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Promoting the achievement in schools of children and young people in care

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Virtual School Case Studies
Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children
PALAC

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Introduction

Education of children in care

As of March 2017, there were 72,670 children and young people in care in England. The number of looked after children has continued to increase steadily over the last eight years.[1] Sixty per cent of these children are in care because of abuse or neglect and three-quarters are placed in foster care arrangements. Children and young people who are in or have experienced care remain one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes. The average Attainment 8 score for children in care is 19.3 compared to 44.5 for non-looked after children and 19.3 for children in need. In 2017 there was an increase in the percentage of children in care achieving a pass in English and Mathematics from 17.4% to 17.5% and also in entering EBacc. Care leavers can experience poorer employment and health outcomes after leaving school compared to their peers. They are over-represented amongst the offender population and those who experience homelessness.

However, research is emerging to show that children and young people in care can have very positive experiences of school if they are supported effectively to reach their full potential academically and socially.[2] The purpose of this report is to share practice in local authorities (LA) from across England and Wales that is contributing to improved outcomes and school experiences for children and young people in care.

The case studies were all undertaken as part of the Promoting the Achievement of Looked after Children (PALAC) programme between 2014 and 2017. This report presents an account of the programme, including the activities undertaken by the participants and the outcomes of the programme to date for pupils in care and staff in the participating virtual schools (VS) and local authorities.

1 DfE (2017). Children looked after in England (including adoption) year ending 31 March 2017. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf.
2 Carroll, C. and Cameron, C. (2017). Taking Action for Looked After Children in School. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

What is PALAC?

PALAC is a knowledge exchange programme that seeks to support practice in schools and research that contributes to knowledge about the education of children and young people in care. The programme was piloted in 2014 and since then it has expanded to reach almost one hundred schools from eight LAs across England and Wales. Schools are engaged in the programme across an academic year and have access to research findings, a whole school audit tool and receive regular support from facilitators with research and school practitioner backgrounds. All participants have the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the year. The PALAC programme has identified seven evidence-informed domains around which schools can focus professional development and learning:

- **Supporting emotional development and wellbeing**
- **Raising and monitoring attainment**
- **Supporting learning**
- **School environment**
- **Effective deployment of staff**
- **Supporting equality and diversity**
- **Working with carers and other professionals.**

VS and schools focus their PALAC projects around one or two domains that are most relevant to their settings.

Case Studies

Section A: Supporting Learning

Achieving for Children Virtual School
Raising the literacy attainment of pupils in care

Background

Prior attainment at KS2 is a significant factor in predicting KS4 attainment[3] and literacy attainment is highly correlated with academic performance in general.[4] Evidence indicates that one to one tuition can be effective for many groups of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, including children and young people in care. Studies that have specifically evaluated one to one academic tuition for pupils in care, including Catch Up and the Three Tutoring Models study have resulted in significant gains in literacy.[5] More widely, the Teaching and Learning Toolkit from the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) currently records one to one tuition, on average, as accelerating learning by approximately five additional months' progress.[6] More effective one to one tuition is likely to be delivered over short, regular sessions, over a fixed period of time and have immediate relevance to the classroom curriculum at the time.

One question that is far from answered, both from a practice and research perspective is to what extent, if any, does an effective literacy intervention for pupils in care differ to that used with any other pupil? In other words, what additional factors might practitioners and researchers need to take account of when designing literacy programmes and interventions for pupils in care? Possible additional factors, gleaned from other PALAC literacy projects would appear to include; firstly, that the pupil was known to the member of staff delivering the intervention; secondly, a knowledge, understanding and sensitivity on behalf of the practitioner of the potential impact of care on development and learning for pupils; and finally, the necessity to personalise the literacy intervention to the specific literacy needs and wider learning context for each pupil.[7]

3 Greaves, E., Macmillan, L., & Sibieta, L. (2014). Lessons from London schools for attainment gaps and social mobility.
4 Dockrell, J. E., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. Child language teaching and therapy, 27(2), 223–237.
5 Liabo, K., Gray, K., & Mulcahy, D. (2013). A systematic review of interventions to support looked-after children in school. Child & family social work, 18(3), 341–353.
6 EEF (2017). Teaching and Learning Toolkit. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/one-to-one-tuition/.
7 Carroll, C., & Cameron, C. (2017). Taking Action for Looked after Children in School: A Knowledge Exchange Programme. UCL IOE Press.

