

Looked After and Learning Evaluation of the Virtual School Head Pilot

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We hope you feel that your efforts have been worthwhile.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report examines the role of the Virtual School Head for Looked After Children (VSH) in the 11 pilot authorities funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The VSH acts as a local authority co-ordinator and champion to bring about improvements in the education of looked after children ('children in care'). Looked after children attend a range of local schools but the role of the VSH is to improve educational standards as if they were attending a single school. The 11 VSH pilots ran for two years from 2007-09, with each receiving on average just over £70,000 per annum for participation, depending on the numbers of children looked after. Four of the 11 also piloted private tutoring under a scheme funded by the HSBC Education Trust. The research occupied a nine-month period from October 2008 to June 2009 and fieldwork was planned for the spring term.

Using their knowledge of the study area, the research team's objectives were to:

- map the range of activities undertaken by the VSHs;
- examine professionals' and children's awareness and experiences of the VSH;
- investigate the educational outcomes for looked after children and the influences on them; and
- identify examples of 'good practice'.

Looked after children have long been recognised to be at a disadvantage in terms of their educational experiences and outcomes (Jackson and Sachdev 2001). The government has introduced a range of measures in attempts to raise educational attainment, enhancing the prospects for future employment as well as personal and family fulfilment (DfES 2007). However, the reasons for the lower attainment of looked after children are complex, including family background, pre-care experiences, instability and shortcomings in the care environment, low expectations and poor communication between social workers, carers and schools (Harker *et al.* 2004; Comfort 2007). Key indicators nationally show signs of improvement but progress has been slow and uneven. The evaluation of the virtual school head pilots needs to be seen against this background.

Research methods

The evaluation was based on analysis of a variety of sources of information, which were made available by the local authorities, professionals, carers and children in the pilot areas. Researchers used the substantial volume of data to consider the contribution of the new VSH role and the processes involved in its initiation. The planning stage included making initial contact with the VSHs and the design of study publicity and research instruments. The fieldwork stage involved gathering data from the following sources:

- official educational outcome indicator statistics published by DCSF;
- progress reports for the first year of the pilots which had been submitted by the VSHs (11);
- background questionnaires for VSHs (11);

- semi-structured interviews with VSHs (11) and directors of children's services or their senior representative (5);
- group- or individual interviews with social workers (39);
- and surveys of young people (31), foster and residential carers (25), designated teachers (21) and social workers (10).

Researchers were cautious with the conclusions drawn from these small sample sizes but the survey information was used to complement other data. The research team used qualitative and/or quantitative analysis of the materials separately, and then looked for substantiation or discrepancies within themes to evaluate this new role of VSH within the pilot authorities. Careful attention was paid to ethical considerations throughout the research, including informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings

Analysis of official educational outcome statistics showed that, over the period of the pilots, the 11 authorities performed well compared to the national average and most showed improvement in GCSE results.

The VSHs appointed were senior educationists and many had social work-related experiences and / or involvement in special education. Several were appointed as part-time VSHs. This is unusual for headteachers and heads of virtual schools were unlikely to have less to do than traditional school heads. Their positions varied in seniority in the organisational structure from Tiers 2 to 5. Posts were mostly at head of service or assistant head of service level. VSHs were mainly located in the education section of children's services. The 'virtual school teams' with which they worked varied considerably in size, location and function. A key element of their work was forging successful relationships with local school heads. This played an important part in enabling them to advocate for children in difficulties and avoid exclusions but was problematic for some VSHs depending on their background and structural position within the local authority. Those who had previously held school headships or were otherwise senior educationists and were placed at a senior level in the organisation were able to exert particular influence and operate more effectively.

The VSHs worked in different ways and gave priority to various aspects of their role. All recognised that raising the measurable attainment of looked after children was perhaps their most important task. However, they were also able to take a broader view of education, aiming to further the *Every Child Matters* outcome for children to enjoy as well as achieve. Many examples of good practice were cited, including: innovative governors models for the virtual school; a dedicated phone line for help with homework; and taking children from the virtual school to concerts and workshops, museums and art galleries and ensuring that looked after children had the opportunity to learn a musical instrument.

Data management was a problem identified by several VSHs. Some but not all had the quality of pupil information available, such as educational progress, that most traditional headteachers would assume. Good administrative and clerical support were seen as essential and those who lacked it expressed frustration at the obstacles this presented to communicating with all the different people they needed to work with and in achieving their aims.

Although direct involvement with individual pupils and their schools was appreciated, the main thrust of their work was strategic. They had helped to raise the profile of looked after children in schools and the importance given to education by social workers and by the authority generally. They had also focused on particular issues identified by previous

research as problematic, such as time out of school, the quality and implementation of PEPs, the need to co-ordinate the work of designated teachers and the level of support provided to children placed out of authority. Some VSHs interpreted their remit as ending with Year 11 but others were actively engaged with post-16 or leaving care teams and strongly promoted participation in further- and higher education for looked after children.

Social workers who were interviewed often lacked knowledge and confidence in educational matters and welcomed the assistance of dedicated education support (e.g. 'LACES' - 'Looked After Children Education Service') teams for looked after children and VSHs. Social workers had varying levels of understanding of the VSH role but they were able to list many specific examples of work undertaken that were helping looked after children to do better.

Carers and designated teachers responding to the survey had a better understanding of the VSH role than did social workers. Predictably, children were bemused by the job title 'VSH' but a number recognised the person by name.

The survey results suggested that most children in the sample had made educational progress during the period in which VSHs were operating but this is a more general finding from other studies in areas without VSHs. The contribution of LACES teams to children's education was considered very helpful.

Individual tutoring

Social workers were enthusiastic about looked after children's experiences of private tutoring during the pilots, concluding that it benefited both their self-confidence and application to their studies with encouraging results. Children who responded to the survey were also very positive about tutoring. Professionals identified that one problem with tutoring was that effective communication and feedback to teachers and social workers were sometimes lacking. Research evidence on the effectiveness of tutoring is mixed (Ireson 2004) but it is quite widely used by parents and pupils in England. It seems important that looked after children should also benefit from high quality private tutoring.

Conclusions

Across the research participant groups, it was generally perceived that the pilot VSHs had successfully raised the priority of educating looked after children. The research concluded that it is indeed a valuable role. It seems that those from a strong educational background are best placed to undertake these responsibilities. Those VSHs in the pilots appointed at a senior level were at an advantage in liaising with other professionals and engaging their cooperation. There were also benefits in being employed full-time. VSHs operate at the heart of complex issues in interprofessional working between education and social work and often seem to be contributing towards the integration of the two previous departments.

It was rare for virtual schools to be engaged in direct teaching of children and this has not been their main purpose. Virtual schools resembled 'schools' in some ways but not others. They spanned a very wide age- and ability range. However, it was strongly felt that being head of a *school* made a connection with and communicated important status externally to other heads.

The job title 'virtual school head' aroused mixed views, although there were some signs that people were becoming accustomed to it. (Alternatives might include, for example, a combined title of 'Head of the Virtual School and Head of Education for Looked After Children' and use which is most suitable for the position and the external or internal audience in question.)

In the authorities where the VSH operated separately from a LACES team there was duplication and it could cause confusion. The research concludes that there would be advantages if the two were integrated and VSHs became overall head of the LACES teams, working mainly but not exclusively in a strategic manner. Those pilot authorities with LACES teams were almost all moving in this direction. However if this is to happen it is even more important that the VSH retains the strong educational focus.

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1. Introduction

This report concerns an evaluation of the local authority pilots for the Virtual School Head for Looked After Children initiative. The low educational attainment of looked after children ('children in care') has long been identified as an important problem, which increases the risk of longer term instability and social exclusion (Jackson 2008). In contrast, positive educational experiences can raise the prospects for job opportunities as well as personal and family fulfilment (Social Exclusion Unit 2003; Gilligan 2007). Looked after children can be low achievers in school for a variety of reasons, including social and family background; pre-care experiences; instability and shortcomings in the care environment; low expectations; and poor communication with schools (Harker *et al.* 2004; Jackson and Sachdev 2001; Comfort 2007).

Government has introduced a range of measures to improve looked after children's educational experiences under its *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (2004) programmes and subsequent policies. These include, for example: looked after children having priority in school admissions; designated teachers in each school to work with looked after children; Personal Education Plans (PEPs) which include particular programmes of support; and additional Personal Education Allowances (PEAs) of £500 per year.

Another important initiative outlined in the *White Paper Care Matters: Time for Change* (June 2007) is the Virtual School Head (VSH) for Looked After Children. The concept of the VSH envisaged by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is that of a senior individual working for a local authority, who has responsibility for overseeing a coordinated system of support for looked after children and improving their educational achievements. Looked after children attend a range of local schools but the role of the VSH is to improve educational standards and access to educational provision for this group, as if they were in a single school. Importantly, therefore, the virtual school is not a 'teaching' institution but a model whereby authorities can provide services and support and hold to account those providing the services. It has responsibilities for looked after children educated locally; pupils in the authority's care placed out of authority; as well as those looked after by another council but educated in the VSH authority.

At the outset, VSHs were seen by DCSF as having a close working relationship with the director of children's services and lead member for children's services. VSHs would thus work both strategically and operationally, being a highly informed source of expertise with the capacity to broker arrangements.

The VSH pilots are running for two years from September 2007 to the end of the academic year 2008-09. They are based in 11 local authorities: Bournemouth, Cambridgeshire, Dudley, Gateshead, Greenwich, Merton, Norfolk, Salford, Stockport, Walsall and Warwickshire. Four of these (Dudley, Gateshead, Merton and Warwickshire) are also piloting private tutoring as part of the virtual school, funded by the HSBC Education Trust. The pilot authorities each received funding, depending on their numbers of looked after children, averaging just over £70,000 per annum.

Evaluation

The research team from the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol was contracted to undertake the evaluation. The bulk of the work occurred over a nine-month period commencing October 2008, covering the second half of the pilots. The overall aim of the evaluation was to inform the development of policy and practice concerning the national extension, structure and focus of the VSHs and related services. We set out to achieve this

by identifying which elements of the VSH role seemed to be associated with improved educational experiences and outcomes for looked after children; as well as contributing to improved working practices and support for key professionals - social workers, foster- and residential carers and designated teachers (DTs). The more specific objectives for the evaluation were to design and implement an appropriate methodology and framework for analysis to:

- map the range of activities undertaken by the VSHs;
- examine professionals' and children / young people's awareness and experiences of these initiatives;
- investigate educational experiences and outcomes for groups of children and the extent to which VSH services appear to have influenced them; and
- identify examples of good practice from the VSHs, which are judged to have benefited professional services and educational outcomes for looked after pupils.

Due to the time available and the task required we have attempted to write a succinct account for policy makers and professionals that conveys the key elements of the evaluation and its findings. We shall write academic papers later. Essentially, the autumn term 2008 served as a planning period, the bulk of data collection occurred during the following spring term, and analysis and writing-up occupied May-June 2009.

Methodology

We needed to be aware of the constraints of the exercise, as well as the complexities of researching local authorities, social workers, schools, carers and looked after children. We did not want to impose undue burdens on individuals and agencies, particularly in the run-up to summer exams.

We decided to gather some information from all 11 authorities and more detailed data from a sub-group of *five* ('the intensive group'). We have not named this sub-group (or indeed others) throughout this report for reasons of anonymity: individuals are less likely to be forthcoming or truthful if there is a possibility of them being identified. Indeed, most people we spoke with were commendably open and frank. We selected the five authorities in order to demonstrate some variety in local government status, regional location, ethnic diversity, number and educational performance of looked after children. On the latter we wanted a range of the better- and less well-performing authorities but, as we shall see, this is complex as there is variation across indicators and from year to year. We also wanted representation from authorities participating in the private tutors scheme. The five eventually selected were a reasonable cross-section and should have wider relevance.

Stage 1 - Planning Stage

Early contact was made with the 11 VSHs to inform them of the nature of the evaluation and provide reassurance of its intentions. Being evaluated would not be easy for any of us. We were invited to attend VSHs' termly meetings with DCSF. Attractively designed leaflets were produced for children, professionals and carers containing information about our study. Research instruments were drafted for use with VSHs, children's services directors, children, foster- / residential carers, designated teachers and social workers. Those for children and carers were piloted with three foster children and two foster carers and minor amendments made. VSHs were required to produce annual reports for DCSF and we undertook a content analysis of all 11 produced in September 2008. In these we focused on the nature and

perceived impact of VSHs' activities and this information also informed our approach to the rest of the evaluation.

Early on, we also issued VSHs with brief self-completion questionnaires to gather information on their professional, educational and social work backgrounds; employment histories; and structural relationships of their services within authorities, including VSHs' job titles and names of services. This helped inform us of who are the VSHs, what they do and what is new or different from what preceded the pilots. As timescales were short, we encouraged the intensive group to identify part-time administrative Liaison Officers, which was costed in the research budget, as a formal point of contact and to facilitate links with research participants.

We liaised with VSHs in the intensive sample to attend meetings with two social work teams in each, which were likely to have good numbers of looked after children who were potential users of VSH services. Here we explained our work and held digitally recorded, group or individual interviews about the pilots, including VSHs' perceived contribution and relationships with social workers. These meetings also started to identify possible individual looked after children for inclusion in the study sample in Stage 2.

Stage 2 - Fieldwork Stage

We analysed certain official DCSF educational outcome indicator statistics for looked after children from 2005-08 for the 11 authorities. Though tentative, this analysis might suggest whether the first year of the VSH pilot was associated with any change in pupils' performance. (At the time, exams and SATs had not yet been taken for the second year.) We undertook detailed, face-to-face individual interviews with the five VSHs in the intensive group and telephone interviews with the other six. These were recorded and fully transcribed. Building on our analysis of their 2008 reports, we explored the range of VSH activities undertaken, the reasons for particular courses of action, their perceived effectiveness and suggestions for development. Again, we wanted to know what had been initiated since the beginning of the pilots, what was a continuation of services previously and, therefore, what the initiative had added that was new. In the relevant authorities, attention focused on the organisation, operation and effects of the private tutors scheme.

An individual, semi-structured interview was also held with the children's services directors (or in two cases other senior manager) in the intensive group of five authorities, to explore the history and context of the VSH role; its strategic and operational contribution; links with other services; perceived effectiveness; and suggestions for development.

The survey sample

The survey aimed to concentrate on the educational experiences and achievements of a sample of 60 looked after children, 12 identified from each of the five intensively studied authorities. These needed to have been looked after ideally for two years where there might be the possibility of seeing changes in educational support during the pilots. Thirty of the 60 were being looked after and educated locally; 15 the responsibility of the authority but living and educated elsewhere; and 15 educated locally but looked after by other authorities. The responsibilities of VSHs potentially span all age groups. However, we needed to focus and so we set out in our samples to include children from Years 3-11 (7-16 years-old), of mixed gender and ethnicity, living in different types of care placements, of differing levels of attainment and special educational needs, and attending a range of schools.

In order to identify the sample we asked local authorities to select a list of 14-18 pupils with the aim of gaining a mixed sample of 12 pupils. We requested the details of pupils representing the following categories:

- males and females;
- children with and without a Statement of Special Educational Needs;
- those educated within the authority and looked after by that authority;
- children and young people educated within the authority but looked after by another authority;
- those educated outside of the local authority;
- pupils ranging from 7 to 16 years;
- if possible, looked after for 2+ years.

For the sample of 30 locally educated children in care and the 15 educated elsewhere, information was gathered from carers, designated teachers, social workers and older children themselves - 11 years and above. For the sample of 15 children educated locally but looked after by other authorities, data was to be gathered solely from the designated teachers and social workers and was of a more general rather than case-specific nature. Negotiating these children's and their authorities' detailed permissions to proceed would otherwise have been too complex and time-consuming.

We aimed to gather information from these research participants through web-based surveys (*SurveyMonkey*). These were mostly structured in approach with some free-text responses. Web-based surveys are becoming more popular in social research and can be a cost-effective option. Naturally, web-based surveys need to be carefully designed and we gave careful thought to format, length, levels of computer-literacy and security issues. Carers may help children with computers in some circumstances; more often perhaps the reverse. Telephone interviews were offered with adults and children who preferred it, where we completed the online survey over the telephone on their behalf. Children could also contact us via text, phone or e-mail if they wished.

Though the most suitable method for our purposes, we were however aware that surveys of different types tend not always to receive high responses, so we built in some contingencies. We also identified all looked after pupils in Years 6 and 10 in the five authorities who had been looked after for over a year and these were included in the sample too. (The Tender specification had stated that DCSF was interested in the views and Pilot experiences of these looked after pupils, who were at important transition points.) Anticipating perhaps a modest response from social workers, we had built in group interviews partly as a precaution.

We therefore wrote to 170 young people and 63 foster carers enclosing letters and leaflets giving the survey web address. We also e-mailed 60 designated teachers and 59 social workers containing a hyperlink for ease of access. (Clicking on this in the e-mail takes you directly to the survey web page.) We sent e-mail reminders to professionals in the study and attempted to contact all other non-respondents by phone. Social workers were alerted in advance that we were intending to approach older young people and professionals. Our letters to young people were sent in sealed envelopes via carers, who were given copies so that they knew what we were writing, and looked after children were not receiving letters from unfamiliar adults.

Our surveys gathered basic background information about children, such as age, gender, ethnicity, placements and type of school / educational setting attended. The main purpose was to explore respondents' awareness and perceptions of the contribution of the VSH service, together with perceptions of any changes and improvements in educational support during the pilot. We explored themes from our own and others' research that are known to be related to positive educational experiences for looked after children (eg. Harker *et al.* 2004; Jackson *et al.* 2005; Berridge *et al.* 2008). Where applicable, we investigated the operation of the private tutors schemes: including who were the tutors, activities undertaken, perceived effects and any recommendations.

Young people who participated in the research were given modest gift tokens as a reward for their involvement. Looked after children may not be motivated to take part in research and small rewards have been found to increase sample recruitment (eg. Barter *et al.* 2004).

Response rates

Table 1.1 - Participation in the survey

	Number of respondents contacted	Number of respondents	Refusals	Response rate
Young people	170	31	9	18%
Foster and residential carers	63	25	4	40%
Designated teachers	60	21	0	35%
Social workers	59	10	0	17%
Total	352	87	13	24%

*Response rate is calculated as the total number of completions as a proportion of respondents contacted.

We aimed to receive up to 225 responses to the web survey and we contacted 352 participants in order to achieve this. Completed responses were less than we had hoped and the survey had response rates which ranged from 40 per cent for foster and residential carers to 17 per cent for social workers (Table 1.1). Clearly, we need to be cautious in our use of survey data as numbers are not as large as we would have wished and we do not know how respondents and non-respondents compare.

There are a number of reasons for these moderate response rates. The information available to VSHs was sometimes out of date and addresses for a number of carers and young people were incorrect. Making contact with foster carers was sometimes difficult because they often had several children, and correspondingly busy lives, and although we tried to accommodate this by calling at evenings and weekends, some foster carers were not able to find the time to participate. Additionally some foster carers spoke about having had contact with other researchers in the preceding weeks. Similarly, as we drew closer to the end of term, many young people were rightly focussed on exams and other assessments and, therefore, unavailable to take part in the study. For professionals, the spring term is also a busy time of year.

Methodology - summary

In summary then our evaluation is based on analysis of information from the following sources:

- DCSF annual official statistics on educational outcome indicators for looked after children (see Section 2)
- analysis of 11 VSHs' annual reports (September 2008) (Section 3)
- VSH background questionnaires (Section 5)
- individual interviews with 11 VSHs (Section 5)
- individual interviews with five children's services directors / senior managers (Section 4)
- group interviews with 39 social workers (Section 6)
- web surveys / phone interviews with young people, carers, designated teachers and social workers, including those living and educated in- and out-of-authority (Section 7).

Research ethics

The research received approval from the ADCS Research Committee as well as the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee. Each member of the research team had an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check. Our research follows the Economic and Social Research Council (2005) *Research Ethics Framework*. This highlights the impartiality and independence of social researchers and not harming research participants. Obtaining informed consent is important and we provided full information in our leaflets to enable an informed choice to occur. Children were asked for their permission to involve them in the research and for us to ask professionals questions about them. If they declined, alternatives would be substituted. Only nine did. Birth parents of children in voluntary care were informed of our research and could also object if they wished - none did. It was emphasised that any participant who was approached could refuse to participate with no further consequences, for example for receipt of services.

All participants were assured of anonymity - nothing would be written or said that enabled any individual or agency to be identified. It was also emphasised that whatever information they gave to a researcher would be treated as confidential. The exception would be if we discovered that a child was at risk of serious harm, where we have a duty to act. Nothing arose. We complied with data protection legislation as it applies to research and university policies. The evaluation was undertaken by an experienced team with wide experience of research and contact with looked after children and professionals.

Outline of the report

In the next section, we look at government official statistics to compare the attainment and educational progress of looked after children in the 11 pilot authorities with the national picture. Using figures for 2005-08 we examine the progress of looked after children before and after the introduction of the VSH pilot programmes. Section 3 offers a content analysis of VSH initial reports to government for the year 2007-08, making use of the VSHs' own analysis of the successes and challenges faced in the first year. Section 4 then summarises our interviews with children's services directors about the background to the VSH pilots and their views about how they have worked. The in-depth interviews undertaken with VSHs are

examined in Section 5, where we present our discussions about processes involved in setting-up the pilot and the strategies used to improve the educational experiences of looked after children. This section also presents information about the professional backgrounds of those in the role.

In Section 6 we discuss findings from our group- and individual interviews with social workers in the five intensive sample areas, about their awareness and perceptions of the VSH role as well as its contribution. The perspectives of young people, carers, designated teachers and social workers are covered in Section 7, including views about the VSH and whether or not services have improved since the commencement of the role. Finally, in Section 8 we draw together the findings to present an overall interpretation and evaluation of the VSH local authority pilots.

Summary points

- The low educational attainment of looked after children is a longstanding problem.
- The VSH, a new government initiative, is a senior person working in a local authority responsible for overseeing a coordinated system of support for looked after children and improving their educational achievements. The virtual school is not a teaching institution.
- This evaluation of the 11 VSH pilots seeks to map the range of activities of the VSHs and to assess their impact on the educational experiences and progress of looked after children.
- We achieve this by a range of methods including analysing official statistics and VSH reports; and individual, group or phone interviews and web surveys with children's services directors, VSHs, children, carers, designated teachers and social workers.
- The evaluation took place from October 2008 - June 2009.

2. Educational outcomes for looked after children in England and the pilot authorities

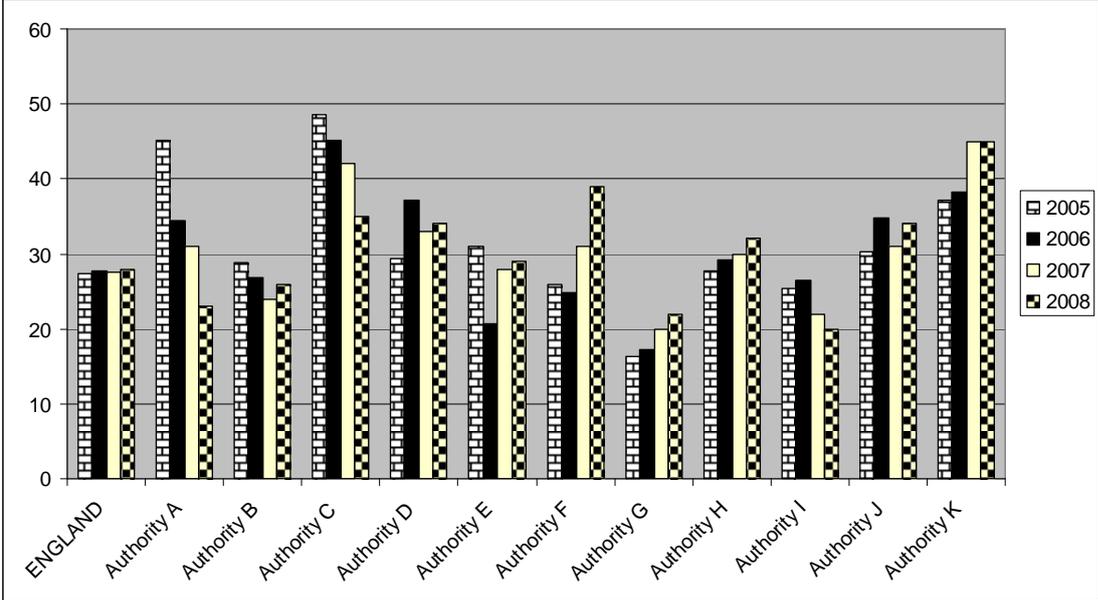
This section analyses official statistics on educational outcomes for looked after children nationally and in the 11 VSH pilot authorities. We do this for 2005-2008 to compare the authorities with the national picture in order to see whether there were any signs of improvements in the first full year of the VSH pilots (2007-2008). We would not necessarily expect to observe a difference after such a short time, nor suggest a causal relationship between the appointment of the VSH and changed results.

