consent to then share that information? To say ‘yes it is [ok]’ as... they agreed to us holding that data previously... *[Data Manager, Alsbury, Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

The VSH in the Alsbury case study area described an unintended consequence of sharing data about a previously CWSW with a school:

I had a mum who was really upset that her child was offered some extra maths work because her child had been open to social care. [She] was suffering domestic violence for a short period of time. She got herself out, she moved to a new school, she moved to a new area. She was so upset to get that letter because she saw that she'd done everything for her kids and she's moved on and she didn't want [her child] to be seen as Ever 6 [CWSW]. *[VSH; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

Other VSHs considered identifying Ever 6 CWSW in data going back 6 years was not possible given the way that data systems were constructed prior to the extension and the disproportionate resource it would have taken from addressing the needs of current CWSW to have retrospectively interrogated those data systems. Having put

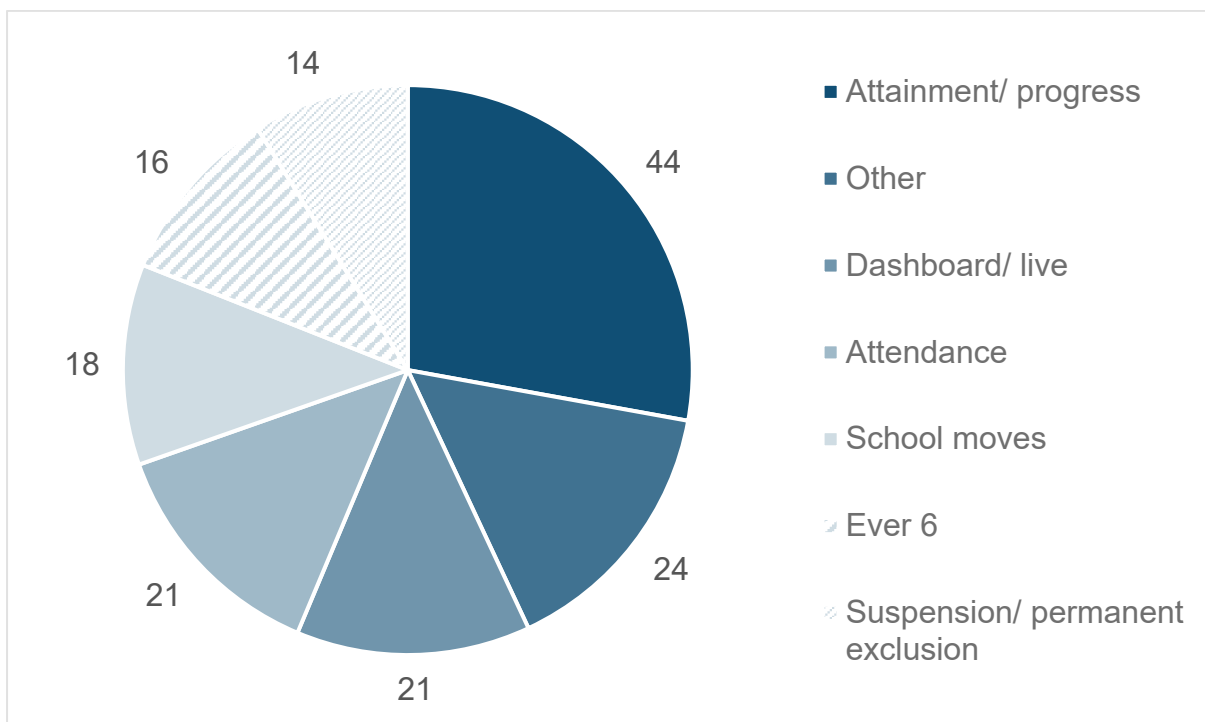
⁵⁶https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6849a7b67c7db3f/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

in place monitoring systems more VSHs are confident that in 6 years' time they would be able to look back at the current cohort as Ever 6 CWSW. There remains, though, a suspicion among some VSHs and senior leaders in Children's Services that local tracking and monitoring the Ever 6 cohort would yield fewer benefits than devoting the available resource to changing school awareness, policies, and practice to better meet the needs of vulnerable learners, so Ever 6 CWSW would benefit whether tracked locally, or not.

Information that VSHs would like access to

In addition to asking VSHs about their current level of access, we also asked them what information it would be useful for them to have access to, to monitor the outcomes for CWSW, to which they do not already have access. Ninety-nine VSHs responded giving a total of 158 suggestions. Most VSHs cited attainment/progress data (44.5%) followed by dashboard/live data (21.2%), attendance (21.2%), school moves (18.2%), Ever 6 (16.2%), and suspension/permanent exclusion data (14.2%). The 'other' 24.3% included SEND, links with CSC data, better national datasets, post-16/NEET, and none.

Figure 1: VSHs views of useful information to have to monitor outcomes for CWSW



Source: VSH Survey 5

We asked VSHs to reflect on what difference having access to this information would make to improving the outcomes of CWSW. Ninety-five VSHs responded making a

total of 144 suggestions. These included being able to: allocate resources/ target intervention (29.2%), analyse data to identify trends/needs (25.7%), challenge schools (9.7%), monitor/track progress (9.0%), share information/data with partners (6.9%), and other (7.6%, including improvements through greater oversight of CWSW cohort, better CIN/ CP planning, and understanding of needs). Survey respondents reported the need for timely access to information and data to enable timely intervention:

Our work would be more proactive, or even when reactive would be reactive in a more timely fashion. We could be looking at changing practice to benefit CIN and CP more than fire-fighting once issues have become very complex. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); East of England; Survey 5]*

Referring specifically to attainment data, respondents noted that having access to this information would help to monitor direct work and support other teams to support the CWSW cohort:

Attainment - this would help us to support social care teams with child level information across services and strategically reviewing outcomes at service management level as we would in the VS for CiC [Children in Care otherwise referred to as CLA]. It would help in presenting this data in an incisive and filterable format to education senior leaders to inform disproportionality and discrepancy across areas in the city and particular settings. *[VSH; South West; Survey 5]*

Some survey respondents also noted how it would be helpful to have systems in place to collect and access data on school moves for CWSW, which could include managed moves and the use of internal suspensions and off-site directions. This would help to provide a comprehensive picture of the ways in which CWSW are moved and removed and help VSs to work more closely with schools and headteachers to ensure stable and suitable school placements and high-quality education for all CWSW.

Some VSHs described how having access to additional data would enable them to ensure support, guidance, and training are provided in a more targeted way and raise the profile of children's needs, risks, and outcomes with key partners. As one CWSW Lead from the South West reported in Survey 5, additional data would:

1. support more effective partnership working and consistent practice

2. facilitate inter-service joint working with neighbouring and cross border authorities around training, intervention and resources to specific schools and settings
3. support more effective transition planning, with families, children and schools
4. support the implementation of education plans in relation to school moves for this cohort. *[CWSW Lead; South West; Survey 5]*

In this way, having access to a broader range of data in a timely manner is identified as key to enabling VSHs and their teams to maintain strategic oversight of the educational experiences of CWSW and support schools and social care, alongside other agencies, to ensure that CWSW feel connected to their schools, engaged in their education, are safeguarded, and do not lose out on learning.

Quality of data

Alongside availability, improving the quality of data for CWSW, through joining up data systems between education and social care, has been an ongoing focus for VSHs since the introduction of the extended duties. Many VSHs have invested in new and improving data systems and dedicated data managers. Case study interview data suggests that in LAs where joined-up systems have been introduced, the quality of data has improved:

I would say the quality of data has absolutely improved, so like many local authorities we've got Power BI across social care and education functions and now we've... systematically built filters for children in need, children subject to plan, children in care and what we're starting to see now, so at any point whether you're from social care or education, you can look up... children with... social care involvement... attendance... suspensions, [permanent] exclusions, you could look at it by a team, you could look at it as an individual child, you could look at localities, you can look at cohorts, you can slice it and dice it in all sorts of ways that you want trying to sort of build a picture. *[VSH; Braddleton; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

However some LAs continue to face challenges in aligning education and social care data:

Yeah, I'd say it's nationally an improving picture but locally it's difficult to align social care to education. [*Data Manager; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview*]

In Alsbury, the Data Manager explained experiencing difficulties with the quality and consistency of the unique reference numbers used in education and social care systems, making it hard to match data, and highlighted discrepancies between different data sources:

So, we have some pretty good attendance dashboard for example, which have filters where you can say; is this a looked after child? Is it a child in need or CP? Do they have an EHCP [Education, Health and Care Plan]? So, you can filter down quite effectively but I guess my problem is that often differs then to when like the SEN2 return⁵⁷ goes in or you get those differing figures. So, we have a consistent view but it's not necessarily a reliable view. [*Data Manager; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview*]

Issues in securing data from schools in a timely manner were also highlighted by some, but there was also optimism over the introduction of new tools, such as Wonde. When asked whether they were confident about the quality and reliability of data across the CWSW cohort the Alsbury VSH responded:

Not yet, [but] I think we will once we get our hands on Wonde. I think we've had various dashboards that have helped us on the way. We have a dashboard so we can see how many CIN, CP we have, where they are, which school they're at, who their social worker is, what their attendance is but that's a very recent thing. Before that, maybe in the last three or four months, lots of schools were not sending us regular attendance. And I would say that sometimes we had to wait almost a year until we could get any comparable figures. And again, I think you'll probably hear from our data manager that you know we are only just now beginning to be able to pull reports that we can then match with social care data. I don't think we have had integrity of data across the whole cohort. We've had some very useful individual

⁵⁷ 'SEN2 is a statutory return that collects data about children and young people who the local authority is responsible for under section 24 of the Children and Families Act 2014' (DfE 2024; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675831b5f72b1d96e06bbfdf/SEN_survey_-_guide_to_person_level_SEN2_return_2025.pdf)

data but absolutely not comparable yet but very hopeful now.
[VSH; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview]

Improving the quality of data has been identified over the course of the evaluation as an important element to securing trust between professionals and ensuring that decision-making is evidence informed.

Use of data

Having improved data systems has enabled VSs to use data to support the VSH's strategic leadership role and raise the profile of CWSW and their educational needs. VSHs in the case study sites described being able to use data to have strategic conversations and make decisions about where to focus resource. They also described using data to identify trends and keep a 'critical' or 'forensic' eye on the education experiences and progress of current CWSW and the work of the VS and to provide both support and challenge to schools around, for example, attendance, and school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) rates for CWSW. Data was also reportedly used to help school leaders understand and monitor the size of the cohort of CWSW.

Some interviewees from the case study sites talked about using data to produce performance reports that they used to advocate for CWSW in different fora. The VSH in Braddeleton, for example, explained how they had 'raised the line of sight' for CWSW both horizontally and vertically within their LA structure and described using the data to raise questions and try to understand what lies behind the figures with different professionals:

What we've been doing is we've been taking those [attendance, suspension and permanent exclusion figures] out to as many meetings as we can, so we'll take it to the SENCO [Special Educational Needs Coordinator] network and [say] have you seen this? Or take it to, there's monthly headteacher forums online, we take it to that. We'll take it to our SEND process, we've got [a] SEND locality hub, so we take it to those. So, basically anywhere where there's a forum, we kind of have a bit of a two-way process. We say this is the data that's coming out, tell us what's going on. What do you think is going? So, it's absolutely raised the profile. *[VSH; Braddeleton; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

In Alsbury, the VSH described how the sharing of CIN and CP attendance data in their monthly performance meetings had resulted in Heads of Service actively seeking information about the attendance of CWSW. In this way, data was used to

leverage the interest of other partners in this previously underserved, and to an extent often invisible, group of children.

As well as supporting strategic work, using data to inform targeted intervention was also discussed. For example, in Earlham, the CWSW Leads described using attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions) data to identify CWSW who are 'not being seen' by schools and to build a fuller picture of the educational experiences of CWSW in their locality. Attendance and suspensions data act as a flag for the CWSW Leads to contact schools and social workers to ensure that they are aware of one another, that they understand each child's educational and social needs, and that children are being supported to attend school. Other VSHs have opted to collect and share child-level attendance data so that, if it shows signs of a downward drift, they can prompt schools and the child's social worker to notice and act on the risk to individual children. VSHs have used such child-level data to raise awareness and reduce individual children's safeguarding risk, by:

- Prompting the child's social worker to act when they are absent, so a habit of non-attendance is not established or reinforced.
- Encouraging the child's school to follow-up on absence by reminding them of the safeguarding risk the child may be exposed to.
- Reminding other education teams, such as SEND or attendance, that the child and family are likely to require all members of the team supporting them to act in concert while they are subject to a plan.

Some respondents also described how data had both led to increased partnership working and was being used to inform decisions, for example about where to target intervention:

We have a working together group of head teachers and we're working together to improve MACE [Multi-Agency Child Exploitation] arrangements and education being involved in deciding which interventions go where because of the data. *[VSH; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

The results from Survey 5 also suggest that increased access to data had led to improved partnership working, with 85.7% of respondents reporting that the availability of data had improved joint working between services and 77.9% reporting that the availability of data had changed the practice of partners (see Annex 3).

Overall, in seeking to fulfil their extended duties VSHs have invested significant effort and resources into improving the sharing of data between CSC and education, reconciling of CSC lists of CWSW with attendance data from schools, improving the

quality assurance processes around that data and then using it to raise awareness of the issue. In so doing, they have provided schools with data they had often never seen or considered that helped them recognise that CWSW should be one of their priorities, too.

Awareness-raising

Key findings

Training has, alongside more direct approaches to raising awareness, provided a significant benefit in increasing both schools and social worker understanding of CWSW and one another. VSHs have made good use of the increasing body of evidence that suggests adopting different, more relational approaches, can make a difference to the educational experiences of CWSW. They have used this knowledge as the basis of their training offer and more operational offers of advice and support to schools, while providing social workers with the same understanding so they can better challenge schools.

Training and advice

The Phase Two Interim Report (Brown et al. 2024⁵⁸) highlighted the importance of training for schools and social workers as the principal route to raising awareness of CWSW needs and changing practice to take account of them (in Survey 4, 97.6% of VSHs offered training to schools; 96% offered training to social workers). In Survey 5, we sought to explore further how the training was delivered, whether for individual groups, or jointly. VSHs were asked to estimate the proportions of training, to the nearest decile, delivered to schools, SWs, other agencies, and combinations thereof.

Table 34 in Annex 3 details VSHs responses to this item, but in summary, two-thirds ($n=61$, 67.7%) indicated that between 10% and 30% of their training is delivered to an audience of social workers only and over half ($n=52$, 57.8%) indicated between 40% and 60% is delivered to an audience of school staff only. The vast majority of VSHs that responded to this item delivered only a small proportion, or none at all, of their training to other agencies ($n=88$, 97.7% - 0%-20%) or jointly ($n=77$, 85.5% - 0% - 20%).

VSHs appear, therefore, to have chosen training for social workers and schools as the principal means of increasing practitioners' understanding of the needs of

⁵⁸https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/663b61984d8bb7378fb6c3a4/Evaluation_of_the_extension_of_virtual_school_heads_duties_to_children_with_a_social_worker_-_phase_two.pdf

CWSW; explaining the barriers they face in learning; and the approaches most likely to lower those barriers. As one VSH described:

Regular training on a variety of topics including trauma and attachment, relational practice, youth mental health first aid, and emotion coaching is delivered by the VS, ensuring that schools receive high-quality training to develop their practice and enable them to better support their vulnerable CWSW.

Bespoke CPD [Continuing Professional Development] has been delivered to 95% of... schools [in LA] in the last two years, and all schools receive weekly CPD updates from the Virtual School as well as individualised support as needed. [VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]

The Phase Two interim report (Brown et al. 2024) suggested that the most effective support for change in understanding of CWSW's needs, goes beyond 'training sessions' to provide a longer-term, more embedded, framework within which the training sits. This can involve whole LA approaches to stimulate schools to re-think their culture and practice or opportunities for continued support for schools after the initial training, either by the strategic initiative of the VS or from other practitioners.

[We provide] regular briefings and training on meeting the educational needs of CWSW to a range of partners including new head teachers, school governors, early career teachers, DSLs, DTs, social care teams, SEND Champions and newly qualified social workers. [VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]

In many areas, the established offer of regular training by VSs has been extended to create conditions for sustainability. In Survey 5, VSHs outlined the extended offer that included various forms of accreditation, membership to organisations (mainly Attachment Research Community, ARC⁵⁹), and ongoing CPD opportunities:

Half-termly hub meetings are also held with the seven identified Secondary Schools who are working with us to become Attachment and Trauma Accredited Schools as part of the ARC programme, with 80% of schools being trained in relational practice, with the remaining 20% to receive training this academic year.' [VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]

⁵⁹ <https://the-arc.org.uk/>

A vast number of school staff have completed EBSA [Emotionally Based School Avoidance] online training. ELSA [Emotion Literacy Support Assistant] training and supervision by EPs [Educational Psychologists] has been supported by the VS too, leading to more children being supported in schools rather than being suspended. The attachment, trauma and mental health training for school staff is part of our LA-wide Committed to Inclusion (CTI) kite mark leading to more staff being able to support children who are distressed. *[VSH; North West; Survey 5]*

Many VSs devise their own training courses, as illustrated by this VS in the East Midlands that offer:

- A 7-day course in relational approaches (45 staff each year participate)
- An 8-module, attachment and trauma course (2000 staff have accessed this course)
- A drawing and talking course (30 staff participated)
- A Play Therapy course (24 staff participated)

[VSH; East Midlands; Survey 5]

VSHs saw training that is responsive to identified local needs (often at school level following a survey or audit), regular, accompanied by ongoing support, and delivered on a whole school basis, as key. Through their training and information programmes, VSHs sought to connect with a broad range of roles within the school workforce, e.g., DSL, DT, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo), headteacher, school governors, and newly qualified teachers. Much of the training was offered on a whole-school basis, reflecting the importance of consistency of approach from all staff members within the school setting.

The training offer from VSHs seldom contains standalone events, but rather a package of activities that are linked to the overarching VS strategy, as this VSH from the South East describes:

[We offer a] comprehensive training programme to include training on barriers/needs of CWSW. We publish a termly DSL Newsletter to highlight barriers/needs of CWSW and share best practice related to engagement and raising attainment. We are trialling themed podcasts and have worked with the County Attendance Team Manager to provide guidance around different barriers to school attendance for CWSW. *[VSH; South East; Survey 5]*

A minority of VSs employ creative solutions that embrace new technology by offering training using Virtual Reality (VR) headsets to better understand CWSW needs:

Additional training using VR headsets has been delivered in schools to give staff a better appreciation of a child's lived experience of trauma and neglect (approximately 400+ education staff accessed this training last year). *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Many VSHs and their staff supplemented the raising of awareness and understanding through training, with visits to schools and the creation or maintenance of professional networks, sometimes extending across schools and CSC:

All primary schools offered a visit last academic year (43/51 visited). All secondary schools visited twice a year. Half termly training for Designated Teachers. Annual VS conference for Education. Cross service training with education and social care. Termly newsletter. Training offer including support for key school staff. *[CWSW Lead; South East; Survey 5]*

Through training and advice on casework, in online or in-person drop-in sessions, VSHs in Survey 3 felt that social workers were increasingly empowered to challenge schools around school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions) and other related practices, e.g., part-time timetables, off rolling:

Training provided to SWs around attendance and part time timetables. Heads of service illustrate in discussions they have a more detailed understanding of education needs and the SEND process. A disability team education worker has started to support social workers in understanding the needs and processes associated with SEND. A growing understanding of the Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) process and how schools can meet needs has been seen in discussion with social workers and when social workers present at panels. *[VSH; Yorkshire; Survey 3]*

This example also illustrates how the attendance of the VSH at meetings attended by CSC Heads of Service has enabled them to see the training and advice taking root among managers and decision makers.

Strategies in place for increasing schools’ understanding of the needs of this cohort

Key findings

VSHs have worked to increase schools’ understanding of the needs of CWSW by raising the profile of the CWSW cohort using surveys to ascertain current level of understanding of needs, delivering training to schools and social workers particularly around relational practice, and provision of advice. Over the course of the evaluation, VSHs reported that schools were making sustainable changes to their systems, interventions, and practice. These included increased adoption of relational practices as schools better understood CWSW needs.

Perceived progress across the period of the evaluation

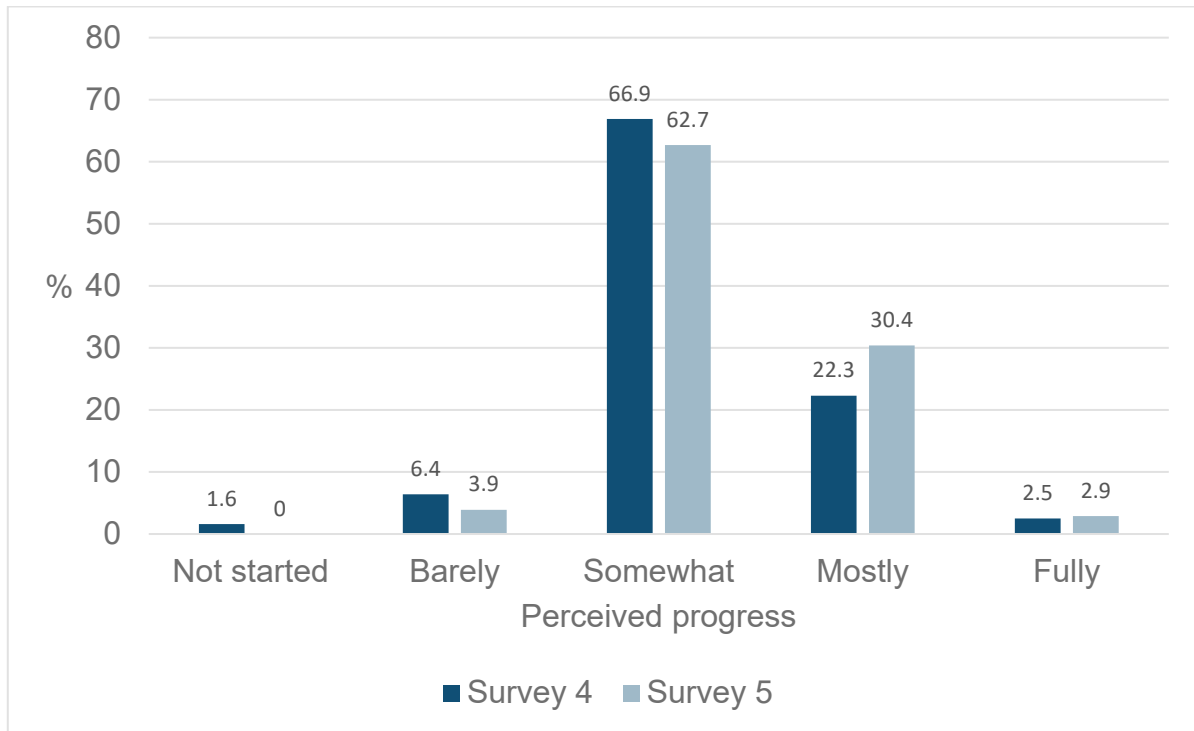
As described earlier in the report, from the outset of the extension of duties in September 2021, increasing school staff’s knowledge of the needs of CWSW was seen by VSHs as a key activity with a substantial increase in training (mainly concerning relational practice, pupil mental health, and behaviour) reported in the Phase One evaluation. VSHs also reported having undertaken consultations, reviews or surveys of school staff, social workers, and other professionals to identify priorities for CWSW for future work in Phase One. By the end of the Phase Two evaluation, all VSHs who responded to Survey 5 indicated that work towards this ToC outcome had begun, with 96% of respondents indicating that progress had either somewhat (62.7%), mostly (30.4%), or fully (2.9) been achieved. This is an increase from 91.7% of respondents reporting that progress towards this ToC outcome had somewhat, mostly, or fully been achieved in Survey 4.

Table 17: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Schools’ increased understanding of CWSW needs

Increased schools’ understanding of CWSW needs	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Survey 4 (Oct/ Nov 2023)	2 (1.6)	8 (6.4)	81 (66.9)	27 (22.3)	3 (2.5)	121
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	-	4 (3.9)	64 (62.7)	31 (30.4)	3 (2.9)	102

Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Figure 3: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Schools’ increased understanding of CWSW needs



Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Strategies

The underlying strategy employed by VSHs was to raise the profile of the CWSW cohort using surveys to ascertain current level of understanding of needs, training, and provision of advice. In Survey 5, VSHs indicated that existing strong relationships with schools facilitated progress towards achieving this outcome.

Surveys

In the early stages of the extension of duties, many VSHs surveyed schools to ascertain their current level of understanding of CWSW needs with a view to allocating resources and devising appropriate training:

[We] surveyed all schools re: their perceptions of specific needs/ barriers to learning. We then analysed this information and shared the overall results with schools, identifying their key barriers for primary and secondary phases. This information was also mapped against the specific needs identified by schools of their Pupil Premium cohorts to establish whether there were any significant overlaps between the two cohorts' needs (there were). We have shared key data and research with school staff at regular meetings (e.g., termly Designated Teacher meetings, termly safeguarding meetings, Pupil Premium cluster group meetings). For those schools with particularly high numbers of CWSWs, a Virtual School adviser has visited school to talk to senior leaders and discuss the specific barriers that their CWSW face. *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

The needs identified were primarily related to factors likely born out of early adversity and broader forms of disadvantage. Many VSs emphasised relational approaches as a way of addressing these needs and a focus on creating and facilitating conditions that maximise learning opportunities such as work around emotion regulation, relationships, and Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH).

Training

At the time of Survey 4 (October/ November 2023), 97.6% of VSHs offered training to schools indicating that they continued to see training as the principal route to increasing understanding of CWSW needs and changing school practice to take account of them.

The consistent offer of training in attachment awareness and trauma informed practice since Survey 3 reflects a consistent focus by VSHs on increasing understanding of how this cohort's needs can be better met through relational approaches:

[Our programme] develops relational and restorative practice to address trauma because we know the challenges our children, families and communities face. These challenges are created and exacerbated by traumatic experiences such as conflict, poverty, loss, neglect and abuse. Trauma, if unaddressed, leads to fight, flight, freeze and flop responses in children, families, communities and the systems around them. Such systemic failure is disastrous for children and financially unsustainable for our wider services, so [our programme] builds and rebuilds relationships, so children, families and communities can overcome trauma, feel safe, survive and thrive. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Survey 5]*

Providing advice

Running parallel to the training offer, VSHs identified the provision of advice to practitioners as a key component in increasing schools' understanding of CWSW's needs. These activities often included some, or all, of the following:

- Drop-in sessions/ clinics/ surgeries
- Creation of toolkits for schools on a variety of topics (e.g., EBSA, trauma, belonging, attendance, ARC)
- Newsletters and other online resources e.g., guides
- Creation of an audit and self-evaluation tool for schools to use, which includes the attainment and attendance data for the previous academic year
- Running local and regional conferences for schools and associated professionals. Some run jointly with the EP service and provide another platform for disseminating information aimed at increasing understanding of CWSW needs.

Attending meetings (including networks and forums) and reviews are additional activities that VSs undertake to support schools (and often CSC case holders). Many VSHs have successfully ensured that 'CWSW' appears as a standing item on the agendas of meetings often held half-termly or termly. Attending networks and forums increases the reach for VSs in terms of number of schools and are an efficient method of raising awareness of CWSW needs:

The Virtual School has a well-established programme of training events including online live and recorded sessions, conferences and networking meetings. However, the most effective training model seems to be surgeries linked to specific individuals. These have been co-ordinated by the Virtual School but are made up from members of several teams including the attendance service and CIN team managers. This has enabled bespoke advice and guidance to be given and support some joint working between teams on complex challenges. *[VSH; East of England; Survey 5]*

Some VSHs have set up meetings with schools to discuss barriers to learning and advise on how to support CWSW. One London VS has a dedicated advisory teacher for social workers offering information on how best to support CWSW in schools.

Redbury: increasing schools' understanding of CWSW needs – key headlines

- A third cohort of the practitioners across Redbury have accessed the 11-day Trauma Informed Schools UK Diploma in Trauma and Mental Health-Informed Schools and Communities (total of 81 trained practitioners). Sustainability for practitioners built in to maintain TIS UK accreditation through the provision of supervision.
- A relational practice network ran termly with a leading consultant. The mailing list of professionals across schools, settings, and children's services has grown to 147.
- A specific grant for supporting relational practice in education has been accessed by 27 settings/schools.
- An Early Intervention and Mental Wellbeing Programme made available to all secondary and specialist schools across Redbury has been funded.
- Redbury's introductory training for becoming a relational practitioner has been successfully delivered to 18 schools and settings.

The difference Virtual Schools have made to this outcome

Survey 5 asked VSHs what differences they had made to this ToC outcome through their activities. VSHs evidenced this mainly through anecdotes based on feedback from training sessions, forums/ networks and conferences, data, case studies, and policy documents. Many VSHs stated that a wider awareness of needs beyond school staff (e.g. social workers, LA leadership) was also seen. Activities related to this outcome were also said to have increased the confidence of school staff to support this cohort.

As the period of the evaluation continued VSHs reported that schools were making sustainable changes to their systems, interventions, and practice. These included increased adoption of relational practices as schools better understood CWSW needs. In many cases this has led to changes in school policy such as moving away from a 'behaviour policy' to a 'relational policy', changes to the language used in schools, the creation of safe spaces, and identification of trained mentors to support emotion regulation. These changes have been most effective when scaffolded by strategies that span the associated agencies (e.g., CSC, Youth Justice, Health) throughout the LA. The following extended quote from a VSH in the West Midlands exemplifies a comprehensive strategy for increasing schools' understanding of CWSW's needs:

The strong relationships developed with schools across the local authority provide excellent opportunities to link with key professionals in schools, including teachers, pastoral teams, SEND teams and senior leaders. Every conversation with a school is seen as an opportunity to develop their understanding of the CWSW cohort, the difficulties they face, and the impact of these difficulties on their ability to access education. Having a robust multi-agency approach ensures that schools are provided with a broad oversight of our cohort's needs, ensuring they remain a key priority for all stakeholders. Regular training opportunities are offered and attended by a wide variety of schools across the local authority, ensuring that key senior leaders and other professionals within schools receive high quality CPD on a range of topics to use and disseminate to their staff. Additionally, targeted support and training for specific schools has been put in place to ensure that these schools develop their understanding of the vulnerabilities of the CWSW cohort, and how these impact on their educational outcomes, attendance and ability to stay safe and away from exploitation and criminal activity. *[VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

Strategies in place for more inclusive practice in schools (directed by Senior Leadership Team (SLT))

Key findings

Raising awareness and delivering targeted training on relational and trauma-informed practices to school leaders, staff, and social workers has been central to VSHs efforts to encourage more inclusive practice in schools. Many VS(H)s have implemented interventions following audits of current practice, offered post-training support, and facilitated professional networks. Other key strategies have included providing direct challenge to school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) practices, support in multi-agency panels, and embedding early intervention through data tracking. VSHs have also spearheaded system-wide collaboration by formalising joint working and data sharing protocols, while dedicated attendance officers have enabled more proactive responses. The perceived impact of these initiatives includes reduced school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), improved attendance, stronger inter-agency cooperation, and greater professional confidence.

Perceived progress across the period of the evaluation

From Phase One, the major focus of the extension of duties was related to inclusive practice in schools, specifically increasing attendance and reducing suspensions and permanent exclusions.

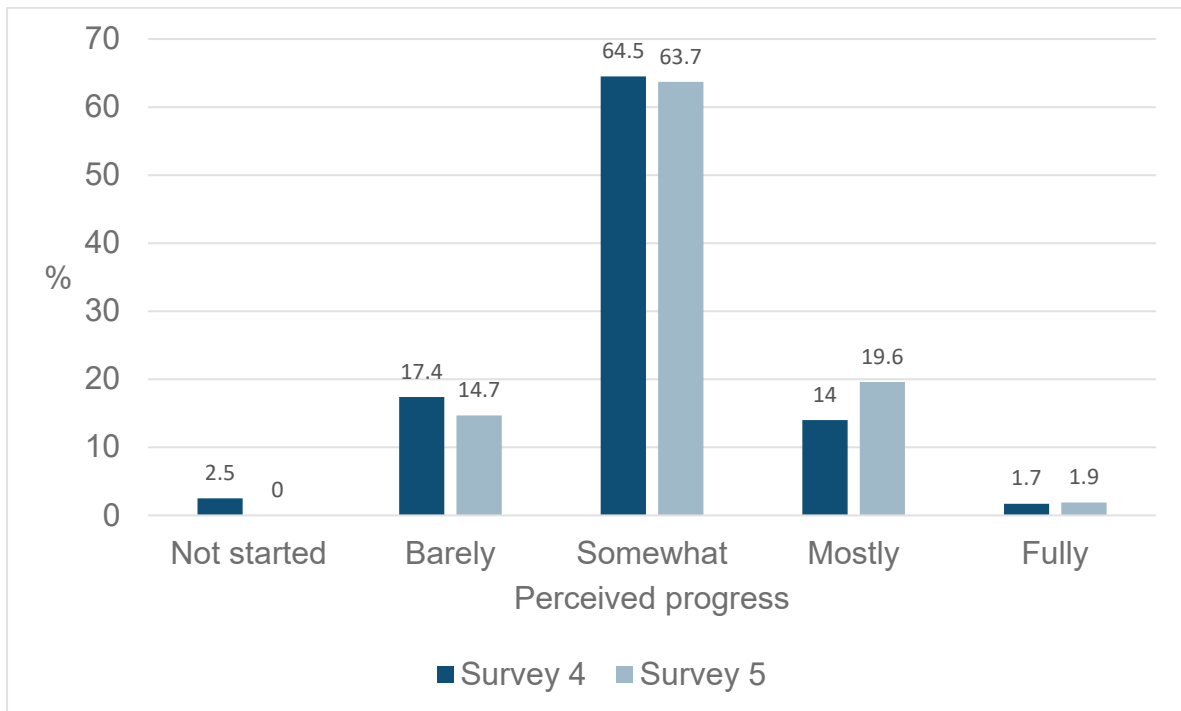
Table 18 shows the progression as perceived by VSHs towards this outcome during Phase Two. In Survey 5, all VSHs reported having started on this outcome with less 'barely achieved' and slightly more 'mostly achieved' than Survey 4, indicating progress towards achieving this outcome. Focusing on those VSHs who responded to both Survey 4 and Survey 5 ($n=91$), a statistical test showed that there was no change in perceived progress towards this outcome during this period.

Table 18: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Somewhat <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Survey 4 (October / November 2023)	3 (2.5)	21 (17.4)	78 (64.5)	17 (14.0)	2 (1.7)	121
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	-	15 (14.7)	65 (63.7)	20 (19.6)	2 (1.9)	102

Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Figure 4: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)



Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Strategies

Awareness raising and training

This ToC outcome recognises that the prevalence of more inclusive practice is unlikely to increase without the positive engagement, support, and drive of a school's senior leaders. Ensuring they have a better understanding of the needs of the CWSW cohort, and of how those needs can be met, is an essential component to improving the inclusivity of schools.

Many VSHs followed a process of first auditing schools on their current practice and understanding. Training was provided based on these audits that mostly aligned with aspects of relational practice and included post-training support (e.g., supervision). Often an appropriate intervention was designed and implemented in conjunction with associated professionals (including supportive and best practice sharing) networks:

Virtual School offers a broad package of AATI [Attachment Aware Trauma Informed] support and training for schools (e.g., VR headsets to look at children's lived experiences of trauma and neglect, PACE [Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy] training for staff, Executive Functioning, Thrive assessments, Attachment Lead training, EBSA support, Key Adult training). The Virtual School also organises and facilitates regular networking opportunities for school staff to share and discuss key strategies and resources to support CIC [Children in Care, otherwise referred to as CLA] and CWSW.' [CWSW lead; North East; Survey 5]

Buy-in by SLT was seen as key, especially when a change of school approach or policy was intended. Some VSs required SLT endorsement of their training and met with members of the SLT prior so that they understood the commitment before sessions were delivered.

Training for school staff and social workers focused on improving attendance and reducing school exclusion (suspensions and permanent exclusions). Topics of the training were mostly ATA [Attachment and Trauma Aware]/ TIP [Trauma-informed practice], EBSA, but other topics included belonging, leadership, coaching, and raising awareness of SEMH issues:

[Our strategies are] training, school visits, training Governors, use of the ARC Attachment Audit from which schools select a whole school change project - usually moving from a Behaviour Policy that is punitive to a relational approach. We hear 'dis-regulated behaviour' cited where we might have heard 'disruptive'. Schools on the programme use Emotion Coaching and Zones of Regulation and understand the impact that trauma can have on cognition and behaviour. It gives us a reference point now should a school want to suspend or [permanently] exclude - we can draw on the training. Generally, a school that wants to [permanently] exclude/suspend is one that is out of borough or not yet attended the attachment training. *[VSH; London; Survey 5]*

To promote attendance, we have shared training and support with social workers and school staff. We have promoted use of the ATTEND Framework⁶⁰ to social workers, Early Help staff, and school staff. We have given free copies of the ATTEND Framework to schools and shown them how to use them (along with other resources designed to support pupils with EBSA). *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Support and challenge

Other activities undertaken by VSs included producing toolkits on suspensions and permanent exclusions for schools and attendance at decision making panels and review meetings:

Virtual School caseworkers support and challenge schools around inclusive practice when required, and share resources, advice, and experience. They also help schools by signposting to other professionals and organisations who can help support inclusive practice. *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

One of the main strategies for VSs to address rates of school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) in the CWSW cohort involved increasing the challenge to schools who were considering school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion). The increased challenge to schools occurred either directly by the VS or by social workers, through improved social worker confidence and awareness to challenge schools themselves. This challenge takes the form of asking questions about children who are either at-risk of school exclusion or who are in the process of being excluded (suspended or permanently excluded). Part of the empowerment

⁶⁰ <https://www.beem.org.uk/ATTENDFramework>

stems from presenting the safeguarding issue; if CWSW are not in school, then they are in a potentially more dangerous situation:

VSH is supporting a local cluster of school leaders as they discuss how to reduce exclusions - part of this support entails helping school staff to understand the local risks around CCE [Child Criminal Exploitation]/CSE [Child Sexual Exploitation] that are particularly relevant for our CWSW cohort. *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Questions are asked regarding alternatives to school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) that have been, or could be, offered and also making sure schools follow correct procedure.