Achieving for Children (AFC), the Virtual School for Kingston, Richmond and Windsor and Maidenhead, investigated the impact of implementing a one to one literacy tutoring programme with primary aged pupils and pupils in Year 7. This case study describes the implementation and outcomes of the literacy programme, with the tuition delivered by teachers and support staff known to the pupils in the nine schools. The team at AFC consisted of Dr Sara Freitag, Specialist Educational Psychologist with the VS, Kerry Crombie, Assistant Headteacher, Claire Farley, Assistant Headteacher and Suzanne Parrott, Headteacher of the AFC VS. Suzanne previously led a successful pilot project of literacy tutoring programme as part of a previous PALAC project and wanted to investigate outcomes with a larger sample of pupils, including those in the first year of secondary school.

What did the Virtual School do?

As part of the PALAC programme, participants are introduced to the research of Vivian Hill and Morag Stuart at UCL Institute of Education on a literacy intervention specifically devised for pupils in care. The intervention itself does not include any formal programme content or set structure and it was this approach that was adopted by the AfC team. The teaching element of the tuition intervention is informed by an individual diagnostic assessment of literacy attainment, cognitive skills and attitudes to learning and school. The assessment is carried out by an educational psychologist (EP), in this instance by Sara. The practitioners in the school then use this assessment data to plan weekly sessions based on the profile of each pupil which can be delivered in two short sessions or one longer session depending on the pupil and context of the school. The tuition intervention takes place over one term. Table 1 outlines the different stages of the intervention and Figure 1 is the Pupil Learning Log completed by the tutors and pupils for each session. This is a record of the teaching and learning activities and outcomes for each session. Each tutor was paid a fee by the VS to support the costs of tuition covered from Pupil Premium.

Table 1: Programme Structure

Time	Activity	Participants
Second half of autumn term	Individual pupil assessments including baseline data	EP and pupils
	EP writes report and recommendations for tuition	EP
	Full day training Content: Education outcomes for pupils in care Supporting the education of pupils in care Discussions around EP report, recommendations and focus for tuition	EP, VS and school practitioners
Spring term	Ten one to one weekly tuition sessions Practitioners complete Learning Log for each session	School practitioners
	Post intervention assessment of pupils by EP with findings sent to schools	EP and pupils
	Review meeting: Discuss individual pupils outcomes, outcomes as a group and next steps	EP, VS and school practitioners

achieving for children

AfC Virtual School
'Together we can achieve!'

AFC Virtual School and London University Literacy Programme 2016-17

MY LEARNING LOG

My Name:	Today's Date:	Session................/10
My Teacher:	My Class:	

Focus of Lesson:

Lesson Content (Bullet Points):

What did I learn today?	What do I need more support with?
•...	•...
•...	•...
•...	•...

Figure 1: Pupil Learning Log

Table 2 summarises the different assessments used with each of the pupils and the focus for each of the assessments. The assessment data collected included standardised assessments, pupil self-evaluation questionnaires and elicitation of their views about school and their learning.

Table 2: Pupil Assessments

Assessment Title	Assessment Focus	Type of data
Diagnostic Reading Analysis (DRA)	Reading accuracy	Quantitative
	Reading fluency / rate	
	Reading comprehension	
	Reading comprehension processing speed	
British Ability Scales	Spelling	Quantitative
	Single word reading	
Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) Survey (Pupil self-evaluation)	Feelings about school	Quantitative
	Attitudes to teachers	
	Attitudes to attendance	
	Perceived learning capability	
	Self-regard as a learner	
	General work ethics	
	Response to curricula demands	
	Preparedness for learning	
	Confidence in learning	
Pupil views towards literacy - likert questionnaire (Pupil self -evaluation)	Example I like reading 1 2 3 4 5 ☹ ☺	Quantitative
Pupil Views	Favourite aspect of school	Qualitative
	Least favourite aspect of school	
	I'm good at…	
	I would like to better at…	
	I need more help with…	
	Who helps me?	
Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (SWOT) Analysis	Views on the tuition programme	Qualitative

Outcomes for pupils and staff

The findings of the project were positive with some pupils making considerable progress with different aspects of their literacy. Presented is an overview of the quantitative findings with examples of individual pupil case studies to show the impact of the tuition programme. Table 3 shows eight of the nine pupils made progress with their overall reading age and half the group with word reading and comprehension as measured by the DRA. The PASS scores saw little change after the tuition programme with all of the pupils remaining within the average range.