Special Educational Needs

In September 2005, 27 per cent of children who had been looked after for at least 12 months had a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN). This national figure increased very slightly over the four years to 28 per cent in 2008. This compares to the much lower proportion of all children and young people with a Statement of SEN which is just under 3 per cent (DCSF 2009b). The high proportion of children with a Statement of SEN amongst looked after children can be attributed to a combination of factors. Children in care, because of their past experiences (for example neglect, abuse or parental misuse of alcohol or drugs leading to developmental delay) may be more likely to have special educational needs. Also, disabled children may be disproportionately accommodated in local authority care. Additionally, because they are already in contact with professionals, looked after children may be more likely to be taken through the formal assessment processes for a Statement of SEN than their peers.

It is clear that the existence of a high proportion of looked after children with special educational needs is likely to have a bearing on the attainment achievable by this group of children and young people. Although some children with a Statement do achieve well in exams, others may not have the capacity to undertake age-related formal assessments. In the 11 pilot areas, the proportion of children with a Statement of SEN was subject to a great deal of change in the individual authorities over the four-year period. In September 2008, 7 pilot areas had a proportion of looked after children with special educational needs that was higher than the national figure. Authority K was the local authority with the highest proportion of looked after children with a Statement - 45 per cent (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 - Percentage of children looked after for at least 12 months with a Statement of Special Educational Needs, 12 months ending 30 September 2005–2008, England and pilot authorities



Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009a), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September.

While recognising Statements of SEN as a factor likely to affect attainment outcomes, we need to be careful not to confound behavioural problems with learning difficulties. Behavioural difficulties, which may arise both from pre-care experiences and the emotional impact of entering care, affect educational attainment by making it more likely that young people may be suspended or excluded for disciplinary reasons. This will be damaging to their quality of schooling but may be unrelated to their academic ability.

Exclusions and attendance

Table 2.1 shows the number of permanent exclusions for looked after children as a percentage of all children looked after for at least a year prior to the data collection point. In nearly all pilot local authorities, five or fewer looked after children were excluded during this period and are, therefore, not included in the published statistics. There was one exception in Authority G, where exclusions accounted for 2 per cent of the relevant looked after population in 2006.

Table 2.1 - Permanent exclusions¹ as a percentage of children looked after for at least 12 months, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008, England and pilot local authorities²

	2005	2006	2007	2008
ENGLAND	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.5
Authority A	-*	-	-	0
Authority B	-	-	-	-
Authority C	0	0	-	0
Authority D	-	-	-	0
Authority E	0	0	0	0
Authority F	-	-	-	-
Authority G	-	2	-	-
Authority H	-	-	0	0
Authority I	-	-	-	-
Authority J	0	-	0	-
Authority K	-	0	0	0

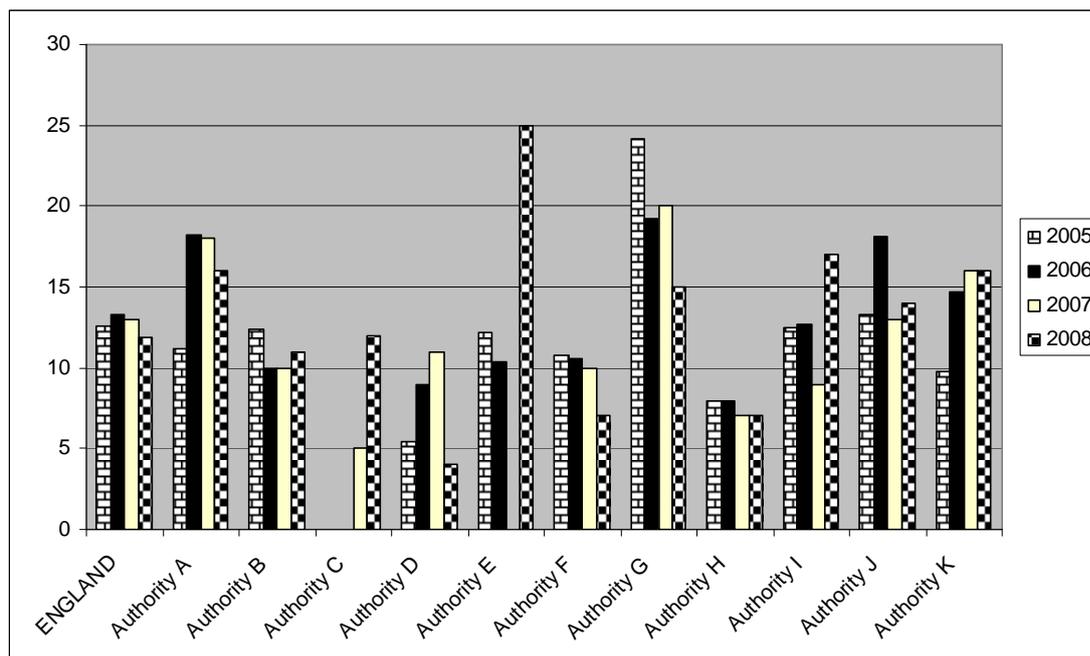
Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), *Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008*.

¹ Where a child was permanently excluded more than once in the previous school year, each occasion has been counted.

² Missing data: in all tables in this report '-' refers to a cell containing 5 or fewer cases or a percentage based on 5 or less.

With regard to attendance statistics for the four-year period shown (Figure 2.2), a minority, albeit a noticeable minority, of looked after children in most areas had more than 25 days off school in the academic year. Compared to national figures for looked after children, Authority E had twice the proportion of pupils in this category in 2008. In contrast, Authority D recorded only 4 per cent having been off school for more than 25 days in the year. Caution is required when interpreting these figures: because of the small numbers of children concerned in some areas, effects related to individual children or families can have a significant influence on the figures shown. The increases shown in three local authority areas over the period may have also been a direct result of improved data collection procedures affected by the pilot programme. Nationally, the figures for attendance have seen an increase and then fall in the four-year period.

Figure 2.2 - Percentage of children looked after for at least 12 months who have missed at least 25 days of school, 12 months ending 30 September 2005–2008, England and pilot authorities.³



Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

³Missing data: in all charts, where no bar is shown this denotes a percentage of less than 5 or shows that fewer than 5 looked after children were recorded in the category.

The attainment of looked after children

Official local authority statistics on the attainment of looked after children have certain limitations. Current published statistics do not make reference to the expectations for particular children, nor ‘added-value’ and figures for each cohort are often low. In the following pages attainment levels for tests at Key Stage 1, 2, 3 and 4 are discussed. There is necessity for caution in making interpretations of figures at the local level since they are highly susceptible to major fluctuations related to the characteristics and abilities of the cohort in question. National figures, because of the more substantial number of children and young people involved, are likely to be more statistically robust.

Attainment at Key Stage 1

Nationally, the figures for reading at Key Stage 1 (KS1) have shown a slight decline in the four-year period, with the latest statistics showing that 57 per cent of the looked after children at the relevant age had reached Level 2 or above. In our group of 11 pilot authorities, attainment levels for this test ranged from 42–69 per cent in 2005 and 40–74 per cent in 2008 (Table 2.2).

Figures for achievements within the pilot local authorities are sparse because the numbers of eligible children are low in many areas. Authority B and Authority I figures for 2008 (74 per cent of children achieving Level 2) appear outstanding and show a definite increase on the previous years’ results, but as only 20 children were eligible to take the test in each area, these figures may be the result of the usual variation in capabilities of individual children year on year.

Table 2.2 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 2 or above at Key Stage 1 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: reading, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N*	% Level 2 or higher	N	% Level 2 or higher	N	% Level 2 or higher	N	% Level 2 or higher
ENGLAND	1,700	57	1,700	57	1,500	55	1,600	57
Authority A	10	-	10	-	15	-	15	69
Authority B	10	-	10	-	15	54	20	74
Authority C	5	-	10	-	10	-	15	50
Authority D	-	-	-	-	-	0	15	43
Authority E	-	-	-	0	0	0	-	-
Authority F	25	59	30	57	15	53	20	63
Authority G	15	69	20	79	15	76	20	40
Authority H	10	50	25	52	20	50	10	55
Authority I	20	42	20	29	10	58	20	74
Authority J	10	-	15	46	-	-	5	-
Authority K	5	-	-	0	-	-	-	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

(*Note: in Tables 2.2-2.9 and 2.11 N = total number of looked after children who are at the correct age to take the test.)

Attainment in *writing* at KS1 (Table 2.3) was generally lower than for reading. Here, nationally, the figures declined very slightly in the period from 52 per cent in 2005 to 50 per cent in 2008. In the 11 pilot areas, where figures were published, attainment for writing at KS1 was almost always greater than the national figure in each year. However, this measurement was not published in many areas because of the small numbers of looked after children involved.

Table 2.3 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 2 or above at Key Stage 1 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: writing, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 2 or higher						
ENGLAND	1,700	52	1,700	52	1,500	51	1,600	50
Authority A	10	-	10	64	15	-	15	77
Authority B	10	-	10	-	15	46	20	63
Authority C	5	-	10	-	10	-	15	57
Authority D	-	0	-	-	-	-	15	-
Authority E	-	-	-	0	0	0	-	-
Authority F	25	56	30	54	15	53	20	53
Authority G	15	69	20	63	15	71	20	45
Authority H	10	58	25	48	20	61	10	55
Authority I	20	47	20	-	10	50	20	68
Authority J	10	-	15	46	-	-	5	-
Authority K	5	-	-	0	-	-	-	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)(2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.4 shows the number of looked after children gaining a Level 2 in KS1 *mathematics* as a percentage of those eligible for the test. The national figures show a decline from 64 per cent of children in 2005 to 62 per cent in 2008. Although figures are patchy at the local authority level, percentages were often higher for the pilot areas than England in 2008 and one area had a success rate of 92 per cent in that year.

Table 2.4 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 2 or above at Key Stage 1 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: mathematics, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 2 or higher						
ENGLAND	1,700	64	1,700	65	1,500	64	1,600	62
Authority A	10	-	10	-	15	44	15	92
Authority B	10	-	10	-	15	77	20	74
Authority C	5	-	10	-	10	-	15	64
Authority D	-	0	-	-	-	-	15	43
Authority E	-	-	-	-	0	0	-	-
Authority F	25	70	30	61	15	53	20	58
Authority G	15	75	20	84	15	65	20	55
Authority H	10	83	25	52	20	61	10	73
Authority I	20	58	20	38	10	50	20	63
Authority J	10	-	15	62	-	-	5	-
Authority K	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Attainment at Key Stage 2

Nationally, figures for looked after children in English at KS2 have gradually improved in the four-year period (Table 2.5). (Tables 2.5-2.10 can be found in the Appendix.) A comparison of the range of figures submitted locally shows a range of 38- 62 per cent reaching Level 4 in 2007 compared to 28- 60 per cent in 2008. In 2008, 4 out of the 7 pilot areas with published figures achieved a percentage that was higher than the national figure for the achievement of Level 4 at KS2 English.

In England as a whole, looked after children had achieved Level 4 at KS2 in *mathematics* in 38 per cent of cases in 2005 and this measurement has gradually increased in the four-year period so that 44 per cent in 2008 achieved a Level 4 (Table 2.6 Appendix). At the local level, the years 2007 and 2008 saw a decline in the proportion of eligible pupils achieving this standard in 5 of the 7 areas where figures were published. However, in 2008, 5 of these 7 areas showed a higher proportion of children achieving the Level 4 standard in mathematics than the national proportion of 44 per cent.

In KS2 *science*, looked after children's national performance has improved each year in the four-year period (Table 2.7 Appendix). From a baseline of 53 per cent in 2005, the percentage of children and young people achieving at least a Level 4 has risen to 60 per cent. Again, there are fluctuations in the performance in different pilot areas over the 4 years; for example, in Authority J the percentage of those achieving the Level 4 started at 50 per cent, and increased, decreased and increased again to 80 per cent at the end of the four-year period. This uneven picture shows statistics for 15-20 children eligible to take the test in the four years shown.

Attainment at Key Stage 3¹

Nationally there has been a slight improvement in the percentage of looked after children achieving a Level 5 assessment in KS3 *English* from 2005 to 2008. The local authority picture is mixed with all 8 areas, where figures were published, showing a higher proportion of eligible children achieving the Level than those nationally in 2007; and 5 out of the 8 areas doing better than the national proportion in 2008 (Table 2.8 Appendix). In 2008, 4 areas showed results for 2008 which had declined in comparison to the previous year.

In *mathematics* at KS3, the national figures have also shown a gradual improvement from 28 per cent to 33 per cent over the period. In 2007 only 1 of our pilot areas showed a figure for Level 5 that was less than the national percentage whereas, in the following year, 5 areas had a lower proportion of looked after children reaching the national benchmark (Table 2.9 Appendix).

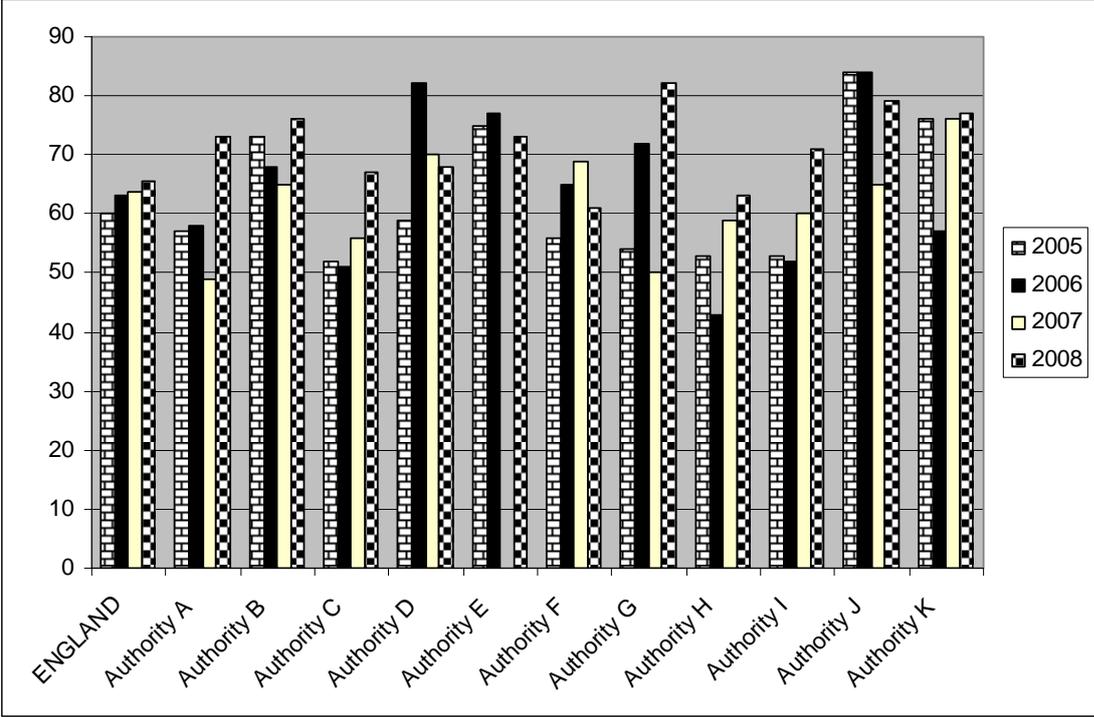
The period from 2005 to 2008 also shows improvements in the national figures for looked after children achieving Level 5 or above in *science*. Nationally a Level of 26 per cent was increased to 30 per cent in the 4 years (Table 2.10 Appendix). Again figures in our pilot areas tend to fluctuate. For example in Authority C where nearly a quarter of young people gained a Level 5 in 2005, this rose to 39 per cent in 2007 and decreased to 23 per cent in 2008; and in Authority J the figure of 39 per cent in 2006 rose to 46 per cent in 2007 and then fell to 36 per cent in 2008. In 2008, 5 areas showed a higher proportion of children reaching the standard than the national figure.

Attainment at Key Stage 4

Nationally the number of young people achieving at least 1 GCSE or equivalent qualification has increased year on year since 2005: an important improvement but not as large as some would have expected (Figure 2.3). In 2007 the percentage of looked after young people leaving compulsory schooling with at least 1 qualification (GCSE grades A-G or equivalent) ranged from 49 in Authority A to 76 in Authority K (Figure 2.3). In 2008 the range was between 61 per cent in Authority F to 82 per cent in Authority J. In 2008, 8 of the 10 areas where figures were published had a percentage of young people gaining at least 1 qualification, which was higher than the national proportion. The figures for 2008 also showed that 9 areas had percentages which were higher than the previous year, showing a noticeable improvement in the first full year of the VSH pilot.

¹ This information will no longer be obtainable.

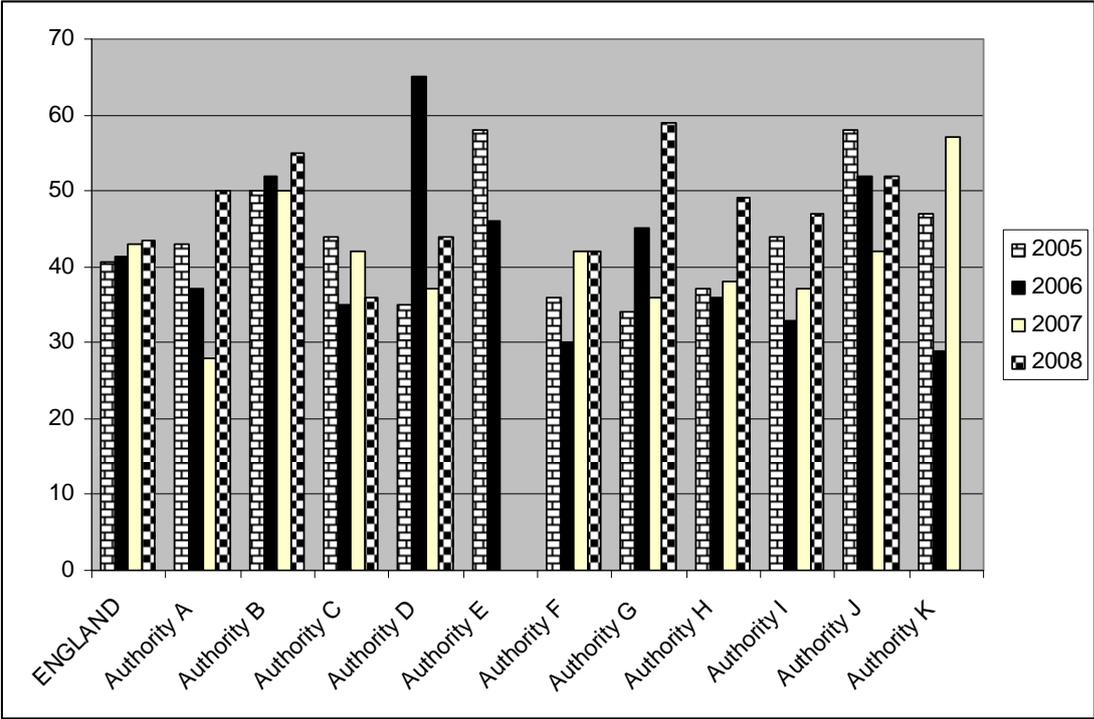
Figure 2.3 - Percentage of children looked after for more than a year achieving at least 1 GCSE at Grades A-G or a GNVQ, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008



Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

In 2008, 7 of the 11 pilot local authorities showed a higher proportion of young people achieving at least 5 GCSEs than the national figure. Furthermore, when the figures for 2007 and 2008 are compared, most local authorities (8) show an improvement in the proportion of children achieving these results (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 - Percentage of children looked after for more than a year achieving at least 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at Grades A-G or a GNVQ, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008



Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

(Note that percentages for Authority E in 2007 and 2008 and Authority K for 2008 were not included in the government figures because they are percentages of 5 per cent, or below or percentages based on 5 or fewer individuals.)

Nationally, the proportion of looked after children achieving at least 5 A-C GCSEs has increased steadily since 2005, so that the latest figures show 14 per cent of looked after children in this category. Locally there are major gaps in the figures with only 10 to 60 looked after children represented as eligible (Table 2.11). The figures do show that in the 4 local authorities where figures were available in 2008, 3 areas had a higher percentage achieving at least 5 A-C grades than the national proportion.

Table 2.11 - Percentage of children looked after for more than a year achieving at least 5 GCSEs (or equivalent) at Grades A-C, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
		at least 5 GCSEs at grades A-C		at least 5 GCSEs at grades A-C		at least 5 GCSEs at grades A-C		at least 5 GCSEs at grades A-C
ENGLAND	4,700	11	5,100	12	5,100	13	5,100	14
Authority A	60	10	50	-	55	-	50	21
Authority B	30	-	25	-	25	-	50	16
Authority C	25	-	35	-	35	22	35	-
Authority D	15	-	15	-	25	-	25	-
Authority E	10	-	15	-	10	-	10	-
Authority F	40	-	55	11	60	-	75	14
Authority G	40	22	45	28	40	-	40	26
Authority H	30	-	30	-	40	-	35	-
Authority I	30	-	25	-	30	-	40	-
Authority J	20	-	25	-	25	-	30	-
Authority K	15	-	20	-	20	-	15	0

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Overall these official statistics show that pilot local authorities have done well taking into account the high proportion of children with special educational needs represented amongst children in care in their areas. The 11 authorities performed strongly against the national picture over the four years and, in general, the attainment of looked after children seemed to be following a positive pathway in the first full school year of the virtual school head pilot.

Summary points

- In 2008, 7 pilot areas had a higher proportion of looked after children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs than the national average.
- Numbers of permanent exclusions in the local areas were generally too low to be published in the annual DCSF statistics.
- In the local pilot authority statistics, there was wide variation in the proportion of looked after children who had missed school for more than 25 days in the academic year 2007-2008. For example, Authority D recorded 4 per cent having been off school for more than 25 days in the final year, whereas Authority E recorded a proportion that was twice the national figure.

- In the 11 pilot areas, where figures were published, attainment for writing at KS1 was usually better than the national figure in each of the 4 years. However, this measurement was not published in many areas because of the small numbers of looked after children involved.
- At the local level for KS2 mathematics, the years 2007 and 2008 saw a decline in the proportion of eligible pupils achieving the level 4 standard in several areas but a majority of these areas performed better than the national figure of 44 per cent of looked after children.
- In 2007 only one of our pilot areas showed a figure for achieving Level 5 at KS3 that was lower than the national percentage whereas, in the following year, 5 areas had a lower proportion of looked after children reaching the national benchmark.
- Where published, the proportion of looked after children gaining at least 5 GCSEs with grades A-C was higher in the local figures (3 areas) compared to the national percentage for 2008.
- Generally, pilot authorities performed well when compared to the national picture for the educational attainment of looked after children.

3. Analysis of virtual school heads' initial progress reports

The 11 authorities piloting the Virtual School Head scheme were announced in May 2007 and local arrangements were put in place, with the majority of VSHs taking up the role during the autumn 2007 school term. In a small number of cases the VSH was not in post until slightly later but all appointments were in place by January 2008.

