

- Home ▾ [Parenting, childcare and children's services](#) ▾ [Safeguarding and social care for children](#)
- ▾ [Looked-after children and children in care](#) ▾ [Health, wellbeing and education of looked-after children](#)
- ▾ [How schools and colleges support the academic and personal progress of children in care](#)



Research and analysis

How schools and colleges support the academic and personal progress of children in care

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Applies to England

Contents

- [Executive summary](#)
- [Acknowledgements](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [Main findings](#)
- [Renewed education inspection framework](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Annex A: further details of research methods](#)

A note on terminology

We use the term 'learners' throughout, for brevity. This refers to children in care, and the small number of 18-year-old care leavers who we spoke with during our school and college visits.

Where we refer to 'schools' and 'colleges', this report reflects findings from the mainstream schools and colleges that we visited. They may have characteristics in common with other types of education provision; however, we do not assume that the findings can be generalised.

During our research visits, many staff at schools and colleges discussed trauma, as part of discussions about training or about the experiences of children in care. In this report, we use the term trauma to describe the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical impact of difficult or

harmful experiences encountered by children in care. In recognising trauma in this way, we acknowledge both the immediate effects of individual experiences and their longer-term influence on learning, behaviour, relationships, and engagement within educational settings.

Executive summary

Children in the care of local authorities are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. They face significant disparities in academic achievement and personal development compared to their peers, despite the statutory duties of local authorities and targeted support systems, such as virtual schools. Over half the children in care are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) – most commonly social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. [\[footnote 1\]](#)

This research was carried out during the 2024/25 academic year. We explored how mainstream schools and colleges support children in care to have positive experiences and make progress, and we considered how this is evaluated on inspection. We aimed to understand what effective practice looks like and what it is like to be a child in care in schools and college settings. We used surveys and interviews to gather information, and made research visits to primary, secondary and further education (FE) providers. We involved inspectors, virtual school heads, social workers, parents and carers, and children in care. Schools and colleges were not compelled to take part in the research, and this may have had an impact on the findings.

In the providers we visited, we found that a flexible approach that responds to individual needs was most effective to support children in care. Rather than applying a standardised offer, most providers tailored their provision based on a deep understanding of each learner's circumstances. This included regular engagement with them and with parents and carers to identify and respond to changes in personal situations. Providers demonstrated sensitivity in supporting children in care, often adapting policies to reflect emotional and behavioural challenges.

Many providers prioritised emotional and social development, particularly for learners who had experienced instability. Safe spaces such as nurture rooms and wellbeing hubs were staffed by trained adults who offered emotional regulation and reassurance. Some staff maintained informal, consistent contact with learners. They fostered trusting relationships and made sure learners felt that they were seen and supported. Learners were reassured by the presence of caring adults who understood their circumstances and could offer both emotional and practical help.

Academic and learning support was a key focus, and providers implemented

targeted interventions, such as one-to-one tutoring, small-group teaching and in-class support. These strategies were often aligned with personal education plan (PEP) targets. They were also adapted to suit individual needs. Learners valued the opportunity to ask for help, and they thought that tutoring was particularly helpful in preparing for exams. However, some learners reported gaps in support, especially when they were transitioning from one provider to another. They also felt unsupported when staff appeared not to be aware of their needs.

Effective communication was essential to timely and effective support. This included collaboration between leaders and staff in schools and colleges, as well as regular engagement with external stakeholders such as social workers and virtual school headteachers (VSHs). Virtual schools were widely valued by leaders and designated staff for their role in providing funding, training and specialist advice.

Careful planning and individualised support were important to help learners navigate moves between schools, colleges and care placements. Education providers often offered much-needed stability during periods of disruption.

However, there were issues that often disrupted continuity and were barriers to progress. These included inconsistencies in local authority processes, high staff turnover and limited availability of external agencies. Differences in access to pupil premium plus funding and PEP processes created inequities and increased workload for staff. College learners faced additional challenges, such as combining studies with parenting responsibilities, or coping with last-minute timetable changes. They often felt less supported than their peers who attended school.

Support was most effective when staff were well trained. Leaders who invested in specialist professional development, particularly in understanding the needs of care-experienced children and the impact that issues such as trauma can have on children in care, were better equipped to create supportive environments.^{[\[footnote 2\]](#)} However, staff access to high-quality training was inconsistent, especially in college settings. Staff showed a keen interest in having more targeted, practical training. To improve outcomes for children in care, it is essential that all staff, regardless of role or setting, receive access to relevant and sustained professional development.

Under the education inspection framework that was in place until November 2025, inspectors were required to consider children in care in a range of ways. This included reviewing how schools used pupil premium plus funding, how effectively learners were supported in their academic and personal development, and the extent to which they were kept safe. Inspectors told us, however, that they did not routinely have sufficient time to evaluate the experiences and outcomes of children in care in depth and that they would benefit from more specific training in this area. In addition, learners, school leaders and virtual school headteachers called for a more holistic approach that recognises both academic and wider needs, with greater involvement from virtual schools. We considered this feedback carefully when developing the renewed education inspection

framework.

[The renewed education inspection framework](#) launched in November 2025 and strengthens our overall focus on inclusion, with children in care recognised as a key group whose needs and outcomes should be explicitly considered as part of this approach. Inspectors will now evaluate provision for children and learners known to, or previously known to, children’s social care across all aspects of school and college inspections. This is supported by an inspection methodology that allows inspectors to understand the typical, day-to-day experiences of children in care, through a case-sampling approach.

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Introduction

Children in care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The latest figures show that 81,770 children are in the care of local authorities in England. [\[footnote 3\]](#) The number of children in care has risen over the last 10 years. The proportion of all children who are in care has also risen over the same period.