In parallel to empowering social workers to challenge school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) practices, schools are also supported by the VS often through some form of joint working or attendance at panels and/ or reviews to offer alternatives to school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion):

Strong relationships have been developed with schools, social care colleagues and a range of other professionals over the past three years. In the first full year of data tracking for suspensions and exclusions, there were four permanent exclusions for CWSW. Three of these [permanent] exclusions occurred early in the autumn term - as a result, support, guidance and advice was offered to the schools that had issued the exclusion, along with strong challenge to ensure that processes were followed (for example the use of the pre-exclusion hotline prior to considering a suspension or exclusion to assist with advice, support and alternatives to exclusion). Subsequently, there was only one further permanent exclusion that year. *[VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

However, as noted by several VSHs, this approach likely involves some form of 'direct working' and relies again on the moral purpose of VSHs to intervene.

Data tracking and early intervention

Some VSHs reported a proactive approach whereby visits to schools were arranged following tracking of school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) data, for example:

[The VSH sits on a] multi-agency panel which tracks data for children with multiple vulnerabilities to target individual support for children and strategic support / challenge for schools with high numbers of suspension / [permanent] exclusion for CWSW. [We are] working with identified schools to share good inclusion practice for CWSW as part of multi-agency project across the LA looking at use of AP [Alternative Provision] and holistic support from agencies to identify unmet SEND needs. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

Some VSs focus on early intervention to reduce school exclusions (suspension and permanent exclusion). Early intervention with schools was seen by VSHs to enable schools to have more time to find alternatives and put in appropriate support. This early intervention may take the form of regular meetings hosted by the VS with schools or clusters of schools to discuss any child at risk of school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion). Additional strategies and support may be added on the advice of the VS, for example in facilitating access to high needs funding. In Survey 5, VSHs clearly understood that effective early intervention requires good communication from other agencies (mainly CSC) with the VS so that they can intervene and offer timely advice and guidance. Many VSs started with supporting individual cases but then moved to enabling schools to adapt and seek their own sustainable approaches to reducing school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions):

The additional capacity given to the education access team has enabled more a proactive response and early intervention work to occur for CWSW experiencing suspensions and this has avoided permanent exclusions and brought about alternative provisions that are better matched to children's needs. Confidence in the system has been a vital component to this and much of that confidence increase is down to better communication between professionals. *[VSH; East of England; Survey 5]*

Greater oversight of suspensions due to strong links with schools and the Behaviour Support Team has meant that suspensions are monitored closely each week. This has allowed the CWSW team to work collaboratively with schools and social care colleagues, offering support, advice, guidance and challenge. Alternatives to suspensions were clearly communicated to schools where the suspension rate was initially high at the start of the academic year, with multiple suspensions for any young people a particular focus to ensure these vulnerable learners were able to remain in education wherever possible. Links between suspensions and poor attendance were highlighted in professionals' meetings and training delivered jointly with the Attendance Support Team, illustrating the significant impact that fixed term suspensions can have on attendance, access to education, the risks of being an out-of-sight young person, and the potential for them to be pulled into criminal activity. *[VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*.

System wide approaches and joint working

The case study evidence indicates that, where the extension of duties has been seen as a component within a broader LA-wide strategy to support the educational outcomes of vulnerable children in general rather than CWSW in isolation, the influence of the VSH has been multiplied and the profile of CWSW raised:

We have been working very closely with the [LA] PRU [Pupil Referral Unit] and Attendance Service, Social Services, Early Help and Preventative Services, Management Information and Intelligence Team and Education Psychology services to develop a countywide approach to increase attendance, highlighting the additional vulnerabilities of CWSW, education neglect and schools being a protective factor. We are in the process of formalising systems and data sharing in line with the new attendance guidance and targeted support meetings. *[VSH; South East; Survey 5]*

The large majority of the activity aimed at decreasing suspensions and permanent exclusions was described as being underpinned by greater efforts to stimulate joint working.

VSHs outlined the range of complex relationships and nuances that they, and their staff, are required to coordinate and navigate to ensure the best outcomes when supporting CWSW. The following extended quote from a CWSW lead in London is typical of the responses in Survey 5:

Schools need to notify the LA of any suspension, [permanent] exclusion, EHE [Elective Home Education] referral or CME [Children Missing Education] referral of any CWSW to ensure that the VS can inform, advise or coordinate responses or interventions as necessary. This includes representation at Fair Access Panel, TAC [Team Around the Child] meetings for recurring suspensions and a TAC pilot programme around CWSW that are permanently excluded to ensure the children do not feel rejected and are given opportunity to reintegrate to mainstream where appropriate.

Where CWSW are hospital in-patients for ten days or more VS holds a TAC meeting to make a robust support plan that ensures education is provided and quality assured and schools maintain contact. The plan sets SMART [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound] targets to ensure the CWSW does not fall behind in relationships or learning and has access to support to reintegrate into the community and education when ready.

Fair Access Panel has been successfully used to help CWSW to have phased integrations into school after time out of education. This has included VS and SEND services working together to support schools to provide support to these children ensuring successful reintegration.

VS have worked with... Chairs to streamline how education is included in CP conferences. Schools therefore are monitoring closely the attendance and academic progress of these children more closely and providing such feedback to support plans to protect children. [CWSW Lead; London; Survey 5]

Dedicated staff to support attendance

Several VSs adopted a strategy to employ additional staff dedicated to support attendance (e.g., Education Welfare Officer (EWO) for attendance, Attendance Entitlement Officer (AEO)). Their role often involved ensuring effective communication between agencies leading to improved multi-agency oversight of the CWSW cohort. Having a dedicated member of staff focused on attendance on the VS team enabled targeted support and intervention to be offered. The following extended quote encapsulates the breadth of activity:

The addition of an Attendance Entitlement Officer (AEO) has led to a tiered response being developed. As part of our universal offer, the attendance team, as part of their normal operating practice, will highlight CWSW through their termly support meetings with attendance officers in school. Our targeted offer has evolved to tracking severely and persistently absent trends for this cohort and the AEO working to support attendance practice at a school level; this has been coordinated with our in-care cohort.

Most impactful for an individual pupil level has been the bespoke dynamic pupil-level response to join TAC discussions when requested by Virtual School advisers to support and challenge attendance practice. Also, through the direction of the Attendance Entitlement Manager to attend Child Protection Conferences where, given the child's current attendance, it is felt additional attendance expertise would be beneficial.

An example of a piece of work that looked to increase attendance was in targeting the severely absent/persistently absent CWSW in Year 6 ahead of transition to high school to ensure enhanced transition plans were in place to support with a focus on supporting attendance. Tracking of these pupils has continued where they have been stepped down and would fall in to the Ever6 CWSW category.
[CWSW Lead; East of England; Survey 5]

The difference Virtual Schools have made to this outcome

At the time of Survey 5, VSHs reported raising awareness of SEND and relational practice through training activities, improved advice, prevention of school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), positive differences to school attendance, and facilitation of better joint working. VSHs evidenced this mainly through project and programme feedback and access to data. A small minority reported it was too soon to identify any changes:

The impact of the targeted activity led by the Virtual School has made a positive difference to the attendance of individual pupils within the CWSW cohort. The weekly drop in, supported by key partner agencies, such as Educational Psychology, [a local study skills provider], SEND, CSC and CAMHS, has facilitated more effective multi-agency working around children and their families, promoting more flexible, timely and creative approaches to reducing barriers to attendance. Through this forum, we have also reinforced professional roles and responsibilities, challenged 'silo' approaches, encouraged collaboration and demonstrated the importance of early intervention and a proactive and joined up approach. This has been reinforced by targeted training for key professionals. *[CWSW Lead; South East; Survey 5]*

In the Phase Two surveys and case studies, many VSHs reported they had impacted suspension or permanent exclusion rates through their advocacy of relational approaches, including support for trauma informed practice and greater attachment awareness, which helped keep CWSW in school and reflected the training focus across the sector. Schools were better able to understand behaviour as communication and not to default to school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) processes when faced with challenging behaviour:

The Relational Schools Programme which promotes relational and restorative practice has resulted in suspensions halving in one large secondary school in 12-months. Schools on this programme are less reliant on detentions, replacing them with restorative conversations. *[VSH; South East; Survey 5]*

Raising awareness and providing training on relational practices in general, and EBSA in particular, also featured in many VSHs reporting of activities leading to improved attendance. The training empowered school senior leaders to disseminate this approach across the school. An absence of relational practice within a school was also reported by several VSHs to account for decreases in attendance.

In Survey 5, many VSHs pointed to raised awareness among professionals (mainly CSC but also other agencies, e.g., Health, Police, Youth Justice) of CWSW's profile and needs as contributory factors in the perceived increase in attendance. VSHs also reported an increase in confidence of social workers when working with schools around issues of inclusivity (Survey 5) as an underlying aspect of facilitating improvements for CWSW.

This was evidenced by attendance data now on CSC dashboards, feedback from training and drop-in sessions hosted by the VS, attendance targets included in CIN/

CP plans, and enabling social worker to challenge suspensions and permanent exclusions in school:

Attendance is now on all the Social Care dashboards to ensure school attendance is part of the supervision process. *[VSH; East of England; Survey 5]*

One key example is supporting a social worker through consultation to go back to a school and effectively challenge a reduced timetable and increase the child's attendance and access to education.

Another example is supporting social workers to access the LA offer for EP work to address emotional based school avoidance that has supported children and their families in improving attendance. *[VSH; South West; Survey 5]*

Strategies in place for increasing Children's Social Care's understanding of education and vice versa

Key findings

VSHs have worked to increase CSC's understanding of education and vice versa through sustained emphasis on awareness-raising and training, drop-in sessions, and shared resources like newsletters to foster a unified understanding of responsibilities. Information and advice sharing has been provided through seminars, clinics, and the development of toolkits and exemplar materials. VSHs have also played an active role in multi-agency meetings, advocating for educational perspectives and fostering joint working practices with social care and education. Their efforts have improved the confidence of social workers to engage with schools, enhanced mutual understanding between agencies, and embedded education more firmly in CIN and CP planning. Evidence of progress includes clearer educational targets in plans and increased collaboration, though cultural and systemic challenges remain.

Perceived progress across the period of the evaluation

From the early stages of the extension of duties, raising awareness and understanding of each other's professional space by CSC and school staff was acknowledged as a key element in the ToC. Establishing a mutual understanding of the systemic challenges inherent in both education and CSC was seen to underpin improvements in joint working and ultimately better outcomes for CWSW in school.

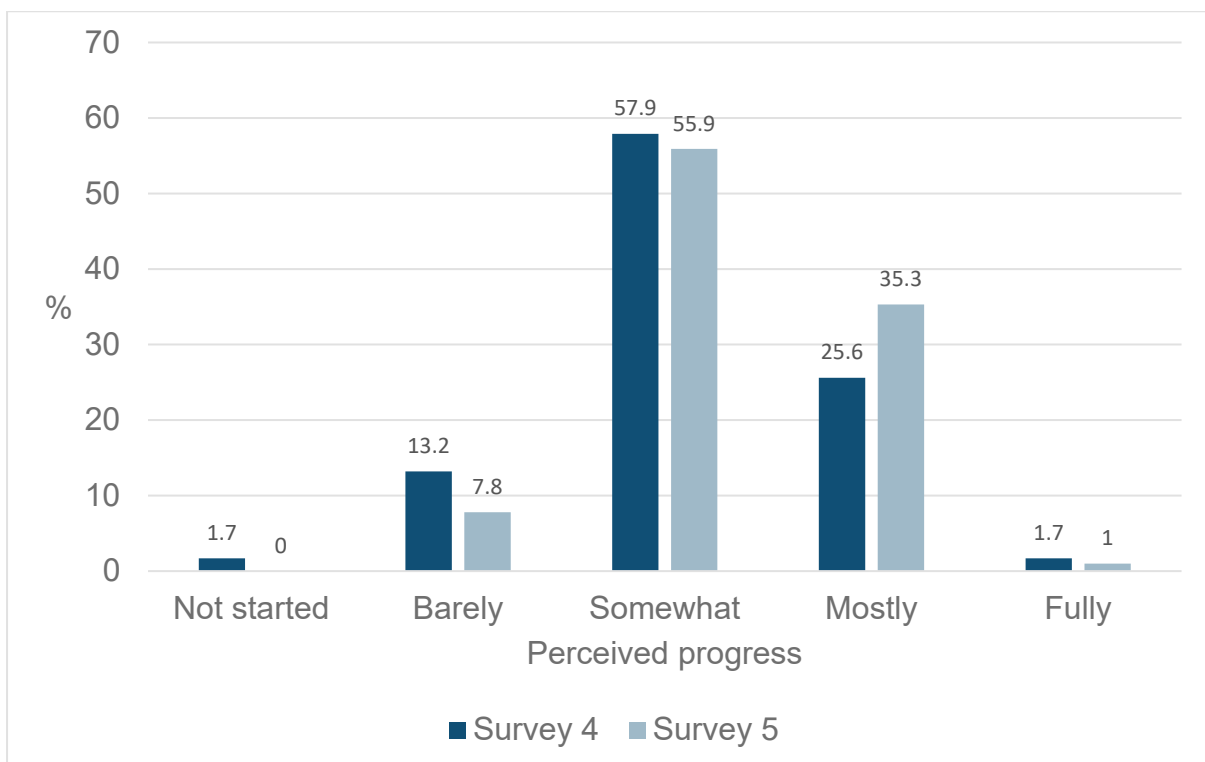
Table 19 shows the shift in overall progress towards this outcome in Phase Two of the extension of duties.

Table 19: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing CSC’s understanding of education and vice versa

Increasing CSC’s understanding of education and vice versa	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Some- what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total N
Survey 4 (October/ November 2023)	2 (1.7)	16 (13.2)	70 (57.9)	31 (25.6)	2 (1.7)	121
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	-	8 (7.8)	57 (55.9)	36 (35.3)	1 (1.0)	102

Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Figure 5: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing CSC’s understanding of education and vice versa



Source: VSH Surveys 4 & 5

Strategies

Awareness raising and training

At the time of Survey 5, the main mechanism for change continues to be training and associated raising awareness activities (e.g., production of guides and toolkits).

Most VSs offer a comprehensive training programme for social workers and schools that includes ongoing support and advice built into a sustainable model. Over time there has been an increase in training provided to social workers, from 70.5% in Survey 3 and rising to 96.0% in Survey 4.

The training offer has been broadened from CSC to include carers, residential workers, and associated professionals. Much of the training is centred on EHCP processes and policies and is often jointly held with education staff; however, just under 50% of VSHs in Survey 5 report no joint training:

Areas of training include absenteeism trends in CWSW in borough, AATI practice, working with uncooperative and hostile parents, EBSA. The list is not exhaustive. *[CWSW Lead; London; Survey 5]*

Support has been given to schools and SW around understanding each other's practice. Workshops were offered in 3 locations across the LA to develop this shared language and understanding, especially around understanding the limitations of each role. *[CWSW Lead; North West; Survey 5]*

Other activities to raise awareness were developed as VSHs saw the need to sustain levels of understanding (particularly to mitigate against staff churn) and continue to facilitate better joint working. Example activities included:

- provision by the VSH of regular drop-in sessions or clinics for social workers (and often open to other professionals) to seek advice, guidance, and clarification on education related issues
- a programme devised by a VS in the East of England that supported DTs and social workers to swap for a day to experience the responsibilities and demands of each other's role
- attendance at CSC team meetings to promote the education perspective on issues facing CWSW (including the protective factor of school attendance).

The Earlham case study (see Annex 2) is an example of an LA aiming to keep the issues raised in training and other awareness raising alive in the work of schools and social workers. One way in which they do this is through sending the same

newsletter to both schools and social workers, reinforcing a sense of shared language, responsibility, and partnership:

...with a monthly newsletter that is sent to SWs and schools to share updates (e.g., on trauma informed approaches), prompts to facilitate reflection on current practice and ways to support pupils. *[VSH; Earlham; Case Study]*

In addition, including CSC SLT in training and other awareness raising activities has facilitated sustainability as managers are now able to support their teams.

Information and advice sharing

Alongside the training offer from VSs, provision of activities related to sharing information and advice were a key driver to develop a reciprocal understanding of professional roles, responsibilities, and challenges. These activities took the form of interactive sessions and production of materials to support those working with CWSW.

The information sessions could be formal, seminar-type sessions often organised to be in-person events at convenient locations across the LA, though online sessions were also offered. The information sessions were usually about case-level advice and guidance or disseminating examples of best practice.

In addition to the information sessions, 'drop-ins' or 'clinics' were offered. These were predominantly online and took an 'as-and-when needed' approach. The drop-in sessions could be 'general' or focused on certain topics, e.g., reintegration meetings. In one VS in the East of England, short films were created to easily disseminate information about the VS role and strategies to support CWSW in school, these were circulated to all CSC staff.

VSHs also produced a variety of materials that were made available online or sent to professional teams on request. For example:

- sets of exemplar education SMART targets that could be used in CIN and CP plans
- preparation of guides and toolkits for SWs and IROs [Independent Reviewing Officers] around permanent exclusions, AP [Alternative Provision] and reduced timetables; effective use of PP [Pupil Premium] funding to support CWSW; to demystify typical misconceptions of schools and procedures.

- Pro-forma for gathering educational information that were co-produced with DSLs and IROs to be used in ICPCs [Initial Child Protection Conferences]/RCPCs [Review Child Protection Conferences] *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Attendance and participation in networks, panels, meetings, and reviews

Attending multi-agency meetings and reviews provides the VSH with opportunities to offer advice and guidance on specific education related issues, but also to act as an advocate for education and the contribution it can make to better outcomes for CWSW and their families. In Survey 5, VSHs reported attending meetings concerning, for example, EHCP, SEND, CSC team meetings, attendance, and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub [MASH]. VSHs report more cross-fertilisation of agencies arising from these meetings, i.e., becoming increasingly common for education and the VS to attend CSC led meetings and CSC are increasingly invited to attend education led meetings:

The Virtual School Head represents Education on all relevant CSC panels and strategic boards. CSC have been invited to participate on the Relational Schools Programme - we have the Principal Social Worker and colleagues from across CSC joining in this work and shaping it. The Virtual School deliver training which is promoted to / attended by CSC colleagues. The Virtual School deliver regular... webinars to raise awareness of the barriers/needs of CWSW and ensure this agenda is live / actively worked through our termly Delivering Quality Improvement in Practice and Performance (DQIPP) meetings. CSC receive weekly attendance information that inform their tasking meetings and subsequent interventions to support improved attendance for CWSW. The Virtual School offer consultations to CSC colleagues which have been well received and utilised to reflect on practice and find ways to overcome barriers to non-attendance. *[VSH; South East; Survey 5]*

Opportunities for joint working in support of CWSW that involved heads of service/ senior managers were welcomed by the VSHs. These meetings often involved sharing data, which led to discussions of how to develop strategic approaches across services whilst considering the opportunities and challenges particular to each service, as exemplified by this extended quotation:

We have devised a model for the ways in which SW highlight and contact us if there is any concern around the education for each child when they are first referred to the team and also if any issue arises when a SW is involved. This is regularly reviewed in SW supervision. We can then offer advice and guidance to the SW on how they can support the child in regard to their education.

A VS worker attends a regular CSC meeting to discuss any concerns and identify where support may be appropriate. We have previously held regular drop-in sessions for SW to attend and speak to a VS worker around any concern or query re: education however this has evolved and they can contact the VS worker at any time to answer on an ad hoc basis.

The VS are working with CSC senior managers to further embed systems ensuring all SW who have issues or concerns are contacting us as soon as possible to try and be even more proactive, with the hopes to reduce the complexities of barriers faced by children and young people. *[CWSW Lead; Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

The difference Virtual Schools have made to this outcome

Progress towards this outcome is not made in isolation. Rather it is part of a complex process where training, participation in networks and panels, and attending meetings and reviews led to opportunities for the VSH to advocate for educational factors and also to raise awareness, thereby increasing understanding of other professionals' roles, responsibilities, and challenges:

The VS has used regular training, awareness raising and information sharing to increase CSC's understanding of education. This has included four-part training programme for social workers on understanding education, delivered termly over two days, to increase understanding of the education systems in the UK, as well as on key themes such as inclusion, attendance and careers. Training to promote good attendance was delivered in collaboration with the Attendance Support Team and Education Access and Support in spring 2024.

In addition, we launched a Virtual School Steering Group for CWSW with key senior colleagues from social care as key members to ensure our training programme reflects and responds to training needs of staff within CSC. The work to improve the quality and impact of education targets in CIN and CP Plans continues to be developed. *[CWSW Lead; South East; Survey 5]*

When asked what differences the VS has made to the understanding of education by social workers, the majority of responses referred to better access to advice and guidance, improved or facilitated joint working (mainly regarding information sharing and good communication), increased confidence of social workers to challenge schools about inclusive practice, and social workers seeking advice from the VS more readily:

[We offer]...bespoke training and support to Social Workers to better understand educational legislation / practice and policy to increase confidence and skills in championing / supporting outcomes for CWSW. *[DVSH; Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

Social Workers demonstrate more confidence is working in partnership with schools. *[VSH; East of England; Survey 5]*

VSHs reported observing changes in CSC SLT as well as front-line workers:

Social workers report that they value the support of the Virtual School in helping them to navigate and understand education policies, practices and procedures. Social Workers feel more confident in challenging some decisions made by school and they also see how they can work with school to support around shared responsibilities such as attendance.

The Virtual School has also been able to demystify and explain some social care practices to school staff which helps both parties to understand each other and promotes positive co-working. The production of exemplar targets for CIN and CP plans helps social workers to create relevant and measurable targets and helps them to see where schools' priorities lie (and where education and social care can work together). *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Differences made to school staff's understanding of CSC also included references to improved multi-agency working (through joint training opportunities) and greater understanding of systemic processes such as thresholds for referral and the benefits of working with the whole family when supporting CWSW in school. In some cases, increased awareness has taken time to be fully understood:

During conversations/meetings with school staff and via training sessions/talks, the Virtual School has sought to address common misconceptions about social care. This can be a challenge, however, as some education staff do not seem to appreciate the size and complexity of social workers' caseloads and the ongoing problems caused by difficulties in recruitment and retention in social care. [CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]

Education focus in CIN and CP plans

In the early stages of Phase Two (Survey 3), focus on CIN and CP plans was an emerging area of work with variance in level of involvement by VSHs in the planning process. Some agreements were made in principle between VSHs and CSC to include key questions about education in the planning process but this was not embedded in practice at the time of Survey 3. Some systemic changes to the construction of plans included, in one VS, mandatory inclusion of attendance targets where attendance falls below 95% and, in another VS, an EWO is invited to review meetings where attendance falls below 90%.

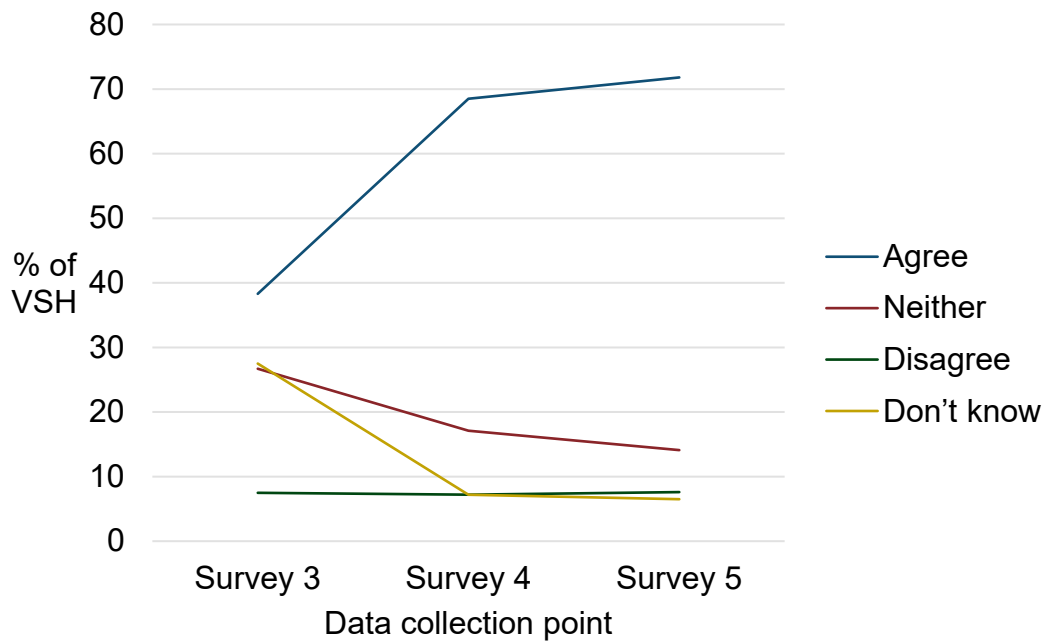
Table 20: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans

Clarity of CIN/ CP plan improved	Agree n (%)	Neither n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Don't know n (%)	Total n (%)
Survey 3 (October 2022)	46 (38.3)	32 (26.7)	9 (7.5)	33 (27.5)	120 (100)
Survey 4 (October/ November 2023)	76 (68.5)	19 (17.1)	8 (7.2)	8 (7.2)	111 (100)
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	66 (71.8)	13 (14.1)	7 (7.6)	6 (6.5)	92 (100)

Source: VSH Surveys 3-5

As CIN and CP plans are compiled, reviewed, and monitored by social workers, improved clarity and focus of education elements may suggest an increase in understanding of education aspects for the CWSW cohort by CSC (Table 20). In Survey 3, 38.3% of VSHs agreed with the statement that the clarity and focus of education in CIN and CP plans has improved but just over one-quarter (27.5%) were unsure. By Survey 4, over two-thirds (68.5%) of VSHs agreed with the same statement and fewer were unsure (7.2%). Focusing on those VSs who responded to both Survey 4 and Survey 5, (n=67) we found no statistically significant perceived change in this outcome during this period.

Figure 6: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans



Source: VSH Surveys 3-5

Audits of CIN/ CP plans to improve quality of education targets were frequently reported by VSHs in Surveys 4 and 5 and may contribute to increases shown in Table 20. Work to improve the clarity and focus of education in CIN and CP plans was not limited to training of social workers:

[Our work includes] attendance at CP meetings - providing support and challenge and ensuring CP chairs acknowledge the importance of education within the CP plan. [VSH; East Midlands; Survey 5]

Strategies in place for a strengthened partnership between school, social care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and Virtual School (VS)

Key findings

While many partners, especially CSC, schools, and inclusion services, have been receptive to partnership working with VSHs, challenges persist. Positive developments include strong engagement from social workers and schools in training and support. Joint working has been particularly effective in addressing issues such as school attendance, where multi-agency strategies have led to coordinated approaches and shared tools. However, more than half of VSHs reported difficulties in collaboration with certain partners, especially health services, CSC, and some schools. These challenges are often due to staffing instability, limited capacity, and inconsistent understanding of trauma-informed and relational approaches. To address these gaps, VSHs have extended their influence by participating in numerous panels, delivering multi-agency sessions, and acting as bridges between services. Their role has been critical in translating educational needs to social care and vice versa, ensuring a more cohesive and informed support system for CWSW.

Perceived progress across the period of the evaluation

This ToC outcome focused on the strategies in place for strengthening partnerships between school, social care, CAMHS, and the VS. The specific inclusion of CAMHS in this ToC outcome reflects the view expressed by VSHs in the original ToC workshops that emotional health and well-being are key to making progress for CWSW. It is likely the same view that has driven many VSHs to focus their training for schools in trauma informed and attachment aware practice and to encourage schools to adopt more relational approaches to the management of learning. However, very few VSHs volunteered specific observations with respect to CAMHS and some noted capacity within CAMHS services as a barrier to joint working.

Table 21 shows that VSH's perceptions of progress towards this ToC outcome were relatively stable across Surveys 4 and 5, with a gradual increase in the number of people reporting that this ToC outcome had mostly been achieved between Surveys 4 and 5.

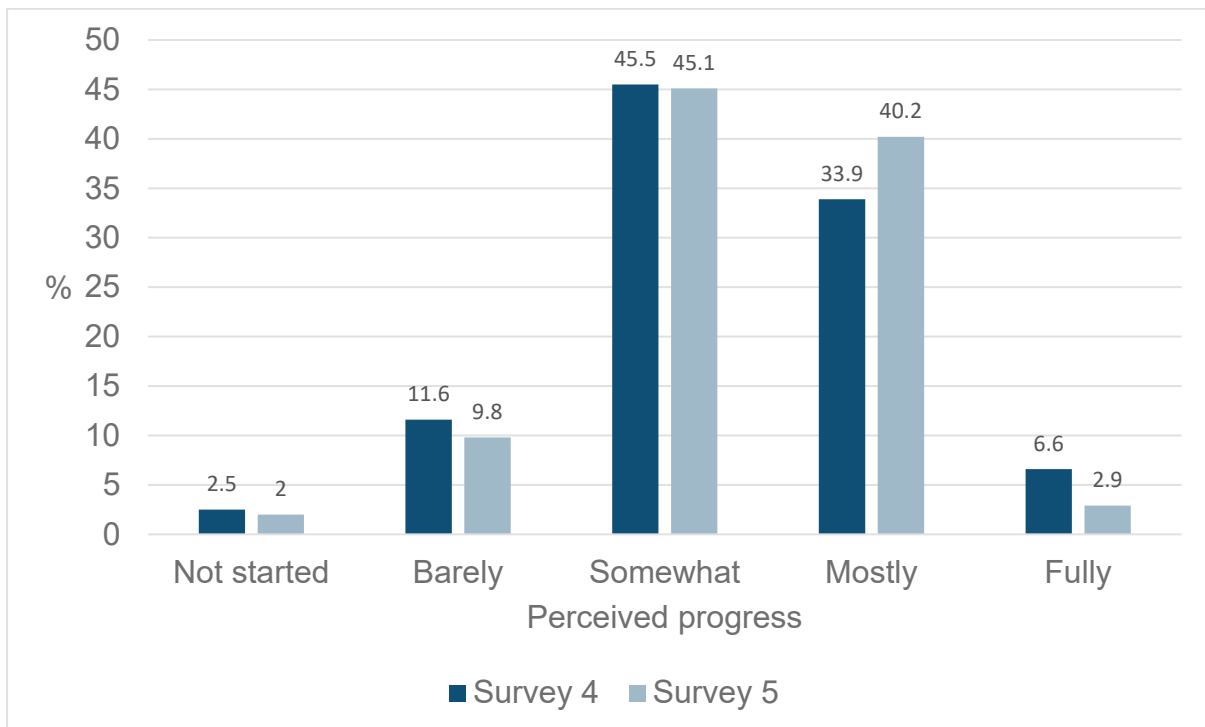
Table 21: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and the VS

Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and the VS	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Survey 4 (October/ November 2023)	3 (2.5)	14 (11.6)	55 (45.5)	41 (33.9)	8 (6.6)	121
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	2 (2.0)	10 (9.8)	46 (45.1)	41 (40.2)	3 (2.9)	102

Source: VSH surveys 4 & 5

In Survey 5, we asked are there any specific partners where joint working has been particularly effective or challenging. 90.3% of VSHs who completed the survey identified partners where joint working had been particularly effective (83 responses giving 121 effective partnerships).

Figure 7: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Strengthened partnership between school, CSC, CAMHS, and the VS



Source: VSH surveys 4 & 5

The most commonly cited partners were those working in other LA teams, including CSC (18.2% of VSH), SEND/Inclusion (16.5%), Educational Psychology (9.9%), Youth Justice (7.4%), and Early Help (6.6%), followed by Schools, Health, and CAMHS. Other services mentioned includes family services, police, LA/SIP [School Improvement Partner], IRO, MATs, and 'Other'. Out of all partners mentioned, MATs were mentioned the fewest times.

Receptiveness of partners to partnership working

A number of examples were presented by VSHs to illustrate the receptiveness of partners to partnership working, such as:

Children's social care, managers and front-line workers have been willing to engage in the sessions we have provided. Also, proximity, as we are working within the same building it has provided us and social care the opportunity to form strong working relationships so better engagement in any sessions or information we share. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); North West; Survey 5]*

Children's social care have been hugely receptive and welcoming of additional support, training and advice around education issues. They have explained how complex it is to navigate education systems for children and especially for families experiencing challenges. The virtual school support to help them advocate for the family and child has been impactful and could be scaled much further with the right resource and funding. *[VSH; South West; Survey 5]*

Schools are identifying increased and more complex needs and wish to engage in opportunities to support developing their practice, despite other priorities and challenges. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); East of England; Survey 5]*

In particular, joint working to improve school attendance was often cited by VSHs:

Joint working with the PRU, Attendance and Inclusion Service, social services and Early Help teams has enabled a LA-wide approach to attendance, linking in the work of the Educational Psychology Service's EBSA training and resources, the LA's online wellbeing and learning platform and statutory guidance to create a [VS] Attendance Handbook and Toolkit for schools. This partnership is also pivotal in our dissemination and embedding of relational approaches to support school belonging and attendance guidance and toolkit. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); South East; Survey 5]*

We've also completed a safeguarding partnership audit on six children whose attendance was poor. So that brought in Police, Health, you know all of the three services. And we had a deep dive. That learning is going to our quality board. We haven't got it yet. It's still being pulled together but that's another, you know, influence of this project that because I'm talking at the Head of Service level, you know, we decided to do that as a partnership. So that's been really useful. *[VSH; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

However, more than half of VSHs (Survey 5, 54.2%) identified partners where joint working had been challenging (51 responses giving 63 challenging partnerships): Health (20.6%); CSC (19.0%); Schools (14.3%); SEND/ inclusion (14.3%); CAMHS (9.5%); School Improvement Partners (6.3%); Police (3.2%); Youth Justice (3.2%); and 'Other' (9.5%):

The relationship between Children's Social Care and the Virtual School continues to need strengthening at all levels to set the foundations in place to facilitate more effective joint working practices. This has been impacted essentially by staff changes and reduced capacity, in the context of high levels of need and an increasingly complex social and familial landscape. *[CWSW lead; South East; Survey 5]*

Some education settings have continued to maintain or implement strict and escalatory behaviour policies that do not have relationships at their core and do not take into account the impact of trauma. This has resulted in children in CP and CIN processes experiencing continued suspension and [permanent] exclusion in spite of their vulnerability. *[VSH; South West; Survey 5]*

Strategies

Since the extension of duties and over the course of the evaluation, VSHs have reported a broadening of their range and depth of influence through partnership working.

Attending panels and working groups

Nearly all VSHs report that they are spending more time attending more panels and working groups relating to CWSW, both within and beyond Children's Services than they did before their duties were extended. They are using these opportunities to influence perceptions of CWSW and to ensure that, in the drive to keep them safe, the way in which their education acts to reduce the safeguarding risk they face, is not forgotten. These demands may explain why, in many cases, VSHs have used some

of the available funding for the duty to increase capacity within the VS, sometimes identifying a specific member of staff to support this broader relationship building.

In Survey 5, 77.6% of VSHs reported sitting on decision-making panels or groups. The main panels and groups mentioned included those related to Children in Care (e.g., placement panels, Special Guardianship Order (SGO) panels, kinship care panels, emergency CLA panels), SEND and inclusion (e.g., SEND assessment panels, EHCP panels), safeguarding, attendance, funding and resourcing, CME, and TAC meetings. VS representatives described how they were able to contribute to the decision making in these panels, by providing information and guidance on the challenges faced by CWSW, and acting as advocates for CWSW:

Providing understanding of the challenges faced by our cohorts and to provide advice and guidance, advocate, contribute to next steps of support linked to learning and education. e.g., during EHCP panel we were able to support context and information that had not been made available through paperwork from school/social care - this supported the decision-making process. *[CWSW Lead; Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

Senior Virtual School Advocate for Children with a Social Worker attends Inclusion panel. Contribution helps to provide experience of strategies and processes that work well for children in care and provide this input into the decision making and advice process to schools and settings when they are seeking appropriate strategies or early intervention/alternative provision. This helps to ensure CWSW's needs are seen in a similar way to those in our care and schools have an understanding of their vulnerabilities as a wider group of children in need. *[VSH; South West; Survey 5]*

Providing multi-agency drop-in sessions, surgeries, case reviews, conferences, and forums

As well as attending panels and working groups, VS representatives also described how they had increased partnership working by providing multi-agency drop-in sessions, surgeries, case reviews, conferences (often regional), and forums to share information and good practice. The highlight box below provides examples of how joint working between the VS and other services has helped to better identify needs and support CWSW.

Examples of how joint working has changed the practice of partners

School improvement prioritised annual conversation with school through keeping in touch visits around support and outcomes for CWSW. The focus of visit questions were jointly developed between school improvement and virtual school. Every school was then visited across the year with notes of visit shared. Areas of good practice and support needed were then shared across services via Heads of Service. Joint working with EPS [Educational Psychology Service] and Youth Justice service to develop use of enhanced case management strategies to highlight vulnerabilities for CWSW and inform effective planning for future education support and provision to improve outcomes. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

Work between Health, Education Psychology, Behaviour and Reintegration Teams, SEND/Inclusion, School Improvement/Early Years and Youth Justice & Exploitation Service (YJES), for example, has led to an acknowledgement that the majority of young people who become known to YJES have a diagnosed/undiagnosed speech, communication and language difficulty. All young people who become known to YJES are now automatically screened for SCLN [*sic*; SLCN, Speech, Language and Communication Needs] which is helping them to feel better understood. Work is underway to raise awareness of SCLN needs, promote early screening / Early Language Pathway and early intervention re: SCLN. *[VSH; South East; Survey 5]*

Joint working between the Virtual School, CSC, Youth Justice and Schools and Colleges has been effective. The strategic support of the Virtual School has supported the establishment and deployment of a new team of Education, Employment and Training Advisors with the Youth Justice Service. The support has enabled this new team to form more rapid connections between services and has been welcomed by school and college leaders. *[VSH; East of England; Survey 5]*

The difference Virtual Schools have made to this outcome

The VS was often described as a 'bridge', with VS practitioners working across professional boundaries and helping to connect education and CSC teams. Describing the impact of the extension of duties over the last 12 months, the AD for CSC in Alsbury stated:

So I think the impact, it's building relationships, it's having the awareness and it's being connected as a system, as a whole rather than pockets and working in isolation. So we know that actually our virtual school team have really good relationships with schools. And sometimes what we hear from schools is actually it can be a bit challenging... building those relationships up. There's lots of different social workers, different managers. And so actually having a core team that is the bridge across the two really assists us. And we know that. We get that feedback. So for me, that's what's really being positive. *[ADCSC; Alsbury; Round 3 Case Study Interview]*

Vs were seen to be responsive and able to mediate between schools and CSC in cases where relationships had broken down and, as described under the fourth ToC outcome, were able to help CSC and education to understand each other's work and provide appropriate support and challenge:

Our social care has been through a very difficult period in the last few years having been rated inadequate in all areas. High turnover of staff and managers has left many schools frustrated with what they perceive as a lack of communication and support from CSC leaving them in difficult situations with children at school. The VS are more responsive to enquiries from schools and often act as a mediator when relations between school and CSC have broken down. This is particularly important over issues of non-attendance with social care viewing it as an 'education issue' and not recognising that the home situation is often a large contributory factor.