A reporting structure was set up by the DCSF, with each virtual school pilot required to submit a progress report, setting out what had been achieved in terms of outcomes during the first school year. This first set of reports was submitted around the end of September 2008. DCSF carried out an earlier review of these annual reports, which gave a flavour of the key issues that had emerged in relation to six progress indicators. Rather than simply repeat the points made there, this section aims to draw out additional material that can inform an understanding and evaluation of the VSH pilot.

Scope of material submitted

The 11 progress reports were each completed using the DCSF template provided and all addressed the specified six progress indicators. We were conscious that VSHs might be cautious in what they wrote in these public reports.

Some reports used only the pro-forma provided while a number of VSHs included additional materials, for example development or project plans for 2008/9, results and trend data. These reports ranged from some 14 to 42 pages (average [mean] 26 pages). Four local authorities also submitted (10 pages or so of) reports on their pilot private tutoring schemes.

Progress indicators addressed in the VSH reports

The progress indicators identified by the DCSF address improvements in:

- strategic leadership and planning;
- strategic planning with other local authorities and their partners;
- operational working with social care personnel
 - within the local authority
 - with other local authorities;
- the way in which data is used;
- the way the virtual school is working with designated teachers, other school staff and governors;
- the way the local authority engages with further education.

Overall, the fifth indicator (educational links) received most discussion in the reports; and data (fourth) and engagement with FE (sixth) the least.

Role and structure

VSHs' reports outlined some of the key initial steps taken to structure the role of the VSH and the virtual school.

Title and terminology

Nomenclature varied. The majority of the reports refer to the virtual school and virtual school head (VSH); some use the term Virtual Head Teacher (VHT); one authority refers to the Head, Virtual School for Looked After Children and another to the Virtual School for Children in Care. Job title has important implications, as we shall see later.

Location of VSH/ virtual school team and links within children's services directorate and broader local authority systems

The issue of where the VSH was located - both in terms of their place in local authority structures and systems and their actual geographical location (or co-location with other relevant professionals, disciplines, council departments) - gave rise to a variety of interesting responses. The reports generally highlight the value the VSH attached to having ready, regular and direct access to colleagues (senior strategic and operational) across the range of children's services, and emphasise the importance of networking and building relationships across the different divisions.

One VSH noted, for example, that they have daily direct access to and liaison with local authority education managers, social care managers, health service managers and relevant key staff within these sections; and are building stronger links both with managers and with other staff in relevant wider services within the local authority and with external community partners. Another report refers to 'regular meetings and open door approach of key senior personnel [both social care and education personnel listed] and a high level of commitment'. The VSH goes on to comment:

'Joined up working was part of the existing culture within the children's services directorate and, in this context, actively promoted by the assistant director of inclusion and access. From the outset he promoted a collaborative approach and convened regular joint meetings between the virtual school and the senior managers with responsibility for LAC. This is firmly established.'

The question of location has clearly been significant for a number of the VSHs and seems to have been used as a way of promoting contact with colleagues from a variety of social care and other professional groups. In one authority, the VSH asked to be accommodated - with the accompanying team of education advisors - in the social care building, along with the looked after children social care team, the placements team, child in need team, fostering team and adoption. This arrangement also resulted in proximity to designated health colleagues working with looked after children. The VSH reported:

'This close proximity means that artificial barriers between social care and our education team are broken and my own induction into the world of social care has been accelerated. I regularly visit the civic centre which houses the education and other Children Schools and Families teams...I feel very integrated into CSF, regularly attending "education" meetings, "social care" meetings and joint meetings. The steering group's own skills and specialities (education/social care/inclusion) have also helped with the integration process.'

Another VSH noted that they were located in the central education offices, with access to the director of children's services, assistant director for early years and youth services and specialist services, and daily interaction with senior educational improvement advisors, educational improvement advisors and school improvement partners (SIPs), but also commented on having senior social care managers' offices nearby.

Governance and line-management arrangements

Connected with the issue of location, a range of governance structures had been put in place across the 11 pilots. A variety of ways of constituting governing bodies for the virtual schools is described - with great diversity of personnel, in many cases including significant representation from senior managers and elected members of the council. Some reports refer to steering groups, management boards / committees or project boards; but other VSHs have adopted the language of 'face-to-face school' governance and have a board of governors.

In one authority, the VSH is also head of school performance, organisation and inclusion, which is part of the early years, schools and communities division of the local authority; the Chair of governors is also the head of corporate parenting (ie. social care) so the structure of the virtual school 'brings together two key senior managers from the social services and education sections of children's services'. Both report directly to the two deputy directors and then to the director of children's services.

Another report identifies that the corporate parenting group (CPG) has been made the governing body of the virtual school. It includes senior leaders from within the authority and also representatives of a range of the children's services department's key partners.

'In this way, there is co-ordination at the highest level of the LA's strategic planning of its corporate responsibilities and of the work of the virtual school, and the virtual school is used as the integrated vehicle for strategic actions in this area'.

The corporate parenting group is chaired by a senior member who reports back to the council. Between meetings of the CPG, an executive meeting occurs which involves, amongst others, the director of children's services, key senior managers and the head of the virtual school; this meeting is chaired by the lead member and is able to give more detailed strategic direction to the virtual school. The VSH concludes:

'The senior managers give a clear lead to the virtual school and show their support for it by their day to day involvement and also through their willingness to resource it generously'.

A number of reports set out the line management hierarchy within which the VSH is located and it is clear that a variety of line management arrangements are in place. Although for the majority of VSHs these operate through education services, in a small number of cases the VSH is managed by, or reports to, a senior officer within Social Care. Within education services, different officers are identified as having the management role in relation to the VSH. These include a senior educational improvement advisor, assistant director for learning and achievement, head of access and inclusion, and head of school performance. Reporting mechanisms are identified that route information from the VSH through to the children's services directorate and on to elected members / relevant cabinet members, corporate parenting panel (or equivalent).

Links with LACES teams

Nearly all of the local authorities had dedicated LACES teams in place before the virtual school pilot project started and the reports suggest that a variety of ways of working together have been established².

In a few authorities, the decision was taken for the LACES team to continue with its existing line management structure, meaning that it did not become the direct responsibility of the VSH. In one, for example, the officer responsible for managing the VSH in that authority holds the looked after children portfolio and also has a role in supporting the LACES team, and the VSH notes that:

[t]here are strong links to the “discrete” LAC Team and their work, and a developing overview of “distributed” support for LAC from other LA services and wider partners’.

Another report describes the role of the VSH as independent of, but complementary to, the LACES service that was already in place. Being separate from the LACES team and located in different divisions within the directorate potentially provides a wider network of professionals to promote and support the educational achievements of looked after children. However, there are possible drawbacks in having the two structures in place ‘in parallel’, in terms of confusion about roles and responsibilities and possible duplication of work and communications with schools. On balance, this VSH suggests that stronger partnership or even partial integration of the virtual school and LACES team could address these drawbacks and bring ‘even more coherence to the well established work that is already undertaken by the latter group’.

In a number of authorities, there are more formal links or levels of integration between the virtual school and LACES teams. For example, one authority has integrated the LACES team into the virtual school development plan. In this authority, the manager of the LACES team has also become deputy head of the virtual school and is line managed by the VSH. The report comments on the good relationships and links that exist between the LACES and social care teams. Another report identifies that the VSH has overall strategic management responsibility for the authority’s LACES team. A more integrated model is described in one authority, where the LACES team is managed by the VSH: the workers have been re-named ‘advisory teachers’ and are now known as the virtual school.

Objectives and initial priorities

This is an area where the amount of information provided in VSHs’ reports is very variable, and objectives are specified at different levels of generality. It is noticeable that almost all reports refer to ‘objectives’ but do not necessarily then identify ‘priorities’ within these. Categorising the objectives has proved to be quite a challenge as boundaries between the strategic and the operational, for example, are not always clear-cut. This could perhaps be understood as a reflection of the developmental nature of the pilot projects. Strategic planning and monitoring support operational activity; and, in turn, operational activity provides valuable information about how best to do things, which then feeds back into the planning process and informs the strategic overview.

² A number of terms are in use, and the reports include reference to LACES, LACE(S), TELAC, ESLAC. For ease of reference throughout this report we have used the generic term ‘LACES’ (Looked After Children Education Service) to cover these different formulations.

Overall, there appears to be a balance more towards the strategic, although in some cases it is possible to infer an operational component within a broadly defined objective. Within the reports, there are a number of objectives that clearly seem to identify operational priorities for the virtual school / VSH - for example, one report sets as a priority: 'Working with teachers, SIPs, schools and educational establishments in order to raise educational attainment and achievement'. Another report has as an objective:

'To link existing roles in the new structure in order to raise attainment and secure well being of LAC - work with [authority's] research and information department; alternative education; admissions; SEN; placement officer; educational welfare officers; educational psychology services; Connexions; independent reviewing officers; social workers; managers in education and social care; other borough teams'.

This suggests a broad operational engagement with a number of individuals and services, within and beyond education.

Outcomes

Attainment

'Accurate, up-to-date and highly accessible data is the bedrock of the virtual school. It supports early, timely and well-informed interventions to improve attendance, raise attainment and accelerate progress.' (VSH)

Reports emphasised the importance of reliable and timely data to allow VSHs to ensure that appropriate targets are set for all looked after children, and that progress towards achieving them is monitored and reviewed. As one VSH notes:

'I can now target the use of our own support staff at the students who the data shows need the most assistance (for example students who are underachieving; at low levels of achievement; are close to achieving a key target, for example 5 A-C; are gifted and talented students etc.)'.*

Two VSHs refer to having introduced a 'traffic light' system to track achievement (in one authority, both under- and excellent achievement are tracked through this system). Elsewhere, a 'Track' system is in place to log all targets for individual looked after children and target under-achieving children. A number of VSHs found that there were still problems in relation to data collection and management. For example, one observed that there were still some issues associated with getting information 'quickly enough to support operational decisions'. Another reported persistent difficulties with data collection due, among other things, to incompatibility of information systems and variability of data collected. This report talked of having a 'snapshot' of the attainment and progress of all looked after children at the beginning of the pilot, which would be compared with attainment and progress data at both the midway and end stages when available (midway data was apparently not available at the point the report was compiled).

A variety of strategies have been introduced to try and improve the attainment of looked after children; including, in four of the pilot authorities, the use of the HSBC Education Trust-funded private tutoring. Some of these operate at a more strategic level, while others have had an impact operationally. Examples range from attempts to build greater understanding and partnership working by devising protocols to outline the role of the LACES team and the VSH; the VSH attending and contributing to relevant training, SIPs meetings, heads meetings, governors meetings etc.; promoting equal access to local schools; the use of 'Catch Up' programmes in literacy and numeracy; through to the provision of laptops to looked after children. These approaches and interventions are generally reported very

positively. However, in a small number of cases, the need to spend time developing positive working relationships within and between local and regional organisations has meant that it has been harder to progress priorities in relation to educational achievement.

Some VSHs felt that it was probably too soon to make definitive comments about children's attainment ('I feel it is still early days to make clear judgements about improved performance'). Another observed that gaining qualifications was seen as a major focus of the LACES team and the private tuition scheme, as part of improving educational attainment and achievement of looked after children; however, 'this aspiration will take time to develop as children in the system need to work their way through before the impact can really be assessed'. In some local authorities, relatively small cohorts of looked after children are taking end of key stage assessments in any one year. One report noted that the range of needs and abilities may vary dramatically from year to year and results may, therefore, have little to do with the extent of the support provided to engage looked after children in learning. However, having said that, the same VSH commented on an apparent upturn in KS2 SATs results for the reporting year 2007-08.

Overall, the reports included very variable amounts of data on formal outcomes. In some cases, information was unavailable at the time of writing the progress report; in others, results data was still provisional. However, where data was provided, it seemed more consistently to indicate improved attainment at KS2; with KS4 or GCSE results, the trends seemed less clear-cut. (Our Section 2 analysis does not completely confirm this picture but there may be a different emphasis on relative and absolute levels of progress.) The following comment perhaps sums up a more general view:

'... some progress made in raising achievement as reflected in SATs and public examination results...but a long way to go in terms of our aim of enabling our students to achieve results that match their full potential'.

Other indicators of progress that were identified include an increase in the percentage of looked after children *entered* for GCSE (or equivalent) exams (one report notes a rise from 75 per cent to 82 per cent); an increased percentage of looked after children being maintained in mainstream education (again, one report notes a change from 78 per cent in 2006-07 to 81 per cent in 2007-08); a reduced number of new school placements as a result of a care placement change; and increased numbers of young people moving on to further- and higher education.

Attainment of children and young people placed out of authority (OOA) and those educated within the authority but looked after by another local authority (OLA)

Tracking and monitoring the progress of children placed OOA has clearly proved to be something of a challenge in a number of cases. In one authority, the VSH and virtual school staff had targeted OOA looked after children through more involvement with PEPs and choice of school placement at the point where the young person is placed out of the home authority; and area social care managers are supported by the VSH and team when they find issues arise elsewhere. In that same local authority, the VSH noted good support in place for children placed in the county by other local authorities - each has an allocated local LACES team worker who leads on PEPs, delivers direct work if needed, attends looked after children reviews and monitors progress. With these supports, 'the progress of these children is generally good'. Elsewhere, another VSH notes, in relation to OLA and OOA achievement, that both groups are 'performing relatively well' and that 'underachievement is being identified better, with more focused intervention and better support for students'. There is some support for this general view in Section 7.

Attainment in the private tutoring pilots is addressed in a separate section below.

Attendance

Some positive changes in attendance rates are noted, with one report identifying a substantial reduction of almost 50 per cent in absence rates for their children placed OOA and another drawing attention to an improvement in attendance figures for looked after children both OOA and OLA. One report notes a continued low level of absence for looked after children with what the VSH identifies as good procedures in place (for example only 6 per cent of students with over 25 days' absence in 2007-08).

This is again an area where the importance of data is identified and approaching half the local authorities in the pilot are now using 'Welfare Call' - a company that provides a daily attendance monitoring service - to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is being collected about attendance. One report comments that, while progress can be shown at the year end, the ability to intervene during the year is more important. This VSH provides the contract department with a print-out of attendance data for children in agency placements, 'so they can challenge or congratulate (whichever is appropriate) when they do contract visits'. One report shows how information from 'Track' and 'Welfare Call' was used to monitor attendance, identify patterns, and intervene effectively: the example given is of a case where a child's regular absence from school was identified. The VSH investigated via the social worker, who learned that the child was being kept back for life-story work one morning a week. The decision was challenged with the result that the work was re-scheduled and the attendance problem disappeared.

Other approaches to reducing absence include updating the attendance policy for looked after children and ensuring that clear protocols for avoiding term-time holidays are drawn up, agreed and communicated.

School exclusion

Most of the reports comment on strategies that have been put in place to monitor and, where possible, reduce exclusion. About half comment directly on indicators of change in the rates of exclusions. In one local authority, the VSH notes that there was only one permanent exclusion during 2007-08 but that fixed-term exclusions for looked after children remained fairly constant at just under 7 per cent. A small number of VSHs note that exclusion rates and duration of exclusions for OLA children and/or those placed OOA have reduced; this generally seems to be ascribed to improved monitoring, which has in turn led to quicker interventions from social workers and the virtual school team.

Many reports comment on the importance of accurate and timely data in tackling issues concerning attendance and exclusion and the value of improved management information systems in collecting relevant data. The collection and collation of relevant information allows for more precise tracking of attendance and exclusions; monitoring and analysis of the data then allows effective early intervention.

VSHs have found a variety of ways to intervene in situations where looked after children are either at risk of school exclusion, or in the process of being excluded. For example, one VSH reports that they hold initial discussions with the local exclusion team when there are problems and that plans have been put in hand to challenge schools to provide 'day 6' provision from day 1 for looked after children. More specifically, a number of reports give examples of direct involvement of the VSH in situations where a child was at risk of permanent exclusion; for example, this could include offering advice and support to schools, representation at hearings, liaison with the PRU, and even challenging a decision to independent appeal. One report provides a 'case example' of the VSH working closely with a child's social worker to persuade her school to rescind a permanent exclusion and to work together to develop an alternative curriculum for her, thus allowing them to re-engage with education and to take the first steps in vocational training.

Private tutoring

Four local authorities participated in the HSBC-funded pilot private tutoring project³ and reported on the four progress indicators requested by the DCSF:

- recruitment and retention of tutors;
- identifying children who would benefit from private tutoring and matching them to tutors;
- monitoring the quality of provision;
- monitoring the outcomes of children who benefit from provision of private tutoring.

The reports identify a shared focus on raising the educational achievement of looked after children but, unsurprisingly, there are variations in the way the different pilots define their objectives within this. For example, the objectives for the scheme in one local authority include incorporating it into a broader holistic approach, which aims to meet the learning and social needs of the child within their educational and care placement. Elsewhere, objectives include identifying and removing barriers to learning, and encouraging and supporting children and young people to have high educational aspirations.

Who is included

Having identified the broad agenda in the 'Objectives' section, the reports give some indication of whom the tuition scheme was intended to assist. It is interesting to note (see Table 3.1) that all the schemes seem to have made tutoring available to at least some children and young people looked after by other authorities (OLA); for example, one scheme undertook to support looked after young people from other authorities in their GCSE year if the 'Looking After' authority was not providing tutoring. Other VSHs set the terms more broadly and opened the scheme to any looked after children if they fulfilled the pilot authority's eligibility criteria (and these were typically quite widely set).

³ In addition, information in two other reports indicated that the VSHs in those authorities were making use of private tutoring to support the educational achievements of looked after children. The comments above relate only to the reports submitted by the four authorities within the HSBC-funded pilot.

Table 3.1 - Numbers of pupils receiving private tutoring according to in- or out-of- authority education placement

	A⁴	B	C	D
Home	77			
OOA	11	41	36	24
OLA	15	4	3	2
Total	103	45	39	26

Home = educated within 'looking after' authority

OOA = educated out of 'looking after' authority

OLA = looked after by external authority but education placement in pilot authority.

One VSH notes that 'in the spirit of the pilot, we have not excluded any pupil from the scheme'; in this authority, they 'resisted the temptation' to target specific age-groups and aimed to make the scheme open to any pupil within the looked after cohort (i.e. looked after children in the local authority's own schools, those educated OOA and also the OLA group). Another local authority that had taken a similarly broad approach had identified specific groups who might be targeted, including not only children who have been assessed as having additional learning needs but also those considered gifted and talented in particular curriculum areas. This local authority also identified asylum seeking young people as a group who may need support to enable them to fully access the curriculum. Other target groups included students aged 16+; those not in education, employment or training ('NEET'), and pupils in Years 6, 9, 10 and 11. Table 3.2 provides an overview of the age-distribution of children and young people using the private tutoring schemes.

It should be noted that the numbers recorded in these tables refer to the number of children who received private tuition during the reporting period; these may not reflect the numbers *referred* to the scheme in a particular local authority, which in some cases were considerably higher.

⁴ This anonymising of the authorities concerned is not the same as that adopted in Section 2.

Table 3.2 - Age distribution of children and young people who received private tuition

	A	B	C	D*
Reception	1			
Year 1	3			
Year 2	4	4		
Year 3	3	1	11	
Year 4	8	4		
Year 5	15	1		
Year 6	17	2		2
Sub-total	51	12	11	2
Year 7	8	10		
Year 8	5	3		
Year 9	8	4	24	
Year 10	13	6		1
Year 11	18	6		22
Year 12		1		1
Year 13			5	
Left school		3		
Sub-total	52	33	29	24
Overall				
Total	103	45	39	26

* Interim projects using authority's own teachers.

Arrangements for the scheme

Three out of the four pilots used external agencies to recruit and manage the tutors for the project. One of these also built-in additional flexibility concerning provision by reserving some funds to use either with the designated providers or elsewhere (other commercial revision or study skills classes or private tutors), in order to meet the diverse needs of the pupils involved. One of the three schemes made 'in house' arrangements as an interim measure while setting up a 'contracted out' scheme; and one pilot only used teachers from within the local authority as tutors. The reports comment on advantages and disadvantages of the contracting-out model. Advantages include the fact that the VSH and virtual school team did not have to get involved in managing the recruitment and retention of tutors, but this was balanced against the disadvantage of being more distant from the tutors and having less control.

The 'in house' approach again had both advantages and disadvantages. Two of the four authorities employed a dedicated staff member or consultant with a specific remit in relation to the tutoring scheme and this appears to have been beneficial in both cases. As one of the VSHs commented: 'Personal one-to-one contact with schools and the ability to "hold tutors"' hands through the initial stage has been vital'. Developing and managing the tutoring schemes seems to have been quite time-consuming and demanding for the VSH and virtual school colleagues but the overall tone of the reports is positive and the scheme was generally well-received.

Difficulties

In some areas, take-up of the tutoring was not as widespread as planned. One scheme aimed to have two-thirds of looked after children accessing private tutoring but the report noted that this target was not reached. Another VSH commented that the numbers of 16+ students taking-up the offer of tuition was fewer than expected. There were also examples of students declining tuition after having previously agreed that they would participate and a small number who withdrew at a later stage.

Some issues were identified in relation to tutoring capacity or availability and in the majority of reports, examples were given where matching of students to tutors could not keep pace with the referral rate. Reports commented on difficulties in recruiting tutors outside the core curriculum subjects (specifically English and maths, and one report identified a problem in relation to science), and also that it was harder to find appropriately qualified tutors to work with the age 16+ pupils and those with English as an additional language.

Outcomes

A range of information is provided, including some formal results data (GCSE and Key Stage results), outcomes in relation to Fischer Family Trust predictions, feedback and initial evaluation from tutors, and other comments from tutors, carers and young people. Information about Key Stage outcomes and GCSE results was not available in all cases but feedback overall is broadly positive and the reports suggest that the private tutoring has had a range of beneficial outcomes for pupils at different stages in their academic careers.

Other issues

Age-focus

The main focus of the VSHs' work seems to have been on primary and secondary school-aged children and young people, including the 14-19 age-group (DCSF progress indicator F). Key transition points are identified (for example Year 6 and Year 9), and the importance of Years 10/11 (GCSE). In one authority, it was noted that the virtual school covered looked after children from ages 3-16, so although involvement of the VSH potentially started at an early stage, educational responsibility for looked after children had to be transferred to the transition and leaving care team at the end of Year 11.

A few VSHs make specific reference to early years provision, for example one report includes a section on high quality early years education and notes that discussions are taking place to inform all early years staff of the needs of looked after children; this VSH also mentions that they have attended early years training. one issue raised in this report is about getting a consistent approach to the use of an early years PEP; this is identified as a key developmental focus for 2008-09 and will be linked to the new early years standards. Other reports echo the importance of the early years PEP.

'Enjoy and achieve' - positive participation

The main focus of the pilots, not unreasonably, has been on raising standards and outcomes for looked after children where these have been seen to be lagging behind. But almost three-quarters of the reports also highlight the issue of *aspiration* and/or a broader sense of engagement with *Every Child Matters'* 'enjoy and achieve' outcome. This is addressed through a range of enrichment activities, such as links with libraries and museums, summer activities, and so on. There are references to involvement with Aim Higher groups (in over half the reports) and links with local universities to encourage wider participation. In addition, a smaller number of VSHs make specific reference to addressing the needs of more able and creative pupils through use of the Gifted and Talented scheme.

Over half the VSHs mention different 'praise and reward' schemes or events – for example the use of an 'Excellent File', various celebration of achievement events, sending good luck and congratulations cards, and so on.

Inclusion or omission of professional and other groups

The reports generally feature references to a wide range of professional and other groups within children's services and, in some cases, beyond. They show the VSH and their teams engaging with individual social workers, LACES teams, foster carers, individual looked after children and young people, IROs, and CAMHS workers, as well as with head and designated teachers, SEN, PRU, educational psychology services, SIPs, SIOs etc. Some mention links with children's rights services. Overall, a wide range of activities and initiatives are described - including joint-training, support, advice, for example - involving a variety of groups and individuals from across the professions.