The educational outcomes of children in care are typically poorer than those of their peers, including other vulnerable groups such as pupils eligible for free school meals. For example, in 2024, only 17% of children in care achieved a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and mathematics, compared to 65% of all pupils and 43% of pupils eligible for free school meals. [\[footnote 4\]](#)

Children in care are more likely than their peers to have additional needs and other challenges that adversely affect their educational progress and achievement. Fifty-seven per cent of children in care have SEND, compared with 19% of the school population. [\[footnote 5\]](#) The most common category of need is SEMH. The high proportion of children in care identified as having additional needs negatively affects attainment and the overall achievement and progress of this group. However, research has shown that, even when adjusting for SEND status, the attainment of children in care at GCSE was poorer than their peers who hadn’t experienced care. [\[footnote 6\]](#)

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children represent approximately 8% of children in care in England.^[footnote 7] This proportion has increased over the last decade from 4% in 2015. Many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children face additional barriers, including language, poor wellbeing, and issues with integration and funding.^[footnote 8] Despite these challenges, it has been reported that 70% of these children want to further their education.^[footnote 9]

Research highlights several factors that contribute to improved educational outcomes for children in care. These include stability and continuity, early intervention, individual tuition and multi-agency collaboration.^[footnote 10] However, for these elements to be truly effective, they have to form part of a holistic, sustained and child-centred approach. To be successful, it is not enough for this support simply to be present; it must also be implemented consistently and meaningfully across the child's educational journey. Therefore, professionals must work collaboratively, maintain high aspirations for the child, and make sure that the child's voice is central in all their planning and decision-making. Working empathetically and in an integrated way makes interventions more likely to be cohesive, sustainable and impactful.^[footnote 11]

Each local authority has a statutory duty to support the education of children in care through a service called a 'virtual school'. This service advocates for children in care, coordinates educational support, and brokers multi-agency partnerships. Since September 2021, the role of the VSH has expanded. The VSH now has strategic oversight of children with a social worker and focuses on improving attendance, fostering high aspirations, and strengthening partnerships between schools and local authorities. To be effective, the VSH builds relationships with schools, parents and carers, SEND teams, social care teams and other agencies involved with children in care, and prioritises learners' educational achievement and progress.^[footnote 12] Currently, Ofsted looks at the impact of virtual schools as part of the inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Under the leadership of His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Martyn Oliver, we now have a particular focus on children and learners who are experiencing barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing. In 2024, we carried out the 'Big Listen' public consultation to hear from professionals, parents and carers, and children and learners. We especially wanted to know how Ofsted can better support vulnerable learners, including those who are looked after. The findings made it clear that we need a more child-centred approach. They also emphasised that it is important for us to reflect on children's lived experiences during inspections and to engage directly with learners to make sure their voices are heard. The consultation also recognised the multi-layered challenges that children in care face. Many of them require tailored support for complex emotional, social and educational challenges. A disproportionate number of them are affected by exclusion and poor outcomes, which suggests that Ofsted should scrutinise this more closely. In our response to the 'Big Listen', we committed to increasing our focus on how providers meet the needs of vulnerable children and learners.^[footnote 13]

To address these evidence gaps, and in response to our 'Big Listen' findings, our research aimed to answer the following questions:

- How can Ofsted improve the way we hold education providers to account for the progress of looked-after learners?
- What do schools and FE providers do that enables some looked-after learners to achieve better than others nationally?
- What do schools and FE providers do that ensures that looked-after learners have positive experiences while in education?

Methodology

Our research took place during the 2024/25 academic year. The findings, particularly those relating to inspection, reflect the inspection guidance in place at the time, and have contributed to the development of the renewed education inspection framework that came into effect in November 2025.

In autumn 2024, we asked schools and FE and skills inspectors, and VSHs, about how the experiences of children in care were considered during education inspections. We gathered evidence from:

- focus groups with 23 His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI)
- a survey of 106 HMIs and Ofsted Inspectors (OIs)
- a survey of 57 VSHs

During the 2025 spring and summer terms, HMIs, OIs and researchers from Ofsted's research and evaluation team carried out 15 research visits. We visited 4 general FE colleges, 1 sixth-form college, 5 secondary schools and 5 primary schools. During these visits, we held discussions with:

- representatives from senior leadership teams
- teaching and support staff
- 51 learners who were children in care or 18-year-old care leavers
- 20 virtual school representatives
- 26 social workers, parents and carers, and care workers who supported the learners we had spoken with

You can find full details of the methods used, including the limitations of this study, in [the annex](#) at the end of this report.

Main findings

Flexible, inclusive approaches helped leaders to support the individual needs of children in care effectively

In the schools and colleges we visited, leaders demonstrated a strong commitment to treating children in care as individuals, motivated by a whole-school ethos of inclusion. Senior leaders described their approach as being inclusive of all learners, regardless of background or need, and ensuring that every learner has access to the same opportunities.

“It’s all inclusive. So, no matter what the needs of the child, we will try and support them.”

(Secondary senior leader)

Staff emphasised the importance of recognising each child in care as unique, with individual strengths, challenges and preferences. Where one strategy was not effective, staff were willing to explore alternatives and adapt creatively to find what works best for the individual.

“All our children in care are different. Every single one of them is different.”

(Secondary senior leader)

Many senior leaders had taken steps to ensure that their policies and practices were sensitive to the experiences of children in care. This included reviewing internal processes to reduce stigma and promote emotional safety, which led to improvements in attendance, retention and learner engagement. An effective example of this was seen in behaviour policies. Schools and colleges applied their behaviour strategies consistently to all learners, but with flexibility to accommodate individual circumstances. Leaders told us that this ensured fairness while recognising the unique challenges that some children face.

“Our behaviour policy applies to all of our children that are looked after, but there are individual flexibilities and leniency for the right reasons and that’s far more on an individual basis in the same way as it would be if we have learners that weren’t looked after, but – you know – had experienced trauma or complex educational needs.”

(Secondary senior leader)

Many providers focused strongly on emotional and social wellbeing, recognising that learners needed to feel safe and secure to effectively engage with learning

In most providers we visited, senior leaders said they focused on pastoral support to ensure that learners felt safe, secure and cared for; they recognised that academic engagement was more likely when emotional needs were met. Staff acknowledged the need for flexibility in response to changing circumstances. They introduced personalised timetables or reduced academic loads where necessary to support emotional health and prevent learners from feeling overwhelmed.

Staff told us that a consistent, caring relationship in a school or college environment was particularly beneficial when a learner's home life was unsettled or when sensitive information needed to be communicated. Confidentiality was important. Learners said they liked to feel assured that their conversations remained private. However, it was equally important to staff to avoid singling out children in care, as sometimes this discouraged them from engaging with support services within the setting.