The CMIE [Children Missing in Education] panel meeting including multi-agency professionals was an attempt to bridge that gap. CSC also don't always understand what is and isn't possible for a school to achieve. Having a VS CWSW officer who is a former teacher means that we can support social care to better understand where they should challenge schools to do better and also understand the limits of schools to be able to adapt to a particular child's needs. *[VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

Strategies in place for increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Key findings

Findings on strategies for parental engagement reveal a mixed picture among VSHs. While some see this area as outside their remit, others have taken steps, often indirectly, to support parental involvement in education. Most VSHs focused on strategic work, training schools and social workers to build relationships with parents, rather than direct engagement. These efforts aim to enhance understanding of education as a protective factor and foster more inclusive and relational school environments. In a few cases, dedicated staff or partnerships with external agencies supported direct engagement, such as home visits and parent workshops. Despite some promising individual initiatives, progress in parental engagement remains limited and inconsistent and is an ongoing aim and area of growth for many VSs.

Perceived progress across the period of the evaluation

Increasing the capacity and capability of parents to engage with their children's education is a key area of development identified in the ToC, particularly in relation to improving attendance. Though the importance of parental engagement was acknowledged from the outset of the extension of duties, progress towards this outcome took time to gather momentum, likely due to VSHs prioritising work towards the other ToC outcomes.

Table 22: VSH's perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

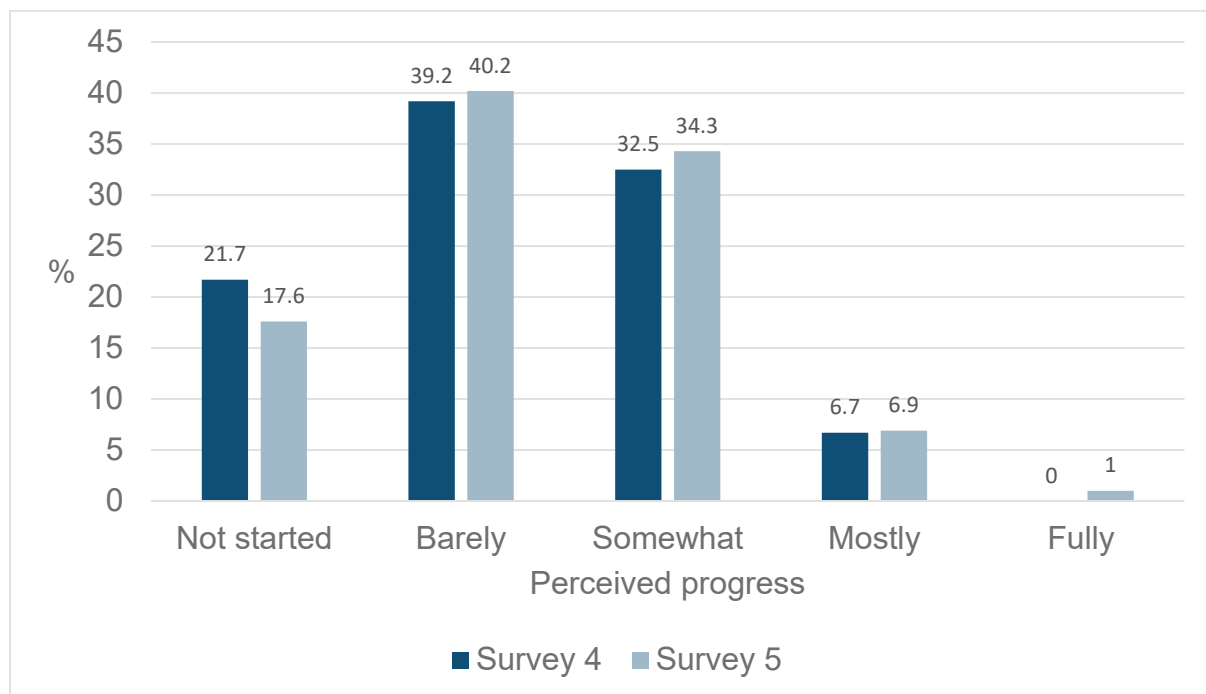
Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Survey 4 (October/ November 2023)	26 (21.7)	47 (39.2)	39 (32.5)	8 (6.7)	-	120
Survey 5 (Sept – Nov 2024)	18 (17.6)	41 (40.2)	35 (34.3)	7 (6.9)	1 (1.0)	102

Source: VSH surveys 4 & 5

When asked about progress towards this outcome, VSHs gave similar responses in Surveys 4 and 5 (Table 22) which suggests that this is an emerging area of work that

continues to be addressed, though some VSHs have made good progress as suggested by their strategies and activities.

Figure 8: VSH’s perception of progress towards ToC outcome: Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education



Source: VSH surveys 4 & 5

Strategies

In Survey 5, VSHs views on this outcome were polarised with some commenting it was out of scope of the duties, to others detailing activities undertaken by specifically appointed advisers within the VS. It is likely that this polarisation of views relates to variation in interpretation of the guidance, rather than VSHs appreciation of the role of families in supporting CWSW in school.

Survey findings suggest that most VSHs did not facilitate direct work on parental engagement. VSHs addressed this aim more intentionally with indirect work, including project work and training schools and social workers to build relationships with parents of CWCW to increase their understanding of education as a protective factor:

The Virtual School has not done any direct work with parents. Our way of working has remained strategic, working with social workers and designated safeguarding leads. *[VSH; North West; Survey 5]*

Improving parent-school relationships

One key approach to improving parent engagement was improving parent-school relationships by making school more accessible, approachable, and unpicking historic distrust. Both educators and VSHs suggested that the role of school as both authority and advocate of CWSW can have conflicting aims that distance parents with negative experience of school. One VS case study site addressed this challenge by identifying and promoting best practices from schools that work more intentionally to replace shaming and penalising practices with inclusive parent-CWSW initiatives. School-initiated events for CWSW and their parents, that the VS supported, included shared literary and arts workshops, outdoor nature experiences, transition to secondary school events, and VS funded parent engagement workshops. Use of parental groups with lived experience to offer support and guidance to parents of CWSW has been resourceful. Some schools incorporated daily practices to increase contact with parents, such as assigning an SLT to parents upon their child's transition to secondary school, having SLTs at the school gate during drop off times to greet parents or providing flexible appointments for parents of CWSW to attend parent meetings:

... with some families we do often find that it's just chipping away, building trust and just making sure that they've got a key member of staff in school that they trust, that they know they can ring into and often that is our safeguarding team... family evenings trying to bring people in... but really, if they've not got a relationship, they're not just going to walk into school for those things anyway.

[DSL; Keldbeck; Round 3 Case Study Interview].

Training schools and social workers to build relationships with parents

Relatedly, indirect work with parents also involved training social workers and schools to build relationships with parents. Upskilling social workers to support mediation between social care and education, model advocacy, and bridge relationships between parents and school staff was a common practice. Training schools to facilitate solution focused circles was particularly effective in schools trained by VSs in this relational practice. Parents and CWSW reported feeling listened to for the first time which improved relationships with school in individual cases. This was also reiterated during a focus group with LA workers who engage CWSW, their parent(s), social worker and school as equals in problem-solving and decision-making processes:

It is hard to engage with parents of CWSW as a group and this is a key tension with the advice and guidance role, the use of Solution Circles around a single child and family whilst a time focused intervention has been really impactful but is still resource intensive. *[LA worker; Braddleton; Focus Group]*

Direct work undertaken by specifically appointed advisers within the Virtual School

Direct work by VS education advisors was noted in a few cases with a smaller cohort of CWSW, however this was not the norm. Some engaged in joint work with professional agencies (e.g., charities, family hubs, Violence Reduction Units) to offer targeted work to schools or parents aimed at parental involvement. Some offered regular training sessions to parents on relational approaches or joined social workers in home visits to discuss educational processes. Others offered monthly Q & A time during clinics to answer CWSW related questions. In cases where parents approached the VS for guidance and support, it often involved completing admissions and special needs information or support to rebuild relationships with school. Making available educational resources to parents on the VS website to help them navigate the education system was widespread. In one case study site, the VSH conducted a small-scale study to understand parental views on factors that they feel hinder their children's educational progress, which was fed back to schools and social workers and was seen as informative. Other examples included:

Guidance, support and challenge to parents regarding their child's engagement with education, in particular regarding identifying and meeting underlying needs (signposting and coordinating relevant services). This required CWSW case work, which VSs are not funded for *[CWSW Lead; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

We have appointed a family communications officer to:

- Establish what positive relationships with children and their families in schools looks like within an AATI framework.
- Develop and enhance parental engagement with the school and other agencies.
- Facilitate the development of a toolkit, with schools, to support parents of children with early signs of social, emotional, health or behavioural issues and work with them, school staff and other support agencies to prevent potential barriers to learning.

- Work with families to develop parenting skills toolkit and promote children’s wellbeing, emotional and social development
- Ensure opportunities for all families to develop their understanding and knowledge of their child’s learning needs and development.
- Encourage good relations and effective communication between families and teachers about children’s progress.’
[VSH; North East; Survey 5]

The difference Virtual Schools have made to this outcome

Approaches to building capacity and capability of parents to engage with their children’s education differed among VSs, primarily due to the size of the cohort, staffing availability, needs, and resource-based decisions specific to the LA. There was a general focus on strategic and not operational aims. Parental engagement was more commonly addressed through indirect work with schools, social workers, and professional agencies.

Though some VSs described strategies used to increase capacity and capability of parents to engage with education, this continues to be an area of growth for many VSs:

There has been limited work completed in this area but we hope that our Children in Need Panel and audits of Children in Need Plans will raise the profile of education in social care planning and that Social Workers will prioritise supporting parents to have the capacity and capability to engage with education. *[VSH; North West; Survey 5]*

Reported progress in parental engagement was therefore largely on an individual basis and not measurable.

Early indications of progress towards longer term outcomes

In this section, early indications of progress towards the longer term ToC outcomes will be discussed. First, data from Survey 5 will be drawn upon to explore VSHs' perceptions of progress towards the longer term outcomes. The results from the linked national administrative datasets analyses will then be presented to explore whether the extension of VSH duties has improved the educational outcomes of the CWSW cohort, with a specific focus on attainment, absence, and suspensions,

Virtual School Heads' perceptions of progress towards the theory of change longer term outcomes

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to rate any early indications of progress towards each of the longer term ToC outcomes. Table 23 shows that many VSHs felt that some progress had been made towards improving attendance, suspensions, permanent exclusions, engagement with education, well-being, resilience, transitions, Children and Young People (CYP) feeling valued and understood, and CYP having more voice and agency in the process. However, less progress was reported for improved attainment, achievement, and reduced in-year transitions outside the normal admissions round, with the highest percentage of respondents reporting barely any progress and progress having not started, respectively.

Table 23: Early indications of progress towards long-term ToC outcomes

Long-term ToC Outcome	Not started <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)
Improved attainment	29 (31.5)	39 (42.4)	20 (21.7)	2 (2.2)	2 (2.2)
Improved achievement	23 (25.3)	33 (36.3)	31 (34.1)	2 (2.2)	2 (2.2)
Improved attendance	3 (3.2)	25 (26.9)	56 (60.2)	7 (7.5)	2 (2.2)
Reduced suspensions	6 (6.5)	34 (36.6)	45 (48.4)	6 (6.5)	2 (2.2)
Reduced permanent exclusions	6 (6.5)	30 (32.6)	38 (41.3)	15 (16.3)	3 (3.3)
Reduced in-year transitions	34 (37.4)	27 (29.7)	26 (28.6)	3 (3.3)	1 (1.1)
Improved engagement with education	3 (3.3)	14 (15.4)	59 (64.8)	15 (16.5)	-
Improved well-being	10 (11.0)	22 (24.2)	55 (60.4)	4 (4.4)	-
Improved resilience	12 (13.3)	25 (27.8)	48 (53.3)	5 (5.6)	-
Improved transitions	8 (8.9)	28 (31.1)	44 (48.9)	10 (11.1)	-
CYP feel valued and understood	10 (11.0)	19 (20.9)	51 (56.0)	11 (12.1)	-
CYP have more voice and agency in the process	12 (13.2)	16 (17.6)	52 (57.1)	11 (12.1)	-

Source: VSH Survey 5

It is noteworthy that 81% of VSHs report at least some progress towards improved engagement with education, with 70% seeing signs of improved attendance, and 69% reporting more CYP voice and agency.

Perceptions of the difference the extension of duties has made to attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs for their perception of the difference the extension of duties has made to attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions as these were seen as proxy measures of inclusive practice in schools. This item is

intentionally different from previous surveys as we wanted to capture VSHs views of the overall difference the extension of duties has made, rather than differences due to their approach at the time of the survey.

Attendance

With regards to attendance, almost two-thirds (63.1%; $n=65$), agreed that a difference had been made, just under a third (29.1%; $n=30$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and a small minority, 7.7% ($n=8$) disagreed (Table 24).

Table 24: VSH perception of difference on attendance due to extension of duties

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	Total
Attendance	2 (1.9)	6 (5.8)	30 (29.1)	55 (53.4)	10 (9.7)	103

Source: VSH Survey 5

The highlight box below provides an example of improved attendance rates reported by the CWSW Lead in one North East LA in Survey 5.

Improved attendance example

The overall attendance of children on CP plans has improved slightly over the last year (+3.7%), perhaps due to the increased attention given to CWSW. The Virtual School has also worked closely with IROs and together we are promoting the positive protective benefits of school attendance through ICPCs/RCPCs.

Persistent absence for the CP cohort has dropped from 60.5% of cohort falling below 90% attendance in summer 2023 to 48.94% of the cohort by summer 2024. During the same period, persistent absence also dropped for CIN pupils and our Ever 6 cohort (the proportion of pupils listed as persistently absent in both these groups dropped by approximately 5% over the year). Severe absence for the CP cohort also dropped last year from 14.29% to 9.27%. *[CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5]*

Of those VSHs that disagreed, reasons proposed for decreases in attendance included the non-statutory nature of the duties that may lead to under-reporting and historical low rates of attendance in their LA. One VSH in the North West presented a comprehensive list of factors that, in their view, contribute to low attendance

including rigid/punitive behaviour policies, fractures in the social contract between families and schools as a result of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty, increased levels of mental health needs in families, under-resourced systems including mental health and SEND, the size of secondary schools (too big particularly for children with neurodiversity), and an unfit secondary curriculum.

Whilst attendance data from some VSs may not necessarily show substantial group-level increases (at this point in time), many VSHs reported examples of individual impact on attendance. For example:

One of our team liaised with a number of professionals for two siblings on a CP plan. They met with the head of the school to support them in identifying the specific barriers for the attendance of these young people, including aspects of parental input. This allowed school to obtain a fuller understanding of what the other professionals were trying to say and gave them an alternative perspective and deeper understanding of the wider impacts for each of the children. This led to full-time attendance for both young people and the ultimate discharge of the CP plan. *[CWSW Lead; Yorkshire; Survey 5]*

However, some VSHs have indicated that attendance can be negatively affected by factors such as children's needs/ SEND, school level issues, and data related issues:

Poverty and schools' inability to meet the growing complexity in SEMH due to lack of funding, physical buildings and access to health services *[VSH; North East; Survey 5]*

Schools are still reporting a large number of children presenting with anxiety related absences, especially in secondary phase. There are children who have not managed the transition from primary to secondary due to missed opportunities due to COVID. *[CWSW Lead; North West; Survey 5]*

Suspensions and permanent exclusions

When asked about their perception of the difference the extension of duties has made to suspensions and permanent exclusions, a similar proportion of VSHs agreed that the extension of duties has made a difference to both suspensions and permanent exclusions (44.1% and 43.2% respectively; see Table 25). A much smaller proportion disagreed that the extension of duties had made a difference (14.7% suspensions; 15.7% permanent exclusions).

Table 25: VSH views on whether the extension of duties has made a difference to suspensions and permanent exclusions

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	Total
Suspensions	4 (3.9)	11 (10.8)	42 (41.2)	37 (36.3)	8 (7.8)	102
Permanent exclusions	5 (4.9)	11 (10.8)	42 (41.2)	32 (31.4)	12 (11.8)	102

Source: VSH Survey 5

When asked for any reasons for any *increases* in suspensions and permanent exclusions there was no standout reason, but some VSHs cited the general rise in suspensions and permanent exclusions nationally (and challenges in isolating rates for CWSW), whilst others mentioned children’s needs and availability of school resources/capacity to effectively manage suspensions and permanent exclusions. Challenges of effective data monitoring and poor inter-agency communication were also offered by some VSHs where they perceived a rise in suspensions and permanent exclusions for CWSW.

A few VSHs suggested that there may be emerging differences in school exclusion data between the CP and CIN cohorts, as the VSH of the Braddleton case study site explains:

Compared to the 2022-23 academic year, *all* Braddleton children were involved in 81% more suspension and exclusion incidents, with a 4.5% increase in exclusions, affecting 58% more children overall.

Our Child Protection cohort experienced a 26% decrease in suspension and exclusion incidents, and a 67% reduction in exclusions...

Our children in need cohort saw a smaller decrease, with 0.2% fewer suspension and exclusion incidents, and 4% fewer exclusions... [VSH; Braddleton; Survey 5; our emphases]

These perceptions are slightly different to the findings of the analyses of national administrative datasets outlined in the next section, however it is important to note that the VSHs may have been reflecting on a different/ longer time period than that covered by the analyses of national administrative datasets.

Findings from analyses of national administrative datasets

In the following sections, the trends in educational outcomes of the CWSW cohort before and after the extension of the VSH role, and evidence of the potential effects of the extension on CWSWs' educational outcomes, namely absences, suspensions, and attainment, are presented.

The analysis of impact is preliminary and tentative at best because of the nature of the programme and its rollout, the early phase of implementation, and the multiple related changes through the COVID-19 pandemic that are hard to disentangle in the data. While the population-level data are rich enough that quasi-experimental statistical methods are feasible, these limitations mean we are not able to isolate the 'VSH effect' directly. In addition, the VSH extension of duties is not an intervention treatment in a classic impact evaluation sense. Rather it is primarily a strategic intervention and so not provided to the same extent and intensity in all areas for all children. This variation in treatment is not observed and so we have used length of time on a CIN/CP plan as a proxy for the VSH intervention based on the assumption that the longer a child is on a CIN/CP plan the more likely they were to have received the benefits of a VSH. We present these findings to support learning about current trends and the challenge facing VSHs, rather than as firm and reliable estimates of the long term effects of the programme.

For more detail on the data, methods, and results of the quantitative evaluation, see Technical Annex in Annex 4.

Analytical approach for absences and suspensions

To estimate any effect of 'treatment', that is exposure to the VSH programme, linear regressions for panel data were applied, incorporating fixed effects.⁶¹ The regression models include variables for the number of months subject to a CIN/CP plan both before and after the extension of duties, as well as an indicator for the period after VSH extension to take account of broader contextual factors – particularly in relation to COVID-19 and the significant increases seen post-pandemic in school absenteeism and disciplinary measures – that may otherwise confound our estimates. Each regression also controls for unobserved, time-invariant heterogeneity, such as ethnicity, helping reduce bias from omitted variables.

⁶¹ This study reports the results of linear regressions fitted for panel data to examine absences and suspensions. Given the count nature of the outcome variable (number of missed sessions), alternative models such as zero-truncated, binomial, or Poisson regressions could also be appropriate. Nonetheless, linear regressions were selected for their simplicity and ease of interpretation. As part of our sensitivity analyses, we conducted several robustness checks using Poisson models for panel data. The results remained substantively consistent across model specifications. Full outputs are available upon request.

Summary for absences

After COVID-19, all children, whether on a plan or not, substantially increased their number of sessions missed due to absence.

The trends are shown in Figure 9, highlighting both the large uptick in number of sessions missed due to absences post-COVID (2021/22 onwards) and the differences between the two groups within the CWSW cohort. In the case of children subject to a CIN plan, the number of sessions missed went from an average of 15.0 in 2017/18 to 36.5 in 2022/23, an increase of 143%. For children subject to a CP plan, the average number of sessions missed went from 24.1 to 51.2, an increase of 112%. Children not on any plan also showed an increase after the COVID-19 pandemic, but the magnitude was less, moving from an average of 10.4 to 18.9 missed sessions per year in 2022/23, an increase of 82%.

Figure 9: Mean annual sessions missed due to absences, by group and year

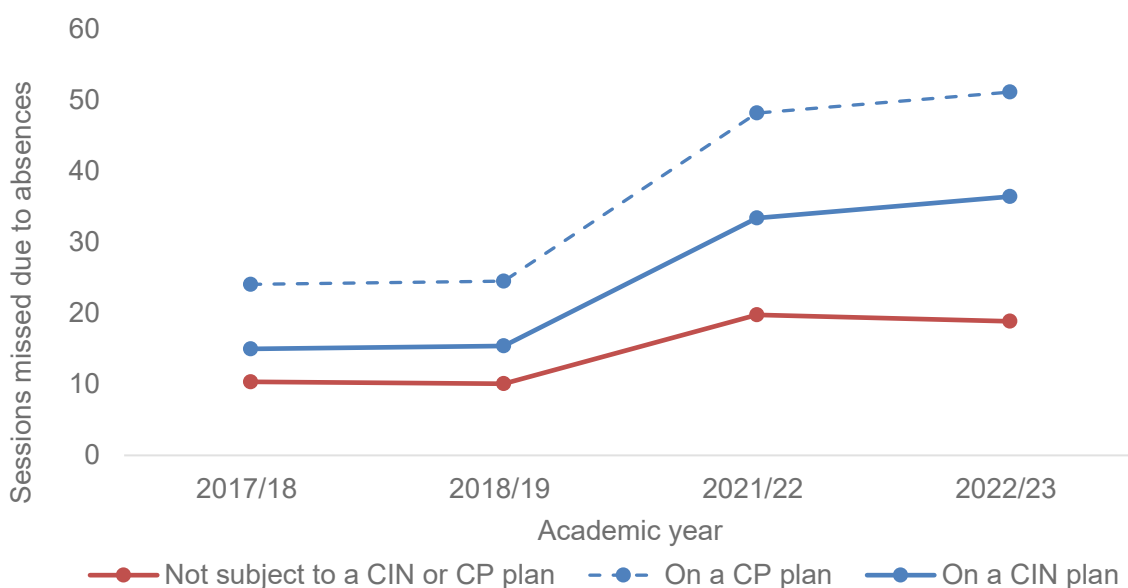
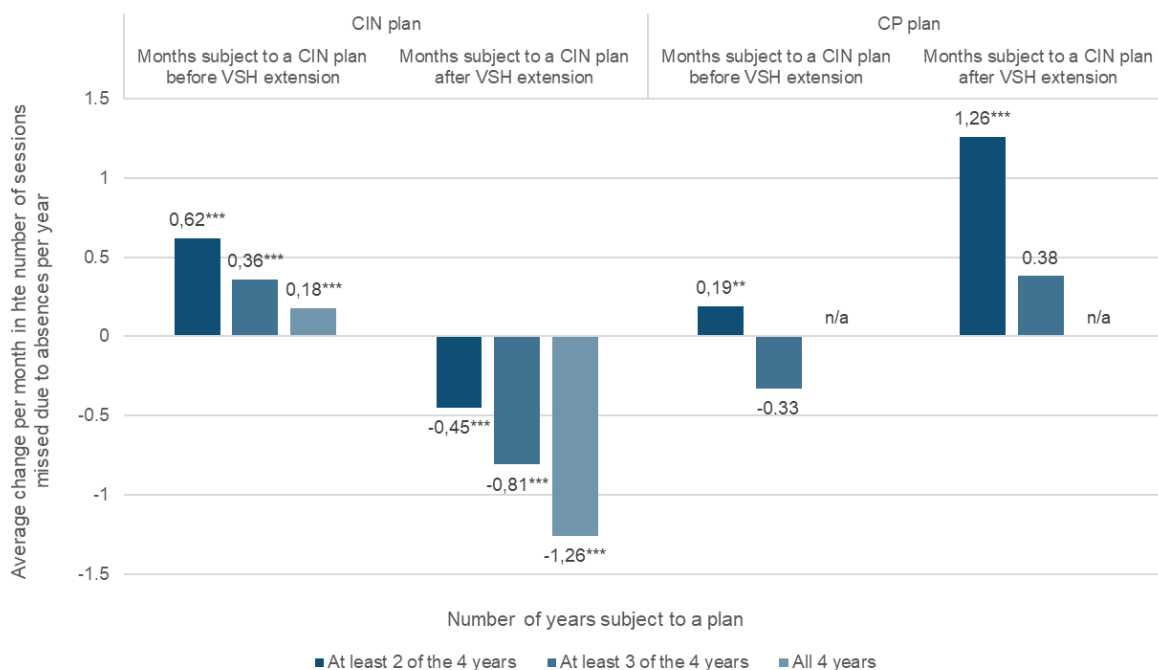


Figure 10 summarises the results of the statistical modelling estimating possible effects of the evaluation and shows that each additional month subject to a CIN plan per year **after** the extension was associated with a statistically significant **decrease** in the number of sessions lost due to absences annually, with the association being stronger for children who have been subject to a CIN plan in each of the four years (-1.26 absences per year for each additional month subject to a CIN plan, $p < .001$).

Figure 10: Summary of regression results: Number of sessions missed due to absences a year, by plan type



Notes: Model controls for period after COVID-19 / VSH extension; age; FSM eligibility; IDACI score.
 Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05.

This consistent negative association suggests that having a plan that had been open for longer following the introduction of VSH extended duties was linked to improved school engagement. This is much stronger than for the months before the extension and marks a shift in the general trend observed, as before the extension, each month subject to a CIN plan was related to more sessions missed due to absence.

These patterns were not observed for children subject to a CP plan.

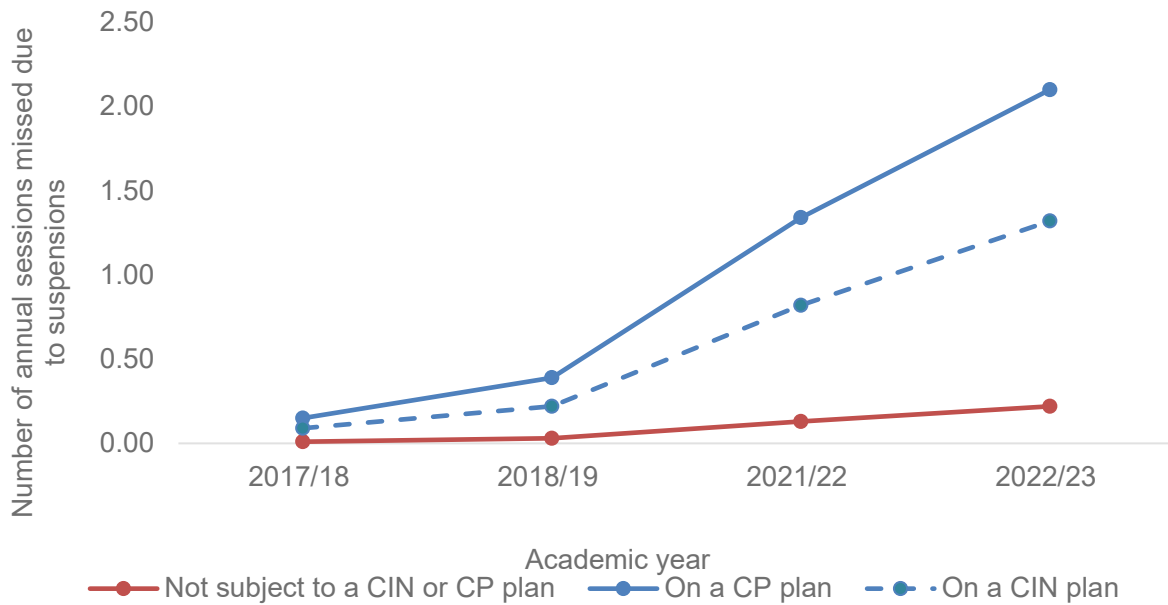
Summary for suspensions

As for absences, after COVID-19, all children, regardless of experience of CSC, showed an increase in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions.

These average trends are shown in Figure 11 and show the large increase in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions post-COVID (2021/22 onwards) as well as growing differences between the two groups within the CWSW cohort. For children subject to a CIN plan, the number of sessions missed went from an average of 0.09 in 2017/18 to 1.32 in 2022/23. The average trend for children subject to a CP plan, moved from an already higher starting point of 0.15 sessions missed due to suspension in 2017/18 to 2.1 by 2022/23, that is 14 times larger. Those not subject

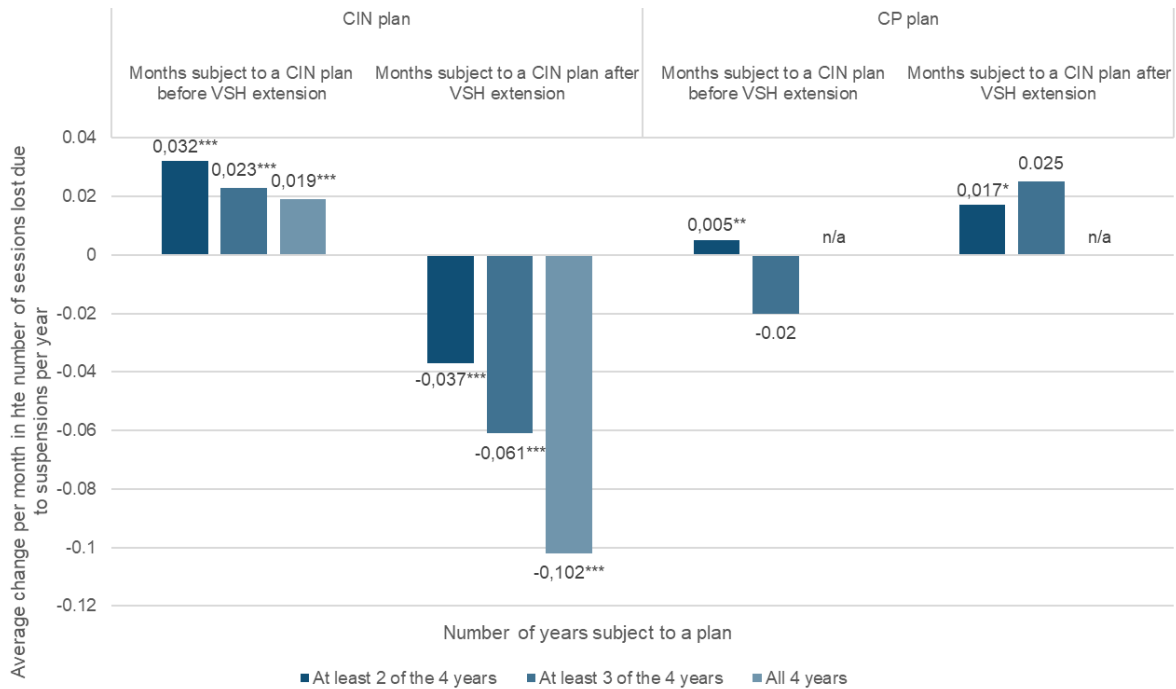
to a plan also showed a sharp increase after the COVID-19 period, but as with the comparative rise in absences, the magnitude of this increase was much less, moving from an average of 0.01 in 2017/18 to 0.22 to 2022/23.

Figure 11: Mean annual sessions missed because due to suspension, by group and year



In the regression analysis, our findings indicated that each additional month subject to a CIN plan after the extension of the VSH duties was linked with significantly fewer sessions missed due to suspension per year, reaching 0.1 sessions missed per year due to suspension for each month subject to a CIN plan (Figure 12). While this effect size might appear small, it should be considered alongside the already fairly low average levels of sessions missed due to suspensions across groups. Note too, that, as with absences, this pattern was not evident for the number of months subject to a plan before the VSH extension of duties.

Figure 12: Summary of regression results: Number of sessions lost due to suspensions annually, by plan type



Notes: Model controls for period after COVID-19 / VSH extension; age; FSM eligibility; IDACI score.
 Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05.

Note too, that the months subject to a CIN plan in the period before the VSH extension of duties is associated with a small but significant increase in sessions missed, implying that the nature or effectiveness of CIN involvement may have changed meaningfully after the extension of the VHS programme, subject to the caveats in the methods section about evaluating causal impact.

For children subject to a CP plan, the evidence was inconclusive: time subject to a CP plan after the VSH extension was not related to improvements in terms of suspensions compared to the period before the extension of duties.

Summary for attainment

Across all stages of education – KS1, KS2, and KS4 – there was a general decline in attainment post-COVID-19 across all groups and subjects.

In line with extant research, children subject to CIN or CP plans consistently performed less well on average than their peers without experience of CSC across all Key Stages.

Table 26, for example, shows the percentage of pupils reaching the expected level at the end of KS1 in reading, writing, maths, and science by group, averaged across the two time periods, before and after the extension of duties.

Table 26: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS1, by group

	CIN Plan	CIN Plan	CP Plan	CP Plan	Not on a plan	Not on a plan
	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023
Reading	72%	60%	68%	53%	84%	77%
Writing	72%	60%	67%	53%	84%	78%
Maths	65%	49%	58%	41%	79%	68%
Science	81%	72%	77%	67%	90%	87%
N	30,070	29,130	5,780	3,580	1,078,540	1,028,160

Source: ONS

At each Key Stage, within the CWSW cohort, higher proportions of children subject to a CIN plan reach the expected standard, score higher, or achieve more passes at 9-4 (KS4) than those subject to a CP plan (see Technical Annex (Annex 4) for tables across all Key Stages).

However, there is no evidence that the extension of the VSH role in 2021 has led to measurable improvements in educational outcomes. In some cases, attainment further declined relative to other pupils, suggesting that the additional support may have been insufficient to counteract entrenched disadvantages or that it has not yet had time to yield positive outcomes.

Persistent disadvantage across all stages

KS1: Children subject to CIN and CP plans, particularly those on CP plans, had the lowest attainment pre- and post-extension, with no post-2021 improvement in reading, writing, or maths.

KS2: Children subject to a CIN plan consistently underperformed across subjects. After the VSH extension, there was no improvement in reading or grammar and a small negative trend in maths.

KS4: Children subject to a CIN plan continued to face large attainment gaps, scoring significantly lower on Attainment 8, Progress 8, and GCSE pass rates (9–4). Post-extension, progress scores declined further.

Socioeconomic disadvantage: deprivation and Free School Meals

In all Key Stages, deprivation (measured by Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)) was strongly negatively associated with attainment. The more deprived the area, the lower the probability of pupils meeting expected standards or achieving high scores.

Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility also predicted lower performance across stages. In KS1, there was a small but notable trend where children subject to a CIN plan on FSM performed slightly better than CIN peers not on FSM, possibly due to targeted support.

At KS4, FSM pupils on average fell further behind after the VSH extension, suggesting widening inequality despite policy efforts.

Gender trends

Across all Key Stages, girls generally outperformed boys in reading, writing, and grammar, though they lagged slightly in maths.

This gender advantage declined slightly over time, particularly after 2019, and was observed most clearly in KS2 and KS4, suggesting shifting dynamics in gendered performance patterns.

Regional and post-COVID variation

From KS2 to KS4, local authority variation was significant. The return to school and educational recovery post-pandemic differed across regions, with some areas showing better outcomes than others.

Vulnerable children—especially children subject to CIN plans—were more severely affected by these regional disparities, indicating that place-based inequalities further compound individual disadvantage.

Conclusions from the quantitative evaluation

It is well known that there has been a substantial reduction in school engagement post-COVID. Overall, absences have grown substantially, particularly on average for girls and for children eligible for FSM. There have also been increases in suspensions. CWSW have also experienced these trends. However, we find that the deterioration in engagement is less for children subject to a CIN plan than would be expected given their other characteristics, in particular taking account of eligibility for

FSM which has a big impact on trends. This result emerges both in relation to absences and suspensions, using robust techniques with panel data analysis and from cross-sectional difference-in-differences analysis.

However, we do not find the same result for children subject to a CP plan. This is puzzling and further evidence that the results must be interpreted with caution. It could reflect differences in the interpretation of the 'duration' variable used – 'months subject to a plan' – between children subject to CIN plans compared with those with open CP plans. For example, children subject to CP plans are often considered at higher risk than those subject to CIN plans. Moreover, CP plans are typically designed to be more short-term than CIN plans. We see this in the descriptive statistics whereby the average number of months spent subject to a plan, either before or after the VSH extension of duties, is much lower for those subject to CP plans (see, for example, Table 54) in the Technical Annex; Annex 4). As such, a longer time spent on a CIN plan might be expected and indicate a better experience for the child than a longer duration subject to a CP plan. More detailed exploration of these issues is needed in future research and underpins the tentativeness of our findings.

In relation to attainment, the general trend has been negative, particularly for children eligible for FSM and there is no evidence yet that the impact of the VSH extension of duties has been able to offset this trend on attainment. However, it is important to note that this null finding may be due to timing, with the evaluation only covering the first 18 months of the VSH extension. It is unlikely that this provides sufficient time to achieve impacts observable at population level on outcomes such as attainment which may require a long lead in time to achieve. Other research has highlighted the association between school attendance and attainment (e.g., DfE 2025⁶²) and it may be the case that the improvements in attendance identified in this evaluation will have a longer-term knock-on effect on attainment, though further research would be needed to confirm this.

Overall, our statistical results are in line with the expectations of VSHs, that they are making headway within engagement, but that attainment will take longer and may prove more difficult without substantial commensurate improvements to wider aspects of schooling such as funding and wider policy on inclusion.

As discussed in the section on strengths and limitations of the evaluation, there are a number of possible sources of bias due to the complexities of the programme and the available data. This means we cannot state strongly that the estimated impact on engagement is evidence of a causal impact of the VSH programme. However, VSHs might take satisfaction from the early evidence of impact, that trends may be going in

⁶² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/link-between-attendance-and-attainment>

the right direction and that this may be due in part to the action they and their teams have undertaken through the extension of duties.

Facilitators and barriers to implementation of the duties

The findings from the Phase One evaluation suggested that barriers to implementing the extended duties included the short lead in time and duration of the funding (addressed in facilitators and barriers below), lack of access to accurate data, social worker turnover, and issues related to SEND among the cohort. These barriers persisted into Phase Two with over two-thirds ($n=79$; 64.8%) of VSHs in Survey 3 reporting access to data as the main barrier and 56.9% ($n=69$) indicating social worker turnover remained an issue.