Factors that could impact on achievement

As well as considering what is contained in the reports, it is also interesting to reflect on what might be overlooked. Generally, the reports were very comprehensive, for example there was much content about inter-professional working, which is at the heart of the VSH role. Overall, the reports said little about gender or ethnicity. For example, specific ways in which low attainment by boys or girls might be addressed, or their subject choices. Little analysis in the reports was gender-specific. Similar points apply to children from different minority ethnic groups. We know that children from different ethnic groups experience different trajectories through the care system (Selwyn *et al.* 2008) and it is quite likely that this is reflected in their educational experiences too (Department for Education and Skills 2005). Some initiatives had occurred, for example additional language classes for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. However, we did not read in the reports many ways in which specific educational issues affect different groups of pupils and ways in which these might be addressed.

Summary points

- The reports emphasise that the issue of 'buy-in' and commitment from senior council elected members and officers is important and has a beneficial impact on the broad project of improving outcomes for looked after children. This is by ensuring the visibility and priority of a range of issues concerning education, achievement and inclusion.
- The reports identify different organisational responses to, and ways of working with, existing LACES teams and of constituting governing bodies for the virtual schools. Issues in relation to the location of VSHs are significant, both in terms of their structural position in local authority departments and systems and their actual geographical location (or co-location with other relevant professionals, disciplines, council departments).

- Good data, supported by a framework for collection, is needed to allow for accurate target-setting, monitoring and support.
- There are reports that some improvements in the educational achievement of looked after children are coming through, though detailed information was not always available at the point that the report was compiled. In addition, where improvements have been identified, these may be 'cohort dependent' to some extent.
- However, overall, the 11 reports suggest that the notion of the 'virtual school' seems to have been well received and the role and actions of the VSH have provided a focus, allowing the educational achievement of looked after children to assume a higher profile across the local authorities.

4. Interviews with directors

We interviewed directors of children's services, or in two cases a deputy- or assistant director, in all five of the intensive case study areas. To avoid identifying individuals, they are all referred to as 'director' or DCS in this section.

It was recognised from the beginning, by DCSF and others, that the VSH role could only be effective with full support from senior management, so we thought it important to find out how the initiative was viewed by directors, what were their motives in applying for the pilot, and to explore their assessment of the contribution that had been made by the VSH up to this point. The interviews took place in February and March 2009. On the understanding that no authority would be identified by name, all the directors were happy to be interviewed. Despite being very busy people, they were generous with their time and spoke with refreshing openness about their experience of being part of the pilot. Two of the people interviewed had been appointed after the application had been submitted, and in one case after the appointment of the VSH was made.

Most of the directors expressed a very keen interest in the pilot and in many cases were able to respond to our questions on the basis of detailed personal knowledge about the activities and priorities of the VSH. Those less closely acquainted with the work depended on reports and statistics supplied by others. All recognised the education of looked after children as an important issue which had not previously been given the attention it merited. However, there were big differences in their perception of how their own authority was performing by comparison with others. Two were relatively happy with the current position and felt that they were doing at least as well as other comparable areas; two could point to a slow but steady level of improvement; while at least one authority was sharply aware of an urgent need to do better.

Why take part in the pilot?

The three directors who had been involved in developing the bid each gave a clear account of their motivation for taking on this substantial task. They were familiar with the evidence on the poor attainment of looked after children and their high risk of school exclusion, and they were keen to take advantage of any avenue that would provide additional resources to tackle the problems.

In one authority, which had a track record of innovation in the care of looked after children, there was a general policy of taking advantage of opportunities such as this. They had bid successfully for several Care Matters pilots, including the Virtual School Head and the Right2BCared4. For this director, however, raising the profile of children's educational achievement was a very important aim, and the VSH role the most attractive of all the pilots: 'The notion of a virtual school has something quite novel and unusual about it'. Their 'JAR' (Joint Area Review) the previous year had provided an additional incentive.

Another director was at pains to emphasise that the decision to apply to be a pilot for the VSH and for the individual tutoring scheme was taken after careful thought:

'We didn't jump because it was just another piece of money. We jumped because it was likely to be an embedding and strengthening of what we were already doing'.

This authority already had a well-established LACES team focused on raising the educational attainment of looked after children.

In a third area with a higher than average number of children looked after, the director felt that there was quite good care and educational support but no coherence, and addressing this problem had been her main object in putting forward the bid:

'The headteacher of a virtual school seemed like a role that could add value by drawing together, galvanising if you like, and focusing the efforts of all those people so that the maximum impact was felt for the children and young people who need it most...giving (the issue) real emphasis in a language that headteachers and other school leaders could really understand'.

By contrast, a fourth respondent felt that the authority was starting from a long way back: 'We needed to make a step-change'. The outcomes for looked after children in this generally low performing authority were said to be 'dire', especially for those coming into care at 13- or 14 years. There was insufficient collaboration within children's services and a clear need existed for someone who could stand back and take an overall view of an education service that was 'fragmented and chaotic' and set up an action plan.

In the fifth authority, the DCS said it was difficult to understand why his predecessor had decided to apply for the pilot, given that the authority had performed well over several years in the education of looked after children. Discussion during the interview raised several unanswered questions, which the director commented had provided food for thought. For example, a number of schools in the authority had been given the unflattering label of 'Persistent Absence' schools. Were any of the persistent absentees looked after? Whose job was it to convene the designated teachers' network? How would any action identified as necessary be taken forward?

Positioning the VSH within the structure of the department.

The five areas differed in the extent to which they had melded education, schools and children's social care into an integrated service. Each had given considerable thought to the best place for the VSH to be situated. Sometimes this had changed for practical reasons, because management posts had remained unfilled, or because personal sensitivities had to be taken into account. In only one case was the VSH said to be based in a social care team.

All the other VSHs were located on the education side of children's services, which in most places was still seen as separate from social care. Four of the interviewees regarded this as a crucial point. One of them said, regretfully:

'With the best will in the world, sometimes teachers will look at social workers with a sort of pity really. I think having (a VSH) with a teaching background is actually critical'.

In another authority:

'We placed the headteacher for the virtual school within the schools block because that's precisely what it is - a school. We want it to have that standing and that status...so we put it with the other universal school services - though we did toy with a few options before doing that'.

One director explained the decision to site the post in education, despite the fact that the LACES team would have liked the VSH to be based with them:

'Once we'd made that decision it felt absolutely right. That's been our experience in terms of ownership by schools and heads ... This means that we've made it a more formal part of our education structure rather than an add-on to the services to looked after children - a subtle but important difference'.

This respondent also emphasised the significance of the status that goes with the title 'head' and the fact that the person appointed was a former school head: 'Particularly for schools, these things matter'. This point was echoed by several others.

Most of the DCSs had personally taken the decision to bid for the pilot and had been closely involved in drafting the application but there were two cases where the initiative had been taken by a previous director. This meant that by the time the present postholder arrived, some crucial decisions had already been made, such as how and where the post of VSH should be advertised and at what level; who should be appointed; and where they should be placed in the management structure of the children's services department. Where the local authority already had a specialist LACES team to support the education of looked after children, a further key question was how the new postholder would fit into existing arrangements.

A new director, coming into post after these key decisions had been made, was at a considerable disadvantage. With so many other pressing issues to confront, especially with the greatly increased emphasis on safeguarding in the aftermath of the Baby Peter case, it was understandable that accepting the *status quo* might sometimes seem the only option even when it was not seen as satisfactory, or as one person described it 'a bit of a mess'.

Understanding of the role by others

One question that it seemed important to explore was how far this new VSH role was accepted by others in the authority and outside it. Was it well understood, and how effective and harmonious were the relations between the VSH and all the other people relevant to her or his work? In general the directors felt that, although the term 'virtual school' had caused some difficulties initially, people were gradually becoming accustomed to it. It hadn't been around long enough for everyone to have a complete understanding but it was in their vocabulary. The title of headteacher was familiar and very helpful in indicating the status of the VSH within the departmental hierarchy.

'It's very much on people's radar. And it has promoted people's thinking about their contribution as a corporate parent. The postholder has been very good at using all his contacts, using every network, personal and professional'.

A director from an authority with a strong corporate parenting ethos commented that it was very helpful to have a lead member for looked after children who was a keen advocate for the virtual school and sat on the governing body. This authority had taken a regional lead, which had contributed to knowledge and understanding of the role throughout the authority. But he felt that there was more to do to help young people themselves understand what it was all about.

This director had set himself the daunting task of visiting all 200 schools in the authority and said he was now finding that there was more spontaneous reference to looked after children - previously he had always had to initiate the discussion himself. He had found that schools were now more aware of their looked after children and he thought that the presence of the VSH at heads' conferences and business meetings acted as a reminder of their needs and circumstances.

Relations with other professional groups

All the directors regarded networking as one of the most important aspects of the VSH role, or as one of them called it 'putting herself about'. As the interviews and the survey of social workers (see Sections 6 and 7) indicate, they succeeded in doing this to varying degrees, but most were seen as very successful. One VSH was considered to be exceptionally good at getting people from different backgrounds to talk to each other:

'What the VSH has been able to do is build the kind of relationships with all those potentially disparate groups (elected members, LACES team, foster carers, school attendance officers) into something much more coherent around the child'.

Several illustrations were given of the ability of the VSH to exert influence on other education professionals in the interests of the child. For example, he would assert the right of a young person to study the course of his choice and, coming from a strong education background, he could say 'I'm not putting this child on hairdressing just because that's where you've got a vacancy in your college'. When a young man was permanently excluded, it only took a few days for the VSH to negotiate a place for him at a neighbouring school where he was much happier.

In another case he was able to insist on a place in a specialist school for a boy who had disclosed too much about his background and been severely bullied. The school was full but the VSH refused to take no for an answer. He went to the Chairman of the Governors and argued that it would be out of line with the school's ethos to refuse the boy a place. 'He can sort these things out because he speaks the school language, understands the structure, so the problems get solved that much quicker.'

Although many other examples were given of instances where VSHs had been able to advocate effectively for particular children, all the directors were clear that the main focus of the role should be strategic rather than operational:

'You need someone who can look at the whole landscape and make sense of it and pick out the key things that we need to be doing to move things forward. Sometimes what they need to do is "helicopter in" on individual cases to get a sense of how it's all working. But I'm very anxious that they shouldn't get bogged down at that level'.

Another director commented that the VSH had worked very hard at reaching all the relevant professional groups:

'She could have spent a lot of her time out in schools dealing with individual, more difficult young people and placement issues, but I think she's recognised, and we've encouraged this, that the biggest task she has is to change the culture'.

This was seen as part of the larger picture, bringing social work teams closer to schools and colleagues formerly in the education department, providing additional support to social work teams but also placing additional demands on them to focus on educational needs rather than just on care and placement issues. This theme, the role of the VSH in bridging the former gulf between care and education, was one that came up frequently in the interviews: 'the development of the virtual school is one of those markers on the ground that we are an ever more integrated children's services directorate'.

Introducing new initiatives

We asked if the director could identify any new initiatives which had been introduced by the VSH. Sometimes these took the form of more intensive monitoring or a closer enquiry into a recognised problem. One example would be a survey of quality and implementation rates of PEPs, undertaken jointly by a VSH and the manager of a multi-professional long-term care team. Another would be the detailed examination of absence records to check on the attendance of looked after children by comparison with others, particularly in schools with high rates of absenteeism.

In relation to attendance, one VSH had started a discussion with foster carers and social workers about the importance of children going to school regularly and not taking them out even for desirable purposes if it could be avoided. It was important that this was done in a supportive and not a punitive way, pointing out to foster carers, for example, that although taking looked after children on holiday with them was a very good thing, missing 10 days of school was a very bad thing, and how could they get round the problem?

At the strategic level the VSH had introduced 'Welfare Call', the digitised attendance monitoring system which provides instant information about school non-attendance, including for children placed out of authority.

In one authority the whole department was structured round the five Every Child Matters outcomes and the interviewee's remit was 'Enjoy and Achieve'. She was a strong advocate of a broad interpretation of education in its widest sense, not just a matter of passing tests and examinations, even though she recognised this as necessary. She was therefore particularly appreciative of one of the VSH's initiatives, which was to ensure that every looked after child who wanted to learn a musical instrument had access to a free instrument of their choice and free tuition wherever it needed to happen. He had also organised a day with a group of young people and their carers to visit the Royal Albert Hall for a workshop with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra:

'They lived all over the place, some of them lived out of authority, but there was a sense of cohesion that focused around the head teacher who had brought them together in that context.'

This was an interesting comment in contrast to the view that was expressed by some people that looked after children should be identifying with their own school rather than with the virtual school.

Another director also emphasised the point that the virtual school had a role in developing the child as 'a holistic human being' and their VSH had been very active in exploring ways of doing this, working with arts and cultural services to set up an artist in residence programme to work with looked after children - in theatre, visual arts, music and performance.

How effective is the work of the VSH?

The general view was that the VSHs had been very effective, but in different ways. Some directors spoke of 'galvanising' and the transformative impact of someone who could genuinely work across services with a strong focus on giving every child the best possible chance to succeed. Others described it as 'seamless', building on what was already there: 'It hasn't come in like a firework and created something dazzling; it's strengthened and deepened and enriched what we were already doing'.

All directors were clear that the prime aim of the VSH pilot was to improve the performance of looked after children in school - 'I always wanted them to bring a sharp focus to the attainment agenda', but were cautious about drawing any conclusions at this stage from the official outcome statistics. Most pointed out that, with small cohorts, the characteristics of the children concerned - for example a higher proportion with special educational needs in a particular year - could cause misleading fluctuations in the figures (see Section 2). One authority had a high rate of adoption, which meant that a number of more capable children were lost from the results.

It would be even more difficult to attribute any improvements directly to the work of the VSH since they had been in post for such a short time. However, except in one area, the VSHs were responsible for target-setting and monitoring and the directors considered that this was now being done more systematically than in the past.

One director, however, was prepared to say that the work of the VSH had impacted directly on outcomes for children in a remarkably short time. She attributed this to his 'dogged perseverance' on behalf of looked after children and young people, of which she gave many examples, including more effective planning and accessing new technology. These covered a wide range of activities at all levels.

Another director had achieved 'record results' in 2008:

'But actually the thing that impressed me most is that I could ask the day after we had the GCSE results and [the VSH] could not only tell me what they were for those young people, in or out of authority, but she could also tell me that 100 per cent of our youngsters in the cohort had got some form of accreditation. She knew where they were, what they were doing and why they were doing it and whether it was appropriate for them, just as a good head teacher would know them in a school'.

Should the VSH role continue?

The directors were unanimous in considering that the role of VSH should continue beyond the end of the pilot, for example one commented:

'I will advocate tooth and nail for us to continue with it because, it's right for children...I'm enormously enthusiastic for it. I had my doubts at the start, so you know I have the zeal of a convert...it's this business of cutting across bureaucracies, cutting across other structures, saying, "No, there's a child here and I'm championing that child" '.

Perhaps the ultimate measure of success, she thought, would be if everyone working with looked after children, and particularly schools, were so focused on their needs in the round that the post wouldn't be needed 'but I see that as quite some way down the line'.

Another argument for continuing the role was that there was still much more to be learnt from the experience of these 11 rather disparate pilot authorities. Two years was a very short time and if the project had been to set up a conventional new school from scratch, one would expect it to take at least five years. But the most important reason for continuing the role longer term was, to echo the different director quoted above 'This can't be fly by night, 'cos this is children...to finish the pilot and not continue with the role wouldn't be to get the best out of it'.

It is worth noting that even the DCS who was rather ambivalent about the effectiveness of the VSH role in their own authority was quick to defend the concept. The director was among several of those interviewed who emphasised the great importance of other headteachers seeing the VSH as one of themselves. 'It should be seen as a mainstream career opportunity for people aspiring to headships', and the job should definitely be located in education, although effective links needed to be made to other professionals working with the same children.

One director explained how the existence of the VSH had strengthened her hand within her authority:

'It's a stronger justification to pull looked after children into the sights of the chief executive, the leadership team in the authority and the elected members, because there is a project on which to report, a specific project with a set of achievement priorities, answerable to government...It enables us to make sure that this cohort of youngsters is very strongly considered when we set budgets, when we set staffing profiles'.

Suggested areas for development

With hindsight, as some people acknowledged, they might have done things differently. For example, children and young people might have been more closely involved in making the VSH appointment, the job might have been located in a different place. Several directors expressed the view that the virtual school should have its own DCSF number and be included in the Department's school circulation list. Overall, however, there was no doubt that they were very satisfied with the achievement of the VSH and thought it had made a valuable contribution to improving attendance and outcomes, as well as addressing other important issues.

One director reflected that the work of the VSH had implications far beyond raising standards of attainment or hitting key stage targets:

'School as a universal service is a key intervention in tackling the problem of intergenerational transmission of deprivation, narrowing the gap. It's about that whole sense of poverty in the widest sense, not just economic poverty but poverty of aspiration, of self-belief. Our VSH supports these children in formulating dreams and making them real. And that is a fantastic tribute to the work he does and the commitment he shows to it. But actually the notion of the virtual school is what enables him to do it. So it isn't just a personality thing, it's the status and the structure of the role'.

Summary points

- In some cases directors had applied to take part in the Pilot because they lacked an education service for looked after children and were aware of deficiencies; in others because they thought the appointment of a VSH would enable them to build on existing good practice.
- Most had taken the decision to base the VSH within the education or schools arm of the service rather than in social care.
- All considered the title of headteacher extremely important in giving the VSH the status she or he needed to engage successfully with schools.

- Directors could usually give a detailed account of the activities of the VSH and how they had contributed to positive experiences and improved outcomes for looked after children; while pointing out that the time had been too short and the cohorts too small to produce statistically reliable figures. One considered that the greatly improved results in the authority were directly related to the work of the VSH.
- There was broad agreement that the VSH role had made a valuable contribution and that it should continue nationally.

5. Virtual School Heads: backgrounds, characteristics and perspectives

Having seen how VSHs assessed the initial stages of their work (Section 3), we wanted to discover early in our research the characteristics of VSHs and what background experiences they brought to their work. Helping to improve the educational experiences of looked after children potentially spans a wide range of educational and social work concerns as well as strategic, managerial, operational and pupil-related responsibilities. Making a difference is likely to require not only the role but also the right people to fulfil it. Who was appointed and what particular characteristics make a person best suited to be a VSH?

Background and characteristics

Three of the 11 VSHs worked in their role part-time (2 x 3 days per week and 1 x 2 days). One more combined the VSH work with a related head of performance role. Another pair of workers in one authority were VSH on a job-share basis (one two days per week and the other one day per week). Therefore several of the authorities were expecting the VSH roles to be undertaken on a part-time basis. There was plenty for them to do as we shall see.

There was a gender mix among VSHs: 6 were females and 5 were males. All VSHs identified their ethnic background as white UK. Several worked in multi-ethnic areas including London and the West Midlands.

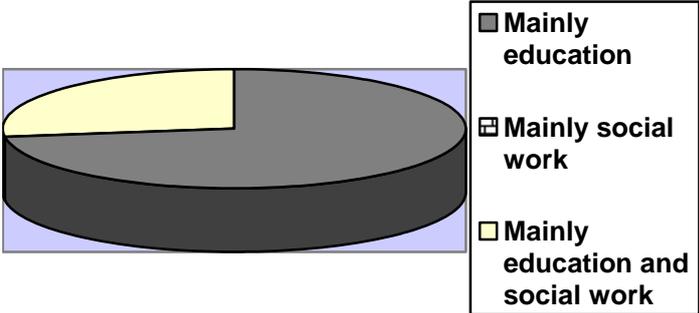
It was clear from our initial contacts with VSHs that they were a senior and experienced group. Most were aged in their 50s with two younger than this and two others who were older.

Professional backgrounds

Given the range of responsibilities of VSHs - together with the mix of educational-, social work- and pupil-related factors that might contribute to looked after children's schooling difficulties - we wondered what professional backgrounds would the pilot VSHs have?

In its initial invitations to authorities to participate in the pilots, DCSF stated that VSHs should be former headteachers or other senior educationists. We therefore asked VSHs whether their professional career to date had been 'mainly educational', 'mainly social work' or 'mainly education and social work combined'. Indeed, all VSHs replied that it had been education with three exceptions, who had combined careers of education and social work (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 - Professional backgrounds of VSHs



We asked for details of all posts undertaken in the past 10 years. Two VSHs had been headteachers (one secondary, one primary) and three were deputy headteachers (secondary, primary and special educational needs respectively). Three VSHs had been managing local looked after children’s education support services (LACES). Two were heads of school improvement (one combined with being an Ofsted inspector). The other one had been an advanced skills teacher.

So VSHs were mostly from educational backgrounds but three included social work issues directly in their responsibilities. Another had been Chair of a local foster carers’ association and at least one other had been a foster and adoptive parent. One VSH had worked part-time privately as a psychotherapist. Some educationists had taken a particular interest in pastoral care or special education. One was formerly an educational psychologist, which he felt prepared him well. Therefore, half the group of VSHs had some wider social work / social care-related experience. All VSHs were professionally qualified as teachers. Seven of the 11 were educated to at least Masters level and there was a range of management and other qualifications. One head had a social work practice teachers award (eligible to supervise students) but apart from this none had professional qualifications in social work.

Role and organisation

In this report we give particular attention to the name ‘virtual school head’: to what extent is this generally understood and does it facilitate the work? Initially the Green Paper *Care Matters* (2006) had used the term ‘Virtual Headteacher’ (as well as ‘Virtual Head Teacher’ and ‘Virtual Head teacher’) but this changed as a result of the consultation. We explored some of this in Section 3. However, this Section examines the situation several months after VSHs’ 2007-08 progress reports. Confidential research responses may also yield different insights than a written, public report for a government funder.

We asked VSHs to state their exact job title. Responses were the following:

- Virtual School Head (x 2)
- Headteacher, Virtual School for Looked After Children (x 2)
- Head of the Virtual School for Looked After Children
- Headteacher for the Virtual School for Looked After Children
(adding ‘I call myself “Headteacher of the Virtual School for Looked After Children”’)

Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children in Care

Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children and Young People in Care

Head of Virtual School

Head of Virtual School for Children in Care; Head of School Performance,
Organisation and Inclusion

Virtual School Headteacher for Looked After Children.

Clearly the names are very similar but subtly different. There was an even split between 'Head' and 'Headteacher'. Three had used the name 'children in care' rather than looked after children. (Legislation in 1989 had intentionally replaced the term 'children in care', partly to move away from the associated stigma but also to suggest a continuum of family support, rather than a sharp distinction between being in care or not.) For some reason *Care Matters* had reintroduced 'children in care' but the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reverted to the now preferred professional term - looked after children. We return later to the VSH name.

Almost all VSHs were located in what was traditionally the Education section of children's services. Five posts were in a general Schools division; 2 were located in Performance; 1 was in Access and Inclusion; another in Behaviour and Attendance; just 1 was in Social Care; and the final one spanned children's services. Their actual position in the management hierarchy also varied (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 - Management tier of VSH posts

Management tier	Number
2	1
3	3
3/4	4
4	1
5	1
Don't know	1
Total	11

Posts were mostly at head of service or assistant head of service level. One was above this and another was below. One VSH was unclear where their post fitted but thought it was probably fourth tier. Reflecting this, the majority of VSHs were line- managed by heads of service; three by assistant directors; and one VSH was line- managed by a deputy director.

Interviews with virtual school heads

Methods used

So that was the context. We now present findings from the detailed individual semi-structured interviews with VSHs. Six were undertaken in person (five from our intensive study group and one other VSH who was leaving) and the other five by telephone. These interviews occurred mainly in early 2009. Face-to-face interviews lasted for just under two hours on average and the telephone interviews were shorter, around an hour and a half. In all, our interview transcripts ran to just under 450 pages (some 160,000 words). We shall not repeat information that has already been discussed, such as structural position. However, here we use qualitative data from VSHs' perspectives to provide more detailed insights, including explanations and implications of events.

Given the time available, we were unable to undertake computer coding and analysis using a software package such as NVivo. Instead, analysis was undertaken manually for each interview question to identify possible areas of consensus and common themes, which were highlighted by quotations from VSHs' own words.