“I feel mainly just the staff they do everything to help. And if you got any problems, no matter if it's at home or at school or it's anything like that, I feel you can go straight to them and just talk about it and they'll help with it and then everything always stays with you and the teacher, unless it's concerning. But other than that, they'll always keep it private and confidential. And I feel that's good because you can maintain a good relationship with the teachers. And you don't have to be nervous about anything. You can always tell them.”

(Secondary school learner)

Some staff maintained regular informal contact with learners during breaktimes and in communal areas, helping to sustain relationships throughout the day. One senior leader noted the importance of assigning staff to mentoring roles, particularly during transitional periods, to ensure regular contact and familiarity with learners. One mentor told us that they arranged morning check-ins with learners who were moving to live with new parents and carers, to offer reassurance and monitor their wellbeing. However, staff also stressed the need to manage informal support carefully to avoid overburdening staff or compromising provision for other learners.

Learners consistently reported that they had access to trusted adults within their setting. They felt reassured that there was always someone available to talk to, particularly when they were experiencing difficult emotions. Learners described

staff as kind, supportive and responsive to learners' emotional needs, and many learners had strong relationships with one or two key staff members. They described these individuals as consistent, approachable and emotionally attuned. Many learners spoke positively about the scheduled check-ins with mentors or key workers but also said that they felt able to access support flexibly when they need it. However, a few learners noted that attending mentoring sessions could mean missing lessons they enjoy.

“Tutors are kind and supportive and treat you like adults. They don't throw a student away when they're feeling sad. They allow them to come to them in a safe space where things like this can be discussed and help to make them feel better, help to advise them on doing better, mentally.”

(College learner)

Many schools and colleges provided safe spaces such as hubs, nurture rooms or designated quiet areas where learners could go if they felt overwhelmed or needed time away from the classroom. These spaces were often equipped with sensory resources and were staffed by adults trained to offer emotional support in a calming environment. This helped learners regulate their emotions and feel secure so that they were ready to return to learning.

“We have a little house, we make 'humans' and there's red, yellow and green and a love heart. We put our humans on what we're feeling, then the teacher checks and the teacher helps us and talks about it and what happened. Or you could write it in a note in the worry monster. You put it in the worry monster, and the teacher will check that as well.”

(Primary learner)

Schools and colleges delivered a wide range of interventions to promote emotional wellbeing and social development, particularly during learners' transitions to new providers. These included counselling sessions, enrichment activities and nurture groups. Some staff had undergone training to be able to deliver these interventions effectively, recognising that some learners may struggle to express themselves verbally and would benefit from alternative forms of communication.

Several schools used emotional literacy programmes to help children in care understand and manage their emotions. These structured sessions began with self-awareness and gradually built towards recognising emotions in others and understanding their causes. Staff told us that this training had been particularly beneficial to help children develop increased emotional resilience and interpersonal skills.

Social skills interventions were also common, and some schools ran dedicated

programmes such as friendship clubs or used visual resources to support emotional literacy. These activities helped learners navigate social situations, build relationships and develop problem-solving strategies.

Most schools and colleges brought in external professionals, including counsellors and resilience coaches, to offer additional support. These services provided a safe space for learners to talk openly, particularly when they may not feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues with staff or family members. However, several leaders expressed concern about the sustainability of these services due to funding constraints.

Academic support helped learners to overcome barriers and make progress

Academic interventions were designed to help learners engage more effectively with the curriculum and make sustained progress. Although a whole-provider approach was common in many schools and colleges, staff prioritised targeted interventions for children in care who required additional support. These included small-group teaching, in-class, one-to-one support and tutoring; we often found that all these were funded through the pupil premium and aligned with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) targets set during PEP meetings. Teaching assistants played a key role in supporting many children in care, offering reassurance and enabling greater independence.

Among all staff we spoke with, there was a strong sense of commitment to helping children in care thrive. Where one strategy was not effective, teams were willing to explore alternatives and adapt creatively to find what worked best for an individual. For some learners, the general classroom environment was a barrier to learning. Some learners said that disruptions in lessons distracted them and made them anxious. Smaller learning groups or quieter spaces enabled some children in care to focus more effectively and engage with their studies in a way that suited their needs. Tutoring was widely valued by learners, particularly in preparation for exams. Many said that they found receiving scheduled one-to-one or small group sessions, either online or in person, helpful and important for making progress.

“The interventions have made a difference because when I go to them, I have lots of questions, but by the end of it I have basically just one or two. I feel like my grades are getting higher and I feel I’m doing a lot better.”

(College learner)

In some schools, staff avoided withdrawing learners from lessons, preferring to integrate support during the school day or offer it after school to maintain consistency of learning.

Most learners felt reassured that it was acceptable to ask for help. Some learners identified particular staff members, such as learning mentors and teaching assistants, who were available to support them with their learning. While most learners felt supported, a minority expressed concerns. Some learners did not feel confident to express their academic needs to staff, and this became a barrier to their learning. One of the main reasons was that they felt that staff moved too quickly through content, making it difficult to keep up. A small number of learners said that they did not feel supported and would like more help in class. One learner, for example, noted that the adaptations they had at school were not put in place when they moved to college:

“I’ve got dyslexia. I don’t really bring it up. I used to have [support]. When I moved to this school, they couldn’t do anything for me because I was so late into the year. So now the college, they don’t do nothing for me because I said I don’t need it.”

(College learner)

When starting school or college, many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children do not speak English and are required to take English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses. College staff told us about the difficulties in managing course expectations for these learners, as their knowledge of English often acted as a barrier to learning.

“It’s really hard for them because a lot of the learners come, and they have real big ambitions: doctor, engineer, a very popular career. But then they don’t realise they’re working at, you know, entry 1, entry 2. Once you sort of break down how long that might take in reality, you can see. Most of the learners are 17 or 18 when they join with us and most of them are either literacy learners or low literacy, very little education, no study skills. So just getting to grips with college alone is difficult. After 2 years with us, they might have passed entry 3. But they’re probably 19 by then, and when they’re 19, in terms of what courses, the choices are very, very limited.”