Pupil responses to the questionnaire that asked how much they 'liked' and how 'good' they felt they were at reading, writing and spelling did improve for some pupils, particularly in relation to reading and spelling (Figure 2).

Table 3: Pupils' Literacy Progress

No. of children who made progress

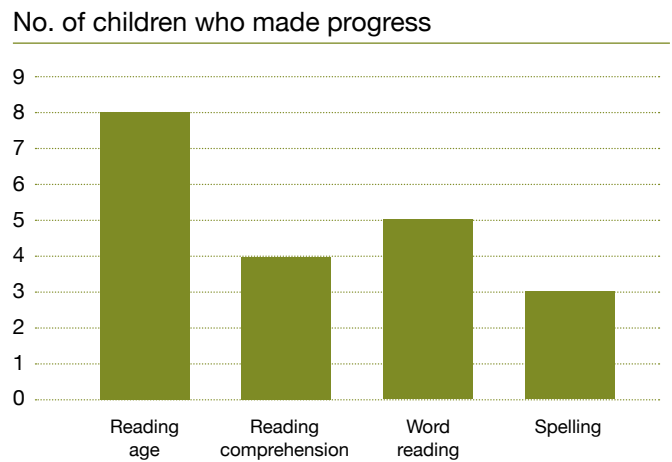Figure 3 presents an overview of the impact of the programme for a Year 5 and a Year 7 pupil by way of illustration to show that pupils of different ability, as judged by the Standard Scores (SS) at baseline, benefited from the programme. It includes their perspectives on the experience with both reflecting that they would have liked the sessions to have been longer.
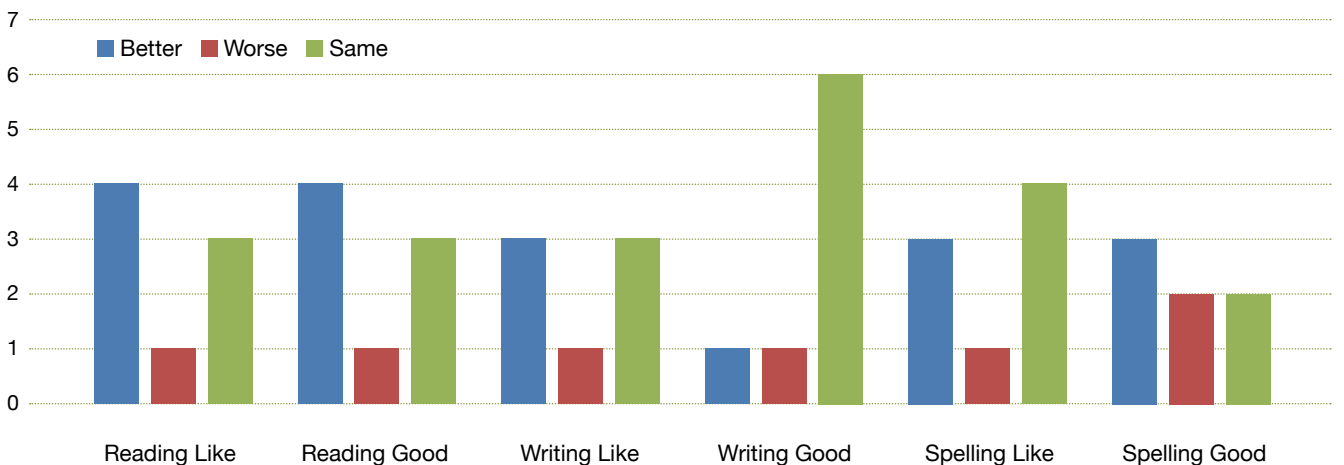

Figure 2: Pupil views towards literacy

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KS2 Pupil
DRA (reading accuracy) increased by 1 year and three months
Standardised spelling score increased from 106 to 115
Self-reported attitude toward and ability in reading, writing and spelling improved

"I learnt stuff, so when I'm in class I know stuff and do well."

"I learnt more about adjectives, verbal, little bit of nouns, lots of other stuff."

"I would like the session to have been longer."

KS3 Pupil
DRA (reading accuracy) increased by seven months
Standardised word reading score increased from 84 to 107
Self-reported attitude toward and ability in reading and spelling improved

"I have worked on my literacy and I have seen a difference in my writing. I can write in more detail."