Nature of virtual schools

The 11 virtual schools were clearly very varied. As one interviewee put it, '...you as a university are looking at virtual schools, you're looking at a rhinoceros, a giraffe and a budgerigar'. The requirements for condensed urban authorities may be different from those which are much larger. The extent of services for pupils placed out of authority or from elsewhere also varied. Furthermore, it was not always easy to differentiate exactly which staff belonged to a virtual school and which did not. Nevertheless, to give some indication, three of the 11 virtual schools were large groupings of approximately 20 professional staff (numbers not whole-time-equivalents); 6 were medium-sized - around 6-8 staff members; and 2 were basically one-woman/man operations. Larger teams are not necessarily more effective than smaller ones with good collaborative links, but the overall scale of resources probably makes some difference.

What is new?

In the past, local authorities may sometimes have sought targeted pilot funding as a subsidy for existing services. Central government sought to preclude this with the virtual heads and the amount awarded per annum (on average just over £70,000), proportional to the number of looked after children in the authority, was intended to fund the full costs of a dedicated post including on-costs. However, we wondered how much of the virtual school was actually new. For example, an omission in *Care Matters* was any mention of the local education support teams for looked after children (LACES etc). Were the virtual schools actually much different from what preceded them?

Three VSHs were longstanding managers of existing LACES teams. The pilot very much built on what already existed. The pilot and associated funding enabled them to change the role of the lead manager. One VSH's comments are quite typical:

'...I stepped up a notch in terms of my seniority...which meant that I was able to almost pull out of some of the operational stuff and had time to be more strategic – some parts of which I was already doing but it enabled me to have a much better focus on the strategy...So that was the biggest single difference I think'.

Two virtual schools were set up as in authorities in which there were no existing LACES or similar structures. Work was being done across the authority but without any dedicated co-ordination. In these areas, the virtual school model, therefore, brought some form of organisation to a range of disparate workers.

But the majority of VSHs came in as new appointments with the need to forge relationships with existing structures. Three were brought in as new, overall managers of the LACES teams. This was a complex role and often they had to deal with personal and professional conflicts including feelings of being usurped. One reported that there had been inadequate forethought about respective roles and overlap in job descriptions. Being an incoming manager of an existing LACES team had been envisaged for one other VSH but the authority changed its plan prior to their appointment. The role of VSHs without management responsibility for LACES teams could be difficult. One said: '...we're beginning to define much more clearly our respective responsibilities'. Another VSH was appointed by Education with no consultation with social work managers and had been dealing with the consequences ever since ('A lot of it is continuation but it's muddied the waters').

Becoming a new manager of a LACES team could be complicated by the fact that the background of these teams was that they were sometimes funded by Social Work rather than Education. Prior to the pilot, several had continued to be managed through social work structures. This was probably linked to the fact that low attainment of looked after children has often in the past been perceived primarily as a failure of the care system and, arguably, schools and Education departments took insufficient responsibility. So introducing a senior educational manager in a close working relationship could raise interprofessional sensitivities. For example, two of our interviewees remarked on the differences in 'supervision' in the two professions - more specifically the fact that it was often absent in Education and schools where greater professional autonomy was expected.

Of the six new external appointments, one VSH was made as a permanent appointment to lead the LACES team. Depending on government's view, at the time of the interviews it was not clear if other authorities would continue to support the VSH post after the two-year pilot; or even if they did, whether these individuals would necessarily be reappointed. VSHs in two authorities were convinced that their agencies would not be continuing with the virtual schools. Elsewhere, one authority had stated that it intended to bring together the separate VSH as new manager of the LACES team. Another commented that there were no such plans but '...the logic to it does seem to be pretty flawless on the face of it'. Therefore, probably only one authority was perceived to have definite plans to continue with a VSH who would be separate from an existing LACES. Failing to integrate may have been a strategy to avoid a continuing financial commitment. We return to this point later.

Nature of VSH role

Trying to summarise the range of VSHs' activities would be difficult. They worked in quite different settings and did different things, partly depending on what else was occurring. We saw in Section 3 that, as envisaged by DCSF, most VSHs defined their roles as more 'strategic' than 'operational'. VSHs often summarised their efforts as 'winning hearts and minds'. Extracts from two VSH interviews illustrate this:

'Winning the hearts and minds amongst the distributed professional team...and hopefully in the future the whole of our community of professionals will have looked after children in the foreground much more'.

'So by your mixture of charm and whatever I suppose, operationally now I have established, I think across the service, that looked after children are special, looked after children get positive discrimination...I think now at the lower level of the organisation it is established that looked after children get priority. I think we have probably achieved that'.

Most good parents would want to give their own children the very best education possible. The same should apply to local authorities acting as corporate parents, particularly for looked after children with a very poor start in life (Bullock *et al.* 2006).

Our interviews showed that the strategic and the operational were often interconnected and the latter can influence the former. Probably just under half of VSHs regularly became involved in cases of individual pupils. One commented that he tended to tackle the most difficult cases, usually at Key Stage 4. Encouragingly, he said that social workers were now contacting him more regularly when problems in schools were emerging rather than leaving it too late. Another involved herself in schools with which there were more concerns, or when there was a new head or DT. A different VSH emphasised that speed of response was the key consideration and that this could occur by whichever senior member of his team was available:

'And as soon as an issue comes up, I insist that we give an instant response...but I'm not precious about who gives that response. And it's whoever is then available – and one of us is always available. We had a child who was excluded last year and my first question was "on day one where are they being educated?". Because from day one they need to be...We ask the difficult questions'.

An important part of their strategic roles was felt to be the relationships they forged with other managers and professional groups. Some VSHs stated that they participated in a range of key committees across children's services. This depended on seniority (see below). It also did not apply to a small number who defined their jobs more specifically in terms of school improvement.

One authority had an interesting model which concerned not so much the VSH participating in various committees but locking other important figures into the structure of the virtual school itself. It was felt that, given the number of looked after pupils, a school would need 20 governors. Those approached to become governors were key partners, including: head of corporate parenting (Chair); director of a large independent residential care group; Chairs or Vice-Chairs of five *Every Child Matters* groups in the authority; the senior educational psychologist; early years and Connexions representatives; and the lead responsible for data management. This governing body gathers four times a year and a smaller operational group drawn from its membership meets fortnightly. This puts the VSH in a strong position to maintain the education of looked after children as a central concern across children's services by '...the shortness of communication routes'.

Status and seniority

DCSF had stipulated in its initial requirements for the pilots that VSHs should work closely with the director and lead member for children's services. This seemed to be occurring in some cases but certainly not all and, as we see throughout this report, the virtual schools were often set up with different priorities and expectations. School headteachers would not usually have a close reporting relationship with a director. A clear majority, but not all, VSHs confirmed that the education of looked after children was a main concern for directors. Reporting was usually through line-management structures, some of which were more direct than others. Children's services directors are very busy people and no doubt seek to restrict to a minimum those reporting directly to them.

This links to a very important point emphasised in many VSH interviews - the seniority of their post. VSHs attributed senior positions in their authority emphasised the advantages this brought ('...I think because of the internal status of the post I can make a request and ask for their assistance...with other relevant players like School Improvement Officers'). One commented that the fact that their post was permanent and at second tier made an important statement locally about the importance of the issue. We would add that it was also full-time - not many school heads would work part-time; quite the opposite. Authorities may have been hedging their bets until after the pilots and linked funding ended. Around a third of the VSHs interviewed stressed that the low status of their position undermined their effectiveness. One expressed it forcefully this way:

'So my position...there is a contradiction there straight away, because the virtual school head is meant to be a champion for the virtual school children, for looked after children. Is meant to have the clout to go across the authority you know pushing practice...amending practice, looking after their interests. And when you're as lowly in the organisation as I am, that's rather difficult to do...As I've hinted, most things have gone well but the championing of looked after children across the authority has been constantly stymied by my lowly position in the authority'.

Relationships with local school heads

Many VSHs emphasised that a crucial, possibly the most important, element of their work was their ability to work with and influence (other) school heads. This required not only status but also educational credibility. Some interviewees, as we have seen, defined their work specifically in terms of school improvement. Ultimately the school and its teachers who regularly interact with a child can have a major impact on their educational career. Importantly, at primary level the head often also acted as the DT. The ability to liaise was complicated by the fact that some pilot authorities had 400 plus schools, half of which at any time may be educating a looked after child.

A clear majority of VSHs felt they had developed good working relationships with most local school heads. Some explained how they were working towards the position whereby a DT or head would ring the virtual head if there were complex problems, usually concerning behaviour. For example:

'...my attitude is let's try...there's always a solution somewhere...Let's find a solution to this particular issue, and they know that I bring a bit of...hopefully creative thinking to the table, as well as some resources to back it up'.

Similarly, another explained how she would help to negotiate a solution:

'...they have got these kiddies that are behaving absolutely diabolically...and they'd love to exclude them and they can't. They know we'll give them support...So we ask if possible they be kept in school. We say, look don't go for a large number of days [exclusion]. You know you've made the point of one day, why give them five days? And we do ask that they provide education for the first day of absence [and 80 per cent of the time they do]'.

This is a specific example:

'I mean just this morning we've got a small rural primary school where there are significant issues with an eight year-old who's had issues with their placement and keeps running away from school and is being violent. Now the head was talking about exclusion there. Now I've been able to give an additional support teacher, support assistant time in there. Whether it will work or not, time will tell but in other cases it has worked'.

One VSH added that she asked heads to phone her if they were having difficulties contacting social workers or getting them to return calls. She would then personally forward the message and ensure it was dealt with promptly. She also encouraged heads to contact her if they had any misgivings about social work intervention, such as if a change of placement was considered. She might explain the social work thinking or, if appropriate, ask social work managers if a planned strategy could be reconsidered. This important role was very well explained in the following extract:

'...we sit bang slap in between the two, and it's mediating, it's being bilingual so that everybody can help to understand each other's language. You know it's that constant mediation without a doubt'.

Being accepted as a peer by other school heads did not come automatically. We saw earlier in this Section that all VSHs were qualified teachers but only two had previously been heads. 'I've won my spurs', one explained, who had managed to achieve a standing agenda item on looked after children at heads' regular meetings. Even for former heads, a sideways move, reduced working hours and a drop in salary might affect their perceived status. One VSH who had not been invited to heads' meetings said that this was one of her ambitions. It was felt to be hindered by her low status and relative marginalisation within the department but also that part of their meetings concerned analysing what the authority was not doing to support them adequately. A 'spy in the works' might not be welcomed, as she put it. Another VSH had been accepted by primary- but not secondary heads ('The secondary heads here are very different...even the director will be given a 20-minute slot and then be expected to clear off!').

Status and power issues it seems can be very different between education and social work. Hierarchical views held by some educationists are likely to be alien to many social workers, where professional cultures tend to be very different. Some VSHs made the key point that their effectiveness in authorities can only be as good as the general level of integration of education and social work services. One put it well when she said 'There was a hasty marriage...and it's now they've got to find out how they're going to live the rest of their lives together...'

These issues concerning VSHs' status and relationships with school heads have important implications for their organisational location, backgrounds and even job title. We return to them in Section 8 in our Conclusion.

Data management

DCSF from the outset put much store on pilot authorities having good information systems. It is difficult to improve the education of a group of children without having reliable, up to date information about who they are; where they live and are educated; what are their educational strengths and weaknesses; and how are they progressing. A head of a school could not do their job properly without good quality information at their fingertips. Children's services traditionally have not had good, integrated IT systems, particularly on the social work side as some safeguarding inquiries have shown. The Integrated Children's System (ICS), which was designed to provide the framework for social work assessment and case review with children and families, does not include detailed, up to date educational information. Having data, of course, is only part of the picture and it is how it is used that matters.

VSHs' perception of the quality of information available to them depended on how they saw their roles. One of the pilot authorities had developed its own integrated data system for detailed educational and social work information. It is the envy of many and some of the other pilots had explored buying it within their authorities. The general view across authorities was that VSHs usually could access good information but it came from a variety of sources

(‘We seem to have databases and spreadsheets coming out of our ears’). Separate databases existed which were not easily cross-referenced. All agreed that good quality information was essential to perform their duties effectively. The following quote is quite typical:

‘That is the answer to it...having the information in a single place...It’s the fact that it’s in so many different places, some of it’s manual and some of it’s automatic, it’s held by different people. So accuracy’s not the problem by and large. It’s knowing where it is sometimes and then getting it on time and when you want it...So whilst it’s not an insuperable barrier, and if it’s not a major barrier to getting the job done, I think it could be done a lot more efficiently and effectively than it is currently is, and I think it’s right at the heart of a virtual school. If we’ve got you know 400 youngsters across a couple of hundred schools potentially in different local authorities, then data’s absolutely the bedrock of the system’.

Having an effective system is only part of the solution, ensuring that it is accurate and regularly updated is also required. One VSH spoke of how essential he found his full-time data clerk. He gave an example of a new girl entering care and on the same day being given full details of her life history and educational career.

Two VSHs spoke of serious shortcomings in their data systems. One commented ‘It slows the job down...and it leads to misunderstandings and errors’. There existed four separate databases and which ones could be accessed depended on where staff were located. His LACES team, whom he managed, could access one database which he could not as their offices were elsewhere. He would have to contact them if he needed certain information.

Responsibilities for different groups

Virtual schools have responsibilities for all local looked after children wherever they are educated, as well as those educated locally from elsewhere (‘Your own in, your own out and others in’ - as some expressed it). However, as we also saw in Section 3, pilot authorities approached this differently. Some VSHs pointed out that this was both anomalous and inequitable and wished government to issue stronger guidance as with special educational needs.

One VSH with a well resourced LACES team felt they provided good educational support for all three groups. It was also aided by a regional protocol outlining reciprocal arrangements. Two other VSHs were confident that they provided a good follow-up service for their pupils educated away with LACES involvement. There were very few looked after pupils about whom they had particular concerns. But three VSHs were less optimistic about the educational service for its pupils living away. Another with a large team stated that they were probably more effective with the third (‘others in’) than the second (‘your own out’) group: ironically their own pupils educated away were less well-served.

An eighth VSH was unable to provide support for other children educated locally, while another stated that the authority did not feel it was its responsibility to do so. The remaining authorities gave additional financial resources to schools elsewhere with its looked after children; one extended this to host schools with pupils from other authorities.

Overall then it was a very mixed picture in terms of what was offered and what could be achieved. Three other interesting points emerged. First, there is clearly a south-east dimension with problems for Kent of educating significant numbers of children from the London boroughs. Secondly, more than one VSH reported that for their out of authority children, foster carers had sometimes sought to re-register children at different schools for reasons of travel convenience; to educate foster children at different schools from their own

children; or to attempt to obtain an independent school placement. The pilot authorities had discovered this belatedly. Thirdly, one VSH explained how education colleagues in her department had not been over-concerned with looked after children educated elsewhere, as their priority was their own schools' league table performance. Therefore, Social Work was judged by all pupils' attainments, irrespective of where they attended school; whereas Education was not.

Private tutors

It will be recalled that four pilots were participating in the HSBC-funded private tutoring scheme (Section 3). Our interviews provided detailed evidence about the progress of two of them, plus one other that made extensive use of tutoring but funded it out of its own resources. Organisational approach varied. Two used mainly an outside company. Decisions were made prior to the VSHs being appointed but it could have been difficult otherwise to have initiated so much private tutoring in the timescale required. Tutoring in the third authority involved additional hours from teachers in the pupil's own school on a self-employed basis, usually after school hours but also during lunch hours or at the foster carer's / residential home. The results from all three were perceived to be overwhelmingly positive. VSHs' comments provide their own evidence.

VSH 1

[Interviewer - 'So it seems to you that looking at predicted attainments, that it's having some benefit and there's some value added?']

'I think there is. It is in the academic performance, it's completing coursework, but it's giving kids more confidence, giving them more ability, getting them to relate to teachers in a different way and actually build up a relationship in a different way. It's those kinds of things that have huge spin-offs. Certainly exam results have gone up. If you look at estimated grades at GCSE, in the subjects they've been tutored for they've exceeded those by a huge amount.'

'...it is making huge effects. And the biggest spin-off is that teachers work one to one, or one to three if you've got something like guitar tuition going on...with children that they've never worked one to one before, because teachers don't work one to one.'

VSH 2

'Where it's been good it's been excellent, absolutely excellent. And I would say that it's probably been more excellent than it hasn't been. We've had some super feedback from carers and from children and from schools actually about that. So it's been a tremendous benefit. I think it's been more successful than we first of all perceived it would be. I think we were a bit concerned that children wouldn't want this...Well over 200 students have accessed private tutoring, which I think is a fair amount.'

VSH 3

'Private tutoring - that's made a massive difference.'

'You can see improvements. I think it is effective, it's an extremely valuable resource. Thinking back to one young person who's 15, heading up for GCSEs, who is very much against being labelled "looked after". And the initial response is "If you think I'm doing that, you can think again, just 'cos I'm looked after". And having to go through all the reasoning with her...you know her foster carer did a lot of it but I talked to her and the school did as well. No, it's what any parent would do if they could afford it and were in a position to provide it. And she's actually now a great believer in it but it was just that sort of initial reaction...In fact she got five A*s for her GCSEs you know'.

Several other issues emerged from these interviews concerning tutoring. One was that the tutoring was a key part of the pilot overall for those agencies involved. Secondly, in retrospect, VSHs would recommend more of a mixed economy approach between the schools' own teachers and a private company depending on pupils' needs and subject availability. The company could be very helpful for pupils educated in a different authority, but engaging teachers at the child's school as tutors could help with continuity as well as having important social / emotional benefits.

A final important point concerned allocation. Tutoring had been made available largely for all who requested it as funding was generous. One VSH added that referrals came mainly from social workers, with some foster carers and schools. Another did target it particularly on Years 6 and 11. But it was felt that the tutoring could have been used more productively, especially when the company early on did the matching and the VSH had not been involved. Having said that, it was thought useful to be able to offer pupils and carers something tangible and the overall benefits were thought unquestionable.

Virtual schools

Part of the interviews focused on virtual schools as *schools*. In practice most VSHs used the term 'schools' but felt that they were actually not schools in most respects. One, working in a small geographical area, said that she felt like a head in that class teachers would often phone her with problems ('What am I going to do about Julie in Year 9?'), although it sounded more like an advisory teacher as she had no resources and no administrative support. However, she emphasised that it was valuable to consider looked after pupils as one group. Another VSH remarked that she considered her base as a school in that she approached looked after pupils as a community of learners. It was rare to hear reference, for example, to a virtual school deputy head or to a bursar and most VSHs did not have a senior management committee to whom matters could be delegated, as would many schools. Some VSHs had their own SIPS, or considered OFSTED-type inspections or had undertaken related self-assessment activities ('Problem is once you call something a school everybody thinks you have to inspect it.').

Some virtual schools had governors or were actively considering them. One, as we saw earlier, had appointed as its governors key managers, who were locked into the structure of the school and this guaranteed their support for the service. Perhaps here, it was as if the virtual school was managing effectively its governors rather than the reverse, which some heads might warm to.

A common view among VSHs, especially where they were linked with established LACES teams, was to see their main role as more akin to educational support services rather than schools. One VSH, who used the term 'virtual school' and had a deputy head, saw their governing body as the authority's corporate parenting group. They added:

'...the virtual school first of all is not a school. I think it's a silly title...I get tired of people ringing me up asking to speak to Birch Hill School...But we are a support team not a school...One of the [managers] said to me "Why don't you run a virtual school football team?"...Well that's a million miles away from...the kids aren't here in this school. We are basically a support team'.

VSHs often saw advantages in using a school model, particularly the title 'headteacher', without taking the metaphor too far.

Virtual school head

We inevitably had to ask about reactions to the job title 'virtual school head'. We encountered only one, not unintelligent, person in the research (a social worker) who had not realised that the VSH was actually a real person (see next Section). Indeed a quick search of the internet will show that there are many virtual schools, often in the US, offering online teaching resources. Most VSHs said that the title was initially a source of amusement ('Beam me up Scotty' (x 2); 'I'm not a hologram'; 'Touch me, feel me, I'm real' etc.). One received regular phone calls asking for advice about problems with a server or other computer equipment. The initial reaction could be a useful ice-breaker for a new appointment in an unfamiliar role. It was also memorable, unlike the job titles for many local government posts.

About half of the VSHs were comfortable with the title and would be keeping it, although usually preferring 'head of the virtual school' rather than 'virtual school head'. Some others did not particularly like the term but could not think of a better alternative that was not too long or stigmatising. Two preferred respectively 'manager of the LACES support team' and 'head of learning and opportunities for children in care'. There was broad consensus around 'head of education-' or 'headteacher for looked after children' or 'head/headteacher of the virtual school for looked after children'.

Has the virtual school made a difference?

Evaluating what are in effect the role and contribution of one person is complex. When interviewed, individuals may be unduly modest or over-optimistic about their contribution, depending partly on who will read the report and its possible consequences. This is why our research design involved complementary approaches ('triangulation') to piece together the broader picture. We asked interviewees specifically whether they thought the role of the VSH had helped to improve looked after children's educational achievement in the authority and on what evidence would they base this judgement. A clear majority were positive and thought that it had, a few unequivocally so. One thought that they were beginning to have an impact. Two felt that their involvement was not yet improving achievements.

Though ultimately the impact on pupils' achievements is the million dollar question, several responded that it is clearly a difficult one to answer. One VSH with a long established LACES team felt they had progressed a long way but '...how much I can put my hand on my heart and say it's about the pilot I really don't know'. Another said 'I think we've made huge strides' but wondered whether this was linked more to the admirably high level of resource the authority committed to this area. Indeed, the education of looked after children is a multifaceted problem with many potential influences. Benefits may be indirect and proving causal relationships in this case are impossible. Official statistics can be volatile, depending on the cohort, and they exclude some of the work of virtual heads. As one put it:

'I think it leaves out some of the quality work...you know I'm all for having targets and being able to be ambitious for our young people but that doesn't tell the whole story...when you've made that relationship with a young person and the member of the team has been their only link with the education system, and they've managed to keep hold of them to get them in, even if it's to do one GCSE...Their response is very positive, very enthusiastic - they don't forget, you'll always be that link for them. And they'll come back and ask you, they'll say "Can you help me with this". And that's a major part of it.'

It is difficult to disagree with the words of one VSH, who did not feel that obvious progress could be demonstrated, who nevertheless commented:

'... I think by raising the profile of the looked after children, by improving the designated teachers' training, by us all focusing on attainment and you know trying to improve attendance and everyone working together and...as you say the networking...it's got to make a difference. That's what you do in schools you know are struggling. It's making sure that people are very clear about what their role is in that in making things better'.

Previous research messages

We repeated a question that one of us has used in previous research, asking about some of the elements that have been recognised in previous studies as contributing to poor educational experiences for looked after children (see Table 5.2) (Berridge *et al.* 2008). We asked the extent to which matters had altered during the period during which s/he had been VSH. We use the same question in our survey with other groups of respondents (see Section 7).

The overall situation showed improvements - 15 areas had 'improved considerably', 38 'improved slightly' and 12 remained unchanged or worsened. It depends, of course, on what point authorities started from and those with long established education support teams often felt that the initial position was quite good. Most improvement was shown in raising the general level of importance given to the education of looked after children and challenging low expectations; something on which all VSHs had focused and which possibly was the easiest aspect for them directly to influence. In contrast, placement instability had changed least and was to a large extent beyond the control of VSHs. Interestingly, progress post-16 was perceived to be uneven: changes in the law concerning care leavers have helped (Jackson *et al.* 2005) but some authorities and VSHs had targeted this area more than others.

Table 5.2 - During the period of being VSH, to what extent had the following changed?

	Stayed the same or worsened	Improved slightly	Improved considerably
Recognising the importance of education for children in care and challenging low expectations	1	5	5
Placement stability for children in care (foster and residential)*	5	5	-
Providing educationally stimulating environments for foster- and residential care	1	7	3
Links between the care system (social workers and carers) and schools	1	8	2
Detrimental effects of disrupted schooling	1	9	1
Need for continuing support and financial assistance post 16	3	4	4
Total	12	38	15

(* One respondent in this category did not know.)