(College staff)

Some providers aimed to overcome this barrier by understanding what the learners’ needs were. Staff told us how these learners often received targeted support such as language tuition, transition planning for FE, and career guidance. These targeted interventions allowed learners to fulfil their potential. Learners told us how they appreciated being able to receive one-to-one tuition. For some, the classroom was a challenging environment that often left them feeling confused or not understanding the content of the lesson.

“It’s feeling to me in the class sometime can not understand a lot, but one to

one they explain to you how can understand.”

(Secondary school learner)

Access to relevant information enables school and college staff to better support learners

Strong internal communication among staff was essential for fostering a culture of shared responsibility, collaboration and moral purpose in supporting children in care. Many staff emphasised the importance of whole-provider awareness and collective ownership of this responsibility. This ethos was supported by robust systems and practices that enabled staff to stay informed and responsive to the needs of vulnerable learners.

Staff used online platforms to share updates and flag concerns, making sure that all relevant staff were aware of a learner’s wellbeing and any emerging issues. Management dashboards, digital communication channels, regular briefings, bulletins and reviews of lists of vulnerable learners were also used to maintain staff-wide vigilance and ensure that appropriate support was in place. Providers also used tools such as pupil passports, which include the child’s preferences for receiving support (for example, “How to help me if I’m upset”). These documents were co-produced with the child and evolved as their needs changed.

Designated staff, safeguarding leads, mentors and teaching staff worked closely together to ensure a unified approach to support children in care. Dedicated staff meetings and forums helped oversee provision and maintain consistency of support across the provider. This reflected a whole-provider commitment to the wellbeing and progress of children in care.

The statutory requirements to have a designated staff member and personal education plan played a valuable role in supporting children in care

In the schools and colleges we visited, the designated staff role was frequently cited as pivotal in overseeing provision for children in care. The designated teacher often led PEP meetings and liaised with external agencies, including virtual schools. In providers with larger cohorts of children in care, pastoral teams took on this role, with each member assigned a caseload to ensure personalised support.

The designated teacher role was often combined with teaching responsibilities. This dual role limited the time the teacher had to build meaningful relationships with children and to liaise effectively with external agencies. Where the two roles

were combined, staff highlighted workload as an issue. When it was not combined with teaching, designated staff appreciated having the time to be able to focus on supporting learners without extra responsibilities. Many designated teachers told us that strong and consistent leadership was important. Senior leaders and governors who actively prioritised children in care, for example by structuring time for teachers to meet with children or by ensuring additional staff capacity, were seen as creating a culture in which staff and children could thrive.

Providers used PEPs to formally review the progress and targets of children in care, and reported that they had a significant impact for learners. These plans were usually reviewed termly and included tailored academic, emotional and pastoral targets. Staff described how the views of learners were embedded in PEPs, either in advance or by encouraging learners to attend the meeting. Most learners expressed a preference for being involved in these processes to avoid unexpected decisions.

“If a PEP is coming up, we will do the views and wishes and feelings of that young person. But I think you could speak to any of them today and they will be able to tell you their views and wishes and feelings for that moment in time. Because as we said, it’s all about the relationship. So their voice is constantly coming through.”

(Secondary school staff)

Virtual school staff highlighted the importance of having PEPs that were consistently well written, with targets that were tailored to each learner’s current needs and educational journey. They told us that a high-quality PEP helped learners build confidence, stay focused and overcome academic challenges. PEP planning was mainly led by designated teachers, but some of the best approaches were seen when it was completed in collaboration with staff, social workers, virtual schools, parents and carers, and the learners themselves. This approach ensured that funding was allocated in a way that was meaningful and responsive to individual needs. However, there was some variability in how local authorities manage PEP funding. Some provided a portion of the funding directly to schools and colleges, which enabled them to put support in place quickly. Others required schools and colleges to apply for funding, which delayed interventions and made them less flexible.

Effective collaboration between education providers and external stakeholders, such as social workers, virtual school heads and local authorities, was essential to delivering high-quality support for children in care

In the schools and colleges we visited, virtual schools were generally regarded as key strategic partners, offering funding, training and oversight. They monitored progress, provided access to specialist support, such as educational psychologists, and offered guidance on post-16 transition. They also helped schools and colleges to understand how experiences such as trauma affect children in care. [\[footnote 14\]](#)

Staff with positive experiences of external agencies described stakeholders as being readily available and approachable, particularly when urgent communication was needed. VSHs echoed this sentiment, expressing a desire to be seen as accessible and responsive. Maintaining clear communication channels and shared expectations enabled staff and stakeholders to work collaboratively in the best interests of the child. This joined-up approach helped build a well-rounded understanding of the child's needs.

However, school and college staff identified some barriers to effective collaboration. Frequent turnover of social workers and virtual school staff meant that they had to keep rebuilding the child's trust and their knowledge of the child.

“Social workers and virtual school workers can change quite regularly, can be quite up and down and that's never helpful.”

(Secondary school senior leader)

Further, external agencies were not always available or responsive when needed. This led to delays in making decisions and providing support to learners.

Effective communication between home and school or college helped children in care make consistent progress

Frequent communication between home and school or college helped maintain consistency between school/college and home life and made sure that relevant information was shared. For example, a learner's behaviour at school or college may be due to changing circumstances at home. Providers kept parents and carers informed of any incidents on site, as they could impact on a learner's home life or relationships outside of school.

“We've got a very good working relationship with the school, from the head teacher to, well, all the staff. So, they have no hesitation in contacting me if something has happened, either to report it or if they need advice.”

(Foster carer of a primary school learner)

Parents and carers who were pleased with the communication they received from staff spoke of consistent, open channels using many different methods. Effective communication could be both formal and informal, enabling two-way dialogue and making sure that parents and carers felt informed, involved and supported. Staff used a range of tools to facilitate this, including bespoke apps and physical 'home books' in which staff, children, and parents and carers could record daily events. In some primary schools, staff offered virtual memory boxes (online photo albums shared with parents and carers and social workers) to help learners retain a sense of identity and continuity across placements.

Parents and carers valued formal communication methods such as PEP meetings, parents' evenings and parent-focused events (for example, lunches or outings) for monitoring wellbeing and academic progress. Parents and carers also appreciated receiving regular updates, which enabled them to celebrate achievements and support their children effectively.