Early facilitators included provision of additional resources, opportunities for new appointments or enhanced roles within the VS, good relationships with CSC (including Early Help), improved joint working, and support from senior managers. Again, these facilitators continued to be listed by VSHs in Survey 3 (e.g., good relationships with CSC $n=73$; 59.8%). Additionally in Survey 3, receiving appropriate data was listed by 45.1% ($n=55$) VSHs as a facilitator, perhaps indicating progress in this area from Phase One to Phase Two.

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to rate the extent they feel the VS has been able to fulfil the responsibilities of the extension of duties as laid out in the guidance. Table 27 shows that the majority of VSHs (87.4%; $n=83$) felt they had been able to at least somewhat fulfil the responsibilities.

Table 27: Extent of responsibility fulfilled

Extent of responsibility fulfilled	Not at all <i>n</i> (%)	A little <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Responsibilities fulfilled	-	12 (12.6)	39 (41.1)	39 (41.1)	5 (5.3)	95

Source: VSH Survey 5

We followed up this question by asking for their thinking. The reasons identified included explanations for the range of answers (i.e., mixed positive and negative) and were grouped into themes:

- Funding
- Data related issues
- Capacity
- Guidance – including statutory status

- Wide remit of extension of duties/ size of cohort
- Takes time to change/ ongoing work/ too soon to tell
- VS position in LA/ Systemic issues
- Joint working
- Better understanding of CWSW needs
- Raising profile
- Relational practices

In Survey 5, we asked VSHs to list what, in their view, were the principal facilitators and barriers in fulfilling the responsibilities of the extension of duties as laid out in the guidance. Overall, 83.2% ($n=89$) of VSHs who completed the survey gave at least one facilitator; 84.1% ($n=90$) gave at least one barrier. In both cases, many VSHs provided a short explanation of their responses. We coded the responses into themes (using NVIVO v14) and the following sections present the main themes, in order of the number of codes, starting with the greatest.

Facilitators

Funding

The most commonly cited facilitator was still funding. VSHs indicated how the grants for the extension of duties allowed for either the enhancement of existing VS roles or the appointment of new roles to focus on the CWSW cohort. In larger LAs, the funding allowed for the role to be split geographically between multiple VS officers. Depending on the model adopted by the VS, the grant funding enabled VSHs to explore commissioning of, for instance, training and widening its own capacity to provide resources including outreach and pockets of funding within targeted settings:

The funding to Virtual Schools to support the delivery of the extended duties has been crucial - without it, we would not have been able to appoint a dedicated data officer to ensure we could accurately identify all of our CWSW cohort, or begin to collect and analyse data to the degree we have [*CWSW Lead; North East; Survey 5*]

Joint working

Facilitators mentioned by VSHs that related to networking, attendance at, or creation of panels, interest groups, and forums were collated under a heading of joint working. Here, joint working often entailed, for example, collaboration on development plans, providing spaces (physical and digital) for schools and other agencies (particularly CSC) to come together to share good practice and discuss possible solutions to issues arising. Regular multi-agency work of this nature

establishes and maintains relationships which VSHs see as an essential part of improving outcomes for CWSW:

The VS has developed strong and effective relationships internally and externally with key partners and has clear visibility and profile within [local social care, education and safeguarding services]. This has enabled us to be credible and influential with partners in challenging and supporting best practice in meeting the educational needs of vulnerable children. *[CWSW Lead; South East; Survey 5]*

Many VSHs emphasised the importance of existing good, open, and transparent relationships with schools and CSC established through their work with CLA or PLAC. Those relationships meant that schools were more willing to receive visits from other professionals and discuss issues when prompted by the VS. Where good relationships were already in place VSHs could use their existing lines of communication to promote work to raise awareness of the CWSW cohort or provide training to support them:

Existing working relationships and reputation of the Virtual School have been strong facilitators in being able to commence the work for Children with a Social Worker. Partnerships with schools has also been a facilitator where we have good communication with schools where there are CIC [Children in Care, otherwise referred to as CLA] or PIC [Previously in Care, otherwise referred to as PLAC], this has allowed for us to promote the work we are doing to support the CWSW cohort. *[CWSW Lead; East of England; Survey 5]*

The reputation of VSs from previous work with CLA and PLAC has provided other agencies with confidence in the work of the VS and trusted relationships have developed that underpin access to other agencies:

Relationships forged with different teams - there are well over one thousand active [CWSW] cases at any one time and therefore without the relationships built across a range of services, change could not have happened. *[CWSW Lead; West Midlands; Survey 5]*

Senior leader support

VSHs report that backing from senior leaders in the LA is essential to ensure the messaging regarding the CWSW cohort is accepted and acted upon. This support manifests at different levels in the LA hierarchy and across agencies involved with supporting CWSW. For example, DCS, AD, and Heads of Service, as well as senior leaders in schools and MATs. In some cases, support from the DCS is indicated by

the positioning of the VSH in the LA structure where they can exert maximum leverage for system level change.

Where Children's Services leaders have actively supported the extension, VSHs acknowledge that commitment and appreciation when confidence in them is demonstrated by trust to develop the VS team and plan strategically as required. Being a member of the Children's Services senior team or at least having regular access to, or meetings with, them to present updates and advise on strategic approaches was also highlighted as a facilitator:

The support we gain from our [Head of Children's Social Care] is huge and this is then reflected from the Head of Education who saw the benefit of our live attendance data and who then set up the attendance taskforce with us being central to this. *[Assistant VSH; London; Survey 5]*

VSH responses to Survey 5 suggest that 28% of them are operating from the level of team leader within their Children's Services structure. The influence available to such a team leader to shape or implement strategic, system level, change is not obvious. To improve the way in which education and social work services, as well as schools, work with and on behalf of CWSW may require some LAs, and the DfE, to consider whether their 'strategic' expectations of VSH are matched with the level of seniority of the VSH post within their leadership structures:

This is a really challenging duty to only have strategic oversight if VS not positioned well in LA. *[VSH; East Midlands; Survey 5]*

Awareness raising

Raising professionals' awareness of the CWSW cohort as a vulnerable group that requires additional support has been central to VSH activities from the outset of the extension of duties. As their work progressed, VSHs adapted and developed their approach to fit current need and tailored ongoing activities accordingly.

Some early, localised, success has raised the profile of the cohort and generated an acceptance that their needs are deserving of prioritisation. This has led, for example, to the development and adoption of a common language in schools and social worker teams following training by the VS. Where the understanding of the CWSW cohort's needs already existed, such as in some CSC teams, VSHs reported engagement as excellent:

Initially the role was allocated a fulltime member of staff for whom the extension of duties was the only focus. Additional staff were added to enable this to be delivered across the whole footprint of the original LA. This allocation enabled time to attend a variety of different meetings and forums and also time to reflect on the identified needs and propose strategic changes *[CWSW lead; North West; Survey 5]*

Whole-school training was cited as a commonly used approach and collaboration with the LA's educational psychology service to deliver the training was well received. Joint completion of audits with the VS helped schools to identify the cohort; their needs and the barriers to educational engagement and learning those needs created. Where audits identified gaps in resources or provision the VSH was able to suggest or signpost targeted interventions to be implemented. Providing opportunities for discussion of incidents and cases through drop-ins and query services has maintained the focus on CWSW.

VSHs have focused relatively less training on social workers compared to schools. This may reflect the challenge of bringing large numbers of social workers for training or that it is easier to influence social workers through less formal awareness raising, including bespoke advice on cases provided in surgeries or other fora.

Data

Whether or not VSHs have felt they were responsible for collecting child-level data on attendance, school exclusions (suspensions or permanent exclusions) attainment, they have almost universally cited access to accurate, timely, and reliable data on the cohort as an essential tool in shifting perceptions of CWSW and stimulating more effective targeting of resources to support them.

The additional funding from the extension of duties allowed for resources to be directed to tackling substantial data issues in the early stages of the extension to better identify CWSW. The availability of resources to address the incompatibility of some data sources and systems were equally essential. These have, in many LAs, led to the development of 'live' dashboards for CWSW data (including attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions)) to prompt a timely response to those schools that are most in need of support to meet CWSW needs. When LAs have required schools to add social care status to shared pupil level data the benefits have been described as 'huge' and 'eye-opening' by school and VS staff.

As with other aspects of the extension of duties, VSHs have found it useful to capitalise on previous professional relationships to gain access to headteachers and DSLs when establishing permissions and processes for data exchange. However,

VSHs report that some schools are beginning to caution against too much data being requested that could be accessed from other sources.

Other

Other facilitators that were identified by VSHs include the autonomy to employ experienced staff in advisor roles that establish, develop, and maintain ongoing professional relationships as a key facilitator.

Specific models of VS structure were also noted as facilitating fulfilment of the new duties. One VS model has the VSH as head of a group of services (Education Support Looked After Children, Education Welfare, and Schools' Safeguarding Team). Such a broad set of responsibilities developed the VSH's credibility with schools and enabled good relationships with partners to be developed. Another model embeds the VSH position so that it spans the boundary between education and social work.

Barriers

Capacity

At the time of Survey 5, VSHs identified the principal barrier to fulfilling the extended duties as being one of capacity. For schools, VSHs report that once the needs of a previously less obvious, and large, cohort of children had been identified, the resource to meet their needs and put support in place was not always available in schools. Existing demands on time due to high current workload also acted as a barrier for social workers to fully focus on the educational needs of their CWSW cohorts, including time available to attend training:

For professionals in CSC, VSHs reported time constraints limiting the focus on the educational context of CWSW in the face of competing priorities. The complexity of family situations and safeguarding has meant that social workers have been unable to prioritise education for many of the children and whilst we all acknowledge that school is a protective factor and educational neglect is evident, social workers are equally under pressure to complete support due to demands of other vulnerable families and young people [*Deputy VSH; South East; Survey 5*]

Funding

Many VSHs reported a mismatch between the scale of the extended duties, alongside their existing duties, and any growth in VS capacity allowed by the funding. Some VSHs, for instance, felt that improvements in attainment, in particular,

required a more direct, casework, approach, which is not in scope of the extension of duties or possible within the funding envelope.

Barriers linked to aspects of funding were commonly reported by VSHs throughout the extension of duties. For example, in the Phase One report, VSHs reported that the short-term funding coupled with short lead in time following introduction of the extension of duties, limited progress in LAs. VSHs could not draw on additional resources or persuade senior managers to take risks by employing staff on contracts that exceeded the funding window. Later in the period of extension, additional, unfunded, duties to children in kinship care duties caused some consternation among VSHs, being added to already overstretched VSs working to implement strategies for the CWSW extension.

In Survey 5, issues linked to funding were the second most commonly reported barriers by VSHs to fulfilling the extension of duties. The uncertainty of funding at the beginning of the evaluation made it difficult to recruit the most talented staff necessary for effective implementation, while the uncertainty during the period of the evaluation and beyond March 2025 has risked the departure of effective members of the VS as temporary contracts end:

Not knowing if the funding will continue so staff having the uncertainty of temporary contracts and constantly looking for a permanent post. This hinders the relationships we are building with all stake holders and the communication channels we have set up to enable a strong work force. *[VSH; North East; Survey 5]*

This quote also highlights the potential negative impact of staffing issues due to funding on the maintenance of relationships that had been established with other agencies over the period of the extension. Some VSHs attempted to mitigate against this by sourcing additional funding from elsewhere within the LA. However, this was not an option open to all VSHs given differing local funding pressures. Indeed, a few VSHs commented that in a LA with a recruitment freeze due to broader budget issues, recruitment often meant redeployment rather than active selection of the best candidates.

Overall, to meet the responsibilities of the extended duties, it was felt that the funding was not commensurate with the expectations that accompanied them. The tiered structure of the grant funding was identified by some VSHs as a barrier in some smaller LAs. A VSH, this time from the West Midlands, encapsulates the views of their colleagues:

Barriers include the uncertainty of the grant funding, particularly with the recent changes in government. Without a longer-term commitment to funding these extended duties for CWSW, fixed term contracts have had to be used for the CWSW team to ensure that VS budgets are balanced year-on-year. The funding does not fully cover the salaries required for highly skilled teachers, so additional funding has had to be sourced from elsewhere within the Virtual School budget. The CWSW team are all employed on a part-time basis. If the VSH extension of duties grant funding was reduced or ceased completely, the quality of support, advice and guidance offered would be greatly lessened, and it would not be possible to retain the skilled team currently in post [*VSH; West Midlands; Survey 5*]

Non-statutory nature of duties

The guidance issued by the DfE to support the extension made clear that the duties were non-statutory. Consistent feedback throughout the evaluation, from Phase One to the final round of case study interviews and Survey 5, confirmed that the duties to CWSW should be as statutory as duties to CLA and PLAC. As long as they were non-statutory the duties would be more difficult to fulfil:

The role not being statutory and temporary leads to some reticence by senior leaders in the LA to invest in data systems, likewise services are not always willing to invest time and resources into the extended duties as they are not sure of the longevity of the role. [*CWSW Lead; West Midlands; Survey 5*]

Many VSHs have found some schools and MATs reticent to share any data but the statutory minimum and this has been interpreted as a resistance to focusing on the needs of this cohort as well as a barrier to the VSH fulfilling their duties. It seems unlikely that the reported responses of some MATs will change until national policy revises the statutory expectations on schools to share the data LAs need to fulfil their duties to vulnerable children in general and CWSW in particular, in a timely manner.

VSHs feel that a unified statutory guidance document that covered all their duties would help other professionals to appreciate the similarities and difference across that suite of duties. This would, in turn, support improved joint working, engagement with partners, and enable more investment in integrated data systems. If the duties were to become statutory, VSHs feel that a statutory duty should extend to school DSLs &/or DTs (as it is for them in relation to children in care) to reinforce their key role in direct work to support CWSW as well as ensuring school policy and practice took account of the needs of CWSW.

There have been, though, a small minority of VSHs who have seen the non-statutory nature of the duties as an opportunity to respond to them in ways driven by their moral purpose, rather than the letter of the law.

The national context: inclusion guidance

Some VSHs note the apparent contradiction between the tone and content of some existing guidance to schools and the aims of the extension and that this has made the challenge of implementation greater. They identify a conflict between existing sets of statutory and non-statutory guidance on admissions, attendance, behaviour, school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion), and mental health that highlight the needs of CLA and PLAC and the absence of any prioritisation of other, often equally (or more) vulnerable children, including CWSW. Much of the system level change that the extension of duties asked of VSHs is made more difficult by this dissonance.

Data

Despite progress, issues of data availability, access, and quality continue to be reported as barriers by a minority of VSHs. At Survey 5, almost one-third of VSHs report that they did not have access to the quality data they needed to maintain oversight of attendance, and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions) for children who currently have a social worker. For the Ever 6 cohort this proportion was markedly higher.

Issues related to accessing data were related to the functionality of existing data systems, especially for the Ever 6 cohort. Many VSHs reported that current databases were not specified to identify these children retrospectively. VSHs also reported that some 'live' data is held centrally by MAT admin teams and that schools sometimes faced challenges when seeking access to it. Access to data was also hampered by different data systems across and within LAs. No universal data system makes access to key networks by school staff difficult, resulting in calls for a national strategic approach to data collection and access.

Even when available, access to data was not always timely. This was due, often, to delays in updating outcomes of CSC assessments and the child's resulting status as subject to a plan not. There were also substantial variations in how and when outcomes were recorded and how CWSW were identified. Many VSHs who were developing live dashboards highlight that efficient data systems require regular updates from other agencies and that delays may result in issues with cohort identification and provision of advice or support.

The absence, at the start of the evaluation, of separate national data on children subject to a CIN or CP plan denied VSH national comparators against which they

could assess local outcomes. Since then the DfE has separated out data on children subject to a CP plan (CPPO) and those subject to a CIN plan (CINO) within the broader Children in Need cohort. However, the CINO sub-cohort continues to include those children awaiting, or subject to, an assessment towards a CIN plan. This could provide misleading comparisons between local data on children currently subject to a CIN plan and national data. Further, 'school type' remains absent as a consistent category for analysis within the additional sub-cohorts. This remains a barrier to more nuanced comparison of a LA's performance with other LAs and regions and to enabling direct national and local comparisons to be made as part of a VSH's self-evaluation.

Different interpretations of the scope of the duties

The way in which the extension of duties was understood was listed by VSHs as one of the principal barriers to fulfilling the responsibilities associated with them. Some of the demand for VSs to carry out direct work came in the form of expectations that the VS would accept requests from associated professionals and act upon them. In many cases, VSHs acknowledged feeling under continued pressure from the moral obligation to support CWSW in their jurisdiction, especially as the skillset of the VS workforce were well-suited to support individual case requests and refusal to do so might harm existing relationships and place future joint working in jeopardy:

The expectations of key partners around 'direct and operational work' for children and families being provided, as part of this extended duty, has been an ongoing challenge [*CWSW Lead; South East; Survey 5*]

We want to be systematic, operational, and directly involved with the young people in most need as there is a moral imperative to support them in their very specific, complex, individual, and often entrenched needs. We want to do this for all the YP in our cohort and sustainably triaging who we can support is a real challenge. [*Deputy VSH; South West; Survey 5*]

Other

Other barriers were listed by VSHs less frequently than the previous sections but are worthy of note.

While CWSW are identified in the non-statutory guidance as children 'subject to a children in need plan or a child protection plan' (DfE 2024⁶³), some VSHs have felt

⁶³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/virtual-school-head-role-extension-to-children-with-a-social-worker/promoting-the-education-of-children-with-a-social-worker-and-children-in-kinship-care-arrangements-virtual-school-head-role-extension>

that CWSW includes those undergoing assessment for a plan by a social worker, for instance. Equally, including Ever 6 CWSW in scope has led some VSHs to speculate that they have a duty to children who have been stepped down from a plan to support by workers who are not social work qualified.

Some VSHs point to large MATs being resistant to change and cite issues with punitive behaviour policies and inconsistent application and understanding of relational practice. The effort needed to convince those school leaders stretches VS capacity even further and reduces its ability to target training and other activities necessary to change classroom attitudes and practices. VSHs feel they are having to make good a situation where few newly qualified professionals have any knowledge or understanding of less confrontational, more relational ways to work with children in the case of teachers or to challenge schools knowledgably in their approaches in the case of social workers:

The lack of training, theoretical learning and practical guidance in de-escalation and relational approaches with young people who have gone through trauma and adverse childhood experiences within social work and teacher training qualifications. This has meant that there is often a lack of understanding in terms of the benefits of trauma informed inclusive practices, the impact ACEs [Adverse Childhood Experiences] can have as a barrier to learning and achieving education potential and the importance of education as a protective factor for these young people. *[Deputy VSH (CWSW); South East; Survey 5]*

While the extension has created opportunities for VSHs to deepen existing relationships of trust and develop new ones with an increasing range of partners, finding (and funding) the capacity to develop those relationships has presented a barrier. This is particularly true of VSHs already operating with a relatively small VS team. Relationships between the VS and other LA education teams also needed careful management where there were overlapping responsibilities and competing priorities, which is sometimes reported of SEND teams.

Other local issues cited were related to the LA's context. VSHs working in large rural LAs faced different challenges to those in LAs with a small, often urban, footprint. Levels of disadvantage also varied between LAs as did the proportion of children subject to a plan and social work practice guidelines for working with them. An LA's organisational structure, level of existing co-location, and remote working arrangements also defined some VSH views of what constituted a facilitator or barrier. Equally, changes in LA senior leadership (or interim appointments) and working within a LA that was deemed inadequate in recent inspections or judged by

senior leaders as at risk of a less than 'good' judgement could undermine the stability necessary for effective implementation of the duties.

Finally, while the senior leaders in all the case study areas expressed universal enthusiasm for the extension of duties and trust in their VSHs, other VSHs reported differing perspectives. Some cited senior leaders as a barrier to progress when they have expected the VSH to undertake activities outside the scope of the duties or failed to support them when they have challenged demands from frontline teams to do direct work with CWSW.

Future developments

Survey 5 was the final opportunity in the evaluation to elicit views and information from VSHs at a national level. We were keen to explore what the priorities for VSHs were in supporting CWSW in the 2024-2025 academic year and the types of activities to improve outcomes.

In total, 88.8% ($n=95$) of VSHs responded to the open text Survey 5 item, 'What outcomes are the Virtual School prioritising in this academic year?'. Most VSHs listed multiple outcomes (Table 28).

Table 28: Priority outcomes for VSHs in current academic year

Outcome	VSHs responding n (%)
Attendance	57 (60.0)
Other ^a	52 (54.7)
Exclusions (including suspensions and permanent exclusions)	29 (30.5)
Relational practice	27 (28.4)
Data related	25 (26.3)
Raising awareness	24 (25.3)
Training	22 (23.2)
Joint working	22 (23.2)
Attainment	16 (16.8)
Kinship	14 (14.7)
Consolidation of existing priorities	4 (4.2)
SEND	4 (4.2)
Parent engagement	1 (1.1)

Note 2: ^aOther included: Post-16 related outcomes (including preventing NEET, transition); raising profile of education targets in CP plans; CYP voice and school moves

Source: VSH Survey 5

Improving attendance remains a key priority for VSHs, activities include developing current approaches to raise awareness of the impact of low attendance with parents and other professionals, sharing attendance data with associated professionals to identify patterns of low attendance to provide targeted support, and introducing attendance targets in CIN/ CP plans. Reducing suspensions and permanent exclusions was often mentioned alongside improving attendance as a key factor to improving attendance.

About one-quarter of VSHs listed relational practice, data related activities, raising awareness, training, and improving joint working as priority outcomes areas which reflect the interim outcomes identified in the ToC and highlight the ongoing nature of the work involved in supporting CWSW in school.

Virtual School Head views on future guidance

VSHs were asked (Survey 5) which of the types of work they hoped any future guidance would expect of them with respect to CWSW (Table 29):

Table 29: Hoped for focus in future

Approach	Yes	No	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	92 (97.9)	2 (2.1)	94
Operational	78 (83.9)	15 (16.1)	93
Direct	30 (33.3)	60 (66.7)	90

Source: VSH Survey 5

It is clear from these responses that while nearly every VSH who responded (97.9%) saw system level work as an essential focus in response to the extension of duties, a large majority (83.9%) also saw a place for operational work, and a not inconsiderable minority (33.3) agreed with the VSHs quoted above, in hoping that direct work would be expected of them in future.

One example of a VSH feeling the need to undertake direct work included an approach reminiscent of the way in which a VS might use Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) to support CLA:

We offered primary schools who had children on CP plans with <90% attendance access to funding to support and increase attendance. Schools came up with a variety of ways to use the money...such as Monday morning Lego club and a walking bus [VSH; South West; Survey 4]

One VSH from the South East of England was among a number (including those from some of the case study sites) who made it clear that whatever their view of direct work (in this case of families) it would not be practical within the funding envelope made available during Phase Two:

Direct work is not part of the current guidance and therefore difficult to justify. There is not the resource (although always the desire) to support families directly ... [VSH; South East; Survey 5]

A different view of the funding possibilities is provided by a VSH from the East of England who makes a case for any additional funding being better deployed to those who *are already* expected to undertake direct work with children:

... direct work [by the VS] would be unwieldy and could be better completed by the schools/CSC possibly with the allocation of funding. [*VSH; East of England; Survey 5*]

Discussion and recommendations

Reflections on the theory of change

The evaluation team's thinking on the ToC has been given context by comments made by VSHs at the 2025 NAVSH national conference.

The VSHs who attended the workshops that shaped the ToC at the start of the Phase One evaluation were, to a large extent, imagining what they *might* do, thinking about what *might* work and what *might* be achieved as a result of the extension of their duties to encompass CWSW. They were doing so using their previous experience as a VSH who almost certainly *did not* have any previous, explicit, responsibilities related to CWSW. They were also working with only the DfE's memorandum of understanding to help guide their thinking.

Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of their proposed longer-term outcomes have proven optimistic or even unrealistic in the light of experience.

Longer-term outcomes

The listing of fifteen indicators that would improve within less than four full academic years of the extension's launch is indicative of the ambition of the ToC. Its optimism is magnified as some of the indicators, including: improved punctuality; young people feel valued and understood; improved well-being/resilience; improved transitions; and improved achievement, are difficult to measure. The expectation of 'sustained outcomes' reflects a lack of recognition of the scale of the task that VSHs would face, as does the possible 'reduction of NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training]' in the time scale envisaged.

Other indicators VSHs hoped to see improve show a level of overlap. For instance, 'improved attendance' and 'reduced suspensions and permanent exclusions' might be considered reasonable proxies for 'engagement with education' and 'improved behaviour' rather than as separate indicators.

This would suggest that if constructing a ToC based on the experience of implementing the duties the reasonable measures that could be both captured and reported on might be limited to:

- Improved attendance
- Reduced suspensions and permanent exclusions
- Improved attainment
- Children have more voice and agency in the process.

The activities proposed

The activities proposed as important in scaffolding improvement in CWSW outcomes mirror the approaches taken by VSHs in the early years of their duty to CLA.

Evidence suggests that the VSH workshops were correct to settle on 'Data' as a means of discovering more about a cohort whose educational needs and outcomes were poorly understood. In many cases, though, it has taken VSHs much longer than anticipated to achieve the 'improved data quality' they hoped for by the end of the 2022-23 academic year. Some VSHs have struggled to smooth the route from data sources (schools and separate LA databases) to a 'data team' (for data integration) to 'analytical team' (for interpretation) and finally to 'users'. Where that route has been effectively established there have remained gaps in the feedback loop necessary to ensure that, where discrepancies have been uncovered by users, the source data has been uniformly corrected.

Similarly, there was logic in prioritising the raising of professionals' awareness about the cohort and its needs. However, experience suggests that expecting 'increased understating of CWSW', the 'development of a common language' and 'better joint working' within 12 months of the introduction of the duty was optimistic. Also while 'Training' was specified the broader raising of awareness was, perhaps, less well thought through. Experience suggests that earlier recognition that schools were more likely to respond to training compared to social workers might have influenced the latter sooner.

The interim outcomes by the end of the 2023-24 academic year

If VSHs were overly optimistic about the range of longer-term outcomes that the extension of duties would improve by March 2025, the interim outcomes seem more realistic. These comprised strategies, the development of which would be most likely to lead to improvement in the longer-term.

The strategy most commonly described to **increase schools' understanding of the needs of this cohort** was realistic and well matched by the decision to focus on awareness raising through training.

Encouraging **more inclusive practice in schools** was matched to a training strategy that focused on encouraging more relational practice. This was complemented, in many cases, by advice to DSLs and members of the team around a particular child and building relationships through networks and other fora. This has raised awareness of school staff and (often) school senior leaders and prompted some schools to review school behaviour policies and practice. These strategies

were complemented by empowering social workers to challenge schools at the same time that the VS offered schools advice and support. However, many schools continue to focus on the letter of existing statutory guidance and resist alternative approaches.

A strategy to **increase CSC's understanding of education and vice versa** was a valid hope but manifested most often in the work done to build relationships and **strengthen partnership working between school, social care, CAMHS, and VS**. Specifically including CAMHS in the strategy was more a reflection of existing VSH frustration than a reasonable expectation, but a focus on partnership building with a variety of other partners has proven a fruitful area of a VSH's strategic focus, even when using operational means to achieve it.

A strategy to **increase capacity and capability of parents to engage with education** was an ambitious target but when parents were specifically excluded from the non-statutory guidance few VSHs pursued it. They continue to see effective working by schools in particular with parents and carers as important, but the only successfully implemented strategies have been as part of a much broader LA-wide effort. To deliver the promise of the extension of duties, guidance that supports those professionals working directly with parents would have strengthened the position of CWSW.

Recommendations for DfE

Name and scope

1. **Consider an alternate name/acronym for CWSW** to better describe the children in scope.
2. **Consider if it is necessary to explicitly include those children previously subject to a CIN or CP plan (Ever 6 CWSW)** in the scope of a strategic duty intended to move policy, practice, and culture in a direction that will benefit them and all disadvantaged children, alongside those currently subject to a plan.

Data

3. **Ensure the specification of school management information systems** enables separate flagging of children subject to a CIN or CP plan so that any subsequent school is made aware of their status through their Common Transfer File (CTF).
4. **Make use of a single pupil identifier to simplify the integration of data and promote the timely publication of comparative outcomes** for children

subject to a CIN or CP plan and allow local and national monitoring of the longer-term impact of the system level duties.

5. **Having already added it to the published National dataset, add 'school type' to the LA-level dataset on the permanent exclusion and suspension of CLA, CINO⁶⁴, and CPPO⁶⁵** to enable LAs to undertake a more nuanced comparison of their performance with other LAs and regions, and to allow direct national and local comparisons to be made.
6. **Further refine the categories of children included in CINO cohort data**, to ensure it refers only to children subject to a CIN plan and excludes those awaiting, or subject to, assessment *towards* a CIN plan, to match the scope of the extended duties.
7. **Place a duty on local authorities and schools to ensure the VSH has timely access to the data necessary** for them to fulfil their system level duties to children subject to a CIN or CP plan.
8. **Recognise that the enormous churn in this cohort makes the routine monitoring of attainment and progress a much less useful focus** for the VSH than the regular monitoring of the cohort's attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions.

Guidance

9. **Publish a single statutory guidance document requiring local authorities to promote the education of CLA, PLAC, those subject to a CIN or CP plan, and those in kinship care.**
 - a. Within that core statutory guidance, **describe the specific duties of the VSH**, to clarify their role within the broader local authority duties.
10. **Replace 'strategic' with 'system level'** in describing the expectations of the VSH with respect to children subject to a CIN or CP plan and make meanings clear with examples that clearly distinguish between 'system level', 'operational' and 'direct work' when describing the work of the VSH with different cohorts of children. Within these examples recognise that 'operational' engagement with the team around the child is a valid, though temporary, approach to build practitioner confidence and implement longer-term system level change.

⁶⁴ CINO: children in need, excluding children on a CP plan and CLA, but *including* those awaiting, or subject to, assessment towards a CIN plan.

⁶⁵ CPPO: children on a CP plan, excluding CLA. For more information see: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/data-guidance>.

11. **Revise the suite of statutory and non-statutory guidance related to the groups of children to whom the LA (and through them the VSH) has a duty**, including:
 - a. **A statutory duty on schools**, through their Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), to promote the education of children subject to a CIN or CP plan (in line with updated guidance to Designated Teachers (DTs) regarding CLA, PLAC, and children on the school roll who are in kinship care), and to provide data the VSH needs to fulfil their duties to these children in a timely manner irrespective of school ownership or governance models.
 - b. **Identifying children subject to a CIN or CP plan as a priority** within behaviour, suspensions and permanent exclusions, attendance, SEND and mental health statutory and non-statutory guidance to schools, stressing the impact school policy and practice can have on their safeguarding risk.
12. **Ensure that ‘Attendance and Behaviour Hubs’ are informed of, and required to take note of, any statutory or non-statutory guidance** to ‘promote the education of children subject to a CIN or CP plan’ and that their advice on best practice responds positively to it.
13. **Revise guidance on CIN and CP plans to:**
 - a. Ensure that **a child’s attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions are considered** as safeguarding risks when assessing the child’s vulnerability and the progress of plans.
 - b. Ensure that **the voice of the child in relation to home and school are captured** in the planning and monitoring process.

Funding

14. **Extend Pupil Premium to children on a CIN or CP plan** who are ineligible for the FSM or Service Children Pupil Premium, so that schools are better resourced to meet their needs.
15. **Ringfence funding in support of the VSH duties** to ensure they retain financial management of the resource provided for those duties in the face of LA funding challenges.

Inspection framework

16. **Ensure that Ofsted inspection guidance highlights this cohort of children and their needs.**

17. **Ensure that any Ofsted ‘report card’** links the admission, attendance, suspensions, permanent exclusions, and isolation of these children to any inclusion or safeguarding judgements.
18. **Ensure that Ofsted’s local authority inspection guidance highlights this cohort of children** and takes account of their educational as well as safeguarding context.

Training frameworks

19. **Revise the social work training framework** to ensure there is sufficient understanding of actions that support ‘school attendance as a protective factor’ in the preparation of newly qualified social workers to work with schools and families.
20. **Revise national social work practice guidance** to ensure social workers understand how they can maximise the impact of ‘school attendance as a protective factor’.
21. **Revise the teacher training framework** to include explicit and effective understanding and experience of relational approaches and the additional emotional needs of children subject to a CIN or CP plan and other children subject to adverse childhood experiences.

Recommendations for local authorities

Data

1. **Ensure there are robust systems in place to provide the VSH with timely cohort level education and social care data** on children subject to a CIN or CP plan so they can fulfil their duties effectively and efficiently.

Structure and system level support

2. **Ensure the VSH is empowered to lead the system level change expected of them** or has sufficient access to those senior leaders responsible for education and social care to ensure they support appropriate system level change.
3. **Ensure that the duties to this cohort are highlighted in broader LA strategies, policy, and practice** relating to, for instance, the voice of the child, SEND, attendance, Elective Home Education (EHE), inclusion, admissions, parental engagement, attainment and progress.

4. **Revise the terms of reference of the relevant group or committee with oversight of the Virtual School** to ensure they take account of the broader duties of the LA and VSH.

Inductions

5. **Revise the induction programme of social workers**, both newly qualified and experienced, to include input from the Virtual School that raises awareness and understanding of the expectation the LA has of its social workers with respect to the education of vulnerable children and how the Virtual School can support them.

Recommendations for Virtual School Heads

1. **The VSH should satisfy themselves that the LA has the following systems in place** and, where they do not, acts to stimulate their development:
 - a. **Education settings are promptly informed** when a child on, or arriving on, their roll becomes (or is already) subject to a CIN or CP plan.
 - b. **That this same information reaches relevant LA teams** such as those dealing with, for instance, the voice of the child, SEND, attendance, EHE, inclusion, admissions, parental engagement, attainment and progress.
2. **The VSH should maintain a training offer to social workers** in relation to 'school attendance as a protective factor' and 'understanding of schools and school processes'.
3. **The VSH should maintain a training offer to education settings** that encourages the awareness and adoption of relational practice.
4. **Extend the training offer to partner services to encourage more consistent and supportive work with the parents and carers** of children subject to a CIN or CP plan.

Recommendations for schools

1. **Schools should ensure they become full partners in the team around the child subject to a plan** and recognise in their policy and practice the safeguarding risk that absence, suspension, and permanent exclusion constitutes for these (and other) vulnerable children.
2. **Schools should recognise the benefits to attendance, inclusion, attainment and progress that the adoption of more relational approaches**

to learning can have and take advantage of any training offered by the Virtual School.

3. **Empower the school's DSL** to enable them to fulfil their role and provide them with sufficient time to fulfil it effectively.
4. **Include children subject to a CIN or CP plan as a separate category in reporting to governors and trustees.**

Annex 1: Brief history of the Virtual School Head role

The role of Virtual School Head (VSH) began in 2007 as a pilot in eleven English local authorities. The pilot intended to evaluate whether such a role could support the education of children looked after (CLA) also referred to as children in care (CIC). Following the evaluation of the project (Berridge 2009)⁶⁶, there was a growing adoption of the VSH model complemented by statutory guidance⁶⁷ (DfE, 2009) for schools to appoint a Designated Teacher (DT) for CLA to work with the VSH, but it was not until 2014 that the VSH role became statutory with guidance on the VSH role regarding management of pupil premium plus (sometimes referred to as the 'looked after pupil premium') and an expectation of direct work with CLA. In 2017, the role of the VSH was extended to encompass 'advice and guidance' on the education of those children adopted from care, those who had left care to live with a special guardian and those who left care on child arrangement/residence orders. Together, this group were described as 'previously looked after children' (PLAC)⁶⁸. This was complemented by an update of the statutory guidance to schools (DfE, 2018a)⁶⁹ extending the duties of the DT to encompass PLAC. In 2021, the role of the VSH was extended to Children with a Social Worker (CWSW); defined as children currently or previously on a Child in Need (CIN) Plan or Child Protection (CP) Plan. The extension was introduced on a non-statutory footing. In 2024, VSH duties were extended once more to include children in kinship care arrangements. This most recent extension of duties is outside the scope of the current evaluation.

⁶⁶https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/190605012/Final_Report_DCSF_RR144.pdf

⁶⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-teacher-for-looked-after-children>

⁶⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/contents>

⁶⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

Annex 2: Case studies

Alsbury

Characteristics of Local Authority (LA) and evidence base

Alsbury is a rural local authority (LA) with a large geographical footprint, a medium overall number and medium rate per population of Children with a Social Worker (CWSW). Survey 5 was completed by the Virtual School (VS) Education Liaison Advisor and nine interviews were conducted (Virtual School Head (VSH), Assistant Director (AD) Children's Social Care (CSC), Data Manager (DM), three Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), and three social workers (SWs)). The VS in this LA sits within the Children and Families service and the VSH reports to the AD (CSC). **The case study foregrounds Alsbury's use of data and strategic multi-agency working.**

Brief summary: Sept 2021 – March 2023

From the outset of the extension of duties, Alsbury invested in data systems and use of data in multi-agency meetings. SWs noted that the extension had reframed their role in education. The investment in data systems in Phase One continues to be of benefit, with improved data availability. Alsbury have finalised the development of a live data dashboard, enabling the VS to track all CWSW. The dashboard is used in multi-agency meetings, including targeted monthly meetings to identify children whose attendance is a concern. CSC team managers are now aware of attendance rates in their area. The VS also offers a weekly drop-in service where they can offer advice and step in where necessary to address any challenges accessing support for individual CWSW. The VS continues to be a strong mediator between education and CSC increasing their understanding of each other.

Focus post-March 2023

The bulk of the budget has been used on training, with continued sessions for school staff on trauma-informed practice but now with additional training around mental health and well-being, awareness of Designated Teacher (DT)/DSL networks, and understanding of the role and support expected from social work practice. There has been continued training for SWs around the education system and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). In addition, new training has taken place for both school staff and SWs on the topics of attendance, inclusion, school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion), and school admissions. The VS in Alsbury has driven a focus on attendance through developing better multi-agency working. Progress to date in this area has been achieved by bringing together education and social care teams with a view to better understanding respective areas of practice.

Developments in theory of change outcomes

Improved data quality

In Survey 5, the VSH reports having good access to data to maintain effective oversight in the areas of attendance, persistent absence, and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions). Access to data for attainment and school moves is in development. Working closely with the LA DM has resolved earlier issues in collating reliable attendance data by creating detailed reports that can be then matched with social care data. The Alsbury VSH is hopeful that the Wonde system will further improve the comparability of data. Whilst the current access to data is welcomed, the VS indicate that access to 'live' data for attendance, school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), and attainment that is regularly updated would be useful to further monitor outcomes for the CWSW cohort.