Should the virtual school continue?

We also asked if the virtual school should continue. We would not have known what to expect at the outset although, in any sector, admittedly few people would want their jobs to end. It will come as no surprise, having read the report so far, that there was an overwhelming endorsement from interviewees. Responses were as follows, in no particular order.

'Absolutely.' (x 2)

'Yes. The principle is exactly right.'

'Yes, definitely.'

'Yes I do. I think it captures the imagination.'

'I think it should...nobody's looking at them as a whole group...I do think it has great potential.'

'I think it should.'

'Yes, I think it would be a great shame to lose the impetus because it's something that takes quite a while to get the foundations for.'

'I think it's absolutely right. I think ...it's certainly made everyone raise their game.'

Two respondents were positive but slightly more circumspect:

'I think it should continue [but here]...we have to be clear about what the role entails and what we're setting out to do with it.'

Finally, while not disagreeing:

'Well I think what we need to continue is high quality LACES teams...led by people who have got some experience and clout, who are given the power and position where they can influence the authority'.

Good practice

We were asked to try to identify areas of good practice in the work of VSHs. Ideally in an evaluation this should be related to good outcomes or at least receive independent corroboration from different sources. This is complex for our more modest task with short timescales. Our Conclusion attempts to link together different themes from the evaluation to help identify what seems to be valuable in VSHs' work. In our interviews we simply asked VSHs to report to us up to two examples locally of what they considered to be good practice. We add some other examples which the research team considered innovative and interesting. Not all would necessarily work elsewhere or, in themselves, raise attainments. They are ideas to consider, which we briefly list below. Some have already been discussed above and a number no doubt are used more widely beyond the pilots. Some VSHs reiterated their private tutoring schemes as examples of good practice, which we discuss elsewhere.

Management

- Setting up a regional protocol between 26 authorities to coordinate reciprocal educational support for looked after children educated out of area.
- Rapid response to educational problems.
- The governors model of the virtual school, which involved key managers and other important figures in children's services. This brought about short communication routes.
- Providing regular information to School Improvement Partners (SIPs) about the attainment and attendance of all looked after children. Ensuring that SIPs asked every school about the progress of any looked after children.

Planning

- Integrating PEPs in the overall child care planning process.
- LACES team leading the PEPs process and chairing PEP meetings.

Professional links

- Ongoing personal contacts with schools.
- Improved designated teachers' training.
- Providing training and educational support to agency social workers and those recruited from other countries.
- Focusing the virtual school on the full 0-19 age range.
- Developing links with the early years team. Working with childminders.

Direct educational support for pupils

- Providing £3000+ per annum per place for every school with a looked after child.
- Computers for all looked after children.
- Summer schools, and gifted and talented programmes.
- Homework Project - dedicated phone line for looked after children and foster-/residential carers needing help with homework.
- 'Letter Box' library for younger children, who receive monthly deliveries of parcels of books and educational activities.
- Additional English language provision for 60 unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- 'The uptake we get for museum activities...not just for visiting museums but for activity days and family days.'
- Providing musical instruments and music lessons.

Other examples

- Praise and rewards schemes: 'We have these fantastic celebration events...our looked after celebration event in November is stunning...It's like a massive school prom with all the awards and things'.
- Plans for a 'virtual student council' of looked after children to operate through a website.

Summary points

Background and characteristics

- Depending how it is defined, approaching half of the VSHs worked part-time.
- VSHs used a variety of slightly different job titles.
- Nearly all had mainly education backgrounds (all were qualified teachers), although half had some social work /social care-related experience.
- Almost all were located in the Education section of authorities.
- VSHs differed in their seniority in the organisational structure.
- Virtual schools varied in purpose and size. Three of the 11 were large, including about 20 staff; 6 were medium-sized - 6-8; and two were essentially one-person operations.

VSH perspectives

- Three VSHs were existing managers of LACES teams; two came in to develop structures; and six came as new appointments to forge relationships with exiting structures.

- The seniority of the VSH position had an important influence on what they could achieve.
- A key element of VSHs' work was forging positive relationships with school heads. Being accepted as a peer by other heads was seen as important but could be problematic.
- Most VSHs could access good information on looked after pupils but it usually came from several separate databases and was inefficient.
- Responsibilities for different groups of pupils varied eg. if educated in different authorities.
- VSHs who had used it were overwhelmingly positive about the private tutors scheme. They preferred a mixed economy approach, using both teachers from the pupils' own schools as well as a private company.
- Though difficult to quantify, a clear majority of VSHs felt that their involvement in authorities was having positive effects and that the role should continue.

6. The social work view

In this section we look at the VSH role from the perspective of social workers. We wanted to know how familiar they were with the person and her or his work, how much direct contact there had been and which aspects of the role they had found most useful.

We carried out face-to-face interviews with a total of 39 social workers from the five authorities in the intensive study group. Most of these were group interviews but some social workers were also seen individually. A few of the group sessions took place during previously scheduled team meetings while others were especially convened for the purpose of the evaluation. In all cases the social workers attending expressed interest in the study and were willing to give as much time as we needed.

Sometimes the participants had been briefed in advance about the purpose of the meeting and had been supplied with the information leaflet which we had circulated explaining the aims of the virtual school head initiative and its evaluation. Where this was not the case, the researchers gave a brief introduction to the evaluation project and provided an opportunity to read the project description and ask questions. Having started off the discussion, the researchers were often able to act as facilitators, encouraging exchanges between those attending, which could be very informative. The individual interviews were particularly useful in enabling less experienced staff to express their views more freely.

How well did the social workers know the VSH?

This depended on three main factors: the physical location of the VSH office base: her/his position in the structure of the department; and, perhaps most importantly, the extent to which the postholder interpreted the role as strategic or operational. In one area the VSH was placed in a large open plan office in close proximity to three advisory teachers for looked after children. He had a good working relationship with the leader of the long-term care team and most people in that team knew him quite well.

Other social workers had come into contact with the VSH through the tutoring scheme or had asked for help in connection with individual cases. One VSH had given useful advice in the case of a child who had been excluded from school, explaining the school's point of view and what action the social worker might take to challenge it. Another social worker had found advice from the VSH particularly helpful when she was attending a PEP meeting and needed to know what questions to ask and what the school could do to support a child in difficulties.

In another area with a well-established educational support team there was less opportunity for social workers and the VSH to meet. In a meeting of eight people, none knew the VSH or could even name him. In a different team in the same authority, some of the social workers had had contact with the VSH in his previous job as a school head and had also met him quite recently when he attended a team meeting. Other VSHs had made a point of attending social work meetings and were much better known to social workers.

How well do they understand the role?

Some of the social workers were still quite confused about the virtual school and the role of its head. One of them said:

'When I think of the name "virtual head" I think it's like not a real person, like a computer. It's just an odd phrase...I didn't know it was a real person until just now!'

A similar comment came from a social worker in a different authority:

'When I first heard about (the virtual school head) I couldn't get my head round it whatsoever. It sounded so computer gameish...'

Another asked 'How can she be a virtual head when she really exists?' but then answered her own question:

'She's the head of the virtual school and what is a virtual school? It's what we share together as the collective school which she looked after children are attending - and I think it requires quite a leap of understanding'.

Some others also had difficulty with the term 'virtual' and were uncertain what it meant. In one team the social workers had met the VSH for the first time only the previous week. They were unsure how the job differed from that of an education social worker. They thought the main task of the VSH was to go into schools and inform them about looked after children. In this authority there seemed to be several individuals with similar job titles. In their experience it was often unclear whom to go to if they had a problem.

It was not possible to know how far the social workers we met were representative but in one authority at least the social workers seemed to have a particularly good understanding of the VSH role.

They saw this person as taking responsibility for children both inside and outside the authority with the overall aim of making sure that looked after children are achieving the best they can, whether academically or in life skills, keeping a balance between strategic interventions and representing the interests of individual children. In this dual role the VSH was seen to be very successful:

'He is able to ask quite challenging questions and advocate very strongly with his peers, other head teachers and designated teachers. He is talking to SIPs and putting looked after children on their agendas. He is there when you need him for whatever difficulties - free tuition, extra help, positive incentives for reaching targets'.

The appointment of a VSH had provided the opportunity 'to focus purely on the educational outcomes, identifying the particular issues that ought to be addressed and where energies needed to be concentrated'.

Where should the VSH role be located?

This question, which arises throughout our report, came up several times in our discussions with social workers. There was general agreement that the VSH was an educational role and the logical place for it was at the head of the LACES team. But in two of the authorities, for complex internal reasons, the LACES teams continued separate from the VSH and they worked side by side. Some social workers thought they complemented each other: the freedom from managerial responsibilities enabling the VSH to concentrate on the strategic side of the post, but others found the situation confusing and complained that they were unsure where to go when they had a problem.

In some authorities there were gaps where no one seemed to take responsibility. Two examples given were children living in residential care with private agencies in other authorities, and young people in the 16-19 group. Some LACES teams and VSHs took the view that their remit covered children only up to Year 11.

Effectiveness of the VSH

Had educational outcomes for looked after children improved over the past year, and if so how far could this be attributed to the work or influence of the VSH? We asked if the VSH had focused on a particular issue, and if this had made a difference? Had the appointment of a VSH helped them to access educational resources more effectively?

Despite the fact that the VSHs were very different people and operated in quite different ways, all the social workers thought they were doing a good job. They were all able to cite cases where the intervention of the VSH had been critical in obtaining resources for a looked after child and where the status of school head had enabled the VSH to resolve issues on which the social worker might be having an uphill battle with a school. One mentioned a case where a young person had moved to another authority and the VSH had liaised with the virtual head in the new area to get her into school immediately. Another worker thought the VSH had been very effective in keeping children in mainstream school and out of Pupil Referral Units.

Social workers identified a long list of issues where the VSH had made a difference.

- Shifting focus from the negative side of looked after children to emphasising their potential.
- Bridging the gap between schools and social workers and advocating for the child from a more powerful position than they could.
- Getting good, up-to-date information on attendance (through 'Welfare Call') and acting on it before a pattern of non-attendance could set in. That had produced 'a huge improvement' in attendance figures in one authority.
- Working with the leaving care team to make transition from school to college run smoothly.
- Identifying children having difficulties at school at an earlier stage. One example we were given was of a VSH, who e-mailed every primary school to ask them to check if each looked after child was reaching their targets and what additional help they might need.
- Developing a new PEP system and making it an active working document instead of just a bit of paper that got filed away until the next review.
- Organising an annual education awards evening, bringing children to celebrate achievement - not just GCSEs.
- 'I think that they get a sense of being part of a virtual school when they attend that evening and for those children it's a massive achievement to share with their carers and sometimes with their families'.

Understanding of social work issues

Most of the directors of children's services and almost all the VSHs came from an education rather than a social work background. We wanted to know how social workers felt about this. Did they think that their work with children and families was being marginalised by the emphasis on raising educational attainment? Did the VSH understand the nature of the social work task and the many difficult situations they faced?

Only one social worker expressed concern about this, worrying that the identity of social care was being lost, but he added that the VSH in this area had worked hard to understand social work issues. Attending social work team meetings was a good way for the VSH to learn about their work and the many difficult problems they had to deal with. In fact this was not exactly new territory for most of the VSHs because, as we saw in the previous section, several had some past experience of social-work related concerns and / or of teaching children with special educational needs, which had often brought them into contact with social workers.

Training initiated by the VSH

We asked if any of the social workers present had attended training on the education of looked after children during the past year and, if so, had it been initiated by the VSH?

There was a general feeling among the social workers we saw that they needed much more training on the education of looked after children, particularly on educational targets and tests. The language of the education system was quite mysterious except to those who had their own children in school. The difficulty was the limited time available for training and the priority that had to be given to child protection and safeguarding.

The only specific training mentioned was on PEPs, which had been organised by two of the VSHs. Many social workers felt that their knowledge of schools was inadequate now that expectations for them actively to promote educational achievement were so much higher: 'I feel out of my depth' was a typical comment. But at least in these five authorities, training was not seen by social workers as a significant aspect of the VSH role.

Individual tutoring

It will be recalled that, in addition to being pilots for the VSH initiative, two of the authorities that were intensively studied were also pilots for the private tutoring scheme. In these areas many of the social workers had direct experience of young people receiving individual tutoring and all were enthusiastically in favour of it:

'I have had three with a tutor. I think it's been fabulous, absolutely brilliant. They've all gone on to want it again'.

In this team all the social workers' experiences with private tutoring had been highly positive. All of the young people offered tutoring had accepted and were felt to have benefited from it, both academically and personally. One had weekly support in English and science for four months, another had an hour a week after school. Foster carers were reported to be very appreciative; the children concerned had become more confident and there were clear improvements in their academic work, which had been reflected in their PEPs. Many social workers commented on how much the young people enjoyed the individual attention and the one-to-one relationship with a sympathetic adult.

Some problems with tutoring were identified but they were mostly organisational. It was more difficult to arrange tutoring for children placed out of authority and often complex to monitor. In one case where the child was placed in another authority the tutoring had ended without the social worker being informed. In this area, girls seemed more willing to take up the opportunity of tutoring than boys did. Only two cases were reported where tutoring had been refused, both involving older boys. Tutors could occasionally be unreliable, especially when outside agencies were employed. On the whole social workers thought the tutoring scheme worked best when the teaching was provided by school staff out of school hours. There was also some uncertainty about how long the tutoring was intended to last; quite wide differences in duration and frequency were reported - from 10 weekly one-hour sessions to a whole year.

Despite these difficulties the social workers in this authority had no doubts at all of the value of the scheme, summed up by the one who said 'I think it's a brilliant service and so many young people have benefited'. Social workers in the other pilot authority concerned were equally enthusiastic. It was the individual tutoring scheme that was most likely to have brought them into direct contact with the VSH. One worker described it as 'a massive help'. They had seen very marked improvements in children's performance over a period of six to nine months, not only from the academic tuition but as a result of their increased confidence and self-belief. One social worker had asked for tutoring for 12 of the children for whom she was responsible; she said the feedback from them was excellent, and 'these are kids that you wouldn't think would buy into it but it's gone really well'. She commented that she had had several conversations with the VSH about home tutoring and she was very impressed by the way he was so creative in making sure that the young people got what they were entitled to.

The picture from the social workers, then, was generally positive but it seemed that it would take longer than the two years of the pilot for the VSH role to become fully embedded in children's services. There was still a good deal of uncertainty about how this person fitted into the structure of the department and what precisely were the boundaries of the role. This confusion was not surprising since, in some authorities, the answers to these questions were still being resolved. There was a clear measure of agreement, however, that the appointment of the VSH had helped to focus attention on the importance of educational attainment for looked after children; had provided them with a powerful advocate; and in some places had introduced changes which could be expected to produce significantly improved outcomes in the longer term. Some social workers put it much more strongly than that:

'I hope we keep the virtual school head role because I think that it has been excellent. For looked after children it's been fabulous.'

'It's been an inspiration for us all and for the young people on our caseloads so please let it stay'.

Summary points

- Thirty-nine social workers were interviewed, individually or in groups.
- Social workers differed in their understanding of the VSH role partly depending on how much personal contact they had with the postholder.
- Most were aware that the role had an important strategic aspect, crossing the boundary between education and social work and raising awareness of the educational needs and rights of looked after children.
- Those who had worked with VSHs on particular cases spoke highly of their commitment and ability to advocate effectively for children.
- The VSH knowledge of the education system was a great asset.
- In every case the VSH was well informed about social work concerns and sympathetic to the particular challenges facing young people in care in the school environment.
- In the two areas where private tutoring was being piloted, all the social workers we interviewed were extremely enthusiastic about it and believed that the young people concerned had benefited both in self-confidence and educational attainment.

7. Survey of young people, foster carers, designated teachers and social workers

We analysed and present our results thematically, combining information from the different groups of respondents: children, carers, designated teachers (DTs) and social workers. Similar issues were raised with each to enable comparison, though for reasons of brevity we asked some questions to some groups but not others. As explained earlier, all young people had been in care for at least two years and, therefore, throughout (in fact longer than) the duration of the virtual school pilots. Many questions compared the current situation with a year ago, to see if changes had occurred while the virtual school had been in operation.

Most questions were multiple choice with some opportunities to elaborate with free text. Totals are not always the same as respondents sometimes omitted questions or they applied in some circumstances but not others (eg. questions applying to specific children or more generally). Phrasing was changed slightly for the different groups with more straightforward language used for children. We have avoided using percentages for the small samples as this could be misleading. We did further analysis to look for possible differences for sub-groups of children, such as by age, gender, ethnicity or location. We draw attention where there may be some possible difference but should be cautious as numbers can become very small. Some details have been changed in a few of the illustrative extracts to avoid possible identification, without altering their meaning.

Children's characteristics

The average (median) age of the 31 children and young people who responded to the survey was 12½ years (calculated as at 31 March 2009). The youngest was 10 years and the oldest 16. There were more males (20) than females (11). Twenty-seven respondents described their background as white UK, none indicated that they were Asian or African-Caribbean, two were unaccompanied asylum seekers from central Asia and two of mixed ethnicity. The majority of children (22) were with non-related foster carers. Of the remainder, 5 lived in residential care and 3 with family carers. Twenty-two children were educated in a mainstream day school, 3 in a pupil referral unit, 2 at both school and college and 3 in another type of educational setting. Eight young people were looked after under a voluntary legal arrangement with birth parents and 9 participants were educated outside of the local authority in which they were in care.

Though there is much overlap, we should reiterate that responses from the four groups do not all relate to exactly to the same group of children, depending who chose to respond and if replies related to children educated in- or out-of-authority (see Section 1). Responses from DTs and social workers concerned a slightly older age group compared with replies from children and foster carers. Children with special educational needs were slightly more likely to be represented among the adults' survey responses. The numbers of pupils in the sample with SEN is likely to be an underestimate as we do not have this information for all children. DTs' responses concerned 5 children with a Statement of SEN and 2 on 'school action'; while respective numbers for foster carers' replies were 3 and 4.

Survey introduction

The surveys opened with some brief statements reminding respondents of ethical considerations, such as the voluntary nature of the exercise and a general guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. In order to proceed, participants needed to click the boxes indicating that they understood.

We began the children’s survey with a few straightforward, warm-up questions to familiarise them with the format and to try to reassure. Almost everyone knew that David Beckham’s wife is Victoria (‘Posh Spice’), and 23 of the 28 who responded were aware that it was Barack Obama who had recently become the first black president of America. (The exceptions were each from younger respondents.) Also as a warm-up, we then asked children ‘Which one of these school subjects do you like best’ and which was their least favourite. We know of the considerable educational challenges facing looked after children but little research has focused on experiences of different subjects. This is important if English and maths are required to be part of GCSE passes for official statistics and targets. Half of the boys replied that their favourite was PE / sport while the girls’ preferences were evenly spread across all main curriculum areas. None of the 11 girls chose PE. There was a wide range of least favourite subjects with English and science very slightly ahead.

General educational progress

An initial question was asked about how well generally the child was felt to be progressing at school compared with a year ago.

Table 7.1 - How well is the young person generally progressing at school compared to a year ago?

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Overall about the same	4	5	6	3
Better than a year ago	26	17	10	7
Don’t know	1	0	0	0
Worse than a year ago	0	3	1	0
No answer (N/A)	0	0	4 ⁵	0
Total	31	25	21	10

Overall we can see that for each group, a clear majority of looked after pupils were felt to be making general progress at school during the period in which the virtual school was operating (Table 7.1). One Year 10 boy explained:

‘Since I started at [name of school] my education is improving, I like it there and do not get bullied, I wish I could stay forever’.

(We explored the data to see how many children mentioned bullying but it was a small number.)

A 13-year-old girl added:

‘I read more than I used to because I enjoy reading now. By keeping on reading, I think I have done better with my reading’.

One boy said simply: ‘I am getting on fine’.

⁵ Twenty-one DTs started the questionnaire but 1 answered only a few questions referring to a specific pupil. Seventeen wrote full responses for particular pupils and 3 DTs were giving general responses only. Therefore, a number of questions were not applicable to DTs replying only on general issues. All social workers’ responses applied to specific children. ‘No answer’ in this and the following tables, therefore, also includes ‘not applicable’.

A foster carer wrote about a boy she was looking after:

'Taking GCSEs - 8. You wouldn't have thought that a year ago. His English has improved...'

And a social worker commented about another pupil:

'His work has been fairly steady. He is on course to do his GCSEs which he is doing at the moment'.

However, the finding that looked after children make general educational progress over time is not new and other research has come up with similar results elsewhere before virtual school heads were introduced (Berridge *et al.* 2008; Harker *et al.* 2004). (The issue is whether it is *enough* progress.) We asked DTs and social workers a further specific question about changes in the pupil's *attainment*. Results were similar to the above for DTs (one commented: 'Her progress has always been a slow, steady progression') but social workers were slightly less optimistic.

One foster carer explained very well the challenges in educating looked after children:

'I am a qualified social worker. Things have improved compared to the children I was working with 15 years ago when there wasn't any expectation that LAC would do well in school. I think there is an expectation now. [Name] couldn't do better than he does in school, he works really hard and he reads avidly but he still needs support so they [LAC] clearly do need far more support than any other child in school. He worries about the future and supporting himself, he worries about what happens if something happens to me and he is one that is doing well, so support is definitely needed for LAC'.

Of the 25 foster carers, 17 were looking after children in the pilot local authority and 8 were caring for those living or being educated out of authority. Educational progress was felt to be similar for both groups.

Factors influencing achievement

Teaching

There are a variety of factors which VSHs can seek to influence to improve children's educational achievements. One is the *quality of teaching and support* they receive.

Table 7.2 - How does the quality of teaching and support the pupil receives compare to a year ago?

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Overall about the same	11	15	9	7
Better than a year ago	19	9	7	3
Worse than a year ago	0	1	0	0
Don't know/ N/A	1	0	5	0
Total	31	25	21	10

Children perceived some overall improvement in teaching but professionals and carers felt that the quality of education offered was largely unchanged. A situation remaining unchanged could mean a variety of things. For example two DTs informed us:

'We have always allocated extra staff to support this child'; and

'Extra literacy support in place. Whole-school dyslexia awareness programme in place'.

One carer was particularly complimentary:

'In all the years I've fostered, that school has been absolutely fantastic'.

Another foster carer described a very effective DT:

'She has a particular person in school who supports the looked after children... That person supports her relationships with the teachers. If there are problems with teachers, the designated teacher will help to resolve that problem and she [goes] to [name] all the time (only one day a week when she isn't) and [she] has had that support since Year 7. She sees the DT at least once a week, possibly more. They quite often see each other in passing and have a quick catch-up'.

Some children may have changed school in the past year. It is encouraging to see that the majority of children themselves felt that the teaching they received had improved. There was some suggestion that this applied particularly to boys. One 11 year-old boy expressed it well: *'I think I am getting cleverer. The teachers are really nice'.*

Changing school could mean a more appropriate response to pupils' special educational needs. The foster carer of one young boy explained:

'A year ago he was in [a mainstream] school and it didn't cater for him. Now his physical needs and emotional needs are being met. He has poor fine motor skills, gets lots of support with PE. He needs a lot of praise and a lot of rewards, has low self-esteem. He can't really communicate things, he cries rather than listens for reason'.

A foster carer observed:

'Big improvement. Different teacher who is more positive. This year they have split them into groups and with the streaming of the groups he just seems to have thrived. I think he enjoys the mix of teachers as well. Has two male teachers who he particularly likes'.

There could be considerable educational challenges confronting young, unaccompanied asylum seekers. But the foster carer of one 13 year-old commented:

'Much better. This young person's first language is not English and in 18 months she has gone from having a reading and spelling age of 7 yrs to 12.5 years'.

As we shall see, some pupils had a private tutor and they may have been more likely to have included this in deciding their response about the quality of teaching than did carers/professionals. The latter were more equivocal and, while noting some improvement, felt that the situation was essentially unchanged. Only one of the total of 87 survey participants thought that the quality of teaching offered had deteriorated.