"If we went on a little bit longer so that I can learn more, to make my spelling more tip-top."

Figure 3: Pupil case studies

Implications for practice and research
Over the course of this literacy intervention, all of the pupils made progress, as measured by the assessments, with some or all aspects of literacy. There are a number of possible explanations for these positive outcomes such as the:

- **personalised and targeted nature of the programme with the EP assessment and recommendations report**
- **way in which the approach builds on the importance of relationships/ attachment with the member of staff being known to the child and the child to the tutor**
- **sensitivity of the practitioner supported with specific staff training on the potential vulnerabilities of pupils in care both academic and social and emotional**
- **immediacy and relevancy of the content of each session and its links with the curriculum that day/week**
- **multiple opportunities for bridging and supporting transfer of learning to the class curriculum.**

The structure and findings from this larger pilot project offer much from a research perspective. The programme is not an 'off the shelf' intervention and, at least initially, appears to be void of content. Thus it seemed counter intuitive to many practitioners and some researchers. However, a recent small-scale quasi-experimental study with thirty-two pupils that investigated the effectiveness of a similar approach to literacy support for pupils with mild literacy difficulties on transition to secondary school, found that the pupils in the intervention group made modest gains in spelling, reading efficiency and single word reading whilst the comparison group lost ground, relatively, in all three areas.[8] Moreover, such approaches do reflect what we currently know about the importance and effectiveness of adopting flexible, individualised approaches to supporting learning for pupils in care.[9]

Children and young people in care often find themselves in one to one tuition contexts in school and often between school placements. Evidence is emerging that tuition for pupils in care, whether one to one or group based can be effective.[10] Further research into the different types of tuition, including who, how and when tuition is best delivered is required. This project addressed all these questions thoughtfully and from the context of the pupil which helped to underpin its success.

8   Bark, C., & Brooks, G. (2016). How can children with mild literacy difficulties be supported at the transition to secondary school? A small-scale quasi-experimental study. British Journal of Special Education, 43(4), 373-393.
9   Tideman, E., Vinnerljung, B., Hintze, K. and Aldenius Isaksson, A. (2011). Improving foster children's school achievements. Adoption and Fostering, 35 (1), 44–56.
10 Harper, J., & Schmidt, F. (2016). Effectiveness of a group-based academic tutoring program for children in foster care: a randomized controlled trial. Children and Youth Services Review, 67, 238–246.

South Tyneside Virtual School
Leading and embedding practice across a local authority, Sunshine Circles case study

Background

In 2016, 17% of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in England were identified with some form of social, emotional and/or mental health (SEMH) difficulty.[11] It is estimated that approximately 70% of pupils in care have a SEN with SEMH the largest category. Moreover, schools report that this is a difficult area professionally and that they want to be informed of the evidence. However, a recent scoping review of whole school and targeted approaches to support pupils with SEMH found an emerging evidence base to support more effective provision for pupils with SEMH, but there remains, particularly at the group and individual level, a dearth of literature.[12] There is even less evidence available specifically evaluated with pupils in care with SEMH.

In this context, having a strong theoretical foundation is imperative, such as the bio-psycho-social theoretical approach that proposes that our behavioural and emotional wellbeing through childhood and adult life is a consequence of continual reciprocity of interactions between our natural abilities and the context in which we live our lives. The model recognises that positive influences, such as social and emotional accommodations and support at school, can be a force for meaningful change for pupils whilst acknowledging individual differences.

Once practitioners have decided a whole school approach and/or small group interventions there are other considerations to ensure successful outcomes. The first is the subject of programme fidelity – in other words, implementing a programme

11 DfE. 2016. Mental health and behaviour in schools edited by Department of Education. London.
12 Carroll, C., & Hurry, J. (2018). Supporting pupils in school with social, emotional and mental health needs: a scoping review of the literature. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 1-16.

that adheres to the protocol defined by the programme authors. This means, for example, ensuring that the practitioners delivering the programme are sufficiently trained and supported, that the stipulated number and length of sessions are delivered (including full pupil attendance) and any specifically designed resources are used, to name just three. We know from research (a review of 500 studies) that fidelity to programme implementation and outcomes are associated and that achieving good implementation increases the chances of programme success in statistical terms.[13]

Therefore, what is the role and contribution of a VS to support greater systemic and longitudinal practice across schools that supports pupils in care with SEMH? This was the question that Serena Middleton and Michelle Bland from South Tyneside VS wanted to investigate a part of the PALAC programme. Sunshine Circles, as an approach to support the social and emotional development of pupils in care, had been introduced to South Tyneside schools in 2015, with the first schools delivering the programme in 2016. Aware of the challenges of delivering interventions in schools, Serena and Michelle wanted to establish a more consistent approach to the implementation and delivery of Sunshine Circles across schools in the authority and therefore, increase the likelihood of better outcomes for pupils.