The VSH reports that sharing data in performance and multi-agency meetings has stimulated strategic discussions and created opportunities to look behind the data to explore potential reasons for trends and outcomes. The VSH suggests that such discussions have built confidence in their own and others' practice by being transparent:

We've brought in CIN [Child in Need] and CP [Child Protection] attendance into our monthly performance meeting. The children and family performance meeting now looks at attendance; what are the [permanent] exclusions and suspensions of CIN, CP, and Early Help. I think that the unintended result is that we're doing a lot more with Early Help as well. We now know the attendance issues with Early Help, not just CIN and CP, and again that's coming into our performance meeting every month. *[VSH; Alsbury; Case Study Interview]*

The VSH views the developments in the monitoring of data as positive and has changed the practice of partner agencies. For example, SWs are having more contact with the VS for advice, consequently there are improving relationships between SWs and schools. Alsbury VS are also raising the profile and importance of education to a range of teams and meetings (e.g., social care planning meetings) where matters such as school attendance are now being discussed on a regular basis. In addition, Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO's) are now asking for attendance figures in all CP meetings, emphasising the importance of education to the team around the child. Access to data has also enabled links with Youth Justice teams who can now identify children in the CWSW who are at greater risk of exploitation.

Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs

In Survey 5, the VSH in Alsbury rated progress against this outcome as 'somewhat achieved'. Activities include sharing of information about the types of support on offer from the VS across the LA in addition to regular cohort discussions and weekly DSL 'drop-ins'. Recognising the challenges often experienced by pupils in the transition to a new school year, the VS offered a series of virtual 'drop-ins' for schools, with a specific focus on CWSW attendance. At a county-wide DSL conference, the VS team collaborated with the Educational Psychologist (EP) to deliver training on the effects of early trauma and workshops to develop trauma informed practice.

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by Senior Leadership Teams (SLT))

Attendance is a priority area for the LA that is recognised and driven by the AD (CSC) who highlights the protective factor of attendance of all children, but especially vulnerable cohorts such as CWSW:

When children are not in school it is a detriment to their wellbeing and to their outcomes. [Absence] opens up problems including mental health, anxiety, exploitation risks, not feeling included in being part of a community. We want our children to thrive, do well, feel part of communities, be safe, have their wellbeing met, feel inclusivity, all of these things that help children to grow and develop in the way that we would want them to. *[AD (CSC); Alsbury; Case Study Interview]*

Low attendance rates in Alsbury is a growing concern and the VSH has attempted to mitigate this trend by raising awareness of attendance rates for children subject to CIN and CP plans specifically into monthly child and family performance meetings so that targeted action planning can occur. The team at the VS also act as a coordinator of professionals for cases where attendance is a particular concern, with positive outcomes:

One of our team liaised with a number of professionals for two siblings on a CP plan. They met with the head of the school to support them in identifying the specific barriers for the attendance of these young people including aspects of parental input. This allowed the school to obtain a fuller understanding of what the other professionals were trying to say and gave them an alternative perspective and deeper understanding of the wider impacts for each of the children. This led to full time attendance for both young people and the ultimate discharge of the CP plan. *[Education Liaison Officer; Alsbury; Survey 5]*

With regard to school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), Alsbury VS recognise this as an area for ongoing development. Among the challenges reported by the VSH are use of part-time timetables by schools, including reports of some settings having children in from, for example, 11am to 1.30pm so that the children are recorded as present for both registration sessions, but only attending school for a small proportion of the day. Additional challenges include change of school leadership where the incoming headteacher has not yet established a relationship with the VS and introduces changes of policy that are not congruent with the relational approaches favoured by Alsbury VS.

Two of the three Alsbury SWs interviewed reported that several CWSW on their caseload are regularly suspended from school, usually for reasons of challenging behaviour. Whilst the SWs value input by the VS, the SWs highlight apparent flaws in the notification system from the schools themselves. Often the SWs are notified of school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions) after the fact, sometimes in a review meeting held weeks later. This has led the SW and the VS to work together so that a member of the VS team attends future CIN review meetings with the SW to:

...really gain some kind of hands on advice and guidance because that's their bread and butter, it's not ours, but it's theirs and I would feel more confident going into a CIN meeting with someone like that and being able to kind of discuss education in a forum of that nature because what we know is very limited, however what they know is a lot more informative. *[SW; Alsbury; Case Study Interview]*

Alsbury VS are increasing inclusive practice in schools by working closely with DSLs to develop relationships with SWs through conferences, targeted training on trauma informed practice with the Educational Psychology (EP) service, and establishing opportunities for consultation:

...the number of contacts made to the VS to discuss CWSW doubled in the summer term compared to the autumn term of last year [2024/2025] with schools looking for advice around engagement of [CWSW] on their roll. *[Education Liaison Officer; Alsbury; Survey 5]*

Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

Alsbury continue to develop CSC's understanding of education primarily through training opportunities. In Survey 5, the Education Liaison Officer estimates that 60% of the training programme is delivered to SWs (30% for education staff and 10% 'other'). Building on previous strategies to address this outcome, Alsbury VS has devised a model for SWs to highlight and contact the VS about education concerns when children are first referred to the CSC team; this line of communication (e.g., via

drop-in sessions) to the VS remains open throughout CSC's involvement with the child and family. Every case is regularly reviewed in SW supervision sessions enabling appropriate advice and guidance to the SW on how their children can be supported in education. The Education Liaison Officer in the VS reports that this strategy has given the CSC managers confidence to emphasise the importance of education, when other factors can appear to be more of a priority.

The Alsbury VSH sampled care planning to assess what SWs knew of the extended duties. Due to an influx of new SWs, knowledge of the VS and their extended duties was limited, prompting creation of an action plan that not only contributes to Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) training, but also SW induction.

Having established positive working relationships with the VS because of their Children in Care caseload, SWs in Alsbury saw this as facilitating work for the CWSW cohort. However, SWs also value the mediation role that the VS has taken on, particularly in setting out the nuances of school systems and legal frameworks (e.g., attendance, part-time timetables, alternative provision), as this SW describes:

I can speak to schools about what my worries are, but I don't know whether it's possible for them to implement any of these things within school. And I think that's where virtual schools are really good because I think they're really helpful bridging the gap between social workers and school and helping us understand what can and can't be achieved and advocate for us from social care, what our worries are about the schools. *[SW; Alsbury; Case Study Interview]*

Likewise for school staff, the VS works to develop their understanding of CSC's systems and protocols. Two of the DSLs interviewed raised concerns about the perceived undervaluing of attendance by some SWs and timely communication of changes in case status (e.g., not being informed when cases are closed). The VS have acknowledged these issues as potential barriers to effective working and have acted accordingly, but recognise it is work in progress:

Staff who we have spoken to often have little knowledge around CSC systems and thresholds, we have been able to share an explanation about the wider model, helping staff understand why certain decisions by CSC are made. We have worked with schools to try and increase the understanding that SW[s] are working with the context of the whole family and the wider complexities, not just the child, and by doing this this can have a positive outcome for the child. This is still fairly limited and we are hoping that we can work on this aspect more. We have full school training that we are able to signpost schools to where they are able to be upskilled around CSC thresholds. *[Education Liaison Officer; Alsbury; Survey 5]*

Strengthened partnership between schools, social care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and the VS

In Survey 5, the Education Liaison Officer reported progress on this outcome was barely achieved. Further exploration of the open-ended responses and the VSH and DSL interviews suggest that the lack of progress relates specifically to working with CAMHS. Historically, Alsbury' engagement with CAMHS was low and the VSH has explored other routes to support CWSW with mental health and well-being issues. These new routes occur in the form of schools being referred through the Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) steering group. As the VSH sits on the panel of SEMH steering group, there is a clear pathway for consideration of support. CWSW attendance and school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) data is brought to this group to aid decision making in targeting resources according to need. The VSH has facilitated membership of panels for school staff to reflect education's voice, knowledge, and experience. Other contributions include attendance and part-time timetable panels where background information is shared and links to information held informs future planning.

The VSH highlights working more closely with Early Help (EH) as an unintended benefit of the extension of duties. EH teams now receive attendance alerts which triggers a plan for that child:

I would say the Early Help attendance plans within their planning are of a higher quality than the CIN and CP plans. Because they've just absolutely taken to it. And the Early Help workers, I think, are making an absolute difference with attendance and we have a new group of managers called school consultants in Early Help. So, schools can have a consultation with an Early Help team manager around those children first.

This project is CIN and CP, but we've got a similar offer in Early Help because two of those members of staff were teachers, which is really useful. And means that where we have some quite high levels of vulnerability sitting in our Early Help which is probably why we do well with our CIN and CP numbers for the size of our authority and our LAC [Looked After Children] numbers because we put an awful lot of support into Early Help. *[VSH; Alsbury; Case Study Interview]*

Raising awareness of CWSW needs with IROs is another area where Alsbury VS have used the extension of duties remit to improve the support for CWSW:

We have worked closely with the IRO managers and we have trained all IRO's on the extension to duties. This has changed their

practice to promote the importance of education with discussions around school and attendance being held at all CP meetings [*Education Liaison Officer; Alsbury; Survey 5*]

Better access to child level data on attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions) has also strengthened joint working, especially with CSC teams. It has enabled the VSH to be proactive in contacting SWs about children whose data is of concern. Similarly, contact has been made with schools that the VSH has concerns about attendance, allowing the VS to offer training, advice or guidance around these issues. The VSH takes this up to [SLT] meetings with education and skills. The VSH is also working with the LA to ensure education is a fourth safeguarding partner.

Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Progress towards this outcome was rated as 'somewhat achieved' in Survey 5. Alsbury VS have been cautious in following the non-statutory guidance and not responded to requests for advice and guidance directly from parents. However, the VSH recognises the importance of supporting the wider family and has done this mainly through two routes: by influencing the way SWs work with families and working with schools to develop their relational practice.

We encourage schools to include the families in planning and discussions. We have kept the families visible within meetings. We have suggested actions for both schools and SW to take back to parents and where possible we signpost wider services to schools or SW[s] that may be of benefit to families. [*Education Liaison Officer; Alsbury; Survey 5*]

Next steps

In Survey 5, we asked the VSH to identify their priorities for CWSW and activities to improve outcomes in the current (2024/2025) academic year:

Priorities:

- Our main focus has been around attendance and engagement with the safeguarding social work teams to raise the profile of education within social care.
- We have also focused on trying to highlight the extension of duties to schools and wider partners.
- We have worked extensively at trying to encourage DSLs to embed trauma informed practices in their schools.

- We have worked with wider services to upskill them on barriers faced for CWSW and the VS extension to duties to ensure education is being prioritised by all, with a consistent approach.

Activities:

- To engage more schools and create stronger relationships with DSL's to have regular, termly cohort conversations with every school. This will allow for earlier sight of children to aim to work in a preventative way.
- To work with wider teams including the School Improvement team around discussions about attendance and collaborative working with schools.
- To work with wider teams including CAMHS and the well-being in mind teams.
- To monitor and reduce suspensions and permanent exclusions of CWSW.

Braddleton

Characteristics of LA and evidence base

Braddleton is a mixed urban and rural LA with a large geographical footprint and a medium overall number and medium rate per population of CWSW. The VSH reports to the AD (Education). Survey 5 was completed by the VSH and five interviews were conducted (VSH, DCS/AD, two DSLs, and one SW). **This case study foregrounds Braddleton's work on use of data and relational and restorative practice (RRP).**

Brief summary: Sept 2021 – March 2023

In the initial stages of the extension of duties, Braddleton VS took a strategic role to invest in SWs to increase their confidence to challenge and support schools which, particularly in the small number of schools in the Social Workers In Schools (SWIS) project, had the capacity to enhance effective provision for CWSW. Support for CWSW was integrated into the existing locality model for Children Looked After (CLA) which was intended to enable EH to reduce the numbers of children escalated at each threshold. The locality model was reported to be contributing to better integration of education and CSC, though further work on this was judged to be required.

Focus post-March 2023

Braddleton has strived to offer consistent provision across a wide geographical area through its locality model and has utilised this structure as a vehicle in the work towards their goal of widespread relational approaches. This has been facilitated by the creation of a relational and restorative practice team that sits within the VS. A large amount of work in accessing and use of data has also contributed to improvements in the support for CWSW in schools.

Developments in theory of change outcomes

Improved data quality

The VSH reports having good access to the data to maintain effective oversight in the areas of attendance, persistent absence, attainment, suspensions and permanent exclusions; enabling access to data for school moves is in development. Braddleton VS use Power BI across social care and education with built in filters that can produce reports on attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions for different groups of children with social care involvement. Data are then filtered at different levels (individual, team, cohort) to produce status reports for each group.

These reports are taken by the VSH to as many meetings as possible, (e.g., Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) networks, headteacher forums, SEND locality hub, IRO teams) to share data and explore reasons behind. The VSH reports that this has raised the profile of CWSW amongst LA agencies:

We're talking about it in a way that we've not done before and we've got the data to back it up and then that data is also going to our directorate, so, education, children's social care, SLT, so they're looking at it. It's absolutely raised that line of sight for those different groups of children. *[VSH; Braddleton; Case Study Interview]*

An attendance and school exclusions working group reviews termly data by locality and social care team, this is then reviewed at a social care performance management board. The availability of these data has improved joint working between education and social care and is evidenced in the increased number of SWs requesting support for children with attendance issues or at risk of suspension or permanent exclusion. The VSH sees the raised profile within CSC driven by the access, quality, and sharing of data.

The quality of data has improved by highlighting errors and inconsistencies in the process as the usage increases. For example, on the attendance system, the inclusion team were capturing permanent exclusions separately and not uploading those data to the system, this has now been rectified.

As a result of the VSH asking for data due to the extension of duties, DSLs in Braddleton use that school-level data to focus their monitoring and support of CWSW, as one DSL in a large secondary school describes:

We've developed a system now where we can record all the children who had a social worker previously or currently so it can be recorded on [the central data hub for Multi-academy Trusts (MATs)] now, we've added a tag so that we can build a dashboard around specifically that group of children. So, we can monitor their attendance, attainment, suspensions, [permanent] exclusions, so that means that I can then follow up where there's spikes in different schools and we can really focus on that group of children...we've got a very low reporting rate because [the VS] have only been asking for it in the last 12 months, so I think it's hard to get a true picture until we've got the right numbers reflected in the data...but then now we've got it on the system, it should be easier to watch the trend moving forward. *[DSL/ SENDCo; Braddleton; Case Study Interview]*

By improving data quality and access, other professionals have been able to enhance their support of CWSW in school, perhaps by offering an alternative perspective to the context of attendance:

In terms of attendance, for example, if there's a pattern of non-attendance, I can use that to recognise, 'well, what's going on?' If this child isn't attending on a Monday, have they stayed at another parent's house all weekend? Is that impacting on them? Things like that. We can determine patterns of behaviours. *[SW; Braddleton; Case Study Interview]*

Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs

In Survey 5, the VSH in Braddleton rated progress against this outcome as 'mostly achieved'. The training package developed in the early stages of the extension of duties has continued and developed to be responsive to local need so that targeted interventions can be provided. The VSH also cites improvements in the data systems described above as central to progress towards this outcome, particularly where information is able to be shared between agencies:

Sharing cohort data at CEO [Chief Executive Officer], SENCO, Head Teacher, DSL and DT Networks has been really powerful. Many strategies have built on what we are already doing for children in care, using similar training approaches and networks. *[VSH; Braddleton; Survey 5]*

The VS have developed a bespoke 'Braddleton Pathway' to raise awareness and develop practice to support CWSWs in school. Created in partnership with around 20 schools, the Braddleton Pathway has three clear strands:

- Raising attainment
- Attachment aware and trauma informed practice
- Relational and restorative approaches (e.g., every school across a trust gaining an Attachment Research Community (ARC) accreditation).

Schools can work towards four different levels, with the highest involving sharing good practice in training other schools. In working towards the Braddleton Pathway, schools carry out practitioner-led research, supported by the VS, as well as an audit of training need and scrutiny of school level data for CWSW. The VSH also worked with an academy chain to develop a strategy for vulnerable learners, which has now been shared across the LA; the VS has also commissioned a local university to evaluate the pathway.

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

The VSH reports that regular briefings for DTs, DSLs, and SENDCos to raise awareness of CWSW needs (including promoting the Braddleton Pathway) has made a difference to this outcome (progress rated as 'mostly achieved' in Survey 5), priorities for each setting were identified in individual training needs analysis. Locality interventions and two bespoke projects to improve attendance have been in place since the beginning of the extension of duties and continue to be developed.

In addition to the interventions described above, the VS has continued to provide information and advice on issues related to inclusive practice, in particular on attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusion). This service is open to all professionals and activities stemming from this include joint visits by district leads and VS officers to schools where there are concerns around inclusive practice for CWSW. The VS have used case studies from the bespoke programmes to capture attendance information of individual children where relational approaches (e.g., Solution Circles) have been implemented.

Recognising the value of SLT input to implement new approaches, the VS developed a six-day training in restorative and relational practice for senior leaders who are wanting to implement systemic change. Schools across education sectors including primary, middle, high, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), and special schools participated; including the CEO of a MAT to rollout RRP approaches across the MAT.

With regard to suspensions and permanent exclusions, the VSH report the following data for the 2023/ 2024 academic year that highlights improvements in suspensions and permanent exclusions for CWSW in the face of rising rates generally (our emphases):

Compared to the 2022-23 academic year, *all* Braddleton children were involved in 81% more suspension and exclusion incidents, with a 4.5% increase in exclusions, affecting 58% more children overall.

Our Child Protection cohort experienced a 26% decrease in suspension and exclusion incidents, and a 67% reduction in exclusions...

Our children in need cohort saw a smaller decrease, with 0.2% fewer suspension and exclusion incidents, and 4% fewer exclusions... [VSH; Braddleton; Survey 5; our emphases]

Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

From the outset of the extension of duties, Braddleton VS understood the reciprocal respect shown by education and CSC professionals for the other's responsibilities and pressures, but recognised that it may not have been freely shared between agencies and their front-line workforce. In that respect, the VS has acted as mediator to close this gap by developing and hosting joint events and opportunities for knowledge sharing. For example, a 'District INSET Day' on the theme of attachment and trauma aware approaches attended by the education and social care workforce from across the LA:

In Braddleton particularly there's been some joint training days and conference days. They've just had a fantastic relational practice day. So, I went and there was *[sic]* lots of social care professionals there and there was *[sic]* lots of education professionals there.

There was a number of people from across our Trust and it was nice to be able to see each of the workshops that you'd got a crossover of professionals. So, there was more of an understanding of the role of each *[other]*. I thought that was a really nice way of generally bringing people together and building those relationships and those networks. *[DSL; Braddleton; Case Study Interview]*

The VS has also worked alongside SWs to conduct Solution Circles where there are education related issues impacting on CWSW. After a review of education support offered by CSC conducted by the VSH highlighted gaps in understanding and provision for supporting CWSW in schools, training in Braddleton's attainment programme is now mandatory for all CSC teams. Further, training for IROs now includes details of Braddleton's bespoke attainment and attendance programs, including better understanding data around attainment and progress of CWSW in schools.

Strengthened partnership between schools, social care, CAMHS, and the VS

Strong partnerships between agencies involved in supporting CWSW is recognised as a key factor in providing support for CWSW and families. To that end, the VSH sits on a strategic group to review mental health support and also a complex needs working group with health and social care to pilot a new approach; the group is exploring Relational and Restorative Practice (RRP) approaches as part of an LA-wide, multi-disciplinary model:

We have signed a memorandum of understanding with *[Braddleton]* University to support them in becoming the first relational and restorative university, this has resulted in partnership around research, de-

livery of joint training including RRP approaches for children in custody suites. RRP also delivered to library staff, we found they often had children tutored in the libraries who were not attending school and wanted to strengthen their relational approaches. By having two key consistent messages around RRP and [LA-wide programmes to raise the attainment and progress of all 'disadvantaged' children and young people] we can see that this is starting to be threaded across partners. The current SEND strategy has commissioned in-reach and out-reach providers to include RRP approaches. The SEND action plan has [the LA-wide strategy] and RRP threaded through it. *[VSH; Braddleton; Survey 5]*

The VSH continues work to develop relationships and communication between agencies by:

- Creating and/ or attending networks and forums that bring agencies together
- Providing multi-agency drop-in sessions/ surgeries/ case reviews to share information and good practice
- Hosting multi-agency conferences (often regional)
- Delivering joint training sessions.

By offering places for enquiry and knowledge exchange, the VS has established itself as a hub for advice and guidance for the range of professionals involved in supporting CWSW, where previously limited opportunities existed:

This new role for virtual school has been massive. It has been so helpful just in everything. And I feel there were times previously before this...I was at a loss. But actually, having that contact and being able to reach out to [the VS] and ask their advice has been fantastic. And that's reduced my families from escalating to worse behaviours or worse non-attendant *[sic]* figures. *[SW; Braddleton; Case Study Interview]*

The VSH identifies some challenges when working with health professionals due to the large geographic size of the county, where there are often multiple providers for one type of service that may unnecessarily complicate allocation of resources.

Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Braddleton's approach to this outcome has been through the use of Solution Circles, the VSH describes this as 'empowering' as parents feel their voice is heard and, in some cases, has transformed relationships with the school. The VSH also highlights a key tension with the strategic nature of the extended role when addressing this outcome. The use of Solution Circles around a single child and family is a resource intensive, individualised approach. The VS have attempted to address this by training education settings and CSC workers in the implementation of Solution Circles however this is still in development as the independence and knowledge of VS staff is highly valued in this approach.

Next steps

In Survey 5, we asked the VSH to identify their priorities for CWSW and activities to improve outcomes in the current (2024/2025) academic year:

Priorities:

- Extending the number of schools joining the LA-wide programme to support the learning of all disadvantaged young people and RRP programmes.
- Developing an accreditation route for schools that join these programmes.
- Launch of two additional pathways: attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions).
- Rolling out a six-day senior leadership training in RRP.
- Increasing the number of SWs completing mandatory training to support the education of disadvantaged young people.
- Building CWSW factors into LA school Ofsted risk categorisation process.

Activities:

- Working as part of a strategic working group to strengthen links between health, social care, and education for children with complex needs.
- Developing a shared training programme with Health around neurodiversity.
- Reviewing policy and practice working with Youth Offending Service.
- Working with SEND to implement two key inclusion strategies of early plan-do-review and introduction of in-reach and out-reach teams to include relational approaches.

Earlham

Characteristics of LA and evidence base

Earlham is a large, mainly rural LA with a medium overall number and low rate per population of CWSW. Survey 5 was completed by the VSH. Seven interviews were completed (1 AD, 1 VSH, 2 CWSW Leads, 3 DSLs). **This case study examines progress made on the theory of change outcomes.**

Brief summary: Sept 2021 – March 2023

The VS in Earlham employed two educational advisers to lead on the extension of duties, one covering primary schools, and the other, secondary schools. The evidence suggests that Earlham had made progress in implementing the extension of duties, particularly in the use of data and the SWIS project, though the VS feels there could be better collaboration with some social workers on the SWIS initiative. The VSH stated that suspensions and SW shortages were immediate priorities. The interviews suggested that the VS would need to continue to raise the profile of CWSW with all DSLs.

Focus post-March 2023

Earlham has built on the progress made in Phase One by utilising the data collected, in particular on attendance, to better inform schools and CSC about the CWSW cohort and raise awareness of their needs. The VS recognised the value of schools working with families of CWSW as a contributory factor to improving relationships, well-being, and attendance. Better joint working via regular networks and ongoing training has enabled Earlham to provide targeted support for CWSW.

Developments in theory of change outcomes

Improved data quality

According to the AD, data for CWSW is not optimal in Earlham but improving. Strategic priorities for the county are to improve attendance and reduce the number of children who are Electively Home Educated (EHE):

And the reason I'm putting that as one of our strategic priorities locally, is because we've now got about two and a half thousand children on that register [EHE], but they're not this...yeah, there's a large cohort. It's a large county mind (you). We've got nearly a hundred thousand students in schools here. *[AD; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

In support of these strategic priorities, the VSH currently collects attendance for CIN and CP cohorts separately, something not done by the VS nor LA prior to the extension of duties. Data is collected on suspensions, permanent exclusions, Children Missing Education (CME) and those on a part-time timetable. Attainment data is not collected, at this stage, due to the large cohort and the focus on attendance. The VS reported that improvements have been observed in comparison to the previous year.

We're all working on attendance and we have seen improvements in all the areas because last year's attendance was not great. Our particular one for this cohort...in secondary, we have seen a big improvement in persistent absence for children on child protection.
[VSH; Earlham; Case Study Interview]

Improvements have been attributed to working collectively and strategically across the education team (e.g., inclusion team, early years) who regularly report back to the VSH. Allocating an Attendance Improvement Officer (AIO) from within Earlham to support the work of the VS with Children in Care supported this aim. The AIO assesses the data and holds fortnightly meetings with VS team, SWs, and schools. Targeted efforts on CWSW under 50% attendance have shown improvement:

Because last year...I think there's about... 82% of children on child protection plan were below 90% and 38% were severely absent, so below 50%, and this year so far, obviously we're only two thirds of the way through, we've got that down to 65% for persistent absence and 25% for severe absence. *[VSH; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

There has been an increase in detentions and suspensions across all students, including CWSW. However, decreased issuance of suspensions can be seen in individual cases where the two CWSW Leads have provided individual support of student's needs and school's Relational Support Plans:

Decreased issuing of suspensions in individual cases where VS has led training and [development of] Relational Support Plans. Bespoke support kit to support emotional wellbeing (e.g. art and musical equipment). This has been the result of some detailed work from the two VS team members. *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

In cases where suspensions have increased in some schools, the VSH attributes it to lack of fully implemented relational practices:

Suspensions across all students - not just CWSW has increased. This may be a result of a lack of real, genuine relational practice;

websites and policies can describe relational policy, whereas in reality it is not fully implemented *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

Schools with a commitment to relational practices reported intentional efforts to minimise external suspensions:

As a school, we don't suspend that much. We really tried the last two years to be more restorative, more relational. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

Data on the Ever 6 cohort has been more difficult to attain due to the transient nature of the cohort:

Tracking an ever-changing cohort who may come on and off a plan CP/ CIN/ Early Help and then move within or out of county is a real challenge with SIMS [School Information Management System] and other systems sometimes losing links and also some young people and families not wanting to continue to engage with professionals. *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs

One important strategy that has been effective in increasing understanding of CWSW has been using a new tracking system that provides a more informed and collective view of a child's progress, which is used by schools, social workers, and review boards and appropriate for corporate meetings. Similar to Personal Education Plans (PEPs) used for Children in Care, the 'pro forma' is sent out to all headteachers, safeguarding leads, DTs and all SW managers. It captures attendance, the voice of the child, the trusted adult, and those engaging with the child to understand whether attendance is improving, whether the child is meeting age-related expectations, and whether the child's views have been considered amidst those of adults; capturing information for 1400 young people:

So, it's basically, it's two sides and it's education and young person's voice to be fed into all CP and CIN plans...schools have said it's brilliant that we can give this to the social worker because otherwise there are some plans where education hadn't even been included in the core group meeting. *[VS CWSW Lead; Earlham Case Study Interview]*

Strengthening the gap between education and social care in understanding the needs of CWSW and each other's roles and remits has been helpful for schools, who often are not aware that some students even have a SW. Having access to data on children with an attendance issue who are subject to a CP plan, the VS can ensure it

is written into the family plan, which is reviewed at core groups and CP plan reviews, aligning the work of family and school.

This is further supported by a DSL who suggested that increased understanding of the needs of CWSW is a result of VS's knowledge of the challenges that vulnerable children face, as well as the challenges that schools face to effectively support them. Targeted fieldwork by the VS funded attendance officer, for example, often provides individualised interventions or small amounts of funding to address individual student needs. Increased collaboration between colleagues can now better ensure that children with SEND are in the right school placement and getting the right education for their need:

I think it's really those key conversations with people who have that understanding about what it takes to support a young person back into mainstream, you know, having the understanding of the workings of education and mainstream settings because sometimes social workers don't have that, whereas the Virtual School is very good at having that understanding. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

Other reported strategies used by the VSH to increase schools' understanding of the needs of CWSW include passing on information to all headteachers via the Education Deputy Director, training more than 800 school staff on relational approaches (since 2021), modelling how to implement relational support plans with schools, and meetings with key staff to support the individual plans of students. Evidence for the increase in schools' understanding of the needs of CWSW includes:

Positive feedback re VSH training in the recent October 2024 ILACS *[Inspecting Local Authority Children's Service]*. Shifts in the policies of some schools to become more relational and trauma-informed. *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

Whole school training on Attachment Aware Trauma Informed (AATI) relational approaches and direct work with schools to build inclusive practices are key methods used by the VS to strengthen SLT's knowledge and capacity to manage the needs of CWSW. Other methods co-produced with SLTs include Relational Support Plans for students, 'micro scripting' scenarios involving children, co-creating interventions to improve attendance, preventing school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), and preparing SLTs to welcome new students subject to a CIN or CP plan:

...each member of staff in the school has a handful of students that they have a positive relationship with. So, I think I've got 11 in my group. And every member of staff has done that and they become

that child's advocate, they become that child's 'the person to go to', the person to keep an eye on their attendance, to keep an eye on their welfare, to keep an eye on their progress, check in, say hello, those sorts of things. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

An example of inclusive practice was refining a support plan to be more in line with a relational approach. After consultation with the SENDCo, the VS carried out a home visit, listened to the child, mother, and SW. From this a plan was developed to better meet that child's needs.

The VSH funded AIO who runs the extended role targeting students under 50% attendance, works as a fieldworker, making home visits, and working closely with both the families and schools. Inclusive practices have helped 'young people previously on 0% attendance now back in school and learning' *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

Bridging the gap between education and social care in Earlham has been a challenge due to high SW turnover in a large region with many family needs. Agency SWs are often recruited as a short-term solution, but familiarity with local needs and available resources limit their effectiveness when supporting CWSW. It is possible that families are assigned several SWs over a short period of time, further increasing the challenge of schools to access the appropriate CSC professional:

You'll send an e-mail to who you believe is the social worker. It goes unanswered. You then chase up and realise that actually that social worker has left [Earlham]. And then you have to do the whole finding out who the new social worker is and quite often the family aren't able to tell you. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

Despite these challenges, consistent work with CSC to increase understanding of the educational needs of CWSW has seen improvements. Strategies reported by the VSH include increased training for SWs, attending CSC team meetings, and providing advisory sessions about CIN and CP plans. The VS is in contact with "every social worker in every school, every Monday for every suspension" *[Earlham VSH; Case Study Interview]*. Previously, SWs mainly consulted with schools, now SWs can attend the VS surgery offered half a day a week or drop-in sessions for schools and SWs to receive guidance on interventions on how to address individual student needs:

Many discussions and ongoing professional relationships with Social Workers who now come back to the VSH with questions and see us as a part of the... education offer. Invites to speak to Social Care

Teams in their team meetings to share our role and remit with new staff. *[VSH; Earlham; Survey 5]*

Triage sessions, between the CWSW Leads, school, and social care occur every two weeks to look at CIN and CP cases separately to identify and work through barriers to student progress and, when necessary, involve LA or others through referrals. The CWSW Lead is available through online calls and in-person school meetings to address issues such as the SEND aspect of some of the complex cases, Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), Speech and Language input (funded by the VS), as well as use of the CIN/ CP education pro forma created by the VS. The VSH attends the termly Safeguarding Forum for all DSLs to provide updates on current initiatives and to explain how the duties of all stakeholders interact to support CWSW.

One DSL confirms that progress in better joint working between CSC and the school has been made, attributing the improvements to consistency in role and communication. The VSH often serves as a mediator to this relationship, offering realistic solutions to CWSW needs with reasonable effect:

...some impact in terms of realistic discussions about what a mainstream setting can do within the constraints of their staffing and spaces in school, balanced by supporting the need for flexibility and relational support. Increased awareness of the importance of the education aspect of a plan being integral. *[VSH; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*.

Strengthened partnership between schools, social care, CAMHS, and the VS

The extended duties have enabled the VSH to bridge prior gaps in collaboration and communication between schools, social care, CAMHS, and other providers. This has been particularly important for schools who have previously felt excluded from inter-agency communications, despite having a wealth of knowledge about CWSW. The VS often acts as a catalyst to joint working, bringing together schools and social care teams for multi-disciplinary team meetings, particularly for points of action on severe absences. Considerable work has been reported by the VSH sitting on the Children Missing Education (CME) Panel, working with the Edge of Care Team and the AIO. There has been more collaborative work with Earlham support groups, including an intermediate Wellbeing Service that the VS helped to launch, who liaise between mainstream schools and CAMHS.

DSLs have raised concerns, however, on statutory timescales for safeguarding referrals. Often, a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) referral by a school that requires an outcome within 10 days needs chasing. MASH referrals for serious cases are not exempt from this concern.

So, we will chase and then we'll find out that they have reached threshold for example for a single assessment, Section 17 assessment. And then again on occasion we have to chase again to find out what the outcome of the assessment was. And unfortunately, it's not massively consistent. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

The VS now works more closely with the EP team involving actions for child on a CP or CIN plan. The VS works with a local school exclusion (suspension and permanent exclusion) reductions team as a link to EBSNA (Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance). Individual social workers have increased their contact with the VS for advice and support. The VSH now sits on the Board of the Earlham's Youth Justice Service to support contextual safeguarding and county-wide initiatives. The VS also regularly consults SEND colleagues who are themselves working under immense pressure with the scale of cases under assessment for EHCPs and sending out consults. Due to financial constraints and a shortage of education places in alternative or specialist settings across Earlham, decisions can be delayed.

Earlham's Inclusion Team and the Team Lead regularly advise schools on specific strategies to deescalate tensions between children and staff. The VS carried out a 'Relational Lens Review'; schools that demonstrate exemplary relational practices become 'Beacon Schools' to model best practice. Some educational settings are in the development phase of implementing relational practice, after VS advice.

Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Increasing parental engagement and capacity has made some progress but continues to be an area of development, particularly at building closer relationships with parents in secondary schools. Through activities such as art, storytelling, outdoor education, the VSH has created, organised, and funded parental engagement days with a range of activities for parents of CWSW:

The VS Education Advisor came in with the Virtual School and did a brilliant art workshop with I think it was six or seven parents with their child on site...the parents and the children all said how positive it was. And in actual fact it would be nice to kind of do a follow up one...I have recently trained to do the Family Links nurture course with families. What we've found is it's been quite difficult to get the secondary parents to engage in that. *[DSL; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

Changing negative perceptions of school with positive experiences is a hopeful aim. The VS received positive feedback from organising, with the VS Education Advisor,

a Literacy Day for CWSW and their parents as well as supporting a Year 6 to Year 7 transition event:

This has removed some barriers and changed perceptions of many parents who had a negative experience of school themselves. These sessions have also supported in helping to develop positive relationships between families and education professionals. It creates happy memories which can be used as a part of elaborative reminiscing; positive particularly for CYP [Children and Young People] for whom broken attachments with adults have been a barrier to positive relationships, trust and engagement. *[VSH; Earlham; Case Study Interview]*

Next steps

In Survey 5, we asked the VSH to identify their priorities for CWSW and activities to improve outcomes in the current (2024/2025) academic year:

Priorities

- Data and tracking the CP and CIN cohort.
- Improved protocols.
- Improved attendance – recording and tracking case-support and involvement.
- Increased student voice – ensuring that education features in *all* CP and CIN plans.
- Improved attainment

Activities

- Ensuring that attendance is a priority and is improving for children on CP and CIN plans.
- Promoting inclusive practice so that suspensions are reduced.
- Continuing to provide relational training and input to individual cases, schools, and beyond - i.e., MAT input.
- Continue to use Relational Support Plans and to offer 'Belonging' Projects to support enhanced transitions.

Keldbeck

Characteristics of LA and evidence base

Keldbeck is a mainly urban LA covering a small geographic region with a medium overall number and high rate per population of CWSW. Survey 5 was completed by the VSH and three interviews were undertaken (VSH, AD, and DSL). **This case study examines progress made on the theory of change outcomes.**

Brief summary: Sept 2021 – March 2023

During Phase One, the extension of duties enabled the VS to develop processes that could better identify CWSW and address barriers to attendance. Improving quality of data collected was important to these aims. Trauma informed and relational training for SWs, schools, and services working with CWSW were central in developing a common language and increased understanding of the needs of CWSW by key stakeholders. Increased joint working across agencies and triaging aimed to close gaps of communication and improve targeted support around CWSW. The recruitment of two Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) facilitated these aims. Turnover of school staff and SWs challenged consistent progress, however, persistent communication, aligning goals, and joint working facilitated the progress of these objectives. Tracking the Ever 6 cohort and increasing parental engagement were areas in need of development during Phase One.

Focus post-March 2023

During this phase of the project the VS reported better integrated working between CSC and education, noted also by the AD, where developments in CSC casework were underway to include attendance as a key factor in decisions around case closure. The VS widened the scope of its DT training to include any professionals working with CWSW. SW turnover rates affected consistency in relationship building.

Developments in theory of change outcomes

Improved data quality

Improving data quality was a strategic goal for the VS. This goal has been addressed in a number of ways. Recruitment of an EWO and Attendance Lead, with CME experience, to track and monitor the attendance of CWSW, sits within the DfE broader attendance strategy, giving greater legitimacy to the VSH to improve data quality and CWSW outcomes:

It gives it more credibility and it ensures that there is higher scrutiny for those children with a social worker. So, if you as a lone Virtual

School had to bang a drum in isolation on a hill, people might hear it in the distance, but actually when there's a group of you playing in a band, it's a lot more effective. It turns into more of a concert. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

A second initiative to improve accuracy of data is the use of a bespoke dashboard that can identify discrepancies between DfE and LA tracking systems, which then is verified by CSC. Weekly spot checks and data cleansing specifically identifies CWSW and their location in real-time:

So, what we then do is I've got an exceptions dashboard that tells me between Welfare Call, LCS system, and Capita and what it will do is where they don't agree, it will highlight them as an exceptions report. I send that exceptions report to social care, they then update it, but even doing that, I can't get it past 85% [accuracy] because of the transient nature of the workforce and the cohort. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Collecting short-term qualitative data on CWSW has been an effective strategy used to monitor their progress, particularly for those that have stepped down from a CIN or CP plan, which makes them more difficult to track.

