

This report examines the impact of virtual schools established by local authorities to support and improve the educational achievement of looked after children.

Executive summary

The educational attainment of looked after children continues to be considerably worse than the attainment of the rest of the school-age population. To help improvement, many local authorities have chosen to appoint a virtual school headteacher (or someone with a similar title), often supported by a virtual school team.

The virtual school approach is to work with looked after children as if they were in a single school, liaising with the schools they attend, tracking the progress they make and supporting them to achieve as well as possible.

This report explores the impact of virtual schools in nine local authorities. There were considerable differences in the roles undertaken by virtual school staff and the size of virtual school teams. These ranged from less than two full-time staff providing, in the main, a commissioning and advocacy role, to larger teams offering teaching support to children and training and consultancy to a wide group of stakeholders.

Overall, there was evidence of improving educational outcomes for looked after children in all local authorities visited.

Improvement was not limited to attainment, but there was also good evidence of increased levels of attendance and reduced numbers of exclusions. Furthermore, in many cases, improved educational achievement had considerably enhanced children and young people's sense of self-worth and had provided some much-needed stability in their lives.

Key findings

- Most outcomes were improving in the local authorities visited, although performance was variable from year to year. There was little evidence, however, that the gap in attainment between looked after children and other children was narrowing. Progress between Key Stages 3 and 4 was slower than during earlier key stages.
- Financial constraints had resulted in several local authorities recently reducing the number of dedicated posts within the virtual school, raising concerns that continued improvement would be threatened.
- The potential consequences of these cuts had not always been fully assessed, despite the acknowledged link between educational outcomes and other key outcomes for looked after children, such as placement stability and emotional well-being.
- Corporate parents' depth of engagement with issues relating to the education of looked after children was variable.
- Clearly stated roles and responsibilities for virtual schools were not always evident.
- Data management systems were of variable quality, which meant that some local authorities were not able to monitor and report on the progress of children and young people.
- The resources of the virtual school were not always effectively targeted.
- Inspectors saw evidence of very effective support involving the virtual school that not only made a difference to

children's educational progress, but also often enhanced the stability of their placements and had a positive impact upon their emotional well-being.

- The quality of personal education plans was variable. The best examples retained a sharp focus on educational attainment while taking into account emotional and behavioural issues. Targets were sometimes ill-defined and insufficiently tracked.
- Children placed outside of the local authority area were less likely to receive good support from the virtual school.
- Schools, other professionals and carers valued highly expert support and challenge from virtual school teams and from virtual headteachers who had strong leadership skills, the necessary 'clout' to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility.

Recommendations

Local authorities and their partners should:

- ensure that corporate parenting and governance arrangements are sufficiently able to support the virtual school while robustly holding it to account
- ensure that a thorough risk assessment of the potential impact on children's outcomes is undertaken before decisions are made to reconfigure support services for looked after children's education, including reducing the capacity of the virtual school.
- ensure that the virtual school's roles and responsibilities are clear and that effective data management systems are in place to help target support to those children and young people who need it most
- ensure that the educational progress of individual children is closely monitored as soon as they become looked after, so that the impact of care upon educational outcomes is more accurately measured and understood
- implement robust protocols for the educational support of children placed outside of their own local authority area and monitor those arrangements closely, so that senior managers and corporate parents can be assured that the progress of those children is not compromised
- consider whether the virtual school's scope should include young people aged beyond the current statutory school age to ensure that the support needs of young people entering further and higher education are met.

The government should:

- consider whether corporate parents' continued prioritisation of the education of looked after children should be protected by a statutory requirement on local authorities to establish and maintain suitably robust virtual school arrangements.

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