A criticism in the past from looked after children has been that teachers do not *understand what it is like for them to be in care and how it affects their schooling*. Examples have been given in which some teachers may have acted insensitively. Children only were asked this question. The majority (17) felt that their teachers did understand what it was like for them to be in care and how it affected their studies. A third of the 31 replied 'I'm not sure' - it is a complex question and idea. Only two children thought that teachers did not understand how being in care affected them. One of these, a 16 year-old girl, explained:

[Interviewer: 'Could you say a bit more about that?']

'Because some know the situation but other teachers don't. So they could say "mum and dad" or "foster carers" or that sort of thing...'

[I: 'Is it ok if I ask what do you prefer?']

'I prefer it to be mum and dad instead of foster carers because then people say "Oh how come you are in care?" and then I have to explain.'

A majority (boys especially) believed that their teachers had a better understanding than a year before of what being looked after was like for pupils and how it affected their education, with most of the remainder unsure.

Pupil motivation

Children's own motivation and attitudes to learning are also important and we asked all respondents about pupils' *studying* patterns.

Table 7.3 - Changes to the child's studying over the past year

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Studies harder	17	10	4	4
Studies less	2	1	1	1
About the same	10	12	7	2
Don't know/ N/A	2	2	9	3
Total	31	25	21	10

We asked children to be truthful and reminded them that no one else would know what they said. Half the group, particularly boys, said they were now studying harder and most of the remainder felt that it was similar (Table 7.3). One young unaccompanied asylum seeker that we interviewed over the telephone was eager to take full advantage of the opportunities now offered to him. His foster carers said that he arrived in the country on the Tuesday and on the Wednesday asked where he was going to school.

It is difficult to know which professional/carer group is likely to be the most revealing, as studying should occur both at school and at home. Taking the 87 replies together, 35 responded that the child was studying harder, while 31 said about the same. Very few indicated that the level of studying had declined. One DT saw it this way:

'His previous experiences impinge on his learning but because of the excellent services, he has become a lot more industrious. He is still very immature for a 10 year-old. His progress is in fits and starts, at Christmas he went through a difficult time when he had contact with his siblings. His progress sometimes drops but this is due to external influences.'

Missing time in education

We also inquired about *missing time in school or in education* (Table 7.4). For reasons of brevity, we did not ask separate questions concerning types of absence, such as exclusions, absenteeism or non-allocation of a school place. We also posed this answer differently for children and did not give the optional response of never having missed time at school. Around half the professionals / carers reported that the child had a very good attendance record. One foster carer observed:

'I couldn't say he's had a day off. None of my children do. All his dental appointments are outside of school and things like that. That's my choice'.

Boys especially thought their attendance had improved over the year, although the adult groups felt that it was mainly unchanged. Non-attendance can be a complex issue for looked after children, as one 16 year-old showed:

'...I try as hard as possible to attend education but it depends what frame of mind I am in, if I ain't in the right frame of mind, which is not quite often. I am very good at English and maths and I am really good at singing'.

As well as any specific problems, looked after children of course also display the general characteristics of other teenagers:

'[Name] is a good attender - although she is difficult to get out of bed and so can pick up some late marks'.

Table 7.4 - Missing time at school for all reasons compared to a year ago

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
(Has never missed time)	-	12	9	7
Misses more time	2	5	2	0
Misses less time	13	1	1	1
About the same	11	5	4	2
Don't know/ N/A	5	2	5	0
Total	31	25	21	10

Behaviour and behavioural management

Children's *behaviour* at school can affect their education and *vice-versa*. We asked professionals if children's behaviour at school/the education centre had changed over the past 12 months (Table 7.5). Numbers are not large but DTs felt that girls particularly had never posed any behavioural problems at school. DTs indicated that, of those from both sexes who did pose difficulties, the behaviour in school of a clear majority had improved ('Enhanced confidence enables greater pleasure in her learning'). Social workers' views were more mixed. Only one reply from DTs and social workers assessed that behaviour had deteriorated during the year in question.

Table 7.5 - Children's behaviour at school compared to a year ago

	Designated teachers	Social workers
Has never had any behavioural problems at school	8	5
Overall about the same	2	2
Better than a year ago	6	1
Worse than a year ago	0	1
Don't know/ N/A	5	1
Total	21	10

As pupils' behaviour is influenced also by the school context and response, we asked if teachers were thought to be any better at dealing with his or her behaviour than previously (Table 7.6). For the pupils who had displayed behavioural problems, DTs thought that school colleagues' skills were essentially similar. One school had a particularly impressive record.

'All members of staff are very supportive of any children in the care system and we have a policy that we share information and we have always done that...the school's Ofsted said that the school was outstanding in taking care of vulnerable children. I think we see it as more than just a job, we do care about the children in our care'. (DT)

Carers and social workers detected some signs of improvement in behavioural management over the past year, particularly for boys:

'The teachers at [name's] school now know [name], they understand the best method of working with him, what methods suit [name] and the best way of dealing with him'. (Social worker)

Table 7.6 - Compared to a year ago, are teachers better or worse at dealing with his/her behaviour at school?

	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Has never had any behavioural problems at school	11	8	4
Overall about the same	6	6	3
Better	4	2	3
Worse	3	0	0
Don't know/ N/A	1	5	0
Total	25	21	10

Support to pupils

Carers

Good parenting is a key component of educational success. Looked after children have often had unsatisfactory early experiences but the care system aims to offer substitute or supplementary parenting, which might restore confidence, application and success. We asked a series of questions about the support offered by those in key support roles. Initially, we asked children whether they felt their carers showed much interest in their education. Encouragingly all but one - 29 of the 30 respondents - replied that they did. The other was unsure and one did not reply. The dynamics of foster care research can make it difficult for children to criticise their carers, as interviews are often undertaken in the presence or earshot of a carer. Some carers may have assisted children in completing the web surveys but it seems that most were done either individually or with us over the telephone. Therefore, we should not decry the fact that children generally found their carers educationally supportive.

We asked the three other groups whether *carers showed more or less interest in children's education* compared to a year ago. We pointed out that some may have changed placements but we asked respondents to generalise as best they could. A clear majority of professionals thought that carers had 'always been really interested' in the child's education'. One DT explained:

'They have been very consistent, showing great interest, they have always been very good carers, exceptional I would say. They attend all the parents' evenings and any meetings at the school'.

This social worker expressed a similar view:

'His carers have always been aware of his learning style and have ensured that he keeps up with his education, which includes completing his homework and school assessment work for his final exams this year'.

A third of children agreed that carers had always been interested in their education and half said that it had increased. None of the 52 from all three groups who replied to this question felt that the child was living in a placement in which carers' interest in education had waned.

Table 7.7 - Do carers show more or less interest in the child's education compared to a year ago?

	Children	Designated teachers	Social workers
They have always been really interested	11	11	9
They have never been interested	(-)	0	1
More interest	14	1	0
Less interest	0	0	0
About the same	5	3	0
Don't know/ N/A	1	6	0
Total	31	21	10

Carers were asked, in general, whether they received enough *help and advice* from children’s services in supporting the child’s education. Fifteen of 24 replied that they ‘definitely’ did and five that they ‘probably’ did. One in 6 felt that they did not. In terms of whether this had changed over the past year, 14 replied that the support had always been good and for 5 it had improved; 4 said it was unchanged. VSHs’ task in relation to these carers, therefore, was essentially to try to maintain what were perceived as existing good systems of educational support. For most carers, VSHs’ efforts may have made some impact but for 1 in 6 had not.

Social workers

Similar questions were asked about *social workers’ perceived educational contribution* (Table 7.8). Children responded that about four in every five social workers (24/31) showed interest in their education, 4 social workers did not and they were unsure about 2 others. Though this is high, 1 in 5 who were not perceived to be interested in children’s education is more than we would wish. This result also confirms how children have been discriminating in their completion of the survey by giving different levels of endorsement between the different professional and carer groups.

Table 7.8 - Does the social worker show more or less interest in the child’s education compared to a year ago?

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers
They have always been really interested	5	8	5
They have never been interested	0	2	0
More interest	16	3	0
Less interest	3	3	2
About the same	6	8	10
Don’t know/ N/A	1	1	4
Total	31	25	21

Children and DTs alike rated social workers’ long-term interest in children’s education lower than that of their carers. Eight out of 25 carers observed social workers’ interest to have remained unchanged over the past year, as did 10 DTs. Mixed reports were given of social workers’ involvement. One DT gave a positive account (‘Excellent partnership work’) but another was much more critical:

‘When [name] came up towards Year 11 and was due to be passed on to the leaving care team there seemed to be less consistency. It’s quite difficult to contact her social worker. There was a meeting held...which I wasn’t told about. Sometimes we are not put in the loop. They said that they thought she was off roll here, but she’s not off the roll... There was a meeting before her 16th birthday (to hand her case over to the leaving care team) which was cancelled and it was rescheduled until after her birthday... We work very closely with LACES which really helps’.

There were several references in our surveys to problems in educational liaison with social work leaving care teams. As in the above example, transfers to these teams sometimes seemed very ill-timed, both in relation to sitting examinations and making decisions on the next stage of education:

[Question: 'Please add any further information that you wish about the education of children in care and how it can be improved.']

'A more consistent interest in the youngster from Y7 through to Y11. At present all the attention seems to land on a youngster at once in Y11 when they have enough to think about. The transfer to "Leaving Care Team" has not yet been successful for us, it seriously frightens our youngsters and there seems to be a lack of empathy. The disruption is the most damaging intervention at the point of exams, either the change has to happen sooner or later, but the timing is completely off at the moment'. (DT)

One foster carer based in a different area to the care authority commented:

'A year ago he had a social worker who left and he hasn't been allocated a new one so the person who looks after him is very busy and he does the absolute bare minimum. Over the last year an awful lot of social workers have left and [we now have] people like students or managers who are very busy. They promised to get him a laptop about nine months ago and it hasn't happened...'

So if we ask if the VSH pilots have coincided with a perception of social workers' greater educational interest, children are quite positive but about one in three feel that it has not and around half of carers and DTs are similarly unconvinced.

Social workers' actions are often publicly misunderstood and there are many constraints on their actions, such as availability of suitable placements and the need to prioritise demands on their time. We have information from a larger group of 39 social workers from the group interviews but here the 10 survey respondents were asked further questions about education. Eight of the 10 responded that they gave the same attention to this young person's education compared to a year ago ('I tend to keep in the background when things are going well, [name] has a very good relationship with her foster carer who deals with nearly all of [name] problems') and 2 gave more attention. Mention was also made of the input of LACES teams and the virtual head, which influenced social workers' educational roles.

Only 1 social worker thought that they did not receive sufficient help and advice from the authority concerning the child's education. However, 3 out of 10 admitted that they did not know enough about children's education to do their job properly and one other was unsure. Four had not heard of Personal Educational Allowances (PEAs), which can provide extra funding for children (Half of carers and DTs had not heard of PEAs either). Half the social workers had not attended any training in the past two years on the education of looked after children. Most would welcome this, for example:

'Do feel that more training on education issues would be valuable - such as specialist provision for SEN children, exclusion rules, support services within schools, general range of "learning difficulties" such as dyslexia etc.'

With the emergence of LACES teams and VSHs it may be that responsibilities for children's schooling have subtly changed. We need to be clear about respective roles and responsibilities but it is still important to know that social workers have sufficient knowledge, skills and confidence to undertake their jobs effectively.

We asked social workers some more questions specifically about whether matters had changed or not over the last year (Table 7.9).

Table 7.9 - Comparing the situation with a year ago, do social workers agree or disagree with the following statements

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
I now get better information than I did about the educational progress of children in care	7	2	1
My links with schools attended by children in care have improved	6	2	2
I now feel more confident than I did in dealing with educational matters	5	2	3
Links between foster / residential carers and children's services about education have improved	3	3	3

Over the period during which VSHs were in post, these results generally indicate improvements in the educational dimensions of social workers' responsibilities for looked after children. In this small sample, the majority felt better informed, reported better links with schools and had gained some confidence. They were less sanguine about liaison with carers, although evidence discussed earlier suggested that this was not considered a major problem at the outset.

Specialist education support services for looked after children (LACES etc)

The relationship between VSHs and LACES teams emerges as an important finding in this evaluation. We asked professionals/carers whether such a team had been involved over the past year with the education of the child in question (Table 7.10).

Table 7.10 - Involvement of LACES team in child's education over the past year

	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
I have never heard of one of the these teams	6	2	1
There has been one of these teams and it has improved his/her education	11	7	5
There has been one of these teams but it hasn't improved his/her education	5	3	1
Don't know/ N/A	3	9	3
Total	25	21	10

Not all 5 authorities used for the survey had LACES teams so being unaware of them could mean a variety of things. When the individual had been in contact with the support teams, about two-thirds of carers and DTs thought it had helped the child's education but a third felt it had not. One DT explained the advantages:

'They have done as much as they possibly could with [name]. LACES has input into all the students. The officer comes to reviews, she is based locally, we are always in e-mail or telephone contact. She does his PEP reviews, sets up professional meeting, set up [individualised programme] for him, annual reviews etc.'

Social workers had a positive view of the LACES teams' work:

'[Name] is absolutely brilliant in this area. Always getting him extra lessons and extra tuition, homework club, something on a Saturday morning. Getting dictionaries - [language]-English for example, a proper one for biology and not just a basic one'.

An important consideration for social workers was that LACES workers could relieve the pressure on them by undertaking some tasks which otherwise would be their responsibility, such as coordinating PEPs.

Virtual school head

A key area to explore is participants' awareness and experience of the VSH (Table 7.11). We have already discussed that it is an unusual term and that they had different job titles. Explaining it succinctly in a survey question for children was a challenge.

Table 7.11 - Have you ever heard of a 'virtual school head'?

	Children	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Yes	7	19	15	10
No	23	5	1	0
Not sure	(1)	1	1	0
Total	31	25	17	10

Just about all DTs and social workers had heard of the VSH and could name her or him. When asked to elaborate on the VSH role only a few misunderstood. Familiarity was lower among carers: 4 out of 5 carers had heard of a VSH and half of these could also name them. A small number confused the purpose of the VSH. Those carers who had been in direct contact with the VSH mostly referred to arranging personal tutoring.

In contrast, four-fifths of children were unfamiliar with the term VSH. This finding was not unexpected for children so, depending where they lived, the web survey directed them to a further question naming the specific VSH responsible and asked if they had heard of that person. Half the sample of children recognised the VSH when named. We have seen that VSHs had different roles and some were in more direct contact with children than others. It varied between authorities, and in one location only 1 out of 10 children recognised the VSH, whereas in another 4 out of 5 did. (Some may have had direct communication with the VSH about our research.)

In terms of their impact, most carers felt the VSH had made a difference to the child's education (Table 7.12). Social workers' views were more mixed; while 7 of the 14 DTs who replied thought the VSH had not made a difference for the specific child and a further 4 were unsure. Not everyone would be aware of, or value, VSHs' indirect contribution, although those who were familiar with the role should have known what VSHs did behind the scenes in overall monitoring and co-ordination.

Table 7.12 - Has the VSH made a difference to the education of this child?

	Carers	Designated teachers	Social workers
Unfamiliar with VSH work	2	0	1
Yes	9	3	2
No	2	7	2
Not sure	6	4	2
N/A	6	7	3
Total	25	21	10

Private tutors

Recent evidence from the Sutton Trust (2009) demonstrates the growth of tutoring in England. Respondents to a survey of pupils aged 11-16 years in England showed that 22 per cent had used private tutoring at some stage in their school careers, rising to 43 per cent of those in London. However, evidence of the effectiveness of tutoring is mixed (Ireson 2004).

Two of the group of five authorities involved in the survey used private tutors under the HSBC-funded scheme. Numbers here are therefore very small, although we report in other sections different groups' perceptions about the operation of tutors.

Five of the 8 children who responded from these two authorities had worked with a personal tutor at some stage during the previous two years. Professionals indicated that tutors came mostly from an outside agency. Tutoring usually occupied an hour a week although one arrangement was slightly longer. Its duration varied, with some having lasted over six months when we interviewed. The focus was on a range of topics but English and maths seemed predominant. No concerns were raised about tutors' unreliability, which is particularly important for looked after children, many of whom in the past have been let down too often by adults. But DTs and social workers did feel that feedback about tutoring could have been improved. One social worker put it starkly for a young boy at a local primary school:

'No. I have never had any feedback from the tutor or agency and am completely unaware of even the name of the person carrying this out.'

A DT agreed that there was poor communication:

'Regular feedback [is needed] from the tutor to the school on progress, any extra support needed, how the student is getting on and what has been covered.'

There are important messages here about overall coordination and communication.

So, did the tutoring help? All children and social workers who replied commented that the tutor helped their education. Four of the five children who had been allocated a personal tutor chose to add further information. Interestingly, each of these said that the particular help given had been with *maths*. For example:

'Help with maths. Feel like I understand things a bit better.'

A social worker showed how the tutor had helped a young asylum seeker:

'I can compare him with other boys who have been here the same amount of time and his English is so much better.'

We saw in the previous section that social workers who were interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of private tutoring.

DTs and carers were more equivocal. One foster carer commented:

'With that tutor he didn't benefit. It was hard for [name] to keep still and relax enough to take it in so I took it on myself not to continue when the 12 weeks were over. It was straight after school and he finds school difficult anyway...He liked it at first but then he got very moody'.

Tutoring may not translate automatically into higher attainment but if separated children perceive a committed adult to be helping them, then it is likely that they will be benefiting.

When asked how the tutoring could be improved, a foster carer felt the main issue was that the child was in a position to benefit. This concerns assessment, planning and allocation:

'...I don't think he was ready for it. It was another stranger in the house coming to see him. He knows that my other children don't have people coming to see them and he is very sensitive about that. On an emotional thing it wasn't suitable, the guy (teacher) was lovely but he spent so much time to get him to sit still. An hour a week is not enough if you think that teachers are working with them every day. Probably on the weekend would have been better or one-to-one in the school for a couple of hours reading with him'.

Interprofessional working

We questioned professionals about links between school and social work services/the care system. Over two-thirds of DTs felt that relationships were 'probably' (n=11) or 'definitely' (2) strong enough. Half indicated that links have always been good and another two thought they had improved. Social workers were less convinced about whether the relationship with schools was strong enough and replied equally in the positive and negative. One probably reflected the views of several social workers in the following response:

'Depends which schools you are dealing with. Some are very good and very keen to promote looked after children and will always have the necessary information for reviews. They will raise any concerns with us very quickly. Other schools treat the PEPs and reviews as if they are a pain. They don't want a looked after child in the school...They just see that there will be problems with disruptive behaviour and don't think about the experience that the child has gone through. It depends on the DTs and head teachers...It depends on what leadership there is'.

Another added:

'We still tend to work as individual bodies rather than as one whole concern. I very rarely ever have schools ask me if something is going wrong in a young person's life to explain a bad period at school. Often find young people have been excluded without me even knowing'.

Furthermore, social workers thought that school-social work relationships had remained essentially unchanged in the previous year. We should probably not delve too much into this and the data may not relate to exactly the same children depending on who replied. But possible explanations might be that (designated) teachers find it easier to work interprofessionally with social workers than the reverse; teachers may be more confident in their professional knowledge and role than are social workers; and schools may be the more powerful institution. Indeed, 18 of the 21 DTs replied that they 'definitely' (12) or 'probably'

(6) knew enough about children in care and their needs to undertake their specialist roles effectively. (We saw earlier that approaching half of social workers were less confident in their knowledge of the education system.) DTs were not complacent though and around two-thirds would welcome further training on their role.

We asked both professional groups if the system for undertaking Personal Educational Plans (PEPs) worked effectively in the child's authority. Seven of the 21 DTs replied yes 'definitely' and another 7 'probably'. Those who disagreed mentioned the duplication of PEPs with existing school systems, especially for special schools. Social workers were equally positive - of the 10, 5 thought 'definitely' and 3 'probably'. Hence, this possible area of interprofessional tension was not in fact a problem. LACES teams often facilitated PEP processes in authorities, which may have helped.

General progress in the education of looked after children

We asked all groups some general questions about support for children's education (Table 7.13). These were taken from an earlier research instrument that one of us used and concern what is felt to be associated with educational progress for looked after children (Harker *et al.* 2004). Overall we would hope to find signs of progress over the 12 months in which the VSH had been involved. This does of course depend on how good services were at the outset, although it is unlikely that practice was so good there was no room for improvement.

As we have seen elsewhere, children were generally more positive about their situation than were the adults working with them. Concerns are often expressed about the low confidence and poor self-esteem of looked after children, so it is encouraging to encounter optimism. Two-thirds of children stated that professionals now showed more interest than previously. The social workers were positive too. We saw earlier that professionals/carers rated educational interest as high from the outset. Thus, children and social workers detect some improvement in professional attention but carers and DTs are less convinced. There were no striking differences in children's responses reported in Table 7.13 between the 30 children living in the authority and the 9 living or being educated outside it (there was 1 non-respondent).

Interestingly, 1 in 3 children were now more concerned about having to change placement or school. This may partially be inevitable as they are now a year older (as we saw average age was 12½ years). Adults did not perceive this level of anxiety about movement in children, which has important implications for practice. Children can often be worried about the future even when this is unexpressed, especially when life so far has been unstable and unpredictable. Some of the 'not sure' responses in Table 7.13 from professionals/carers are concerning. It may be that they are genuinely in two minds. However, if it is that they are unaware, then these issues are of such importance that they should probably ask and find out. If it is unknown if children are encouraged to read more books and magazines then it seems reasonable to suggest that they might provide some so that they know. This is what aspirant parents do and looked after children need it all the more.

Table 7.13 - Do respondents agree or disagree with the following statements comparing the situation to a year ago⁶

	Children			Carers			DTs			Social workers		
	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
Overall professionals now show more interest in his/her education than before	19	5	6	13	9	1	6	5	6	5	0	2
S/he is more worried about having to move from where s/he lives or goes to school than a year ago	9	19	2	3	19	2	4	10	3	1	3	3
She has more friends who are doing well in their education than a year ago	20	5	5	12	10	2	5	6	6	2	3	2
There is more money to spend on his/her education than there was a year ago	15	5	10	7	6	11	5	7	5	5	2	0
S/he is encouraged to read more than a year ago, such as books, newspapers, magazines etc.	22	5	3	12	11	1	8	3	6	1	4	2
S/he has more hobbies and interests than a year ago	23	6	2	15	7	2	5	4	8	1	3	3
Total		31			24			17			7	

⁶ Or, for employees who started their current position more recently, when they first arrived. As elsewhere, questions were rephrased for children and professional groups.

Respondents' suggestions

We asked some open-ended questions at the end to enable participants to express themselves more freely. Most took the opportunity, including children, which revealed a genuine engagement with the survey. Many carers' and professionals' comments concerned special educational needs issues, which reminds us of the particular learning needs of this group of pupils.

What one thing has really helped with education this past year?

We began by asking children, carers and social workers what was the one thing that had really helped with the child's education in the previous year (We omitted DTs as their questionnaire was becoming over-long.)

Children

The largest number of suggestions from children noticeably concerned the support of *carers*, particularly foster mothers. There are too many excellent and sometimes quite moving quotes to use here but some were as follows:

'My foster carer [name]. Making sure I don't get caught up with coursework and making sure teachers understand me.'

'My foster mum. She gives me the space that I need but she is there for me when I need her to be.'

Slightly fewer examples referred to *teachers* or were otherwise *school-related*, for example:

'Getting help from some teachers but some teachers don't. They sit with us in class and help us.'

A similar number of comments concerned *private tutors*, such as:

'When I did have a private tutor that did help. For maths, the last six weeks of exams for about one hour...New tips on how to do maths, help with handing in on time and better understanding of how it all works.'

A smaller number concerned *personal motivation*:

'Me wanting to get qualifications.'

'My literacy - I can read a lot more, I push myself a lot more. We do get help but most of it's done by me. I almost got kicked out of school but I put my head down and stopped it.'