"We also get regular emails, I think they're termly emails. They're usually a couple of days before they break up, giving scores around their behaviour, their confidence, their learning level for each subject from every teacher, and it also gives you the attendance for those lessons, which is fantastic. Fantastic for us as foster parents and carers, because that's really good evidence to celebrate things with and I'm providing encouragement to [child] so that she's had fantastic attendance and, you know, like, behaviour points and stuff like that. So we can reward [child] with that."

(Carer of secondary school learner)

As well as more formal communication, informal interactions, such as gate-side conversations during drop-off and collection for primary school learners, were praised by parents and carers for their immediacy and personal quality. Staff also told us that these check-ins allowed them to gauge how a learner was feeling and ensure that staff were aware of any home-related issues that might affect behaviour or wellbeing.

Parents and carers valued staff who advocated for their children's emotional wellbeing and addressed behavioural challenges sensitively. Some leaders introduced emotional wellbeing programmes that helped learners reflect on their experiences, which in turn supported smoother communication at home. Parents and carers told us how mentors resolved peer-related issues before involving them or brought them in early to collaborate on solutions. This team-based approach was deeply appreciated. One foster carer described how their child faced prejudice, and the school stepped in to de-escalate the situation, demonstrating compassion and going beyond expectations. This left parents and carers feeling supported and understood. This fostered harmonious relationships with providers.

Some schools offered workshops to help parents and carers understand the curriculum and teaching strategies; this enabled them to better support learning at

home. These sessions were particularly helpful in subjects like mathematics and English, in which teaching methods may differ from those parents and carers were familiar with from their own experiences of school.

School senior leaders praised children's homes that proactively built strong relationships with them, including contacting them ahead of a learner's arrival. Repeat foster parents and carers were often well known to staff, which enabled deeper collaboration. Leaders recognised the challenges that parents and carers faced and offered support where needed. They told us that learners often noticed if their carer was struggling, and it was in the learner's best interest to resolve this as soon as possible.

Access to enrichment activities helped learners have positive experiences at school and college

Some school and college leaders made a conscious effort to ensure that children in care were prioritised for activities that broaden their experiences and raise aspirations. These included after-school activities, summer schools, mentoring programmes, educational trips and career-focused initiatives. Some providers worked with local authorities and universities to offer bespoke programmes for children in care, including pathways to higher education.

Providers used funding to give children in care the same resources and experiences as their peers, such as tablets for online learning, or participation in outdoor activities. Leaders emphasised the importance of inclusion and belonging, so that no learner felt disadvantaged due to their circumstances.

“It's about not feeling disadvantaged from being able to take part in it because you haven't got access to that technology. It's really important – that part of feeling like you belong, feeling included, having the same experiences.”

(Primary school senior leader)

Despite these efforts, many school and college leaders reported that they had challenges in accessing funding from local authorities. Some expressed frustration that valuable support, particularly for mental health and enrichment, was sometimes dependent on complex application processes or conditional approvals.

Careful preparation and induction packages helped learners navigate the move to a new school or to college

Moving to a new school or to college is a pivotal moment for all learners, but especially for those who are looked after. Whether they are moving between schools, progressing from primary to secondary education, or moving on to college, these changes can be particularly challenging for learners who have experienced instability at home. Such changes are known to have a negative impact on learners' outcomes. For many children in care, these transitions are particularly difficult because they have experienced disruption in their home life that often leads to multiple moves of both care and education settings.

School staff told us about the importance of managing moves between academic years in their school. Each new school year brings changes in routine, including new classmates, teachers and curriculum content. Some learners told us that they found these changes unsettling. Many senior leaders told us how they made sure that staff were well informed about each child's circumstances and support needs before the start of the academic year. This included organising structured handover meetings that focused on understanding learners' academic and social challenges. They also thought through how to maintain continuity of support, and adjusted learning plans. This enabled staff to provide consistent and responsive support from the start of the school year.

School staff highlighted the challenges faced by children in care during the move from primary to secondary education. For many, this involved adapting to a new school environment. Teachers and senior leaders consistently emphasised the difficulties associated with this move, particularly in relation to building new relationships and maintaining a sense of emotional security. One senior leader expressed concern that the nurturing environment provided in primary school might be disrupted by the move to a larger, less familiar secondary setting.

“Really, really concerned about the children because they're going from this very safe place [...] they're going to a place that's much bigger.”

(Primary school staff)

Many senior leaders demonstrated a strong awareness of the challenges faced by children in care during transitions and described proactive measures they used to support them. These included early engagement with parents and carers, organising additional school visits for learners, and tailoring their support plans. Some schools and colleges also offered summer induction programmes, enabling learners to familiarise themselves with new settings, meet staff and peers, and reduce anxiety. Some staff, mainly primary, shared detailed information with feeder schools through transition visits and attendance at PEP meetings to ensure continuity and personalised support from the outset.

Leaders commented on the move from secondary to FE, which often required bespoke support and targeted interventions. In many schools, preparation began early in a young person's secondary education journey. They commonly used careers guidance and set aspirational targets in PEPs to support planning and progression. School and college leaders consistently emphasised that it was

important to approach this move with sensitivity and care. They thought it essential to be strongly committed to understanding learners' individual circumstances, because that was how to make sure that support was meaningful and effective.

Moving to new carers or leaving care disrupted educational progress

Moves to new carers can be highly disruptive for children. These often occur with minimal notice and require rapid adjustment to new environments. One learner described the complexity of their care journey.

“I was at home and then I was in care in Year 11, then I left care in January and I went back to my mum's. I was back in care and then back together [with mum], a week after my last exams in June.”

(College learner)

Learners told us that personal circumstances made the school and college environment more challenging. Some leaders explained how they had to be flexible when learners faced difficulties with their care placements, for example making alternative exam arrangements to allow learners to complete their qualifications. Many learners explained how moving to different carers or schools can increase the travel time to their education provider, making the journey both long and difficult. This made them feel anxious and tired.

“I think this is my eighth (school). So this is my last one. I won't be moving again. I do not want to move again.”