What we'd need to do is monitor those children when we no longer have the GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] remit to do so...it's difficult to do it in a quants measure so we have to do it qualitative. So, we do case studies and for example, I've got a case study that talks about a young person who was struggling, who was on a CP plan. They've now been stepped down to CIN. Their attendance was at 24%. It's now at 68% as in year increase...So, there's evidence of impact, but it's really difficult to get it in a quantitative nature due to the cohort because by the nature of being successful, they're no longer within that cohort. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

As a result of the extension of duties, having access to all safeguarding data and sitting on panels has enabled the VSH to identify educational risk factors for CWSW that they would like to see embedded in a system of daily practice and care planning with SWs:

One of the areas of development, what I would like to do is increase auditing around education for CP and CIN. So the next step is to work with the principal social worker to understand what auditing looks like, understand what supervision looks like for social workers,

and create a model and a matrix around audit to ensure that education's got a higher priority...next thing is to embed that into the system so it's not just about awareness, it's about embedded into the system that becomes part of daily practice and care planning. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs

The VSH continued working on a systemwide shift in consistency in relational practices by key adults supporting CWSW. Therefore, increased training for schools, SWs, and the LA on trauma informed and relational practices continued. Advancing SLTs training to implement, monitor, and audit their school improvement plan, upskill staff, identify mentors, and ways to measure impact were objectives the VSH worked towards:

So, what we've asked schools to do is the first year they've come on, they baseline all of their data across lots of different metrics. So, we've got social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing for students and staff...Attainment and attendance...we're looking at as well. And we're breaking that down through all cohorts, CIN, CPP, children with a social worker as a group...So, we've currently got 22 schools on-board. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Including the voice of CWSW is another current area of development. A care experienced 'Education Champion' was appointed who visits CWSW that are severely absent to understand their needs, build relationships, and counsel the VSH on best practices in improving communication and attendance:

She's really good at getting that authentic voice because they can speak to her peer-to-peer and she's had that experience and I can't give that authenticity from where I am. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

School-directed inclusive practices that have strengthened relationships and targeted approaches for working with CWSW were provided by the DSL. She is also the Deputy Headteacher and Safeguarding Officer that sits within the ARC Services of a MAT. Together with four skilled safeguarding members from the school, best practices are shared across the trust.

With the oversight of the DSL and safeguarding team, who have extensive training and background in social work, developing closer working relationships with families,

teachers and vulnerable children, including classroom support is central to their aim of inclusion:

So, I've got a team of four members of staff that actually work with these pupils and with these families and they're absolutely phenomenal. we've got an area of school called ARC Services which is where basically our safeguarding team sits but we've got lots of supportive... mechanisms in classrooms and things down there. *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Supportive measures that create consistency of their aims includes meeting on a fortnightly basis to discuss progress on CWSW's attendance and issues affecting them, evaluating and adjusting individual plans when needed, and sustaining a climate of safety and trust so that CWSW will want to come to school:

Certainly, for the vast majority of them school's their safe place, they have relationships and people they trust. We work on a relationships approach in school and they want to come to school, they want to come and talk to us, they want to tell us what's going on, they're very open and honest. So, for us, that's what we need to be, we need to be able to get them in and keep them safe and then obviously the learning is secondary to that *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

A half-termly review enables the MAT to flag the most vulnerable pupils and provide teachers with information on a need-to-know basis with key strategies and interventions to support the students in the classroom. For CWSW with persistent absences, the EWO works on a bespoke level to address their needs:

...so, it's very, it's on an individual basis, we offer incentives, we do everything we can to make sure that their attendance is a priority to us and why we want them to be here and trying to make them want to be here is the biggest thing really. *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

While attendance has not returned to pre-COVID rates, the DSL anecdotally stated that they are above the national average, overall, including for CWSW:

...we're not doing bad and in terms of we're above national and above, way above Keldbeck, we're the same for every vulnerable group *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

On a broader scale, the VSH reported in Survey 5 that work with an external agency that liaises with the school and parents has improved attendance and school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions):

Schools have self-reported that by using [external agency's] strategies, they have avoided 22 Permanent Exclusions and 314 episodes of suspension over 2 years. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Survey 5]*

Keldbeck's VSH is an important link and advisor to the DSL in finding solutions for difficult cases and raising accountability. AATI interventions are used to train schools on inclusive approaches to working with CWSW with low attendance and challenges at home. The DSL views that as a direct result of the extension of duties, the school has been able to provide CWSW with more targeted support:

So, one of the members of my safeguarding team is specifically linked to looked after children but also children with a social worker who may have SEMH needs and to be able to make sure that those children have the right plan and the right support and that is fed back to teachers around school to make sure that those pupils get support around school and that's as a direct result of working with a virtual school and saying well, you know what, we could do better here but I haven't, how do I do it? *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

One strategy to increase CSC's understanding of education has been to engage new senior service managers in social care with the VS to ensure that education remains in the top three priorities due to large turnover over of CSC senior staff:

There's been massive churn of staff on their side at the senior level, DCS, AD, all the way down, heads of service. We're talking about maybe three or four, probably four whole reinventions of all of that management there So, if you're trying to say that education or the work of the virtual school has...if it doesn't have primacy, it has at least some kind of importance within their thinking... but that's a very localised issue. *[AD; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

The VS has stepped up mandatory training to SWs and holds weekly briefing meetings with CSC staff completing case file audits and overall care planning. Information is reported back to the VS's governing body, chaired by the AD. The extended duties enabled the VSH to have greater influence in this work with SWs:

We work with the team around the child to give them information, advice, and guidance... We've made it mandatory training so that they've got an understanding of contextual safeguarding in school attendance and what educational neglect is as well and to make

sure that they feature in CPP and CIN plans. So, the [Keldbeck Attendance Intervention] project does that work. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Strengthened partnership between schools, social care, CAMHS, and the VS

The VS has grown in strategic influence in Keldbeck due to resources allocated that have improved access to data and strengthened partnerships for joint working with schools, social workers, CAMHS, police, and other LA services working with the CWSW cohort. The AD confirms that extended duties gave more legitimacy to the VS to strengthen cooperation among stakeholders:

If we'd have had the virtual school... hustling social workers who are already getting pulled from pillar to post about a child's attendance who's CIN or something. I don't know if they would've got the same response. So, the legitimacy and the resource to do something about it was absolutely critical at that point in time. *[AD; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

The VS's role also has strengthened oversight of CWSW between SWs, school, and police as 'an extra set of eyes' in a system with many professionals who are often changing, causing potential delay in communication processes, which may ultimately affect the safeguarding of children:

So even from a year ago when we spoke last, there's been some significant developments... So we seem to elicit a lot... more information, and that then has built new escalation policies with social care... So just kind of, for me, adds to the checks and balances. No system's perfect. People are off or ill, etc., and they missed this. So, you've got another set of eyes on these children, and that's way outside of, are you going to school? *[AD; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

It is possible that school staff perceive they do not have the same status as other LA services and often are overlooked and not consulted by SWs when triaging child assessments for panels, as the Keldbeck DSL describes:

We're often kind of being the ones that hold more information than any social worker and we often find that particularly at the moment a case will get picked up from a referral that's come in from elsewhere that we're not aware of, an assessment's done, nobody even contacts us and I keep saying to them do you have any idea what information we hold? *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

The VSH reports that the processes between VS and CAMHS have better aligned and have facilitated closer working relationships, better communication, and joint board-level participation since the introduction of the extension of duties:

So, all of the mental health we sit on their board and a member of theirs sit on our Strat [strategy] team. So, there's the communication across the two. So, whatever we do is embedded into what they're doing and how they support. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

An important partnership in Keldbeck that is making progress, although complex, is with the Youth Justice Board. While there are some conflicting viewpoints in delineating the boundaries between each other's role for the education of CWSW, establishing this relationship has built confidence that issues that need to be addressed on behalf of a CWSW will be timely:

And the secure estate sees it as their child. Obviously it's not. It's our child, or shared responsibility. And I think there can be issues there. We worked with Youth Justice Board, the one I chair, rather than the national one. And took our staff, including education staff into the secure establishments around us and had conversations with them just to build up a partnership... We know the staff in there. We can go in and feel comfortable kind of that we're going to get appropriate level of response if we raise issues with the governors of the secure state. *[AD; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Extended duties funding has enabled the VSH to apply a community-wide approach to attachment and trauma informed training that includes police, CAMHS, and other LA services working with CWSW, in an effort to align language, principles, and practices. This effort also serves as a preventive measure for children at risk of needing intervention from CSC. Prior to the extended duties:

...police are doing a little bit of attachment aware trauma informed, but they would never have got into schools. Some schools are doing a bit of attachment aware trauma informed, but that wouldn't have leaked in with CAMHS and they might have done a bit, but only with looked after children and it wouldn't have been as a wider scale and a broader scale because the point of [Keldbeck AATI Intervention] is to make it universal so we're all using a common language. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Rigorously tracking and monitoring CWSW, therefore, has supported the DfE broader initiative to make attendance a key focus of all frontline council services and bring together the systems that oversee CWSW. Triangulating data collected through

existing methods, better identifies the children who are persistently and severely absent, driving a multiagency approach to care planning. These objectives have provided professionals with data to inform strategies that support CWSW to access education:

So there has to be expectation around information, advice and guidance, and educating and bringing systems together and having people to drive that. I also think it gives great flexibility to the Virtual School head within that local authority to understand what that works with. Because with the funding we've got, it must be strategic. We can't do it in another way. *[VSH; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Building relationships with parents is a key strategy used by schools and supported by VSHs to encourage participation in their children's education. Transitioning from primary to secondary school is a key point of contact with parents. Schools aim to ensure that they have a key member of staff that they can build a trusting relationship with and have contact with throughout the school year. Common initiatives where parents are invited to engage with school are parent evenings, safeguarding talks, transition to secondary school events, and student academic and arts events. Parents are less likely to attend these events if relationships have not been established and therefore, more frequent contact with parents of CWSW with follow up calls and updates on student progress is an important step to the process for schools:

...with some families we do often find that it's just chipping away, building trust and just making sure that they've got a key member of staff in school that they trust, that they know they can ring into and often that is our safeguarding team...family evenings trying to bring people in to give them what they think is information and we've done some kind of safeguarding talks...but really, if they've not got a relationship, they're not just going to walk into school for those things anyway. *[DSL; Keldbeck; Case Study Interview]*

Joint work between the VSH and external agencies to support parent engagement strategies with schools has been an effective approach. The VSH has appointed a family communications officer from a local charity in Keldbeck that works with schools within an AATI framework to support this aim:

All [Charity Name] schools have audited parent engagement and have a school action plan to support development. There is a toolkit for parents to access to support AATI parenting. They create opportunities for families to develop their understanding and knowledge of

their child's learning needs and development. [VSH; Keldbeck; Survey 5]

Next steps

Keldbeck VSH did not respond to the items in Survey 5 regarding next steps. In the interviews for the latest round of case studies, the VSH indicated that priorities for Keldbeck in the net academic year include a focus on attendance, an increase in auditing in CSC around education, with a view to creating a model to ensure education has a higher priority for CWSW.

Redbury

Characteristics of LA and evidence base

Redbury is a mainly rural LA with a large geographic footprint and a medium overall number and medium rate per population of CWSW. The LA is currently in a period of transformation and change, following the retirement of the Director of Education, the removal of the role, and the reallocation of duties across different directorates within Children's Services. In Redbury, the VSH reports to the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care. Survey 5 was completed by the CWSW Lead and the VSH. The VSH, DM, a secondary school DSL, and a deputy DSL working in an infant and junior school were interviewed. **This case study foregrounds Redbury's work on attendance, training, and joint working.**

Brief summary: Sept 2021 – March 2023

In Phase One, Redbury actively sought to implement the extension of duties, particularly on attendance and joint training for education and CSC staff. The commencement of the extended duties coincided with the introduction of a countywide attendance strategy in Redbury. As part of this strategy, the VS began working closely with the Attendance Lead and other teams within the LA to promote good attendance across Redbury. Members of the VS joined two working parties related to the strategy, one on effective interventions and the other on workforce development, which focused on promoting the importance of making attendance everybody's business. By March 2023, Redbury had considerably extended its training activities for both schools and social care staff and was beginning to see some early outcomes of these activities such as schools and SWs having a clearer focus on the education of CWSW and better joint working and use of data to target specific schools. Individual schools provided examples of changing culture, improved behaviour, and a reduction in suspensions.

Focus post-March 2023

Building on earlier work around the attendance strategy in Redbury, at the start of the 2023/2024 academic year, the VS invested funding from the CWSW grant to part-fund the appointment of an Attendance Entitlement Officer (AEO) to the attendance team whose remit covers all children within the cohorts covered by the VS. They have also introduced a tracking mechanism to record all queries that come through the attendance duty advice line relating to CWSW. In line with Working Together to Improve School Attendance, and as part of their universal offer, attendance entitlement officers in Redbury also run targeted support meetings. The template used to guide these meetings was updated in the 2023/2024 academic year by the Attendance Entitlement Manager to include specific reference to CWSW. This has

helped to (1) raise awareness of the cohort, and (2) gain a better understanding of challenges related to attendance as well as examples of good practice.

Moving forward, the plan is for the VS and the AEO for CWSW to use feedback collected over the 2023/2024 academic year from schools and settings to inform training or resources to support schools. In addition to their universal offer, the AEO for CWSW is also engaged in targeted work, for example, attending CP conferences.

Most recently, the VS has been using available data to identify CWSW within the population of pupils who are severely absent from school ($\leq 50\%$ attendance). The monitoring of absence trends at the school and pupil level will further direct the work of the AEO for CWSW, with the aim being for the AEO to work at the whole school level to support practice. Rather than creating new systems, the approach of the Redbury VS has been to identify, build on, and enhance existing systems.

Developments in theory of change outcomes

Improved data quality

In Survey 5, the CWSW Lead somewhat agrees that they have access to data for current CWSW oversight in the areas of attendance, persistent absence, and permanent exclusions, but strongly disagrees that they have access for suspensions. Access to data for attainment and school moves was neutral.

The picture for Ever 6 CWSW is different, with the CWSW Lead strongly disagreeing they have access to all areas except for permanent exclusions; this exception coming about due to a bespoke piece of work the VS has undertaken prior to the extension of duties, but nonetheless encompasses the Ever 6 cohort. Redbury VS feel that access to Ever 6 CWSW data is poorer due to schools not having a directive to collect the data, the CWSW Lead suggests that:

...further work needs to be done to ensure this cohort of children [Ever 6 CWSW] is collected through existing reporting mechanisms e.g. creating a flag within Wonde, within the school and pupil census and an ability to report on this cohort at a national and local level for attainment to start reliably capturing data for this cohort. [CWSW Lead; Redbury; Survey 5]

Redbury VS make the best use of the available data but caveat that delays in data availability and access can hamper progress towards this outcome. The VS team work closely with data managers and partners to develop systems that accommodate shortcomings in current systems. Through this work, Redbury are able to collect data about the CWSW cohort half termly to include a breakdown of case status (CIN/CP/Social Worker Assessment), school phase broken down by case status, setting type attending, SEND, Free School Meal (FSM) entitlement, English as an

Additional Language (EAL), school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), absence sessions overall for cohort, geography for where the CWSW are located within the Redbury locality model, and proportion of CWSW at each setting. Being able to access data categorised in this way has allowed Redbury to approach schools and settings where there are large numbers of CWSW to be able to promote the VS offer of support. However, the lack of attainment data means it is difficult to target this offer to narrow the attainment gap specifically.

Redbury have appointed an AEO who has enabled Redbury to use their CWSW data alongside the DfE Wonde data and have achieved a 77% match rate to give cumulative attendance data for this cohort. Consequently, they have been able to track CWSW who are persistently and severely absent pupils. The AEO has been able to target work both with schools and social care to offer advice and guidance to improve pupils' attendance. Redbury identify that having timely reporting on attainment data for this cohort would enhance their ability to target and support CWSW more effectively at a school level.

Increased schools' understanding of CWSW needs

Redbury VS consider progress towards this outcome has been fully achieved. Mainly through their established relational practice training offer for schools and other agencies. Key headlines from Redbury's work towards this outcome include:

- A third cohort of the practitioners across Redbury have accessed the 11-day Trauma Informed Schools UK Diploma in Trauma and Mental Health-Informed Schools and Communities. Upon completion in Autumn term, this will bring the total of trained practitioners to 81.
- Programme begun to build sustainability for practitioners to maintain their Trauma Informed Schools UK accreditation through the provision of supervision.
- Termly Trauma and Attachment Aware Practice in Education Network meetings
- Local funding in the form of a grant to develop relational practice has been accessed by 27 settings.
- Funding of an early intervention programme for mental health and well-being is available to all secondary and specialist schools across Redbury.
- Bespoke VS introductory training 'Becoming a Trauma and Attachment Aware Practitioner' has been successfully delivered to 18 schools and settings.

More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

Redbury focused on attendance to make progress towards this outcome. In Survey 5, the CWSW Lead somewhat agrees that the extension of duties has made a difference to attendance of CWSW. Redbury also addressed this outcome by developing understanding of CWSW needs through relational approaches and training leading to increases in inclusive practice in schools. Redbury achieved this in part by funding external organisations to deliver projects aimed at early intervention of mental health and physical health in schools, but is unclear if the funding for this came solely through the extension grant or was part-funded with other resource envelopes.

Redbury VS continue to develop good relationships with schools in their locality by offering opportunities for advice and support, particularly around school exclusions (suspensions and permanent exclusions), as this DSL describes:

...we did have a conversation [with the VS] about a child at risk of suspension and how we could support them to make sure it didn't happen. And those were very useful conversations to have so that we could reframe it and think about other things that we could put in place to support that child's emerging behaviours, so that it was less likely to happen again. So, they've been very helpful with that. *[DSL; Redbury; Case Study Interview]*

The addition of the AEO (see 'Improved Data Quality' section above) has led to a tiered response to meeting CWSW needs. As part of Redbury's universal offer and usual operating practices, the attendance team will highlight CWSW through their termly support meetings with attendance officers in school. Their targeted offer has evolved to tracking severely and persistently absent trends for this cohort and the AEO works to support attendance practice at a school level, this has been coordinated with Redbury's CLA cohort. The VS consider the bespoke, dynamic pupil-level response to join Team Around the Child (TAC) discussions when requested by VS advisers to support and challenge attendance practice as most impactful for an individual pupil level.

In addition, the Attendance Entitlement Manager attends CP Conferences where, given the child's current attendance, it is felt additional attendance expertise would be beneficial. For example, Redbury VS conducted work that aimed to increase attendance for severely absent/persistently absent CWSW in Year 6, ahead of transition to secondary school, to ensure effective transition plans were in place, with a focus on supporting attendance. Tracking of this group of CWSW has continued after they have been stepped down (and so would fall into the Ever 6 CWSW category) and ongoing attendance reviews are in place.

Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

In Survey 5, the CWSW Lead reported that this outcome was 'somewhat achieved'. Redbury VS have developed SWs' understanding of education by providing a programme for trainee SWs akin to the SWIS programme. Building on their work in the 2022/23 academic year, Redbury continued with the programme in the current academic year (2023/2024) and saw enrolment increase by 50%. Eight trainee SWs completed a placement in school, including training and activities during school holidays lead by the VS. Redbury utilised the skills and experience of the VS team and collaborated with the attendance team to provide a comprehensive schedule delivering content on the VS cohorts, Personal Education Plans (PEPs), introduction to special school provision, and overview of attendance, as well as access to AC Education learning modules and webinars:

...feedback from the trainee SWs was that they found the session delivered by our AEO around the importance of school attendance to be really beneficial as well and so, you can see how we're trying to link various pieces of work. *[CWSW Lead; Redbury; Case Study Interview]*

In addition, Redbury VS have worked with the LA's Designated Social Care Officer to increase CSC staff's understanding of SEND by devising a training offer and co-delivering sessions.

School staff report varied levels of understanding of CSC and needs associated with CWSW. One DSL trained in relational approaches describes how a lack of understanding can have a direct effect on attendance in lessons:

Some staff are very old fashioned and think that those young people are being naughty, and I would say there's increased truancy to some of those lessons into my Nurture area because there's no relationship with those staff, and they think that they're choosing to not go to the lessons, and they absolutely are choosing not to go to those lessons, but they're choosing because there is no relationship. There's no sitting with those staff and those young people and those staff don't believe that they're going to get better. *[DSL; Redbury; Case Study Interview]*

Strengthened partnership between schools, social care, CAMHS, and the VS

The CWSW Lead in Survey 5 rated progress towards this outcome as 'somewhat achieved'. Both the VSH and CWSW Lead refer to ongoing work at the LA level in the area of SEND awareness. The VS participate in specialist SEMH moderation

panels and a panel specifically concerned with identification of SEND needs descriptors in education settings. One of the main aspects of this work is to ensure consistency in identifying need with children across the categories from within the SEND code of practice. The CWSW Lead recalls the focus of a recent meeting being:

...around identification of the primary area of need for EHCPs for CIN and CP children; they're highlighting the crossover between the [CWSW] cohort and free school meals. So, I think that is also a burgeoning area of work where we can look to make influence and impact. *[CWSW Lead; Redbury; Case Study Interview]*

Much of the work to improve joint working is driven by access to data. For example, in improving understanding of SEND, e.g., where to access information and support (see above the partnership work with the Designated Social Care Officer in delivery to social care teams); work with the safeguarding team promoted the role of the VS through a dedicated webinar highlighting the VS's remit under the extension of duties; and also trauma and attachment aware training opportunities. Redbury have seen an increase in the number of DSLs who are seeking to attend VS courses and engage with cohort discussions.

The VSH also contributes to the county-wide attendance strategy, and the associated subgroups, for effective intervention and workforce development which have contributed to the guidance available through the VS attendance team.

The VSH has acted as mediator and coordinator when bringing services together by leveraging prioritisation or awareness in a range of specialist teams that already have responsibilities to CWSW:

I think that's everybody's business, because I think the risk, and it's a risk for Children in Care as well. As soon as you say, 'here's a team that are responsible', then the risk is, well, 'here you go then'. And so, we spend an awful lot of time saying 'no'. We're the people with the grit in the systems, so we're the people looking holistically, saying 'shouldn't you be?' 'Are you aware of?' 'Can you link in?' So, I think that ability to join people together and to challenge and to question and to then support, because you can't just challenge and say it's your job now. We have to be able to support as well, because I think there is no service that is not feeling hugely under pressure. *[VSH; Redbury; Case Study Interview]*

Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Redbury VS report that targeted work by the VS towards this outcome is not a priority and sees this falling mainly under the remit of schools. The VS responds to requests for advice and support from SWs with regard to working with parents and families.

Next steps

In Survey 5, we asked the VSH to identify their priorities for CWSW and activities to improve outcomes in the current (2024/2025) academic year:

Priorities

- Quality of education and learning.
- Outcomes focused (progress and attainment).
- Whole system (supporting collaboration and partnership working).
- Understood and included (ensuring our children and young people feel listened to, understood, and part of the decision-making progress).

Activities

- By 2026, a professional development (PD) offer has been developed to focus on improving education within CIN and CP plans. This is continually updated using feedback from a quality assurance process to highlight strengths and areas of improvement which can be responded to through the PD offer.
- Through aggregate data of specific cohorts (CIN, CP) showing schools they attend, and scrutiny of progress data for settings with high numbers of CWSW the VS will ensure contact for focused discussions where there is not already a Children in Care adviser.
- By 2026, pupils who are within the CWSW cohort are no more likely than their peers to be subject to suspension or permanent exclusion as evidenced by monitoring and collaborative working with the Inclusion and SEND Teams.
- All teams with established relationships to raise awareness of the cohort will have termly contact to promote and raise awareness of the VS offer of support.
- A clear pathway has been established and communicated to partners for acknowledging school and settings impact on embedding trauma and attachment aware practice utilising the ARC audit and matrix to evidence.
- By 2026, the VS aim for a 50% increase in attendance at Trauma and Attachment Aware Practice in Education Network.

Annex 3: Responses to VSH Survey 5

Question 1: I have read the information sheet

Response: Yes/ No

Q2: Do you agree to take part in this survey?

R: Y/ N

Q3: What is your job title and role within the Virtual School (VS) in relation to the extension of duties for CWSW?

Table 30: Job title and role within the Virtual School

Role	n (%)
VSH	61 (57.5)
DVSH/ AVSH with responsibility for CWSW	18 (17.0)
Other - with responsibility for CWSW	27 (25.5)
Total	106 (100)

Q4: Please state your Local Authority

R: Open text

Q5: Please state the region of your local authority

Table 31: Responses to survey by region and total

LA Region	Frequency <i>n</i>	Response by region %	Response of total %
London	20	64.5	18.7
South East	18	100	16.8
North West	17	70.8	15.9
Yorkshire	8	53.3	6.5
West Midlands	10	71.4	9.3
South West	9	71.4	8.4
North East	6	50.0	5.6
East of England	13	100	12.1
East Midlands	7	77.8	6.5
Total	107	100	100

Q6: We would like to ask some questions about where the Virtual School sits in your LA. Who does the VSH report to? (Note: We appreciate 'Educ' and 'CSC' may not be the description you use locally but hope they are sufficiently indicative to help you place yourself in your LA structure)

Table 32: Who does the VSH report to?

Response	<i>n</i> (%)
DCS	7 (6.5)
AD – Education	58 (54.2)
AD – CSC	12 (11.2)
Other head of service	30 (28.0)
Total	107 (100)

Q7: What is the professional background of the VSH?

Table33: VSH background

VSH background	n (%)
Teacher	98 (92.5)
Other	8 (7.5)
Total	106 (100)

Q8: Out of all of the training delivered by the Virtual School in the academic year 2023/2024, please **estimate** the proportion of training for Social Workers, schools or other agencies (please set so that all choices total 100% of the training)

Table 34: Please estimate the proportion of training for Social Workers, schools or other agencies

Professional body	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
SW only	5 (5.6)	22 (24.4)	20 (22.2)	19 (21.1)	11 (12.2)	9 (10.0)	4 (4.4)	-	-	-	-
Schools only	2 (2.2)	3 (3.3)	5 (5.6)	11 (12.2)	19 (21.1)	18 (20.0)	15 (16.7)	12 (13.3)	4 (4.4)	1 (1.1)	-
Other agencies only	46 (51.1)	30 (33.3)	12 (13.3)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	-	-	-	-	-	-
SW and School (joint)	47 (52.2)	19 (21.1)	11 (12.2)	3 (3.3)	4 (4.4)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	2 (2.2)	-	-	1 (1.1)
Other joint	49 (54.4)	21 (22.2)	11 (12.2)	3 (3.3)	4 (4.4)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)	-	-	-	-

Note 2: Total n=90 for all rows; all cells (n %)

Q9: Do you, or a colleague within the Virtual School, now sit on any decision-making panels or groups relating to CWSW?

R: Y/ N

Table 35: Decision making panel membership

Response	<i>n</i> (%)
Yes	83 (77.6)
No	24 (22.4)
Total	107 (100)

Q10: For each panel, please briefly outline its function

R: Open text

Q11: Please give an example of a key contribution by the Virtual School to one of these panels

R: Open text

Q12: Do you work with any Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) in relation to the extension of duties?

R: Y/N

Table 36: Working with MATs

Response	<i>n</i> (%)
Yes	78 (74.3)
No	27 (25.7)
Total	105 (100)

Q13: Please outline any challenges or facilitators when working with MATs in relation to the extension of duties:

R: Open text

Q14: The DfE guidance includes in the CWSW definition any child who has fulfilled the criteria at any time in the last 6 years, but do not currently have a social worker (known as Ever6 CWSW). Please state your level of agreement with the following statement for each area:

Our Virtual School has access to the data I feel we need to maintain effective oversight of the Ever6 CWSW cohort relating to:

Table 37: Access and quality of Ever 6 CWSW data

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree
Attendance	34 (32.4)	23 (21.9)	9 (8.6)	32 (30.5)	7 (6.7)
Persistent absence	33 (31.4)	24 (22.9)	9 (8.6)	31 (29.5)	8 (7.6)
Attainment	43 (41.0)	34 (32.4)	12 (11.4)	10 (9.5)	6 (5.7)
Suspension	29 (27.6)	24 (22.9)	11 (10.5)	29 (27.1)	12 (11.4)
Permanent exclusions	24 (22.9)	25 (23.8)	12 (11.4)	28 (26.7)	16 (15.2)
School Moves	44 (41.9)	25 (23.8)	16 (15.2)	14 (13.3)	6 (5.7)

Note 3: All rows total $n=105$; all cells ($n \%$)

Q15: If access to, and quality of, data for Ever 6 CWSW is poorer than for current CWSW, please indicate why you think this is:

R: Open text

Q16: Please state your level of agreement with the following statement for each area:
Our Virtual School has access to the data I feel we need to maintain effective oversight of the current CWSW cohort relating to:

Table 38: Access and quality of current CWSW data

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree
Attendance	4 (3.8)	11 (10.5)	6 (5.7)	41 (38.3)	43 (41.0)
Persistent absence	5 (4.8)	9 (8.6)	7 (6.7)	41 (39.0)	43 (41.0)
Attainment	18 (17.1)	33 (31.4)	16 (15.2)	22 (20.6)	16 (15.0)
Suspension	6 (5.7)	13 (12.4)	10 (9.5)	38 (36.2)	38 (36.2)
Permanent exclusions	3 (2.9)	11 (10.5)	9 (8.6)	35 (33.3)	47 (44.8)
School Moves	23 (21.9)	25 (23.8)	20 (19.0)	24 (22.9)	13 (12.4)

Note 4: All rows total n=105; all cells (n %)

Q17: Has the availability of these data improved joint working between services (e.g., Schools, Children’s Social Care, Youth Justice)?

R: Y/N

Table 39: Availability of data improved joint working

Response	n (%)
Yes	90 (85.7)
No	15 (14.3)
Total	105 (100)

Q18: Please describe the improvements:

R: Open text

Q19: Has the availability of these data changed the practice of partners (e.g., Schools, Children’s Social Care, Youth Justice)?

R: Y/ N

Table 40: Have availability of data changed the practice of partners?

Response	n (%)
Yes	81 (77.9)
No	23 (22.1)
Total	104 (100)

Q20: Please describe the changes.

R: Open text

Q21: What information/ data, that you don't currently have access to, would be useful to monitor outcomes for the CWSW cohort?

R: Open text

Q22: In what ways could having access to those additional data help to improve outcomes for CWSW?

R: Open text

Q23, 26, 29: Please rate the following statements:

The extension of duties has made a difference to the **attendance/ suspensions/ permanent exclusions** of CWSW.

Table 41: VSH views on whether the extension of duties has made a difference to attendance, suspensions, and permanent exclusions

Area	Strongly disagree	Some-what disagree	Neither	Some-what agree	Strongly agree	Total
Attendance	2 (1.9)	6 (5.8)	30 (29.1)	55 (53.4)	10 (9.7)	103 (100)
Suspensions	4 (3.9)	11 (10.8)	42 (41.2)	37 (36.3)	8 (7.8)	102 (100)
Permanent exclusions	5 (4.9)	11 (10.8)	42 (41.2)	32 (31.4)	12 (11.8)	102 (100)

Q24: For any **increase** in attendance, please provide an example of activity that in your view has led to this

R: Open text

Q25: For any **decrease** in attendance, please suggest why you think this is

R: Open text

Q27: For any **decrease** in suspensions, please provide an example of activity that in your view has led to this

R: Open text

Q28: For any **increase** in suspensions, please suggest why you think this is

R: Open text

Q30: For any **decrease** in permanent exclusions, please provide an example of activity that in your view has led to this

R: open text

Q31: For any **increase** in permanent exclusions, please suggest why you think this is

R: Open text

Q32: Below are the outcomes for the 2023-2024 academic year drawn from the theory of change. We acknowledge that work towards meeting these outcomes may still be ongoing.

First, please rate your view of progress in the LA towards each outcome.

Table 42: Progress against ToC outcomes

Toc Outcome	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Some- what <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Not started <i>n</i> (%)
Increased schools' understanding of the needs of the cohort	3 (2.9)	31 (30.4)	64 (62.7)	4 (3.9)	-
More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)	2 (1.9)	20 (19.6)	65 (63.7)	15 (14.7)	-
Increasing CSC's understanding of education and vice versa	1 (1.0)	36 (35.3)	57 (55.9)	8 (7.8)	-
Strengthened partnership between school, social care, CAMHS, and the VS	3 (2.9)	41 (40.2)	46 (45.1)	10 (9.8)	2 (2.0)
Increasing capacity and capability of parents to engage with education	1 (1.0)	7 (6.9)	35 (34.3)	41 (40.2)	18 (17.6)

Note 6: All rows *n*=102

Q33: Next, we'd like to focus on each short-term outcome in turn.

1. Increasing schools' understanding of the needs of the cohort

Please describe the strategies that have been used by the Virtual School to address this particular outcome:

R: Open text

Q34: In the 2023/2024 academic year what difference has the Virtual School made to **schools' understanding of CWSW and their needs?**

R: Open text

Q35: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q36: 2. More inclusive practice in schools (directed by SLT)

Please describe the strategies that have been used by the Virtual School to address this particular outcome:

R: Open text

Q37: In the 2023/2024 academic year, what difference has the Virtual School made to school practice in relation to the **inclusion of CWSW in schools?**

R: Open text

Q38: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q39: 3. Increased CSC's understanding of education and vice versa

Please describe the strategies that have been used by the Virtual School to address this particular outcome:

R: Open text

Q40: In the 2023/ 2024 academic year, what difference has the Virtual School made to the **understanding of education by social workers &/or their managers?**

R: Open text

Q41: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q42: In the 2023/ 2024 academic year, what difference has the Virtual School made to the **understanding of Children's Social Care by school staff?**

R: Open text

Q43: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q44: 4. Strengthened partnership between School, Social Care, CAMHS, and the VS

Please describe the strategies that have been used by the Virtual School to address this particular outcome:

R: Open text

Q45: In the 2023/ 2024 academic year, what difference has the Virtual School made to the **quality &/or breadth of partnership working around CWSW and their families?**

R: Open text

Q46: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q47: Please provide two examples of how working with other professionals who support CWSW has changed the practice of partners (e.g., Health, Educational Psychology, Youth Offending Team, Police, Education Entitlement, SEND/Inclusion, Early Help, School improvement).

R: Open text

Q48: Are there any specific partners where joint working has been a particular challenge?

Table 43: Partners where joint working has been a particular challenge

Challenging partners	<i>n</i> (%)
Yes	52 (54.2)
No	44 (45.8)
Total	96 (100)

Q49: If yes, which partner and why?

R: Open text

Q50: Are there any specific partners where joint working has been particularly effective?

Table 44: Partners where joint working has been a particular challenge

Response	<i>n (%)</i>
Yes	84 (90.3)
No	9 (9.7)
Total	93 (100)

Q51: If yes, which partner and why?

R: Open text

Q52: 5. Increased capacity and capability of parents to engage with education

Please describe the strategies that have been used by the Virtual School to meet this particular outcome:

R: Open text

Q53: In the 2023/ 2024 academic year, what difference has the Virtual School made to **improving the capacity and capability of parents to engage with education?**

R: Open text

Q54: What evidence (e.g., data, policy documents, anecdotal) informs your answer to this question?

R: Open text

Q55: The theory of change also sets out long-term outcomes for the 2024/ 2025 academic year.

Please rate any early indications of progress towards each outcome:

Table 45: Early indications of progress towards long-term ToC outcomes

Toc Outcome	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Some- what <i>n</i> (%)	Barely <i>n</i> (%)	Not started <i>n</i> (%)
Improved attainment	2 (2.2)	2 (2.2)	20 (21.7)	39 (42.4)	29 (31.5)
Improved achievement	2 (2.2)	2 (2.2)	31 (34.1)	33 (36.3)	23 (25.3)
Improved attendance	2 (2.2)	7 (7.5)	56 (60.2)	25 (26.9)	3 (3.2)
Reduced suspensions	2 (2.2)	6 (6.5)	45 (48.4)	34 (36.6)	6 (6.5)
Reduced permanent exclusions	3 (3.3)	15 (16.3)	38 (41.3)	30 (32.6)	6 (6.5)
Reduced in-year transitions	1 (1.1)	3 (3.3)	26 (28.6)	27 (29.7)	34 (37.4)
Improved engagement with education	-	15 (16.5)	59 (64.8)	14 (15.4)	3 (3.3)
Improved well-being	-	4 (4.4)	55 (60.4)	22 (24.2)	10 (11.0)
Improved resilience	-	5 (5.6)	48 (53.3)	25 (27.8)	12 (13.3)
Improved transitions	-	10 (11.1)	44 (48.9)	28 (31.1)	8 (8.9)
CYP feel valued and understood	-	11 (12.1)	51 (56.0)	19 (20.9)	10 (11.0)
CYP have more voice and agency in the process	-	11 (12.1)	52 (57.1)	16 (17.6)	12 (13.2)

Q56: For any long-term outcomes 'not started', please describe how you plan to measure these outcomes.

R: Open text

Q57: Please rate the following statement:

'Since the introduction of the new duties in September 2021, the focus on educational needs and targets in CIN/ CP plans has improved.'

Table 46: Education focus and clarity in CIN/ CP plans

	Agree <i>n (%)</i>	Neither <i>n (%)</i>	Disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Don't know <i>n (%)</i>	Total <i>n</i>
Clarity of CIN/ CP plan improved	66 (71.8)	13 (14.1)	7 (7.6)	6 (6.5)	92

Q58: We understand that the extension of duties is described as 'strategic' but appreciate that VSHs have taken different approaches to implementing the duties in pursuit of strategic change.

Responses from focused interviews with Virtual School Heads have indicated that work under the extended duties tends to fall within three main categories:

- **'System level' work:** e.g., LA level activity; organisation of resources; general training; attending panels; working with Headteacher groups; influencing teams (e.g., LA SEND, inclusion, attendance)
- **'Operational' work:** e.g., signposting to other services; targeted training; attending CIN/ CP review meetings; joining informal meetings between school & CSC to facilitate understanding/agreement
- **'Direct' work:** e.g., working 1-1 with CYP/ parents; providing specific resources or activities e.g., horse riding, equipment, tutoring

Q59: Which of these are you doing?

Table 47: VSH approach to the extension of duties

Approach	Yes, and is the main focus	Yes, but it not the main focus	Not doing this	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	81 (85.3)	14 (14.7)	-	95
Operational	36 (37.9)	56 (58.9)	3 (3.2)	95
Direct	4 (4.3)	36 (38.3)	54 (57.4)	94

Q60: Which of these do you think the guidance expects you to do?

Table 48: Expectation of approach

Approach	Yes	No	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	95 (100)	-	95
Operational	55 (62.5)	33 (37.5)	88
Direct	1 (1.1)	88 (98.9)	89

Q61: Which would you like to see the guidance expect you to do?

Table 49: Preference of approach

Approach	Yes	No	Total <i>n</i>
System Level	92 (97.9)	2 (2.1)	94
Operational	78 (83.9)	15 (16.1)	93
Direct	30 (33.3)	60 (66.7)	90

Q62: To what extent do you feel the Virtual School has been able to fulfil the responsibilities of the extension of duties as laid out in the guidance?