Twenty-eight children also replied to a qualitative question asking what one thing had really made their education more *difficult* in the past year. The largest group of replies (5) concerned starting their GCSE year. This might suggest that these children did not see these national exams as an integral part of education but instead a distraction. One teenage girl living in a residential children's home, who also felt that her teachers did not understand what life in care was like for her, commented:

'Well yes actually, have to revise for GCSEs. I am scared I am gonna' fail coz' I don't do much revision'.

Carers

Carers mainly related that it was the *commitment and professionalism of schools and teachers* that had the greatest influence on children's education in the past year. One foster carer explained it as follows:

'The input at primary school, the consistency, never giving up. A little boy that when [he] arrived he just wouldn't get up off the table. He was aggressive, teachers were hurt but they stuck with it. Having that consistency, the sameness in their life is a big thing...'

Mention was made specifically of changing school and this time going to the *right* school. Continuity is important for children but the quality of the experience can be more important (Sinclair *et al.* 2007).

A similar number of comments from carers concerned *more suitable subject choices* for children. One example was the following:

'Because [name] was struggling with a lot of subjects...the PEP meeting discussed the possibility of her doing other things like photography, PE & dance etc. i.e. could do non-/less academic subjects at GCSE'. (Researcher notes)

Several carers identified *stability* as playing an important part in the child's educational success:

'Stability. Being at the same school and not be moved around. Also being able to stay here in the foster home.'

'We are progressing...the longer he is with us, the more progress we are making'.

Social workers

Two (of the six) additional comments from social worker identified *placement stability* as contributing most to the child's education in the past year. One expressed it this way:

'The stability of her carers. She has been in her placement since she was five and has had that involvement from an early age. They have always supported her, attended parents' meetings and any meetings they can concerning her education. Also the involvement of CAMHS in managing her ADHD has been really useful'.

Good practice

We asked for examples of good practice from carers and professionals. As we explained in Section 5, these have not been evaluated and simply because something is new does not necessarily mean that it is more effective than older, tried and tested methods. However, it is interesting to explore what participants defined as good practice and to consider any interesting suggestions which might be useful elsewhere. We list some examples in no special order.

Carers' examples included:

- 'The reading packs. The whole process of something coming through the post in a big brown envelope and it was his. He used to get stickers with his name on and we put the stickers on every book and everything he got had his stickers on. It was really encouraging for him, something special for him.'

- He keeps the books very neatly in a white box...He got them monthly for six months...'
- 'The library did something for children in care. They gave them a CD player and they gave them a talking book and a book which was the same story and I think that was really good practice. The libraries have got a brilliant system, they put it on their card that they are a looked after child and if they damage or lose the book the foster carer is not penalised, you are not discouraged from using the library.'
- 'The school made it easy for me in lots of ways. I was always informed with anything that he did. They'd even phone me and say how good he had been that day. Sometimes twice a day with any little thing they thought I needed to know. They really tried to support him.' (Other examples of good communication from schools were given by carers.)
- 'The school has an electronic info system which can be used (by young people or carers) to check on homework and course info.'
- One carer described in some detail a school-based Innovation Project, which was part of a pilot scheme to help looked after children. This was organised with foster carers. It began with one-day activities for children and their carers involving activities such as dog-handling, water sports, a trip to Paris (most children had never previously been abroad), problem solving skills and a Christmas meal. Police, Connexions and social work were involved. 'She has enjoyed the activities and a sense that she really does belong in that school'.

DTs' suggestions mainly concerned examples of good professional/interprofessional practice rather than new schemes. The following illustration had clearly received a great deal of thought and input from a range of people.

- 'Full integration in school but put to front of lists for interventions such as trips. Aim Higher events. Connexions interviews and opportunities to publicly celebrate success all within a "need to know" culture within the school community. Regular and informal meetings set up with LACES officer who is now part of the furniture in the school. As many of the formal meetings held on school site as possible to lessen disruption and to make school as much of a home base for the young person as possible. Same faces around the table every time rather than sharing out responsibilities for meetings. Carers made welcome and listened to, and contacted for advice by the school.'

Social workers' illustrations of good practice also mainly reflected well-thought through and implemented professional services rather than new projects. Two referred specifically to the LACES teams:

- 'How fantastic his school is and his LACES officer. They are so helpful and they get on with it so I don't have to worry. It's not like a battle, it's good practice in working together.'
- 'Education Case Workers for LAC are great workers. They provide an excellent support for [the] young person in care.'

Summary points

- Most children were considered to have made educational progress over the period during which the VSHs were operating, although this is a more general finding from other research without VSHs.
- Though children reported some improvement in the quality of teaching and support at school, professionals and carers felt it was essentially unchanged.
- A clear majority of professionals felt that carers had always been very interested in children's education.
- Children thought that social workers' interest in their education had grown but carers and DTs gave mixed views. Social workers' contributions depended on the role of LACES teams.
- When LACES teams had been involved, two-thirds of carers and DTs considered their intervention positive and a third did not. Social workers were more complimentary.
- Professionals and carers were mainly familiar with the role of the VSH and could name them. Most children were unfamiliar with the term 'VSH' but half recognised them by name.
- Most carers felt that the VSH had made a difference to the education of their children but professionals' views were more mixed.
- All children and social workers who replied felt that personal tutors had improved the pupil's education. DTs and carers were more equivocal. Tutors' feedback to, and communication with, professionals needs to have higher priority.

8. Conclusion

The introduction of virtual school heads is one of a series of important reforms introduced by the government, building on its *Every Child Matters* initiative, to enhance the well-being and life chances of looked after children. Children who experience family breakdown deserve full State support, and good quality services are a sound investment for the future. This report is based on a nine-month evaluation of the local authority pilots of the virtual school head for looked after children. These pilots ran for two years from 2007-09 and our research focused particularly on the second year, by which time one might hope that some benefits would be discernible.

We conclude by bringing together some of the main themes from the evaluation. We do not attempt to summarise what we have already written as concise summary points are listed at the end of each section. We focus particularly on whether it seems that the VSH role has made a difference to looked after children's educational experiences and attainment; as well as the question should the role continue and, if so, in what form. The evaluation was unable to contrast those authorities which have VSHs with others that do not. However, our evidence came from several complementary sources: analysis of official statistics; scrutiny of VSH annual reports; detailed interviews with directors / senior managers of children's services, social workers and VSHs themselves; and analysis of survey data from children, carers, designated teachers and social workers. The researchers were welcomed into the agencies and given access to all the relevant people and documents, reflecting positively on their confidence and willingness to learn. We were grateful for the assistance and support we received.

Prioritising the education of looked after children

For too long the education of children in care was marginalised if not disregarded. Government has made this issue a high priority in its policies to combat social exclusion more widely and promote better life course outcomes for looked after children. It has taken us over 20 years to reach the current position (Jackson 1987). Although there is much still to be done, there has been steady progress across children's services in acknowledging this problem and levels of attainment are starting to rise. Social workers now usually give greater consideration to looked after children's education; and most schools offer better support than previously and are more aware of the difficult circumstances of children living away from home. Social care and education, so long separate and often non-communicating organisations, have now been drawn together as departments of children's services, and this has produced some key changes both at officer and member level.

Previous research has recommended the appointment of a local authority 'champion', ideally at a senior level, to help develop a corporate approach to promoting the education of looked after children and to ensure that this is not brushed aside by other pressures (Harker *et al.* 2004). The VSH represents one way of realising this vision. So, during the pilots, was the VSH role perceived to have made a difference in highlighting and maintaining local authority responsibilities? The general consensus from those we interviewed - directors, social workers and VSHs themselves - was that it did. However, as we discuss below, this depended on a range of organisational and structural decisions. The operation of the VSH and virtual school encapsulates the dilemmas of interprofessional working. These have long plagued the education of looked after children: the problem of recognising educational issues in a social work environment; a lack of priority for the specific needs of looked after children in schools; and spanning two diverse professional cultures with traditionally different priorities.

When we focus on the circumstances of individual looked after children, it is often difficult to pinpoint the direct impact of VSHs as distinct from schools, LACES teams or the care system more widely. However frequent cases were cited where the status of headteacher and the fact that the VSH usually had an intimate knowledge of the way schools work had enabled a child to gain admission to a particular school or prevented an exclusion.

Awareness of the presence and role of the VSH in our study varied across social work teams. Children, understandably, were rather perplexed by the job title 'virtual school head' but some could recognise by name the individual occupying the role, which is probably more important. Children reported some improvements in teaching and wider educational support for them over the previous year, which is encouraging; although professionals and carers in the pilot authorities perceived that standards were generally good to start with and had remained essentially unaltered. We see below that the contribution of private tutors was generally well received. The provision of tutoring was sometimes an integral part of the VSH role and their indirect contribution through organising the tutoring may not have been fully appreciated.

VSHs had introduced a more strategic approach to identified weaknesses, such as inadequate record-keeping, insufficient attention to problems of attendance, the quality of PEPs or a failure to engage foster carers as partners. Some had also taken on the important task of co-ordinating the work of DTs and organising training for them. Several VSHs were strongly committed to the concept of the virtual school and tried to make it a reality by setting up boards of governors or by organising events which brought together looked after children. They were also able to work with other headteachers as a group and to liaise directly with elected members in a way that was not available to LACES teams.

Improving children's educational attainments

It is useful to discover that most who took part in the interviews and surveys perceived that the priority locally of the education of looked after children increased during the pilots. However, although we should not forget that education has many wider benefits, we also want to see children's measurable attainments improve. Was there any evidence that this occurred during the pilot phase?

We saw in Section 2 that, despite particular challenges in some areas, even in the first year of the pilot the 11 authorities usually achieved better results than the national average. This occurred across a range of measures. A majority were also showing noticeable signs of improvement in GCSE results over this period. Clearly we need to be cautious: all official statistics have their limitations and we have to be consistent and not to criticise their robustness on some occasions but then to use them when it suits. Furthermore, these general improvements are part of a wider trend which was happening before the introduction of VSHs. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see that the pilot authorities were strengthening their test and exam results. At an individual level, most children in the survey sample were perceived to have made educational progress over the pilot phase. We did at the outset try to select for our intensive study group authorities that were both well- and less-well performing so those in the pilot were starting from very different positions. As we have said, it is not possible to attribute improvements specifically to the work of the VSH but it is important for the evaluation to have established that the levels of educational improvement were at least as good as in the country as a whole and in some areas a good deal better.

Virtual school heads and virtual schools

It was interesting to discover that virtual schools varied considerably in terms of size, function and location. Some authorities used the bare minimum pilot funding but others resourced these services much more generously. *Care Matters* (2007), which had first proposed virtual schools, made no mention of existing specialist LACES educational support teams. The majority of VSHs in the study joined existing LACES services or equivalent structures. Three VSHs were longstanding managers of existing LACES teams and three others (part-) transferred from other responsibilities within the same council. But six of the 11 VSHs were new external appointments. None of the virtual schools structures and services were simply a continuation of what already existed but signified a step-change.

VSHs themselves were all senior, experienced educationists and qualified teachers. Half had been school heads or deputies and two others had led school improvement teams. Often their careers had also included social work-related interests. VSH appointments were mainly at third or fourth tier - head of service or assistant head of service level. Nearly all were located in what was traditionally the Education section of children's services.

On the basis of our evidence, we would conclude that this mix of skills and the location of the VSH post were appropriate. Improving the education of looked after children spans education and social work concerns but it was clear to us that it needs to operate from a strong educational base and requires an authoritative educational leader. But the person appointed also needs to understand, or be prepared to learn more about, social work cultures and the pressures and constraints under which social workers and carers operate. To help, encourage and indeed ensure joint-working across a local authority's functions needs someone of high status. VSHs in the pilots where this was not the case recognised that they were at a disadvantage.

An important finding from the evaluation was the key relationship that the VSH needs to develop with local school headteachers (and DTs). Ultimately, heads and their staff can have a major impact on looked after children's engagement with education. Attainment is tempered by social background and prior experience but heads can contribute to school experiences being enjoyable and rewarding, or not. Though admissions legislation has helped, heads also have much influence on who joins their school in the first place, and when problems arise, how long pupils stay and on what basis, as the very different exclusion rates among schools illustrate. Heads are also important in allocating school support and other resources. Some schools communicate across the boundaries to local authorities, social workers and carers better than others.

Results from our evaluation showed that the power and influence of the VSH depended to a large extent on the extent to which they were accepted as peers by other school heads. Some VSHs were welcomed into the headteachers' network, others were not. Being a senior educationist and in a high status position in the authority helped, particularly with secondary heads. Job title can also be important, which we return to soon. Therefore, an essential consideration in the appointment, structural location and hierarchical positioning of VSHs is how it contributes to the relationship with (other) headteachers.

Thus far we have concentrated mainly on the VSHs themselves but there is also the accompanying idea of the *virtual school*. Our research explored the extent to which this is a useful concept. Are they actually *schools* and is it helpful to perceive them as such? The virtual school is clearly not 'a school' in that it does not have substantial buildings or infrastructure. We have seen that several VSHs were employed (but did not, they emphasised, work) part-time, which is unusual for headteachers. Very few virtual schools actually taught children on their premises. Most schools would have good information available to them and would know something about pupils as individuals, whereas this was

more problematic for the pilots. Few schools would have some 40 per cent of their membership joining and leaving each year, as does the care population. Virtual schools varied in what they offered to pupils in different groups depending on geography. Some pupils could belong to more than one virtual school if they were looked after by one authority but educated in another (Hypothetically even three in, say, central London if a pupil was looked after by one borough, lived in another and was educated in a third.)

Indeed, even for those fixed to one place, should a large and diverse body of pupils be seen as belonging to one virtual school or several ('virtual primary schools' / 'virtual secondary schools')? We should not forget their heterogeneity, for example across age, ethnicity and ability. As it exists, the virtual school is a 'comprehensive' well beyond the usual meaning of the term. Much of history has been about deinstitutionalising and disaggregating groups of children in care rather than bringing them together. Children well-settled and performing successfully in their own schools might perceive the virtual school as stigmatising and want nothing to do with it, although we have no evidence either to confirm or refute this.

However, as with other disadvantaged minorities, children in care face some common experiences and challenges, so there may well be advantages in considering looked after children as 'a community of learners', as one VSH expressed it. Bringing them together under the aegis of one senior corporate manager has merit. Indeed, the educational challenges for looked after children are often so great, and their deprivation so deep-rooted, that we should perhaps allow the benefits of belonging not just to one school but two. A structure that was seen as more amorphous than 'a school' may yield fewer tangible benefits. Returning to a previous point, the other considerable advantages of the school metaphor are the status it confers and commonality it implies to other school heads.

Specialist educational support 'LACES' teams

VSHs often said that, in effect, they were not managing schools but education support teams. LACES teams usually already existed. Little, if any, research has been undertaken on LACES teams nationally, in terms of how extensive they are, how they are organised, what they do and to what effect. No major study has been undertaken since the one conducted by Fletcher-Campbell (1997) for the National Foundation for Educational Research over 10 years ago. Most authorities now seem to have a LACES team in some form. The concept of specialist, dedicated LACES teams received general endorsement in our research. They vary in their effectiveness depending on how well they are resourced and run and by whom. Nevertheless, professionals and carers responding to our survey reported that when a LACES team had been involved, the child's education had usually benefited.

A strong finding from our research concerned the relationship between the VSH and the LACES team. It was problematic if the two functioned separately. There could be wasteful duplication of efforts and it caused confusion internally and externally. Schools sometimes were reported to have played one off against the other. Only one of the 11 pilot authorities was continuing with plans to keep the VSH separate from a LACES team (not all had them). Our conclusion is that integrating the two would be logical and beneficial and that the VSH should become overall head of the LACES team. It may also be unusual in local authorities to have quite a senior manager leading such a team, but as we have already emphasised several times in our report, it is essential if the VSH is to have real impact on this long-standing problem. It is also atypical for educationists to be heading teams which sometimes might be quite social work-oriented. However the point was made by a number of our respondents that if that happened it was essential that the VSH should continue to be an educationist and not in effect another social work manager. Otherwise there might be a danger of the VSH role losing its emphasis on educational achievement and being taken over by social work concerns. Interestingly, the LACES team / virtual school then becomes something of a microcosm of the interprofessional challenges that exist between education

and social work. Making it work for the team may be an important precursor to being successful externally.

VSHs in the pilot mainly worked at a planning, monitoring and overall strategic level and this also seems to us sensible. Most had developed and maintained relationships at a senior level across the authority in obtaining commitment to and resources for looked after children's education from many different sources within the local authority. Influencing 'hearts and minds' was a key part of what they did. Yet VSHs often combined this with undertaking elements of direct, operational work in complex or specific circumstances. It is desirable that this should continue. We were informed that it was often difficult for VSHs to differentiate the strategic from the operational: the two are often inter-linked and awareness of the latter can enlighten the former.

Private tutors

Individual tutoring was a specific part of the pilot, funded by the HSBC Education Trust. It applied to four of the 11 authorities and tutoring was used by some others more generally. We saw earlier that evidence about the impact of tutoring is quite mixed, depending on its quality (Ireson 2004) but findings from our evaluation were positive. VSHs identified clear gains. Social workers interviewed reported benefits to pupils' self-confidence and attainment, although some DTs and carers were more sceptical. This could be related to the personality and approach of individual tutors but we do not have evidence on this point. Each of the children responding to the survey who had accessed tutoring said it benefited them and that they valued the personal attention. If children think they are benefiting from tutoring then *ipso facto* they are. However, it is clear that some serious questions remain to be resolved, in particular which pupils were offered tutoring, how they were assessed, the allocation of tutors, and how to ensure sufficient communication and feedback to professionals.

Title ('a rose by any other name?')

We turn inevitably to the name 'virtual school head' and whether or not it should be retained. As a title it was certainly confusing to many. 'Virtual schools' are plentiful across the world in the education field and the term certainly has a cutting-edge feel to it. We were informed that it is memorable and makes an impact when being introduced to someone. We have seen that the 'head' and 'school' analogies can bring professional kudos, particularly with other heads. Even if a term is mystifying, over time it may enter into the professional lexicon and become commonplace. Brand recognition is an important area in the field of marketing and few probably are aware, for example, what the acronym BMW stands for but many of us would still like to own one. There has been much reform in children's services and a period of stability would be welcome. VSHs had differing views about their title and whether it helped or hindered their work. This varied given the particular local context and history. It seems that different names may suit internal and external audiences. For example, that they could have a combined title of 'Head of the Virtual School and Head of Education for Looked After Children' and use whichever is most suitable for their position and the audience in question.

Should the VSH role continue?

Though minds may already have been made up, the purpose of a pilot and its evaluation is to assess whether an initiative should continue and, if so, how it might be adapted in the longer term. With the previous considerations in mind, does our evidence suggest that the VSH role makes a difference? As we have said, it is impossible to be certain what would have happened without the pilots and the world otherwise has not stood still. However, a number of positive aspects of the role have been considered in this report.

Directors of children's services were very positive about the role and most planned for it to continue. Given the pressures on their budgets, an increase in projected expenditure is a very strong endorsement. For several directors, the VSH symbolised the responsibility that councils have as corporate parents of looked after children and the duty to give them the best possible opportunity for a good education, ideally leading to a more positive future. Social workers welcomed the senior post as a significant enhancement of the work of existing LACES teams in helping guide them through the complex modern world of education; plan children's education alongside their care experience; and, where necessary, to help liaise with or challenge schools. Therefore, it is evident to us that our research provides a clear endorsement of the need in local authorities for a senior educational figure to 'champion' the education of looked after children; to make sure that this remains a top priority; and to continue to work across, and bring together, the education and social work professions to become integrated children's services departments. We would hope that this report might help to achieve these aims.

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Appendix

Table 2.5 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: English, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 4 or higher						
ENGLAND	2,900	42	2,840	43	2,700	46	2,700	46
Authority A	25	52	15	38	15	59	15	41
Authority B	15	-	20	50	20	38	30	28
Authority C	15	44	20	45	20	50	15	50
Authority D	10	-	20	29	15	-	10	-
Authority E	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
Authority F	50	43	45	41	60	50	55	53
Authority G	40	48	40	63	30	62	25	50
Authority H	40	37	20	35	20	40	15	-
Authority I	25	42	20	47	25	48	25	33
Authority J	20	40	15	41	20	-	20	60
Authority K	10	-	10	-	5	-	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.6 - Number of children looked after for more than 1 year achieving Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: mathematics, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 4 or higher						
ENGLAND	2,900	38	2,840	41	2,700	43	2,700	44
Authority A	25	39	15	-	15	53	15	47
Authority B	15	-	20	55	20	48	30	34
Authority C	15	-	20	45	20	67	15	50
Authority D	10	-	20	33	15	-	10	-
Authority E	-	-	-	-	-	0	5	-
Authority F	50	43	45	52	60	38	55	57
Authority G	40	40	40	58	30	59	25	50
Authority H	40	24	20	35	20	30	15	-
Authority I	25	38	20	37	25	52	25	48
Authority J	20	35	15	41	20	-	20	40
Authority K	10	-	10	-	5	-	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.7 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: science, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 4 or higher						
ENGLAND	2,900	53	2,840	57	2,700	59	2,700	60
Authority A	25	48	15	50	15	65	15	53
Authority B	15	47	20	50	20	57	30	24
Authority C	15	38	20	60	20	67	15	50
Authority D	10	-	20	48	15	40	10	-
Authority E	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
Authority F	50	63	45	59	60	60	55	64
Authority G	40	63	40	73	30	72	25	63
Authority H	40	42	20	45	20	45	15	-
Authority I	25	50	20	63	25	70	25	78
Authority J	20	50	15	59	20	35	20	80
Authority K	10	-	10	-	5	-	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.8 - Number of children looked after for more than 1 year achieving Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: English, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 5 or higher						
ENGLAND	4,000	27	4,000	28	4,100	29	3,900	30
Authority A	45	-	30	23	30	33	40	34
Authority B	25	26	35	42	30	42	30	29
Authority C	25	36	20	-	30	35	25	27
Authority D	25	-	25	-	20	55	20	-
Authority E	10	-	10	-	10	-	10	0
Authority F	45	22	70	29	60	34	70	41
Authority G	30	31	35	39	40	49	45	29
Authority H	35	24	30	-	30	-	45	37
Authority I	30	32	30	31	40	31	35	48
Authority J	25	-	25	43	25	33	30	32
Authority K	20	42	10	-	10	50	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.9 - Number of children looked after for more than one year achieving Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: mathematics, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 5 or higher						
ENGLAND	4,000	28.3	4,000	32.5	4,100	30.7	3,900	33
Authority A	45	-	30	35	30	37	40	32
Authority B	25	26	35	47	30	42	30	36
Authority C	25	32	20	-	30	35	25	23
Authority D	25	35	25	25	20	60	20	-
Authority E	10	-	10	-	10	-	10	0
Authority F	45	40	70	41	60	45	70	49
Authority G	30	41	35	33	40	36	45	47
Authority H	35	21	30	-	30	-	45	30
Authority I	30	32	30	21	40	23	35	33
Authority J	25	33	25	52	25	46	30	32
Authority K	20	37	10	-	10	-	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Table 2.10 - Number of children looked after for more than 1 year achieving Level 5 or above at Key Stage 3 as a percentage of all looked after children who are the correct age to sit the test: science, 12 months ending 30 September 2005-2008

	2005		2006		2007		2008	
	N	% Level 5 or higher						
ENGLAND	4,000	25.9	4,000	29.4	4,100	29.2	3,900	30
Authority A	45	-	30	29	30	27	40	26
Authority B	25	22	35	36	30	42	30	25
Authority C	25	24	20	-	30	39	25	23
Authority D	25	-	25	-	20	45	20	-
Authority E	10	-	10	-	10	-	10	0
Authority F	45	38	70	39	60	40	70	51
Authority G	30	28	35	42	40	28	45	36
Authority H	35	24	30	-	30	-	45	33
Authority I	30	21	30	41	40	23	35	33
Authority J	25	-	25	39	25	46	30	36
Authority K	20	32	10	-	10	50	10	-

Source: Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) (2009b-e), Statistical First Release (SFR) on Outcome Indicators for Children Looked After, 12 months ending 30 September, Years 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

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