(Secondary school learner)

By the time many learners reached FE, they might have experienced significant disruption, including changes in carers and education providers. Many college leaders told us that this instability can result in learners entering FE without having achieved any GCSE qualifications and lacking the confidence to achieve their full potential. This put learners at a further disadvantage, and many required additional support to re-engage with learning and achieve their aspirations.

“For some of our care-experienced young people, if they've moved around care placements and moved around schools, their GCSE results may not be what they could be, had they been in a stable school environment. So, we look at that as well.”

(College senior leader)

■

Leaving care at 18 is the beginning of a significant period of change for learners, often involving relocation from familiar environments and the loss of established support networks. Despite local authority statutory duties for care leavers, learners often faced additional pressures such as securing accommodation and acquiring independent living skills. College staff shared the perception that formal support structures tend to diminish once a young person turns 18, leaving education providers as one of their few remaining sources of stability. One safeguarding lead noted:

“We’ve put systems in place to continue monitoring care leavers because we’ve clearly identified that, once they turn 18, everything seems to disappear around them. College becomes the only consistent thing, and we don’t want that to vanish.”

(College staff)

All care leavers up to the age of 21 are entitled to a personal adviser; however, some care leavers reported that they do not have one. Staff across education providers told us about their concern for the wellbeing of these learners and recognised the importance of maintaining regular contact and continued support. Trusted adults, such as teachers, tutors, and parents and carers, played a vital role in helping learners navigate the change.

Some college leaders told us that disruption often begins before the age of 18, as some children are moved into semi-independent or independent living arrangements before they are ready. One college reported that several learners had been required to leave foster homes at age 17, midway through the academic year. In such cases, education staff played a critical role. Their continued support acted as a protective factor, helping learners manage stress and uncertainty, and reinforcing the message that they were not facing these challenges alone.

Differences in local authority processes created frustrations for schools and colleges

Staff highlighted structural barriers that could limit their ability to support the progress of children in care. Several challenges stemmed from variations in local authority practice. For example, schools described a ‘lottery’ effect, where access to resources and the virtual school provision depended heavily on which local authority a child was placed under. This lack of consistency was seen to create inequities; some children benefited from proactive support while others experienced delays in accessing funding or interventions.

Leaders and designated staff described their frustration at needing to navigate different PEP formats, systems and processes when they supported children

from several local authorities. This increased their workload and created inefficiencies. Additionally, some schools felt frustrated by what they saw as bureaucracy preventing funding.

“The difficulty is getting the funding to get the extra interventions that are identified normally on the PEP for the children. We have a virtual school [that] will not provide the pupil premium plus, if they don’t feel that the PEP has been administered correctly.”

(Primary school senior leader)

We heard several times that support for care-experienced young people post-16 was inconsistent. FE staff told us that some local authorities do not hold PEP meetings for children after the age of 16, resulting in reduced oversight, support and progress opportunities for learners.

“They don’t have PEP meetings beyond 16... that support literally disappears.”

(College staff)

Some college learners felt they were not fully supported. More college learners were dissatisfied with the level of support than learners at primary and secondary schools. However, college learners had many more barriers, such as the move to independent living, long travel times, parental responsibilities and last-minute timetable changes.

“At first, they changed timetables. Fine, timetables change ... They was, like, you don’t have a child, and I said yeah I do. And then it just kept escalating and I’d say towards the end of the first year. They kept saying, oh, we’re not coming in on this day, we’re coming in on the timetable days. I’m like I can’t do that because of nursery. She goes to nursery and her nursery is the set college days. And everyone else, they let everyone else go on a Zoom meeting and do it but to me they were like bring your child in college but everyone else got to do a Zoom call, and I ended up working around the childcare and still came in, and it was, like, why did everyone else get to do a Zoom call, but I couldn’t? Like, literally everyone else got to do a Zoom call and then one of the times that [I] showed up on college on a non-college timetable day, they weren’t even there.”

(College learner)

Specialist training and professional development help staff to provide a supportive environment

Providers considered training and continuing professional development for staff to be essential for producing positive outcomes for children in care. In schools, specialist training was regularly provided in collaboration with virtual schools. Leaders who prioritised training to help staff understand the impact that issues such as trauma can have on children in care and how experiences can affect the specific needs of those in care reported that they were better able to provide a stable and supportive environment.^{[\[footnote 15\]](#)}

“The ones I’ve done with the virtual school, personally, the ones where it’s, like, full-day designated teacher ones because they’re very specific ... to looked-after children. They always have people in who have had children in care experience. So obviously you can do a bit of networking as well, [so] actually going in person is useful. So personally, I think they’re the most impactful.”

(Secondary school staff)

In the absence of formal training, many college staff relied on experiential learning and peer support. This approach, while valuable, led to inconsistent understanding of key processes, for example how to support the transitions for children in care at age 18. College staff in these providers told us that there was a lack of targeted training in areas such as counselling, mental health, bereavement and support for unaccompanied asylum seekers. While safeguarding training was available in all providers, it was often generic and not tailored to the nuanced needs of children in care. For many, training opportunities were frequently constrained by time, staffing and budget limitations. Some staff noted difficulties in attending external courses due to lack of staff cover, scheduling conflicts, and geographic barriers (for example needing overnight stays for training in other local authorities). They thought one-off or short-duration sessions (for example single-day Zoom courses) were insufficient for meaningful skills development. However, staff had a strong appetite for continuous professional development, particularly refresher sessions that reinforced prior learning.

“I think we just need a bit more support, because I think there’ll be more and more young people that can’t cope with home life.”

(College staff)

Staff highlighted the emotional demands of supporting children in care and the importance of peer support. Many providers operated an open-door policy in

senior leadership teams, allowing staff to seek guidance and emotional support when needed. Staff described a culture of mutual support, where colleagues checked in with one another and shared the emotional load.

“What’s really important is we look after each other, our community. The thing that we want for the children is [for them] to feel looked after. We do that so, not in a tokenistic way. We do check in with each other... we put different packages of support in and change things.”

(Primary school staff)

Education inspections should place more emphasis on the experiences of children in care

This research explored experiences of inspection in relation to children in care. Fieldwork was carried out during the 2024/25 academic year, before Ofsted implemented the renewed education inspection framework, with its sharper focus on children in care, in November 2025.