Table 50: Extent of responsibility fulfilled

Extent of responsibility fulfilled	Fully <i>n</i> (%)	Mostly <i>n</i> (%)	Some-what <i>n</i> (%)	A little <i>n</i> (%)	Not at all <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i>
Responsibilities fulfilled	5 (5.3)	39 (41.1)	39 (41.1)	12 (12.6)	-	95

Q63: Please suggest why you think this is

R: Open text

Q64: What have been the principal **facilitators** in fulfilling the responsibilities of the extension of duties as laid out in the guidance?

R: Open text

Q65: What have been the principal **barriers** in fulfilling the responsibilities of the extension of duties as laid out in the guidance?

R: Open text

Q66: What would you identify as the **benefits**, if any, of including Ever 6 CWSW in the extension of duties?

R: Open text

Q67: What would you identify as the **issues**, if any, of including Ever 6 CWSW in the extension of duties?

R: Open text

Q68: What outcomes are the Virtual School prioritising in this academic year?

R: Open text

Q69: What will the Virtual School be doing to try to improve outcomes for CWSW in this (2024/ 2025) academic year?

R: Open text

Q70: Finally, please add any other comments, not already covered in this survey, relating to the Virtual School's extension of duties to CWSW that you feel the evaluation team should know.

R: Open text

End of Survey

Annex 4: Technical Annex – Quantitative Evaluation

Introduction

This Technical Annex presents the quantitative findings from the Evaluation of the Extension of the Virtual School Heads (VSH) Programme, focusing on its impact on Children with a Social Worker (CWSW); identified as children subject to a Child in Need (CIN) plan or Child Protection (CP) plan.

The evaluation examines outcomes of (i) engagement (in particular school absenteeism and school suspensions); and (ii) educational attainment. In line with the theory of change and findings presented in the main report, VSHs have indicated that they perceive impacts on engagement, but think it is too soon to see these play through into impacts on attainment. In this statistical analysis, we test whether that may be the case at population level in national administrative data.

The statistical analysis presented here is intended to contribute to the overall, mixed methods, formative evaluation by providing insight on the trends for children identified as being subject to CIN or CP plans and attempting to estimate, with advanced statistical analysis, what the potential impacts of the VSH programme might be.

We have population level, longitudinal data, with good measures across our outcomes of interest, spanning the period before and after the extension of duties. However, the analysis of impact is preliminary and tentative at best because of the nature of the programme and its rollout, the early phase of implementation, and the multiple related changes through the COVID-19 pandemic that are hard to disentangle in the data. We present these findings to support learning about current trends and the challenge facing VSHs, rather than as firm and reliable estimates of the long term effects of the programme.

We first describe the different methods followed for the different outcome variables considered. These are different for engagement outcomes than for attainment because for the data on engagement we have annual observations per child, whereas for attainment, given the initial extension of the VSH was introduced in September 2021, most pupils only had scores for one key stage assessment within the time frame of the study.⁷⁰ This means we can use more robust panel data techniques for the engagement outcomes, while the available attainment data can only provide a “snapshot” of the population of interest at one specific moment. Results on engagement are presented

⁷⁰ Outcome data were available for the academic years 2017/18; 2018/19; 2021/22; and 2022/23 with the years 2019/20 and 2020/21 missing due to COVID-19 restrictions

first, followed by those on attainment. Next, we briefly describe robustness checks and sensitivity analysis conducted and then conclude.

Data and methods

This report presents the quantitative findings from the Phase Two evaluation of the extension of the VSH duties to CWSW to understand how the extension of duties were implemented, explore trends in outcomes, and estimate early signs of impact. Initially the extension was introduced for a six-month pilot between September 2021 - March 2022 (see Sebba et al. 2022)⁷¹. In March 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) announced that the initial six-month pilot would be extended until March 2025.

Our interest is in understanding the trends in educational engagement and attainment of the CWSW cohort before and after the extension of duties and estimating the possible effects of the VSH programme on these outcomes. We do this using two linked national administrative datasets and a number of different statistical modelling techniques, which are explained in more detail in this paper.

Groups of interest

The role of the VSH was extended to include all children who have or had a social worker from September 2021 defined as children currently - or previously - on (during the past six years).

However, because the extension of duties is primarily a strategic role that is defined across a broad population of CWSW ever in the last six years, there is no one-to-one connection between a specific child and a service. In short, there is no formal treatment group. To try and identify children based on their likelihood of receipt of the impact of the strategic role, we focused on CWSW who were 'currently' subject to a plan across each of the years they were observed in the data (see The extension of VSH duties was introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic, which also saw periods of school closure and the cancellation of Key Stage assessments. This means there are gaps in the coverage of available data. Moreover, data from the NPD was only available to the end of the 2022/23 academic year, meaning that the quantitative evaluation was only able to cover the first 18 months of the VSH extension. Table 51 provides an overview of the two linked datasets in relation to the extension of the VSH programme.

(see Table 51 for further detail on the structure of the datasets used).

⁷¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_December_2022.pdf

Data from the CIN Census return were used to create two key groups of interest:

- a Child in Need (CIN) Plan; or
- a Child Protection (CP) Plan.

We compared these two groups across two time periods: before (2017/18-2018/19) and after (2021/22-2022/23) the extension of the VSH programme. Where possible, and for context particularly in relation to the broader trends over time, we also compare these groups with children who were **not** on any such plan.

Data

Data come from two administrative datasets which track the care-related experiences (CIN Census return) and educational outcomes and key related characteristics (NPD) of children and young people in England:

- **Children in Need (CIN) Census return:** The CIN Census covers all children and young people referred to Children's Social Care Services in England even if no further action is taken. It includes children's demographic characteristics, referral dates, actions and outcomes of assessments. We requested records for the academic years covering the period 2012/13–2022/23.

National Pupil Database (NPD): The NPD is a longitudinal database linking pupil and student characteristics and attainment information for all children in state-funded schools in England. It holds pupil and school characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, attendance, and suspensions matched to pupil level attainment data. Data was requested on attainment at Key Stages 1, 2, and 4 and on individual-level characteristics, such as Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and absences and suspensions for the academic years 2017/18; 2018/19; 2021/22; 2022/23. Note that due to the pandemic and the cancellation of exams, attainment data were unavailable for KS1 and KS2 for 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 (see Table 51 for more detail).

De-identified data were provided by DfE for analysis in the Secure Research Service (SRS) provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).⁷²

The DfE uses the child's Unique Pupil Number (UPN) as the primary matching key to link social care and education datasets. The UPN is allocated to pupils when they start

⁷² This work was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS) using data from the ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

school. Local authorities (LAs) submit (as part of the CIN Census) a valid UPN for all children who received services during April 1st-March 31st of the collection year. The UPN ensures that there is a standard set of identifiers and enable data to be linked. The records from the social care datasets are matched into the NPD by the DfE, mainly through the UPN, but also by other information such as date of birth, sex, ethnicity, and the LA caring for the child. If a child can be matched, the child is given a Pupil Matching Reference (PMR) number, and it is this de-identified number that can be made available for researchers to use.

Data structure

The extension of VSH duties was introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic, which also saw periods of school closure and the cancellation of Key Stage assessments. This means there are gaps in the coverage of available data. Moreover, data from the NPD was only available to the end of the 2022/23 academic year, meaning that the quantitative evaluation was only able to cover the first 18 months of the VSH extension. Table 51 provides an overview of the two linked datasets in relation to the extension of the VSH programme.

Table 51: Data structure and coverage

	2012 - 2016	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
VSH Extension						•	•
CIN Census	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
NPD		•	•	No data due to COVID-19 restrictions	No data due to COVID-19 restrictions	•	•

Data from the CIN Census return was used to create the key groups of interest and provides data on the length of time children have been in contact with Children’s Services and when, across the full time-frame included in the study.

The NPD provided the detail for the outcomes, both engagement and attainment, as well as the covariates. Given the period where there is no available data from the NPD following COVID-19 restrictions – 2019/20 and 2020/21 – falls broadly within the same window as the extension of the VSH programme, outcome data is therefore considered as being measured before and/or after the VSH extension.

Types of data

Due to the nature of the data and the period of investigation covered by the study, the available data to estimate the effects of the extension of the VSH programme differed between absences, suspensions, and attainment data:

- For absences and suspensions, we were able to access information for the number of sessions missed due to both absences and suspensions for each pupil per year, which allows the generation of panel datasets. This type of data follows the same units of observation, in this case, pupils, over multiple time periods, here, academic years, whilst also taking into account individual characteristics, and important contextual factors.
- For academic attainment, Key Stage assessments are typically administered at ages 7 (KS1), 11 (KS2), and 16 (KS4) and so are not available for each pupil in every year. As such, most pupils in these data only had one attainment observation.⁷³ This means the available data for our evaluation in terms of attainment outcomes are largely cross-sectional and typically only contain key stage scores for a single point in time. As such, unlike the panel data for absences and suspensions which can look at the same student before and after the VSH extension, the available attainment data can only provide a “snapshot” of the population of interest at one specific moment or Key Stage.

Reflecting these differences in the structure and type of data, sample sizes varied by outcome and we used different sets of analytical approaches for estimating the possible effects of the programme’s extension on the two sets of outcome variables.

Sample

The sample sizes from the linked datasets are detailed in

Table 52, shown by group.

⁷³ There are some pupils in these data who have attainment measures at two time points, namely those who took KS1 assessments in 2017/18 and then KS2 in 2021/22. However, the sample sizes were not large enough within the CWSW cohort to model this data longitudinally. Similarly, pupils who took KS2 assessments in 2017/18 would have taken their KS4 exams in the summer of 2022/23, however, data from the CIN Census return only included the period to 31st March 2023, meaning that this groups who potentially might have had longitudinal information, actually had not finished the KS4 period.

Table 52: Sample sizes by outcome

Outcome:	CIN plan	CP plan	Not on a plan	Total
Absences	79,230	7,360	-	86,590
Suspensions	93,420	8,510	-	101,930
Educational attainment in KS1	57,000	11,430	2,106,820	2,175,250
Educational attainment in KS2	75,980	8,210	1,997,720	2,081,910
Educational attainment in KS4	90,110	5,930	1,795,380	1,891,420

Source: ONS.

Measures

Our interest lies in exploring trends and estimating the possible impact of the VSH extension on educational engagement and attainment outcomes.

Outcome measures**Engagement**

Number of sessions missed due to absence: The total number of sessions missed annually due to absence for all pupils as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions for all pupils. One session is equal to half a day.

Number of sessions missed due to suspension: The total number of sessions missed annually due to suspension. Suspensions, also known as 'fixed period exclusions', refer to when a pupil is excluded from a school for a set period of time. A suspension can involve a part of the school day and it does not have to be for a continuous period. A pupil can be suspended for 1 or more periods up to a maximum of 45 school days in a single academic year.

Attainment

Key Stage 1: Attainment at KS1 is measured through teacher assessments when children are typically aged 7. Indicators of KS1 attainment are defined as the percentage of children who reached or exceeded the expected standard for reading, writing, maths, and science for KS1.

Key Stage 2: Attainment for KS2 is assessed in Year 6 when pupils are typically aged 11 and is measured here as the percentage of children who reached or exceeded the

expected standard in reading, writing (Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling; GPS), and maths for KS2.

Key Stage 4: Attainment at KS4, when pupils are typically aged 16, is measured using three separate indicators:

- Attainment 8 score: Attainment 8 is a scale measure used to assess the average academic performance of students across eight subjects at the end of Key Stage 4. The scale for Attainment 8 is based on the grades achieved in these subjects. Each grade is assigned a point score using the new GCSE grading system (9 to 1), with English and maths double weighted. The scores are summed and then divided by ten.
- Number of passes at grades 9-4: Number of passes 9-4 is a continuous variable that represents the total number of GCSEs (and equivalent qualifications) the pupil passed with grades between 9 and 4.
- Progress 8 score: Progress 8 scores are a relative measure and capture students' average progress between KS2 and KS4 exams. It compares the young person's Attainment 8 score with the national average Attainment 8 score of young people with the same starting point at KS2. The scale can change from year to year, and therefore, it is not possible to compare Progress 8 scores over time.

Key independent variables

Our main interest lies in understanding whether the extension of the VSH programme led to changes in outcomes for CWSW. Since the extension of VSH duties is not an 'intervention' in classic treatment/control sense (i.e., it is not a specific treatment given to specific children at an exact point in time), but rather a strategic duty to support schools in promoting the educational needs of CWSW, identifying who gets support is difficult.

To try and capture the possible effects of the extension of duties in child-level data, we require a variable that can distinguish children based on their likelihood of receipt of the impact of the strategic role. As a proxy for exposure to the 'VSH intervention', we use the length of time children are subject to either CIN or CP plans, both before and after the extension of VSH duties, measured as the **number on months** during each academic year, and observe any impact on engagement and attainment.

To try and disentangle some of timing elements in our analysis which are complicated by the overlapping periods of the VSH programme and its rollout, as well as the multiple changes related to COVID-19, we also use a binary indicator to reflect the **period after COVID-19 / VSH extension**, which takes a value of 1 for outcomes measured in the

years 2021/22 and 2022/23 and 0 for those captured in 2017/18 and 2019/20 (see Table 51 for further detail).

Covariates

We use a number of different explanatory and control variables to help estimate the possible impact of the VSH Extension, including:

1. **Individual characteristics:** Gender; Age; Ethnicity.
2. **Deprivation:** The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score as a continuous variable ranging from 0 -1;⁷⁴ Receipt of FSM as a binary indicator of whether the child was eligible or not.

Analytical approaches

Absences and suspensions

The methodology for both absences and suspensions is based on the comparison between children who were on either a CIN plan or a CP plan both before and after the VSH extension and uses the variation in the length of time on this plan (number of months annually) to explore the relationship between duration of having a social worker and changes to these engagement outcomes.

The logic of this is that the more time a child has spent subject to a plan, the more likely they are to be in receipt of VSH strategic intervention. However, it is also likely that children's family contexts and other characteristics also vary with the length of time on a plan such that the variable is picking up the impact of these characteristics rather than the impact of the VSH programme. We undertake sensitivity analysis in relation to this question in the final section of the report.

To estimate any effect of 'treatment', that is exposure to the VSH programme, linear regressions for panel data were applied, incorporating fixed effects.⁷⁵ The regression models include variables for the number of months subject to a CIN/CP plan both before

⁷⁴ The IDACI score is a national measure that captures the proportion of children aged 0–15 living in income-deprived households within a specific geographic area, known as a Lower-layer Super Output Area (LSOA). It reflects geographical levels of child poverty, with a higher IDACI score indicating a greater deprivation in the pupil's residential area. For instance, an area with an IDACI score of 0.2 means that 20% of children between 0 -15 years old in that locality live in income-deprived families.

⁷⁵ This study reports the results of linear regressions fitted for panel data to examine suspensions and attendance. Given the count nature of the outcome variable (number of missed sessions), alternative models such as zero-truncated, binomial, or Poisson regressions could also be appropriate. Nonetheless, linear regressions were selected for their simplicity and ease of interpretation. As part of our sensitivity analyses, we conducted several robustness checks using Poisson models for panel data. The results remained substantively consistent across model specifications. Full outputs are available upon request.

and after the extension of duties, as well as an indicator for the period after the VSH extension of duties to take account of broader contextual factors – particularly in relation to COVID-19 and the significant increases seen post-pandemic in school absenteeism and disciplinary measures – that may otherwise confound our estimates. Each regression also controls for unobserved, time-invariant heterogeneity, such as ethnicity, helping reduce bias from omitted variables.

Modelling fixed effects: Time-variant and time-invariant variables in panel-data analysis

Time-variant variables are measures that can – or do – change over time such as age, a shift in FSM eligibility, or a move to a different area with a different IDACI score.

Time-invariant variables are stable characteristics and measures that do not change over time such as ethnicity. Since they do not vary, they do not contribute to any within-individual variation and so cannot be used to explain changes in a given outcome. These time-invariant characteristics are absorbed into the model and not estimated separately.

In a fixed-effects regression model, time-invariant characteristics cannot be directly controlled for because they are perfectly collinear with the individual fixed effect. That is, fixed-effects models estimate association by comparing changes within individuals over time and estimate how changes in a variable (such as becoming eligible for FSM) relate to changes in an outcome (such as sessions missed due to absences).

Educational attainment

Given the academic years for which educational attainment data were available (2017/18; 2018/19; 2021/22; 2022/23), and the timing of the VSH extension (2021), most pupils in these data only had scores for one Key Stage assessment, namely KS1, KS2, or KS4. Hence, it was not possible to observe the academic outcomes of the same pupil before and after the VSH extension but only observe the characteristics of those at each Key Stage pre- and post-extension.

As such, to identify the effects of the extension of the VSH role, we used an approach called difference in differences (DID, see text box below for further detail) which compares the average change before and after a given ‘treatment’ or ‘intervention’, here the

extension of the VSH role, for those who received the ‘treatment’ (the intervention group) and those who did not (the control group) to try and identify an impact of the intervention.

To create the different treatment groups, first an indicator was created to identify pupils who were on either a CIN or CP plan for any period between 1 September – 31 August for each of these four academic years. Next, a cross-sectional dataset was created with the Key Stage outcomes for each relevant academic year. These individuals were then identified as the ‘intervention group’ for that particular Key Stage. Depending on the academic year of their Key Stage outcome, two groups were further created:

- Pre-VSH Extension intervention group: Children subject to a CIN or CP plan in the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19.
- Post-VSH Extension intervention group: Children subject to a CIN or CP plan in the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23.

The control group is made up of all the children in the dataset for each of the corresponding Key Stage outcomes who were not subject to a CIN plan or CP plan in each specific academic year. The control group was also divided:

- Pre-VSH Extension control group: Children NOT subject to a CIN or CP plan in the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19.
- Post-VSH Extension control group: Children NOT subject to a CIN or CP plan in the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23.

In the DID model, three key variables are needed to understand the results:

- First, a time dummy variable called “period” which takes the value “1” for observations in the period after the extension of the VSH role and “0” otherwise, that is distinguishing the pre- and post-intervention groups.
- Second, a group indicator called “CIN” or “CP” which identifies whether a child was ever subject to a CIN or CP plan during the observation period, that is distinguishing the intervention and control groups.
- Third, an interaction term called DID which captures the combined effect of being subject to a CIN or CP plan and being observed after the extension. This is the main ‘difference-in-differences’ estimator.
- The coefficient on this interaction term represents the estimated effect of the VSH extension, isolating the average change in outcome trends for children on CIN or CP plans before and after the extension, relative to the trend observed for the comparison group (children not subject to a CIN/CP plan). A positive and statistically significant coefficient suggests that the VSH extension was associated

with a relative increase in the outcome for children subject to a CIN/CP plan before and after the extension compared to the control group change, all other variables equal.

As the engagement outcomes, each regression also controls for individual characteristics and deprivation.

Difference-in-Differences

The DID approach is a quasi-experimental methodology, also called a “controlled before-and-after” design, and uses the availability of both ‘control’ and ‘treatment’ data before and after the start of an intervention to measure the differences between the two groups in relation to the outcome of interest and provide an estimation of the causal effect.

By comparing changes over time in the population that received the intervention with those in the population who did not (i.e., the control group), this design assumes that, in the absence of intervention, the unobserved differences between the experimental and control groups would remain constant over time.

In the case of the VSH role extension, this approach allowed us to account for biases caused by permanent differences between the two groups and by trends equally affecting both groups. Under these assumptions the statistical modelling can account for changes that might otherwise bias results such as in the overall difficulties of the tests and the effects of COVID-19 on poorer school attendance, especially at KS4, when schools re-opened.

Strengths and limitations of the analysis of impact

The particular strengths of the analysis are that we have population level data with sufficient sample size – and hence statistical power – to test reasonable effect sizes. In the case of absences and suspensions, we have longitudinal data, spanning the period before and after the extension of VSH duties. We also have good measures of the attainment outcomes and the data are rich enough that quasi-experimental statistical methods are feasible. These are substantive advantages. However, there are also substantial limitations:

- The first and most immediate weakness of research design for estimating programme impacts is that the extension of duties was rolled out universally and so there is no formal randomisation or quasi-randomisation of treatment. Neither is

there a clear control group other than comparable peer groups not on a CIN or CP plan.

- In addition, the VSH extension of duties is not an intervention treatment in a classic impact evaluation sense. Rather it is primarily a strategic intervention and so not provided to the same extent and intensity in all areas for all children. This variation in treatment is not observed.
- This is further complicated by the extension of VSH duties to children who have been on a plan *in the last 6 years (Ever 6)*. However, difficulties in relation to coding over the time frame available in these data meant we were limited in our ability to use the Ever 6 measure and were instead reliant on current CIN/CP plan status for each year observed.
- Moreover, LAs vary in the degree to which they can, and do, extend the duty to children Ever 6, so both in practice and in the data, it was impossible to define and identify precise treatment and control groups. Instead, the best we can do is proxy for treatment with a variable giving the status of being subject to a CIN or CP plan.
- The ‘treatment’ period also includes the disruptions brought about by COVID-19. Because of the conflation of timing of the extension of duties with the post-COVID period, in a simple comparison of outcomes before and after the extension of duties, we are simultaneously and unavoidably also picking up the effects of changes brought about by the pandemic. For many children, including those on CIN and CP plans, the transition back to “normal” schooling may not have followed a straightforward path.
- We cannot distinguish changes in outcomes resulting from the new activity under the extension of VSH duties from the impact of other policy changes that might particularly influence CWSW following from the Children in Need Review. Other policies and programmes during and following the COVID-19 lockdowns may also have influenced the changes in outcomes observed, for example CWSW were entitled to attend school during the partial-school closures (though the data on the percentage that did is unclear) and attendance programmes were introduced following the pandemic to tackle falling attendance rates. However, no firm conclusions can be drawn without further study.
- The CIN Census return data supplied (that includes the period where the VSH role was extended) is from 1st Sept 2021- 31st March 2023. It is unlikely that this provides sufficient time for the programme to have been fully and universally rolled out effectively and to have started to achieve impacts observable at population level on outcomes such as attainment which may require a long lead in time to achieve.

- Finally, while our methodology does its best to impose an experimental paradigm on the available data, the analytical approaches used are not without flaws. Therefore, although we are using quasi-experimental techniques that address some forms of bias in estimation of causal effects, the assumptions on which these are based may not apply here and so the analysis can at best only provide an early indicator of improvements rather than a firm measure of impact.

Results

We present results for children without SEND. Recognising the complicated and dynamic relationship between experience of CSC and SEND, a similar set of analysis has been conducted separately for children with SEND and the results are broadly similar. None of our headline findings are substantially different but are available from the authors on request.

Engagement

Absences

Table 53 presents the average number of school sessions missed annually due to absences in the academic years 2017/18 to 2022/23, disaggregated by gender and our groups of interest. Across all four years, children subject to CIN or CP plans consistently have higher number of sessions missed due to absence than those without experience of CSC. Within the CWSW cohort, children subject to CP plans consistently recorded more absences than those subject to CIN plans.

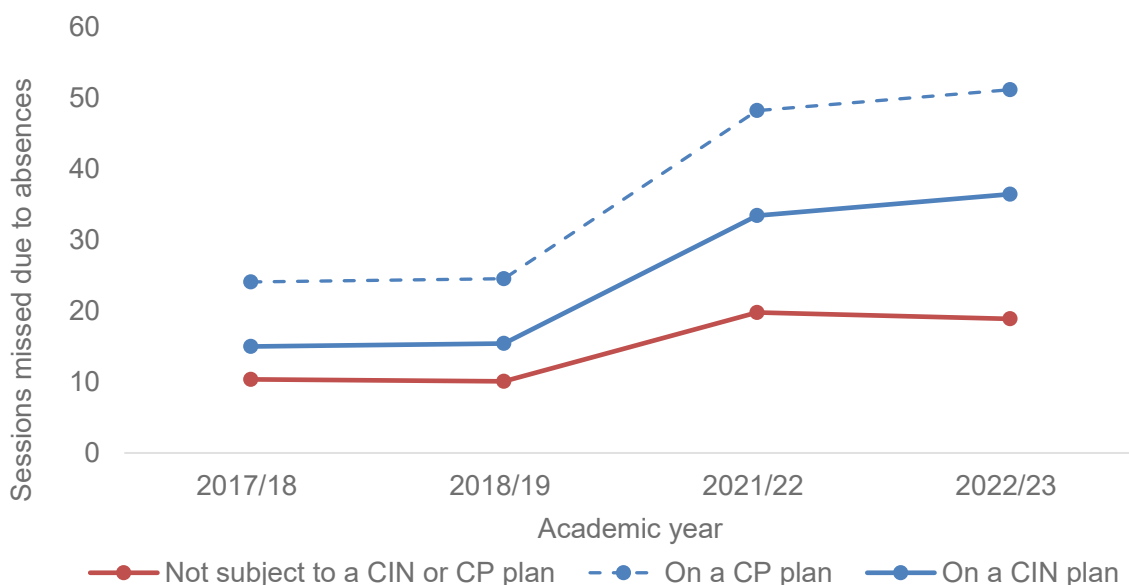
Table 53: Mean number of number of sessions missed due to absences, by group and academic year

Year	CIN plan		CP plan			Not on a plan			
	Overall	Boys	Girls	Overall	Boys	Girls	Overall	Boys	Girls
2017/18	15.0	14.9	15.0	24.1	24.1	24.1	10.4	10.3	10.4
2018/19	15.4	15.3	15.5	24.5	24.9	24.3	10.1	10.1	10.1
2021/22	33.4	31.4	35.0	48.2	45.4	50.1	19.8	19.1	20.4
2022/23	36.5	34.1	38.2	51.2	48.2	53.1	18.9	18.1	19.6

Source: ONS. Observations: 3,486,950

The trends are also shown in Figure 13, highlighting both the large uptick in number of sessions missed due to absences post-COVID (2021/22 onwards) and the differences between the two groups within the CWSW cohort. In the case of children subject to a CIN plan, the number of sessions missed went from an average of 15.0 in 2017/18 to 36.5 in 2022/23, an increase of 143%. For children subject to a CP plan, the average went from 24.1 to 51.2, an increase of 112%. Children not on any plan also showed an increase after the COVID-19 pandemic, but the magnitude was less, moving from an average of 10.4 to 18.9 missed sessions per year in 2022/23, an increase of 82%.

Figure 13: Mean annual sessions missed due to absences, by group and academic year



Overall, Figure 13 illustrates both the persistence and deepening of educational inequalities. Social care involvement is strongly associated with higher levels of school absence, and these disparities have only grown in the post-pandemic context.

Regression analysis: Number of sessions missed due to absences

To estimate the possible impact of the VSH extension on outcomes for the CWSW cohort, we separated the sample by the length of time they were in contact with Children’s Services. This allows us to create a proxy for the intensity of their ‘exposure’ to its support, measured as the number of months spent subject to an open CIN or CP plan.

As a further form of sensitivity analysis, using the structure of the data - captured across four academic years - we further distinguish between individuals who had at least one period subject to a plan both before and after the VSH extension lasting between two, three, or four years of the four years of data available. We use this further detail on plan duration as an additional proxy to reflect the increased likelihood of having received support from the VSH extension of duties, alongside the number of months subject to a plan in each year, which more accurately captures variation in plan length.

Table 54 shows the descriptive statistics across key characteristics for these nested samples. Note that as the number of pupils with a period subject to a CP plan in all four years of the data is under 1,000, they are not included in the study.

Table 54: Summary statistics, by group and number of years subject to a plan

	CIN plan in: at least 2 of the 4 years	CIN plan in: at least 3 of the 4 years	CIN plan in: all 4 years	CP plan in: at least 2 of the 4 years	CP plan in: at least 3 of the 4 years
Annual sessions missed due to absences	24.9	23.5	20.8	38.3	42.3
Average months a year subject to a plan after extension	4.9	5.4	5.9	1.0	2.3
Average months a year subject to a plan before extension	4.4	4.8	5.6	2.4	2.8
Average age	10.9	10.9	10.8	10.1	10.0
Average proportion of time eligible for FSM	59%	57%	54%	85%	85%
Average IDACI score	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.27	0.28
N	79,230	69,000	44,000	7,360	1,160

Source: ONS.

The interpretation of the coefficients is how a change in one unit of the explanatory variables from one period to another for a given child is related to changes in their number of sessions missed due to absence in the same time frame.

Table 55 below shows the results from a set of regression models estimating the effect of length of annual time subject to a CIN plan (before and after the extension) on the number of sessions missed due to absences per year for each of the three subgroups.

The key independent variable here is the number of months subject to a CIN plan after the extension of duties in 2021 as it represents our proxy for ‘exposure’ to the VSH ‘intervention’: the longer children have been subject to a CIN plan, the more likely they are to have received support from the VSH programme and benefit from its strategic role.

The interpretation of the coefficients is how a change in one unit of the explanatory variables from one period to another for a given child is related to changes in their number of sessions missed due to absence in the same time frame.

Table 55: Number of sessions missed due to absences per year since 2017 for children subject to a CIN plan

CIN plan in:	at least 2 of the 4 years			at least 3 of the 4 years			all 4 years		
	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.
Months subject to a CIN plan after VSH extension	-0.45	***	(0.049)	-0.81	***	(0.062)	-1.26	***	(0.133)
Months subject to a CIN plan before VSH extension	0.62	***	(0.040)	0.36	***	(0.040)	0.18	***	(0.060)
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	21.51	***	(0.711)	22.45	***	(0.814)	23.61	***	(1.840)
Age	2.34	***	(0.152)	2.36	***	(0.149)	2.44	***	(0.157)
Eligible for FSM	-3.55	***	(0.246)	-3.14	***	(0.259)	-1.73	***	(0.292)
IDACI score	10.26	***	(1.538)	9.45	***	(1.584)	7.79	***	(1.606)
Constant	-12.25	***	(1.520)	-10.90	***	(1.487)	-11.63	***	(1.542)
N	79,230			69,000			44,000		

Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

Across all three models, an increase of one month subject to a CIN plan per year after the extension was associated with a statistically significant decrease in the number of sessions lost due to absences annually, with the association being stronger for children who have been subject to a CIN plan in each of the four years (-1.26 absences per year for each additional month subject to a CIN plan, $p < .001$). This consistent negative association suggests that having a plan that had been open for longer following the introduction of VSH extended duties was linked to improved school engagement. This is much stronger than for the months before the extension, where an increase in the number of months subject to a CIN plan was associated with an increase in the number of absences in the same period. These results indicate that although the general trend in school absences increased at the national level after COVID-19, being subject to a CIN plan after the VSH extension was associated with improved attendance outcomes, especially among children who were subject to a CIN plan over a longer duration.

In terms of the time-varying covariates included in the model, becoming older was statistically significantly associated with an increase in the number of sessions missed due to absence, while becoming eligible for FSM was associated with a decrease in the number of missed sessions due to absences. This could reflect that where families with a child subject to a CIN plan experienced a drop in income and became eligible for FSM,

the incentives to attend school increased. This suggests that FSM could be an effective policy to mitigate the negative effects that decreases in income can have on school attendance for children subject to a CIN plan. Conversely, an increase in the level of local deprivation, measured using the IDACI score, was strongly and positively associated with an increase in absences.

In sum, the results suggest that the VSH extension may have had a protective effect, helping to counterbalance the wider rise in absences observed in the post-COVID-19 period, but that wider contextual factors are also important in relation to school engagement.

Table 56 shows the analyses for children subject to a CP plan.

Table 56: Number of sessions missed due to absences a year since 2017 for children subject to a CP plan

CP plan in:	at least 2 of the 4 years			at least 3 of the 4 years		
	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.
Months subject to a CP plan after VSH extension	1.26	***	(0.17)	0.38		(0.29)
Months subject to a CP plan before VSH extension	0.19	**	(0.09)	-0.33		(0.20)
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	8.74	***	(1.71)	24.77	***	(4.75)
Age	5.25	***	(0.44)	2.60	***	(0.88)
Eligible for FSM	-11.76	***	(1.25)	-18.62	***	(3.70)
IDACI score	26.18	***	(3.88)	22.63	**	(11.18)
Constant	-18.19	***	(4.05)	13.18		(8.24)
N	7,360			1,610		

Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

Results for children subject to a CP plan showed that an increase in the number of months on a plan after the VSH extension was not consistent and statistically significantly associated with changes in the number of sessions missed due to absence. Unlike those

subject to a CIN plan, the extension of the VSH role does not appear to have a clear effect—positive or negative—on absences for this group.

Summary for absences

- After COVID-19, all children, both on a plan or not, substantially increased their number of sessions missed due to absence: the average for non-CIN/non-CP children increased 82%, while for children subject to a CIN or CP plan was 143% and 112%, respectively.
- Each month subject to a CIN plan after the extension was linked with significantly fewer absences per year, reaching 1.26 absences per year for each additional month subject to a CIN plan. This marks a change in the trend, as before the extension, each month subject to a CIN plan was related to more sessions missed due to absence. This was not observed for children subject to a CP plan.
- Although children who were eligible for FSM showed larger numbers of sessions missed due to absences compared to those subjects to a CIN plan, becoming eligible for FSM was related to a decrease in the number of sessions missed due to absence and the likelihood of becoming a persistent absentee. This could indicate that FSM provides a positive incentive to attend school for children subject to a CIN plan.
- For children subject to a CIN plan moving to a more vulnerable area (as indicated by the IDACI local area deprivation measure) was more likely to increase the number of sessions missed due to absence and the likelihood of becoming a persistent absentee.

Suspensions

Table 57 shows the average sessions missed due to suspensions for children subject to a CIN plan, CP plan, and those without any experience of CSC for each academic year, separated by gender.

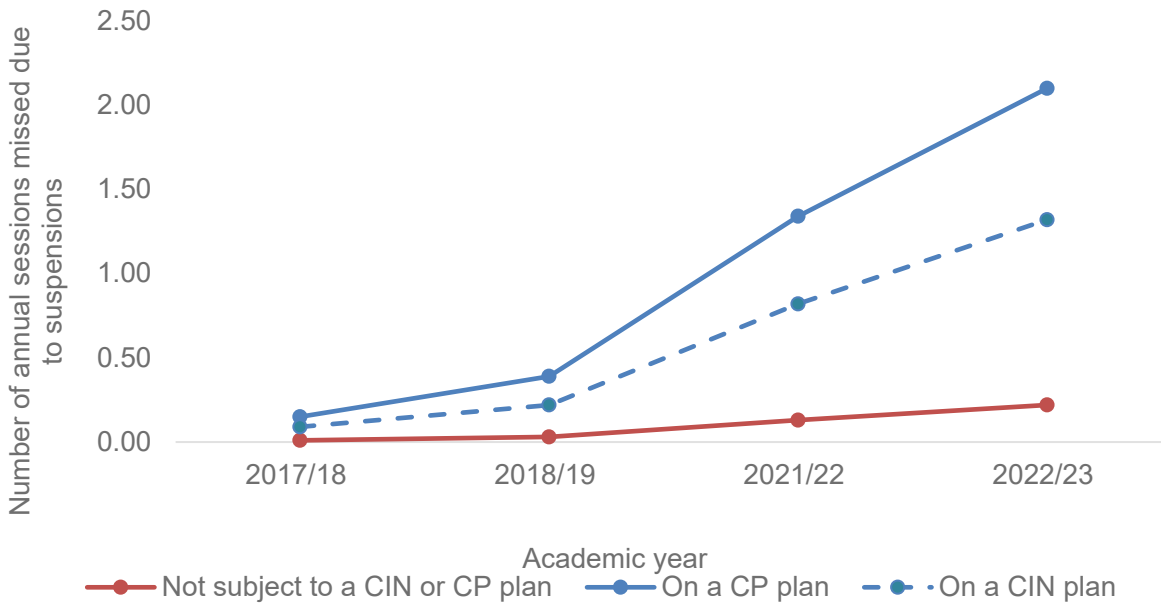
Table 57: Mean number of number of sessions missed due to suspensions, by group and academic year

Year	CIN plan			CP plan			Not on a plan		
	Overall	Boys	Girls	Overall	Boys	Girls	Overall	Boys	Girls
2017/18	0.09	0.15	0.05	0.15	0.22	0.10	0.01	0.02	0.01
2018/19	0.22	0.31	0.15	0.39	0.50	0.32	0.03	0.04	0.01
2021/22	0.82	0.94	0.72	1.34	1.46	1.26	0.13	0.17	0.09
2022/23	1.32	1.48	1.20	2.10	2.20	2.04	0.22	0.28	0.17

Source: ONS. N= 4,362,770

The trends are also shown in Figure 14 highlighting both the large increase in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions post-COVID (2021/22 onwards) and the differences between the two groups within the CWSW cohort. In the case of children subject to a CIN plan, the number of sessions missed went from an average of 0.09 in 2017/18 to 1.32 in 2022/23. In the case of children subject to a CP plan, the average went from 0.15 to 2.1. Those not subject to a plan also showed an increase after the COVID-19 period, but as with the comparative rise in absences, the magnitude of this increase was much less, moving from an average of 0.01 in 2017/18 to 0.22 to 2022/23.

Figure 14: Mean annual sessions missed because due to suspension, by group and academic year



These findings are in line with national statistics which similarly show that there has been an upward trend in the number and rate of suspensions that began before the pandemic (DfE, 2025).

Regression analysis: Number of sessions lost due to suspensions

Following the strategy used for absences, we again estimate different models for different lengths of time children were in contact with CSC services. Again, as the number of pupils with a period subject to a CP plan in all four years of the data is under 1,000, they are excluded from these analyses.

Table 58 shows the results of the characteristics of these nested samples for children subject to a CIN or a CP plan. Again, as the number of pupils with a period subject to a CP plan in all four years of the data is under 1,000, they are excluded from these analyses.

Table 58: Summary statistics, by group and number of years subject to a plan

	CIN plan in: at least 2 of the 4 years	CIN plan in: at least 3 of the 4 years	CIN plan in: all 4 years	CP plan in: at least 2 of the 4 years	CP plan in: at least 3 of the 4 years
Annual sessions missed due to suspensions	0.6	0.54	0.46	1.06	1.07
Average months a year subject to a plan after extension	4.8	5.3	5.9	1.0	2.2
Average months a year subject to a plan before extension	4.3	4.8	5.5	2.4	2.8
Average age	10.8	10.9	10.9	9.7	9.5
Average proportion of time eligible for FSM	58%	57%	54%	84%	84%
Average IDACI score	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.27	0.29
N	93,420	80,240	47,560	8,510	1,340

Source: ONS.