Under the education inspection framework that was in place until November 2025, inspectors were required to consider children in care in a range of ways. This included reviewing how schools used pupil premium plus funding, how effectively learners were supported in their academic and personal development, and the extent to which they were kept safe. However, inspectors and school and college leaders reported that children in care were not routinely considered as a distinct group during inspections but were instead included within the broader category of disadvantaged learners. Inspectors also told us that they did not feel they had sufficient time to assess the experiences and outcomes of children in care in depth. In addition, more than three-quarters of inspectors surveyed felt they had not received enough training to effectively evaluate provision for children in care. Inspectors suggested they would benefit from further training on reviewing PEPs, understanding the legal obligations and responsibilities of providers, recognising the barriers and risks faced by children in care, and identifying best practice when working with this group.

Learners, senior leaders and VSHs expressed strong support for a more explicit and sensitive focus on children in care in future inspection arrangements. Learners welcomed the opportunity to share their experiences, with one learner commenting, “I guess it’s nice to, like, talk about how school is and how it works for me at least.”

Inspectors and senior leaders emphasised the importance of handling conversations with children in care sensitively so that they did not feel like they were being singled out or that their care status would be disclosed. One senior leader noted, “I don’t feel like it should be something to make our looked-after

cohort feel even more different to their peer group.”

Several school and college leaders highlighted the need for a nuanced approach to evaluating provision for children in care. They stressed that inspection should not only consider academic progress but also the personal journeys of the learners, inclusion within the provider, and the broader support offered to learners. Many suggested that a case-study approach would help provide an in-depth look at the progress a child is making overall.

“Just looking at their progress alone isn’t going to tell you whether there’s good provision for those children in care or not. It has to be wider. If you were looking at the provision for children in care, you’d need to look at the entire package. You want to be at a point where the package around them means they can’t be differentiated in the classroom.”

(Primary senior leader)

VSHs reported that inspectors did not routinely contact them during school or college inspections, despite the potential for them to contribute valuable insights. Over 90% of VSHs felt they could support inspection by providing information about PEPs, inclusive practice, educational outcomes, attendance and behaviour, and SEND support.

Renewed education inspection framework

The renewed framework, effective from November 2025, provides a sharper focus on children known or previously known to local authority social care, including children in care. This reference to ‘children known, or previously known, to children’s social care’ is a major change from the previous framework and was informed by the findings in this report.

These are some of the changes to the inspection framework in relation to children in care:

- Every evaluation area references learners known, or previously known, to children’s social care.
- The ‘inclusion’ evaluation area includes a section for inspectors to evaluate how well providers are identifying need and putting in place support for children and learners who are known, or previously known, to children’s social care.
- On inspection, inspectors must speak to the designated staff member for children in care.
- Children in care must be included in the case sampling methodology.

- Inspectors may choose to speak with the relevant VSH(s) about current or previous children in care, those with a child in need or child protection plan, or those living under kinship care arrangements.

We have developed a new training package for inspectors in early years, schools and FE and skills to support the focus on inclusion in the renewed education inspection framework. This aims to help inspectors understand the groups of children and learners who are known or previously known to social care, what they should be exploring in relation to these groups on inspection, and how to gather evidence of this through inspection activity. This includes better understanding terminology like 'virtual school heads' and 'virtual schools', 'designated teachers' and 'personal education plans'.

Conclusion

The schools and colleges we visited were aware of their responsibility to provide a positive and inclusive education for children in care, and all had put in place measures to provide this for learners. It was important for children in care that they were supported as individuals and not as part of a generic offer. Interventions that supported both the academic and emotional wellbeing of learners had a positive impact. Despite the challenges that frequent changes to social workers and virtual school staff raised, senior leaders made sure that school or college was a consistent environment for learners. This was something that children in care valued. Having a trusted member of staff or mentor that they could talk to at any time if they needed to was especially beneficial to them.

Our research identified some persisting barriers to children in care making progress. To help create more effective and inclusive provision, the following areas may be particularly helpful to consider:

- Enhancing staff training: ongoing, specialist training can help staff to better understand and respond to the needs of children in care. This may include training about the specific challenges faced by children in care. Training is most effective when it is ongoing rather than delivered as a one-off session. Regular refresher opportunities can help reinforce learning and embed approaches over time. Further bespoke training in areas such as mental health, bereavement and support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children may also be beneficial. Continuing to involve virtual schools in the coordination and delivery of training can help maintain consistency and ensure that content remains relevant to the needs of children in care. School and college leaders should monitor the impact of any training to ensure staff have the skills and knowledge to support children in care.
- Evidence suggests that staff are better able to tailor support for children in care when they have up-to-date information about learners. Schools and colleges may wish to consider using robust systems (for example online platforms, pupil passports or dashboards) to keep staff informed about learners' needs and

circumstances. Where possible, co-producing this information with learners can help reflect their preferences and make sure their voice is central. Staff will also need support in using this information sensitively and appropriately to avoid stigmatising or singling out learners.

- Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure continuity of support for care-experienced young people beyond age 16, including maintaining effective PEPs. Colleges might benefit from additional support to offer mentoring, emotional support and academic interventions. Early transition planning, with clear pathways to education, employment or training, and access to guidance and financial support, could help improve outcomes.
- A more consistent national approach to PEP formats, funding processes, and virtual school provision could help reduce inequities. Streamlining funding approvals, particularly for pupil premium plus, may help avoid delays in support. Strengthening collaboration between education providers and local authorities through shared protocols and expectations could also support more effective working.
- While current research has largely focused on mainstream schools and colleges, there is value in exploring how a wide range of education and training providers support children in care. Further research in these settings could offer important insights into effective practice and support mechanisms.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children continue to face significant barriers to accessing education. There is a need to further understand their experiences in depth, which could inform the development of targeted interventions and policies to better support their educational aspirations.

Annex A: further details of research methods

Research questions:

- What role do schools and colleges play in providing good experiences for looked-after learners?
- How can the progress of looked-after learners be assessed during inspection?
- How do we recognise the academic progress and personal development of looked-after learners, and what are the barriers to progress?
- What do some schools and colleges do that means children in care make better progress academically than others nationally?
- How is the academic progress and attainment, as well as the personal development, of children in care considered as part of inspection?