Table 59 shows the results from a set of regression models where the outcome is number of sessions lost due to suspensions and the key independent variable is the number of months subject to a CIN plan after the extension of VSH duties in 2021.

Table 59: Number of sessions lost due to suspension by time since 2017 for children subject to a CIN plan

CIN plan in:	at least 2 of the 4 years			at least 3 of the 4 years			all 4 years		
	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.
Months subject to a CIN plan after VSH extension	-0.037	***	(0.005)	-0.061	***	(0.007)	-0.102	***	(0.018)
Months subject to a CIN plan before VSH extension	0.032	***	(0.004)	0.023	***	(0.004)	0.019	***	(0.006)
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.212	***	(0.073)	0.533	***	(0.105)	1.056	***	(0.244)
Age	0.384	***	(0.019)	0.344	***	(0.017)	0.316	***	(0.019)
Eligible for FSM	-0.385	***	(0.035)	-0.339	***	(0.031)	-0.264	***	(0.034)
IDACI score	0.053		(0.176)	0.120		(0.177)	0.230		(0.215)
Constant	-3.308	***	(0.183)	-2.982	***	(0.166)	-2.841	***	(0.176)
N	93,400			80,230			47,560		

Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

The results show that each additional month per year subject to a CIN plan after the VSH extension is associated with a reduction of 0.037 sessions missed due to suspension for those on a plan for at least two of the four years included in the analysis, rising to 0.102 sessions missed due for those who spend time subject to a CIN plan in all four academic years. This is a substantial negative association, suggesting that for children with prolonged and continuous involvement subject to a CIN plan, the extension of the VSH policy may have contributed to better engagement outcomes – here in terms of fewer suspensions. In contrast, months subject to a CIN plan pre-VSH is associated with a small but significant increase in sessions missed, implying that the nature or effectiveness of CIN involvement may have changed meaningfully after the extension of the VSH programme.

The period after the VSH extension, which captures both the post-extension and post-COVID-19 context, is also positively and strongly associated with an increase in

suspensions, highlighting the broader challenges faced during this time. Even though the results suggest that longer periods subject to a CIN plan appear to mitigate some risks, the post-COVID-19 / VSH extension period coincides with a general rise in school suspensions and behavioural challenges, likely tied to the pandemic's social and educational disruptions.

The other variables in the model show expected patterns. For example, older children are more likely to be suspended, which aligns with findings that suspension rates typically rise in secondary education (DfE, 2025)⁷⁶. Becoming eligible for FSM is associated with fewer missed sessions due to suspension, which, as with the results for absences, could be related to the free meals being an incentive to attend school for children of deprived families. The association of sessions missed due to suspensions with changes in the IDACI is small and not statistically significant in the full sample but does become slightly more positive as the duration of time spent subject to a CIN plan increases.

In summary, for children with sustained involvement in CIN plans across all four years, greater exposure after the VSH extension is associated with fewer suspensions, while exposure before the extension had a weaker and opposite relationship. These findings suggest a potential improvement in the effectiveness of support for those subject to CIN plans following the extension of the VSH duties, which is particularly important in the post-2020/21 environment where suspension rates increased overall.

The same analysis was repeated for children subject to a CP plan and is presented in Table 60. Note, again, due to sample size restrictions, only results for children with two or three of the four years subject to a CP plan are presented

⁷⁶ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24-spring-term>

Table 60: Number of sessions lost due to suspension by time since 2017 for children subject to a CP plan

CP plan in:	at least 2 of the 4 years			at least 3 of the 4 years		Std. err.
	Coeff.		Std. err.	Coeff.		Std. err.
Months a year subject to a CP plan after extension	0.005	***	(0.014)	-0.020		(0.033)
Months a year subject to a CP plan before extension	0.017	*	(0.010)	0.025		(0.020)
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.744	***	(0.176)	-0.459		(0.537)
Age	0.713	***	(0.052)	0.640	***	(0.123)
Eligible for FSM	-1.147	***	(0.106)	-1.108	***	(0.330)
IDACI score	0.465		(0.476)	-0.016		(1.238)
Constant	-4.686	***	(0.494)	-3.892	***	(1.057)
N	8,510			7,360		

Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

For children subject to a CP plan in at least two of the four years in these data, each additional month per year on the plan after the extension of the VSH is associated with an increase of 0.005 in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions, rather than fewer. Moreover, each month subject to a CP plan before the extension is associated with an increase of 0.017 sessions missed due to suspensions, indicating a similar, though slightly stronger, pattern prior to the intervention.

Interestingly, the binary indicator capturing the period after COVID-19 is associated with a significant decrease of 0.744 sessions missed due to suspensions per year. Age is positively and significantly associated with sessions missed due to suspensions. Notably, becoming eligible for FSM is associated with 1.147 fewer sessions missed due to suspensions, suggesting that receiving FSM might generate positive incentives for children subject to a CP plan in terms of engagement behaviour.

Among children with more sustained CP involvement, that is those with at least one period subject to a CP plan in at least three of the four academic years of the analysis,

plan duration after the VSH extension is not significantly associated with changes in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions. These results suggest that for this more exposed group, neither pre- nor post-extension CP involvement shows a clear relationship with changes in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions.

The post-extension indicator is again associated with a decrease in the sessions missed due to suspensions, though the result is not statistically significant. Age remains a significant predictor, and FSM eligibility is again linked to fewer missed sessions, reinforcing the earlier finding that economic disadvantage, in this context, may trigger additional support mechanisms that help reduce behavioural issues related to suspensions.

Summary findings for suspensions

- After COVID-19, all children, both on a plan or not, showed an increase in the number of sessions missed due to suspensions.
- Each month subject to a CIN plan after the extension of the VSH duties was linked with significantly fewer sessions missed due to suspension per year, reaching 0.1 sessions missed per year due to suspension for each month subject to a CIN plan. While this effect size might appear small, it should be considered alongside the already fairly low average levels of sessions missed due to suspensions across groups.
- For children subject to a CP plan, the evidence was inconclusive.
- Time subject to a CP plan after the VSH extension was not related to improvements in terms of suspensions compared to the period before the extension.

Educational attainment

Most pupils in these data only had Key Stage scores for a single point in time providing a cross-sectional ‘snapshot’ of attainment over the period considered: 2017/18 – 2022/23. To explore the impact of the VSH extension of duties, we used a cross-sectional difference-in-differences (DID) approach to compare the average change before and after a given ‘treatment’ or ‘intervention’, here the extension of the VSH role, for those who received the ‘treatment’ (the intervention group) and those who did not (the control group) to try and identify an impact of the intervention (see section on data and methods for more detail).

Key Stage 1 (KS1)

Table 61 shows the characteristics of the sample with KS1 data. The percentage of children in each group who are female ranges from 52% to 55%. As for the descriptives given in Table 61 and Table 65, children in the CWSW cohort have higher average IDACI scores, that is, they live in relatively more deprived areas than children without experience of CSC. In terms of FSM eligibility, the differences are also very large, with an average of less than 1 in 5 (18%) of those not on any kind of plan eligible, compared with over half (56%) of those subject to a CIN plan and nearly three-quarters (73%) of children subject to a CP plan.

Table 61: Summary statistics for the KS1 sample, by group

	CIN plan	CP plan	Not on a plan
% Female	53%	55%	52%
Average IDACI score	0.25	0.27	0.19
% Eligible for FSM	56%	73%	18%
N	57,000	11,430	2,106,820

Source: ONS.

Table 62 shows the percentage of pupils reaching the expected level at the end of KS1 in reading, writing, maths, and science by group, averaged across the two time periods available for analysis.

Comparing within the CWSW cohort, higher proportions of children subject to a CIN plan reach the expected standard across all four indicators than for those subject to a CP plan. In line with the extant research, pupils without experience of CSC had higher levels of achievement in KS1 assessment than both CWSW groups.

Consistent with national trends, Table 62 also shows a general decline in KS1 performance after 2019, wherein for each group and across all four assessment areas, the proportion reaching the expected standard is higher in the earlier period (2017-2019) than the later one (2021-2023).

Table 62: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS1, by group

	CIN Plan	CIN Plan	CP Plan	CP Plan	Not on a plan	Not on a plan
	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023
Reading	72%	60%	68%	53%	84%	77%
Writing	72%	60%	67%	53%	84%	78%
Maths	65%	49%	58%	41%	79%	68%
Science	81%	72%	77%	67%	90%	87%
N	30,070	29,130	5,780	3,580	1,078,540	1,028,160

Source: ONS

To estimate whether this decline in performance is associated with the extension of the VSH programme, we used a DID methodology to explore the association of different explanatory variables and the probability of meeting the expected standards in maths, science, reading, and writing at KS1 separately for the two CWSW groups.

The results are shown in Table 63. The dy/dx marginal effects coefficients are interpreted as how a change in one unit of the explanatory variable is related to the likelihood of reaching the expected standard in any given KS1 subject.

Table 63: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS1 for children subject to a CIN plan

	Reading			Writing			Maths			Science		
	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.059	***	(0.001)	-0.092	***	(0.001)	-0.045	***	(0.001)	-0.031	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CIN plan	-0.092	***	(0.003)	-0.117	***	(0.003)	-0.093	***	(0.003)	-0.066	***	(0.002)
Eligible for FSM	-0.080	***	(0.001)	-0.101	***	(0.001)	-0.084	***	(0.001)	-0.057	***	(0.001)

Ever FSM * Period after COVID- 19 / VSH extension	-0.020	***	(0.00 1)	-0.023	***	(0.00 2)	-0.019	***	(0.0 01)	-0.017	***	(0.0 01)
Subject to a CIN plan * Pe- riod after COVID- 19 / VSH extension (DID)	0.000		(0.00 4)	0.002		(0.00 5)	-0.003		(0.0 04)	-0.004		(0.0 03)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eli- gible FSM	0.040	***	(0.00 4)	0.046	***	(0.00 5)	0.036	***	(0.0 04)	0.028	***	(0.0 03)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eli- gible FSM * Period af- ter COVID- 19 / VSH extension	-0.007		(0.00 6)	-0.013	*	(0.00 7)	-0.004		(0.0 06)	0.000		(0.0 04)
IDACI score	-0.178	***	(0.00 3)	-0.185	***	(0.00 3)	-0.129	***	(0.0 03)	-0.164	***	(0.0 02)
IDACI score * Period af- ter COVID- 19 / VSH extension	-0.002		(0.00 4)	0.001		(0.00 5)	-0.022	***	(0.0 04)	-0.005		(0.0 03)
Female	0.044	***	(0.00 1)	0.095	***	(0.00 1)	-0.023	***	(0.0 01)	0.011	***	(0.0 01)
Female * Period af- ter COVID- 19 / VSH extension	-0.022	***	(0.00 1)	-0.027	***	(0.00 1)	-0.022	***	(0.0 01)	-0.011	***	(0.0 01)

N 2,162,410												
------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Source: ONS. Note: ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown.

Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10.

The first row of Table 63 reports a decline in the probability of meeting expected standards across all subjects and groups: 5.9 percentage points in reading, 9.2 in writing, 4.5 in mathematics, and 3.1 in science. The second row shows that, all else being equal, children subject to a CIN plan consistently performed worse, with reductions of 9.2 percentage points in reading, 11.7 in writing, 9.3 in mathematics, and 6.6 in science compared to children not subject to a CIN plan on the year of the outcome.

Children eligible for FSM were also significantly less likely to meet expected standards, with a likelihood of meeting the expected KS1 standard 8.0 percentage points lower in reading, 10.1 in writing, 8.4 in mathematics, and 5.7 in science compared to those not eligible for FSM. Furthermore, row 4 indicates that children eligible for FSM experienced an additional disadvantage in the period after COVID-19 / VSH extension – the interaction term – with further reductions of 1.7 to 2.3 percentage points depending on the subject.

The interaction term between being subject to a CIN plan and the period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (the DID estimate) was not statistically significant for any subject, indicating no effect of the extension for children subject to a CIN. However, children who are both subject to a CIN plan and eligible for FSM show a modest positive association with attainment, with the likelihood of meeting expected standards increasing by between 2.8 (science) and 4.6 (writing) percentage points.

Area-level deprivation, captured by the IDACI score, was strongly and negatively associated with attainment: an increase in IDACI of 0.1 was linked to a 1.78 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of meeting the standards in reading, 1.85 in writing, 1.29 in mathematics, and 1.64 in science. Gender differences were also evident. Girls were more likely to meet expected standards in all subjects. However, the interaction term indicates a slight reduction in this advantage for girls after the VSH extension, particularly in reading, and writing.

Table 64 shows the results for children subject to a CP plan and, as for those subject to a CIN plan, indicates that they perform considerably worse than pupils not on a plan in the year of the outcome, with reductions of 11.3 percentage points in the probability of reaching the expected standards in reading, 16.3 in writing, 12.7 in mathematics, and 9.4 in science.

Children who were eligible for FSM also exhibited lower probabilities of reaching the expected standards, with decreases of 7.9 percentage points in reading, 10.0 in writing, 8.3 in mathematics, and 5.6 in science. Additionally, children eligible for FSM faced an extra reduction in their probability of meeting expected standards after the VSH extension, ranging from 1.6 to 2.3 percentage points across subjects. The interaction term between being subject to a CP plan and the period after the VSH extension (the DID estimate) was not statistically significant in any subject, suggesting no differential effect for children subject to a CP plan post-extension.

As with the results for children subject to a CIN plan, the IDACI score was strongly and negatively associated with KS1 outcomes. Girls were also more likely to meet expected standards: 4.4 percentage points higher in reading, 9.5 in writing, 2.3 in mathematics, and 1.1 in science. However, their advantage is slightly reduced in the period after the extension.

Table 64: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS1 for children subject to a CP plan

	Reading			Writing			Maths			Science		
	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.059	***	(0.001)	-0.092	***	(0.001)	-0.044	***	(0.001)	-0.030	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CP plan	-0.113	***	(0.008)	-0.163	***	(0.009)	-0.127	***	(0.008)	-0.094	***	(0.006)
Eligible for FSM	-0.079	***	(0.001)	-0.100	***	(0.001)	-0.083	***	(0.001)	-0.056	***	(0.001)
Ever FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.020	***	(0.001)	-0.023	***	(0.002)	-0.019	***	(0.001)	-0.016	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CP plan * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (DID)	-0.014		(0.014)	0.005		(0.016)	-0.001		(0.014)	0.007		(0.010)
Subject to a CP plan * Eligible FSM	0.036	***	(0.010)	0.058	***	(0.011)	0.051	***	(0.009)	0.039	***	(0.007)
Subject to a CP plan * Eligible FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.001		(0.016)	-0.026		(0.019)	-0.018		(0.016)	-0.011		(0.011)
IDACI score	-0.179	***	(0.003)	-0.188	***	(0.003)	-0.131	***	(0.003)	-0.163	***	(0.002)
IDACI score * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.003		(0.004)	0.001		(0.005)	-0.022	***	(0.004)	-0.007	**	(0.003)
Females	0.044	***	(0.001)	0.095	***	(0.001)	-0.023	***	(0.001)	0.011	***	(0.001)
Females * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.022	***	(0.001)	-0.027	***	(0.001)	-0.022	***	(0.001)	-0.011	***	(0.001)
N 2,112,700												

Source: ONS. Note: ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown.

Significance levels: *** p<.01;

** p<.05; * p<.10

Summary for KS1

- There was a general decline in KS1 attainment after the COVID-19 / VSH extension period across all groups and subjects.
- Children subject to a CIN or CP plan had lower attainment than other pupils pre- and post-VSH extension. Children subject to a CP plan had the lowest levels of attainment.
- In 2022/23, children on CIN and CP plans did not improve - or worsened - their KS1 achievement compared to those not on CIN or CP plans before or after the VSH extension.
- Area-level deprivation, measured by IDACI categories, was strongly negatively associated with attainment. As IDACI increased, the probability of meeting expected standards declined consistently across all subjects.
- All children eligible for FSM had lower probabilities of meeting expected standards than those not eligible. However, children subject to a CIN plan and who were eligible for FSM performed slightly better compared with children subject to a CIN plan who were not eligible for FSM.
- Gender differences showed that girls had higher probabilities of meeting expected standards. However, there was a small negative interaction after the COVID-19 / VSH extension period, particularly in reading and writing, where girls' relative advantage slightly decreased.

Key Stage 2 (KS2)

Table 65 shows the key characteristics of the sample with KS2 attainment scores. Across each of the groups, the proportion of pupils who are female ranges from 52% to 56%. Children with experience of social care live in more deprived areas relative to those without such experience both in terms of average IDACI scores and the proportion eligible for FSM.

Table 65: Summary statistics for the KS2 sample, by group

	CIN plan	CP plan	Not on a plan
% Female	55%	56%	52%
Average IDACI score	0.24	0.26	0.18
% Eligible for FSM	63%	79%	23%
N	75,980	8,210	1,997,720

Source: ONS.

As with attainment at KS1, after the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a general decline in KS2 performance and the percentage of pupils not reaching the expected standard across most subjects (DfE, 2025b). The results in Table 66 also show a similar pattern across the different groups with pupils subject to a CIN plan, on average, having higher attainment than those subject to a CP plan but lower than children not on any kind of plan.

Table 66: Percentage of children reaching the expected standard at KS2 and average KS2 scores, by group

	CIN Plan	CIN Plan	CP Plan	CP Plan	Not on a plan	Not on a plan
	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023
Reading	73%	72%	66%	67%	83%	83%
Maths	76%	71%	69%	65%	86%	82%
GPS*	78%	74%	71%	68%	87%	83%
Reading score	103.8	103.8	102.7	102.8	106.2	106.4
Maths score	103.7	102.4	102.7	101.0	106.1	105.6
GPS score	105.4	103.7	104.1	102.5	107.9	106.7
N	36,680	39,300	4,830	3,380	983,400	1,014,320

Source: ONS. Note: GPS: Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling.

Table 67 shows the probability of meeting the expected standards at KS2 for children subject to a CIN plan.

Table 67: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS2 for children subject to a CIN plan

	Reading			GPS			Maths		
	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.03	***	(0.001)	-0.03	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CIN plan	-0.07	***	(0.002)	-0.07	***	(0.003)	-0.08	***	(0.003)
Eligible for FSM	-0.06	***	(0.001)	-0.07	***	(0.001)	-0.08	***	(0.001)
Ever FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.02	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CIN plan * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (DID)	0.00		(0.003)	0.00		(0.004)	-0.01	***	(0.004)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eligible FSM	0.03	***	(0.003)	0.02	***	(0.003)	0.04	***	(0.004)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eligible FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.00		(0.004)	0.00		(0.005)	0.00		(0.005)
IDACI score	-0.16	***	(0.002)	-0.15	***	(0.003)	-0.12	***	(0.003)
IDACI score * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.00		(0.003)	-0.02	***	(0.004)	-0.03	***	(0.004)
Female	0.01	***	(0.001)	0.05	***	(0.001)	-0.03	***	(0.001)
Female * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.01	***	(0.001)	-0.01	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
N 2,070,100									

Source: ONS. Note: GPS: Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling; ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10.

The results in Table 67 show that, after the COVID-19 / extension period, all children (regardless of whether they were on a plan or not) had a lower probability of meeting the expected standards by 3 percentage points in reading and Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS), and by 2 percentage points in maths.

Over and above this general decline in attainment, children who were subject to a CIN plan also performed worse, with further reductions of 7 percentage points across reading and GPS, and 8 percentage points in maths, compared to children who without any experience of CSC.

Similarly, children eligible for FSM were significantly less likely to meet expected standards in KS2, with a decrease of 6 percentage points in reading, 7 percentage points in GPS, and 8 percentage points in maths compared to their non-FSM peers. These children also experienced an additional disadvantage after the extension period, with reductions of 2 percentage points across all three subjects.

The interaction term between being subject to a CIN plan and the post-extension period (DID estimator) shows that for reading and GPS, the estimated marginal effects are effectively zero and not statistically significant. However, for maths, the effect is negative, small, but statistically significant, indicating a 1 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of children subject to a CIN plan meeting expected standards after the VSH extension.

There is a modest positive effect for children who were both subject to a CIN plan and eligible for FSM: an increase of 3 percentage points in reading, and 2 percentage points in GPS, and 4 percentage points in maths, implying that FSM may have buffered the negative outcomes observed in the post-COVID period.

Regarding gender, the models show that girls are more likely to meet expected standards than boys in literacy – an advantage of 1 percentage point in reading and 5 percentage points in GPS – and slightly worse in maths by an average of 3 percentage points. However, the gender advantage decreased slightly after the extension, with girls' likelihood of meeting standards dropping by 1 to 2 percentage points in each subject.

Table 68 presents the results for children subject to a CP plan and shows that, across all KS2 subjects, they have significantly lower academic attainment compared to their peers without experience of CSC. They are 10 percentage points less likely to meet expected standards in both reading and maths, and 9 percentage points less likely in GPS.

Table 68: Likelihood of reaching the expected standard at KS2 for children subject to a CP plan

	Reading			GPS			Maths		
	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.	dy/dx		Std. err.
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.01	***	(0.001)	-0.03	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CP plan	-0.10	***	(0.010)	-0.09	***	(0.010)	-0.10	***	(0.010)
Eligible for FSM	-0.06	***	(0.001)	-0.07	***	(0.001)	-0.08	***	(0.001)
Ever FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.02	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
Subject to a CP plan * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (DID)	0.00		(0.016)	0.01		(0.015)	0.00		(0.015)
Subject to a CP plan * Eligible FSM	0.03	**	(0.011)	0.01		(0.011)	0.03	**	(0.011)
Subject to a CP plan * Eligible FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.00		(0.017)	-0.01		(0.016)	-0.01		(0.016)
IDACI score	-0.21	***	(0.003)	-0.16	***	(0.003)	-0.12	***	(0.003)
IDACI score * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	0.01		(0.004)	-0.02	***	(0.004)	-0.03	***	(0.004)
Female	0.05	***	(0.001)	0.05	***	(0.001)	-0.03	***	(0.001)
Female * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.01	***	(0.001)	-0.01	***	(0.001)	-0.02	***	(0.001)
N 2,002,460									

Source: ONS. Note: GPS: Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling; ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown. Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10.

Children eligible for FSM also experienced important disadvantages. They are 6 percentage points less likely to meet reading standards, 7 points in GPS, and 8 points in maths. In addition, FSM-eligible children experienced a further drop of 2 percentage points across all subjects after the extension period. However, the interaction between being subject to a CP plan and FSM eligibility shows a modest positive effect of 3

percentage points for both reading and maths, indicating that FSM-eligible children subject to CP plans performed slightly better in these subjects than those subject to plans but not eligible for FSM.

The interaction between being subject to a CP plan and the period after the extension (the DID term) is not statistically significant, suggesting that the VSH extension did not result in a differential change for children subject to CP plans compared to those not on a plan.

Area-level deprivation, captured by the IDACI score, again shows a strong and negative relationship with KS2 attainment. Moreover, after the COVID-19 / VSH extension period, the disadvantage associated with IDACI intensified slightly, more so for maths and GPS, suggesting a widening gap for children living in more deprived areas.

Gender disparities are again evident amongst those subject to CP plans: girls are 5 percentage points more likely than boys to meet expected standards in reading and GPS, but 3 points less likely in maths. This gender advantage slightly decreases after the extension period, with girls' performance dropping by 1–2 percentage points across all subjects.

Summary for KS2

- For all children there were declines in the percentage of children who reached the expected levels at KS2 when comparing 2017-2019 and 2020-2023.
- Children subject to CIN plans performed significantly worse than their peers across all three subjects before and after the extension period.
- After the extension, the likelihood of children subject to CIN plans of meeting the expected standards did not change in GPS and reading, but there was a small negative effect for maths.
- Overall, girls were more likely to meet the expected standards in reading and GPS compared with boys and less likely to do so in maths, but after the extension period, this advantage showed a slight but consistent decrease.
- IDACI was strongly and negatively associated with attainment. Pupils in more deprived areas consistently scored lower across all subjects.

Key Stage 4 (KS4)

Table 69 shows the characteristics of the sample with attainment data at KS4. The proportion of children subject to a CP plan who are female is notably larger than from previous key stages – 61% at KS4, compared with 55% and 56% at KS1 and KS2, respectively – and higher than those subject to a CIN plan or without experience of CSC.

Again, those in both groups of the CWSW cohort live in more deprived households, both in terms of higher average IDACI scores, and larger proportions eligible for FSM.

Table 69: Summary statistics for the KS4 sample, by group

	CIN plan	CP plan	Not on a plan
% Female	55%	61%	51%
Average IDACI score	0.23	0.26	0.18
% Eligible for FSM	54%	74%	20%
N	90,110	5,930	1,795,380

Source: ONS.

Table 70 reports KS4 attainment across three different indicators for both CWSW groups and their peers without experience of CSC.

As with attainment at both KS1 and KS2, children subject to a CIN plan do better than those subject to a CP plan. Children subject to CIN plans showed small average gains in their Attainment 8 score over the periods considered, while those on CP showed small declines.

Both CWSW groups showed declines in the Progress 8 score, with children subject to CP plans starting at a lower point in 2017-2019 than where those subject to a CIN plan finished in 2021-2023. Interestingly, for those subject to CP plans, the number of passes at grades 9–4 increased marginally, from 3.09 to 3.18, and remained stable for those subject to a CIN plan.

Children without experience of CSC saw gains over the two periods across all three indicators. They also achieved more than double the number of grade 9-4 passes than those subject to a CP plan in both periods and approximately 50% more than those subject to a CIN plan.

Table 70: Attainment at KS4, by group

	CIN Plan	CIN Plan	CP Plan	CP Plan	Not on a plan	Not on a plan
	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023	2017-2019	2021-2023
Attainment 8 score	37.72	37.79	30.17	29.89	50.66	52.19
Number of passes 9 - 4	4.30	4.30	3.09	3.18	6.49	6.54
Progress 8 score	-0.58	-0.68	-1.10	-1.32	0.11	0.15
N	38,290	51,820	3,230	2,700	861,600	933,780

Source: ONS.

Table 71 shows the association of key explanatory variables and three indicators of KS4 achievement for those subject to CIN plans relative to their peers without experience of social care.

Table 71: OLS regression for KS4 outcomes for children subject to a CIN plan

	Attainment 8 score			Number of passes 9 - 4			Progress 8 score		
	Coeff.	Std. err.		Coeff.	Std. err.		Coeff.	Std. err.	
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	1.701	***	(0.051)	0.081	***	(0.009)	0.116	***	(0.004)
Subject to a CIN plan	-10.635	***	(0.136)	-1.796	***	(0.023)	-0.581	***	(0.009)
Eligible for FSM	-8.043	***	(0.05)	-1.401	***	(0.008)	-0.355	***	(0.003)
Ever FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-1.504	***	(0.069)	-0.136	***	(0.012)	-0.098	***	(0.005)
Subject to a CIN plan * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (DID)	-0.913	***	(0.178)	0.024		(0.03)	-0.083	***	(0.012)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eligible FSM	3.249	***	(0.186)	0.545	***	(0.032)	0.085	***	(0.013)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eligible FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.264		(0.246)	-0.09	**	(0.042)	-0.024		(0.017)
IDACI score	-26.909	***	(0.145)	-4.411	***	(0.025)	-1.153	***	(0.01)
IDACI score * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-2.432	***	(0.211)	-0.184	***	(0.036)	-0.192	***	(0.014)
Female	4.359	***	(0.037)	0.761	***	(0.006)	0.452	***	(0.003)
Constant	53.88	***	(0.037)	7.041	***	(0.006)	0.054	***	(0.003)
N 1,882,670									

Source: ONS. Note: ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown.

Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10.

Overall, students performed slightly better after the policy extension, as reflected in the positive and statistically significant coefficients on the dummy indicator for “Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension” across all three outcomes. This suggests a general improvement in attainment and progress following after this period, even after accounting for other background factors.

Nevertheless, children subject to a CIN plan face persistent challenges. They scored, on average, 10.6 points lower in Attainment 8, have 1.8 fewer passes at grades 9-4, and show lower progress scores (-0.581) compared to peers not on any kind of plan.

The DID estimate for children subject to a CIN plan is negative for Attainment 8 and Progress 8, suggesting pupils subject to CIN plans did not see the same improvements as their peers, although the coefficients are small. However, for the number of passes 9-4, the coefficient is positive (0.024) – although not statistically significant – which could be an early sign of progress in an area where gains may take time to emerge more fully.

Broader patterns in the data also reflect known dynamics: socio-economic disadvantage (captured by IDACI) is strongly associated with lower outcomes. Girls outperform boys across the board, although the “female after extension” interaction suggests the gender gap narrowed slightly.

Table 72 presents the results for children subject to a CP plan for KS4.

Table 72: Results of an OLS regression for KS4 outcomes for children subject to a CP plan

	Attainment 8 score			Number of passes 9 - 4			Progress 8 score		
	Coeff.	Std. err.		Coeff.	Std. err.		Coeff.	Std. err.	
Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	1.737	***	0.052)	0.088	***	0.009)	0.116	***	0.004)
Subject to a CP plan	-16.959	***	0.609)	-2.82	***	0.103)	-0.985	***	0.041)
Eligible for FSM	-7.97	***	0.05)	-1.389	***	0.008)	-0.351	***	0.003)
Ever FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-1.5	***	0.069)	-0.136	***	0.012)	-0.098	***	0.005)
Subject to a CP plan * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension (DID)	0.089		0.891)	0.33	**	0.151)	-0.173	***	0.061)
Subject to a CIN plan * Eligible FSM	3.573	***	0.707)	0.638	***	0.12)	0.024		0.048)
Subject to a CP plan * Eligible FSM * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-1.631		1.038)	-0.332	*	0.176)	-0.021		0.071)
IDACI score	-27.384	***	0.148)	-4.487	***	0.025)	-1.165	***	0.01)
IDACI score * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-2.653	***	(0.216)	-0.211	***	(0.037)	-0.196	***	(0.015)
Female	4.389	***	(0.038)	0.765	***	(0.006)	0.453	***	(0.003)
Female * Period after COVID-19 / VSH extension	-0.734	***	(0.052)	-0.234	***	(0.009)	-0.154	***	(0.004)
Constant	53.96		(0.037)	7.06	***	(0.006)	0.058	***	(0.003)
N 1,798,620									

Source: ONS. Note: ethnicity is also controlled for, but estimates are not shown.

Significance levels: *** p<.01; ** p<.05; *

As in the preceding analyses, the key coefficient of interest is the DID estimate variable which captures the effect of being subject to a CP plan after the period including both COVID-19 and the VSH extension of duties. This coefficient is positive for number of passes (+0.33) and statistically significant, not statistically significant for Attainment 8 (+0.089), and negative and statistically significant for Progress 8 (−0.173). Consistent with the descriptives presented in Table 72, this mixed pattern suggests that children subject to CP plans experienced a slight improvement in pass rates, but no clear change in Attainment 8, and a small decline in Progress 8 compared to their peers.

FSM eligibility and higher deprivation (IDACI) are again strongly associated with lower performance across all indicators. Gender differences are consistent: girls perform significantly better than boys across all outcomes, but this advantage slightly decreases after the extension.

Summary for KS4

- Children subject to a CIN plan face persistent challenges. They score, on average, 10.6 points lower in Attainment 8, have 1.8 fewer passes at grades 9-4, and show lower progress scores (-0.58) compared to peers not on a plan.
- The DID estimate for children subject to CIN plans is negative for Attainment 8 and Progress 8, suggesting that children subject to CIN plans did not see the same improvements as their peers who have not had any experience of CSC. However, for the number of passes 9-4, the coefficient is positive, although not statistically significant.
- In terms of gender, girls outperform boys across all measures: they have higher Attainment 8 scores, more passes at grades 9–4, and better Progress 8 scores. However, this advantage appears to have slightly declined over time, as previously observed for children in KS2.
- Students eligible for FSM performed worse across all outcomes and the gap widened further after the VSH extension.
- IDACI was strongly and negatively associated with attainment, with pupils in more deprived areas consistently scoring lower across all indicators of KS4 performance.

Robustness checks and sensitivity analysis

In this paper, we present our main analyses of impact on the two engagement outcomes – absences and suspensions – and on attainment at the three stages of KS1, KS2, and KS4, with three different ways of measuring attainment at KS4.

A wide range of other analyses, using different methods or considering different outcomes with different sub-groups have been undertaken in order to test the sensitivity of results to assumptions and consider overall robustness. We do not report the detail of

these results but summarise here the overall findings and implications. These other results can be provided on request.

Measuring receipt of the VSH programme

There is a concern that the variable of ‘months of time subject to a plan’ as the indicator of receipt of the intervention is subject to selection bias such that children near to the point of a plan starting might be more subject to difficulty and trauma. Thus, the months on a plan variable may pick up improvement in outcomes because of this selection effect, rather than the causal effect of the extension of duties. To test this, the analysis was conducted separately for the period before the VSH extension of duties and again after it to consider whether the relationship between the length of time subject to a CIN plan and absences varied across the two periods.

Table 73 compares these two regressions and shows a marked change in the association between time subject to a CIN plan and absenteeism. Before the VSH extension, each additional month per year spent subject to a CIN plan in the same period was associated with a reduction of 0.48 sessions missed. However, after the VSH extension, this association became significantly stronger, with each month linked to a reduction of 1.75 missed sessions.

Table 73: Number of sessions missed due to absences in the same period before and after the VSH extension for children subject to a CIN plan

	Before VSH extension			After VSH extension		
	Coeff.		Std. Err	Coeff.		Std. Err
Average months per year subject to a CIN plan in the period	-0.48	***	(0.013)	-1.75	***	(0.045)
Average age in the period	0.20	***	(0.031)	4.91	***	(0.708)
Average IDACI score in the period	0.43		(0.468)	10.95	***	(1.24)
Female	-0.19	*	(0.113)	3.58	***	(0.294)
Eligible for FSM in the period	6.05	***	(0.111)	13.72	***	(0.299)
Constant	13.05	***	(0.420)	-23.83	***	(0.995)
N	79,530			79,530		

Source: ONS. Significance levels: *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$

However, it is noteworthy that there is a statistically significant beneficial effect before the extension of the VSH programme. This suggests that there is some degree of selection bias, but that this doesn't explain away the estimated positive impact of the extension. However, it does further substantiate the argument that more replication and sensitivity analysis is required

Other covariates also display notable shifts. The association between age and absences, while positive in both models, was much larger after the VSH extension, though with greater uncertainty (i.e., larger standard errors). The effects of deprivation (IDACI), gender, and FSM eligibility also become more pronounced in the post-VSH extension model. For instance, being eligible for FSM is associated with over 13 additional missed sessions post-VSH extension (up from 6 pre-extension), reinforcing earlier findings that economic disadvantage remains a strong and growing predictor of absenteeism, even as the effectiveness of CIN plan involvement appears to improve.

Taken together, this analysis indicates that after the VSH extension, having a CIN plan open for longer was more strongly associated with improved attendance outcomes. However, structural inequalities linked to deprivation and poverty continue to shape patterns of absenteeism, and in some cases, these effects have intensified.

Other engagement outcomes

In addition to the panel data, fixed effects analysis undertaken for absences and suspensions, we have also undertaken analysis of persistent absenteeism, defined as pupils who missed more than 10% of school sessions in an academic year.

These results similarly showed small positive associations for the length of time children were subject to a CIN plan in terms of reducing the likelihood of being persistently absent. Each month subject to a CIN plan after the VSH extension was linked to a reduction in the probability of persistent absence by approximately 0.2 percentage points. Over six months, this translated into a 1.2 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of persistent absence, indicating a protective effect against absenteeism.

Alternative approaches to analysis of engagement outcomes

In addition to the panel data, fixed effects analysis undertaken for absences and suspensions, we also for these outcomes apply a complementary methodology that transforms the panel data into a cross-sectional format, collapsing each pupil's information into pre- and post-extension periods. This approach enhances interpretability, allows for the inclusion of time-invariant characteristics such as gender, and enables the

use of both linear and logistic models to evaluate improvements in outcomes like persistent absenteeism, or suspension risk.

Results are broadly in line with those in the main analysis presented.

Alternative approaches to analysis of attainment

For educational attainment, as well as the DID design, multilevel models are also used for KS2, and KS4, accounting for variation at the local authority level and recognising that the implementation and effect of the extension may differ regionally.

Results here indicated that the impact of the intervention was not uniform across the country, with some local authorities seeing larger improvements (or smaller declines) in outcomes for those subject to CIN plans than others, highlighting the need for local knowledge in implementing national policies aimed at reducing educational inequality for vulnerable children.

Conclusions

It is well known that there has been a substantial reduction in engagement post-COVID. Overall, absences have grown substantially, particularly on average for girls and for children eligible for FSM. There have also been increases in suspensions. CWSW have also experienced these trends. However, we find that the deterioration in engagement is less for children subject to a CIN plan than would be expected given their other characteristics, in particular taking account of eligibility for FSM which has a big impact on trends. This result emerges both in relation to absences and suspensions, using both panel data analysis with fixed effects, and from cross-sectional difference-in-differences analysis.

However, we do not find the same result for children subject to a CP plan. This is puzzling and further evidence that the results must be interpreted with caution. It could reflect differences in the interpretation of the 'duration' variable – months subject to a plan – between children subject to CIN plans compared with those with open CP plans. For example, children subject to CP plans are often considered at higher risk than those subject to CIN plans. Moreover, CP plans are typically designed to be more short-term than CIN plans. We see this in the descriptive statistics presented here whereby the average number of months spent subject to a plan, either before or after the VSH extension, is much lower for those subject to CP plans. As such, a longer time spent on a CIN plan might be expected and indicate a better experience for the child than a longer duration subject to a CP plan. More detailed exploration of these issues is needed in future research and underpins the tentativeness of our findings.

In relation to attainment, the general trend has been negative, particularly for children eligible for FSM and there is no evidence yet that the impact of the VSH programme has been able to offset this trend on attainment. Estimated effects are small and negative or zero depending on the model.

Overall, our statistical results are in line with the expectations of VSHs, that they are making headway within engagement, but that attainment will take longer and may prove more difficult without substantial commensurate improvements to wider aspects of schooling such as funding and wider policy on inclusion.

As discussed in the section on methods, there are a number of possible sources of bias due to the complexities of the programme and the available data. This means we cannot state strongly that the estimated impact on engagement is evidence of a causal impact of the VSH programme. However, VSHs might take satisfaction from the early evidence of impact, that trends may be going in the right direction and that this may be due in part to the action, they and their teams have undertaken through the extension of duties.



Department
for Education

© Department for Education copyright 2025

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

Reference: RR1542

ISBN: 978-1-83870-681-4

For any enquiries regarding this publication, contact www.gov.uk/contact-dfe.

This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.