- What do looked-after learners say about the support they have received from schools, colleges, the virtual schools and other services?
- How do inspectors engage with children in care and what activities can inspectors carry out to make sure that children in care are considered?

Methods

To answer our research questions, we designed a mixed methods study which included:

Survey of His Majesty's Inspectors and Ofsted Inspectors

We sent a survey to all schools and FE HMIs and OIs in the 2024 autumn term. This aimed to aid an understanding of current inspection practice with regards to looked-after learners, including barriers and suggestions for change. We received 68 responses from school inspectors and 38 responses from FE inspectors. This equates to around 5% of school inspectors and around 10% of FE inspectors.

Focus groups with inspectors

We held 4 focus groups (2 schools and 2 FE) with 23 HMIs, including those with experience of inspecting local authority children's services. We heard about current inspection practice in schools and colleges, including how frequently looked-after learners are considered as part of inspection, and what the challenges to capturing their experiences are.

Survey of virtual school headteachers

In collaboration with the NAVSH, we sent a survey to all VSHs in January 2025. The aim of the survey was to explore how virtual schools were currently involved in school and college inspections, and to identify areas for development. We received 57 responses, which equates to over a third of VSHs.

Research visits to schools and further education colleges

We carried out 15 research visits during the 2025 spring and summer terms. This included 4 general FE colleges, 1 sixth-form college, 5 secondary schools and 5 primary schools.

Our sampling frame contained mainstream primary and secondary schools with at least one looked-after child on roll in the January 2024 school census, and mainstream colleges. To avoid any potential extra burden, providers who were judged inadequate, and providers where an inspection or other Ofsted visit had taken place or was planned in the 2024/25 academic year, were excluded from our sample. We selected a sample of schools to contact, aiming for a mix of rural and urban schools and schools of varying sizes. We then invited schools and colleges to take part in the research, aiming to include schools and colleges from multiple regions. Schools and colleges were not compelled to take part in the research visits. It is possible, therefore, that this had an impact on the findings. Providers that thought that their support of children in care was weaker may have chosen not to take part.

Visits were led by HMIs, OIs and researchers. Other researchers attended the visits to support the data collection. On each visit, we spoke with senior leaders, school/college staff, and looked-after learners.

A typical visit had the following structure:

- meeting with the senior leadership team
- discussions with children in care
- interviews with school/college staff who supported the children in care we met
- informal meeting with senior leadership at the end of the visit

In total, we spoke to 51 learners. We asked colleges to select 4 learners to include, where possible, a mix of genders, courses, ages and ethnicities. We asked schools to provide information to people with parental responsibility for children in care. Where permission was given, we asked schools to invite pupils to take part in a discussion.

We also gathered evidence from interviews with 20 virtual school representatives and 26 social workers, parents and carers, and care workers. This allowed us to triangulate with the school/college data to make more informed inferences from the findings.

Participation in all visit activities was optional for staff and learners.

Analysis

We used an inductive thematic approach to coding the data collected during our research visits. We developed a coding framework using our inductive codes and our research questions. We also identified new themes as they emerged from the data. We analysed data using MAXQDA.

Limitations

This research was largely qualitative in approach, which allowed us to explore practice in depth but across a limited range of mainstream provider types. It is important to note that none of the schools or colleges involved were judged inadequate at their most recent inspection. Participation was voluntary, and many of the providers were proud of the work they do to support children in care. As such, while the findings offer valuable insights into how some schools and colleges are supporting children in care effectively, they should not be interpreted as representative of all children's experiences or of all education providers.

1. This includes children who are identified as having special educational needs

(SEN) support or who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

[‘Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England’](#), Department for Education, July 2025. ↵

2. The Department for Education’s statutory guidance for local authorities, [‘Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children’](#), highlights the role of VSHs in signposting appropriate training and specialist services to ensure schools understand the impact that issues such as trauma can have on looked-after children. ↵
3. [‘Children looked after in England including adoptions’](#), Department for Education, November 2025. ↵
4. [‘Key stage 4 performance’](#), Department for Education, November 2024. ↵
5. This includes children who are identified as having SEN support or who have an EHC plan.

[‘Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England’](#), Department for Education, July 2025.

[‘Special educational needs in England’](#), Department for Education, July 2025. ↵

6. D Berridge, N Luke, J Sebba, S Strand, M Cartwright, E Staples, L McGrath-Lone, J Ward, A O’Higgins, [‘Children in need and children in care: Educational attainment and progress’](#), Nuffield Foundation, 2020. ↵
7. [‘Children looked after in England including adoptions’](#), Department for Education, November 2025. ↵
8. [‘UK government’s new asylum bill threatens to lock up thousands of refugee children who come to the UK alone: Refugee Council and Barnardo’s joint release’](#), Refugee Council, April 2023. ↵
9. C Gladwell, [‘The impact of educational achievement on the integration and wellbeing of Afghan refugee youth in the UK’](#), in ‘Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies’, Volume 47, Number 21, 2021, pages 4914–4936. ↵
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D Berridge, N Luke, J Sebba, S Strand, M Cartwright, E Staples, L McGrath-Lone, J Ward, A O’Higgins, [‘Children in need and children in care: Educational attainment and progress’](#), Nuffield Foundation, 2020.

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12. H Drew and R Banerjee, '[Supporting the education and well-being of children who are looked-after: What is the role of the virtual school?](#)', in 'European Journal of Psychology of Education', Volume 34, Number 1, 2019, pages 101–121, 2019.

N Harrison, J Sebba, M Wigley, R Pryor and F Blyth, '[Improving the effectiveness of virtual schools](#)', University of Exeter, 2023.

'[The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children](#)', Ofsted, October 2012. ↵

13. '[Hearing feedback, accepting criticism and building a better Ofsted: the response to the Big Listen](#)', Ofsted, September 2024. ↵
14. '[Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children](#)', Department for Education, February 2018. ↵
15. The Department for Education's statutory guidance for local authorities, '[Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children](#)', highlights the role of VSHs in signposting appropriate training and specialist services to ensure schools understand the impact that issues such as trauma can have on looked-after children. ↵

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