What did the Virtual School do?
The VS identified three strategic approaches to supporting implementation of Sunshine Circles across the authority. The first approach was to allocate responsibility for coordinating, monitoring and developing Sunshine Circles to two members of the team, namely Serena and Michelle. As

practitioners in the VS they were well placed for this role in that they had knowledge of the pupils in care and schools delivering the programme. They had also delivered Sunshine Circles groups in schools which provided an in-depth knowledge of the programme and of the challenges with implementing it. The second action was to set up a Sunshine Circles practice network across the authority. This included practitioners in schools currently delivering the programme, those colleagues interested in the programme and multi-disciplinary colleagues including educational psychologists and from North Tyneside who were experienced in the programme. The final action was to write an implementation guide for current and new practitioners which complemented the programme handbook. The guide included advice and support: why use Sunshine Circles; costs and resources; assessment; measuring the impact of Sunshine Circles and including parents/carers.

Outcomes for pupils and staff
The emphasis of the PALAC project was on staff development as opposed to pupil outcomes in this phase of the project. By the ends of the first year the practice network had fifteen members and the learning shared within the group had helped to build their confidence with implementing the programme. This knowledge was also used to inform the content of the implementation guide. One of the major concerns of the group was how to find a way to set targets and measure pupil progress that encapsulated the wide ranging and complex needs of pupils and which showed small steps in progress. Feedback from members of the network was that the SDQ and the Boxhall Profile had not always been sufficiently sensitive to demonstrate progress

13 Durlak, J. A, & Du Pre, E. 2008. Implementation matters: a review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. American journal of community psychology 41 (3-4), 327–z350.

and the Children's Behaviour Checklist too complex to administer. This led Serena and Michelle to develop a pre and post assessment tool based on the Early Years Foundation Stage profile areas but that could also be used with older aged primary pupils.

Feedback from practitioners who had received the implementation guide included:

"This will be so useful, as I am starting to implement in school."

"Thanks so much for this – I'm starting my group on Friday and it has been very helpful in my planning, perfect timing."

Implications for practice and research

One clear implication of this case study for practice is that implementing interventions effectively relies not just on the 'right approach with the right child' (which is a challenge in itself) but also factors relating to the fidelity of implementation. VS can play a strategic as well as operational role in contributing to sustaining effective approaches in schools through championing evidence informed approaches and providing long term support in programme fidelity. This does require a significant resource commitment on the part of any VS, but the potential rewards for practitioner development and ultimately pupil outcomes make it potentially a more cost effective commitment in the long term. Although

pupil outcomes have been observed at an individual pupil level, as documented in the Bamburgh and West Boldon case studies, one of the significant outcomes of the VS project has been the development of the assessment tool which can be used across all the schools thus allowing progress data to be recorded over time in each setting and across the authority. In this way the VS will develop its own evidence base for the efficacy of Sunshine Circles. Without the allocation of staff time and the subsequent practitioner network and development of the implementation guide, the chances of Sunshine Circles continuing to expand and embed in practice were far from certain.

Testing the efficacy of any programme in school presents considerable resource challenges, whether it is conducted as part of a mixed methods, quasi or randomised control trial. Moreover, funding for research rarely allows for follow up once the study is over. It is ultimately in the interest of pupils to investigate longitudinally the impact of different practices, pedagogies and specific interventions. VS are in many ways well placed to coordinate and monitor longitudinally the approaches to teaching and learning that best suit pupils in care and as in the case of the South Tyneside VS case study in Sunshine Circles, the approach does not always have to involve large scale research studies to elicit meaningful knowledge and understanding.

Section B:
Strategic approaches to raising and monitoring attainment

Surrey Virtual School
Implementation of post-16 electronic personal education plans (ePEPs)

Background

Ofsted (2016) reported that the quality of PEPs, from inspections across England, were found to be inconsistent in nearly half of local authorities with PEPs not up to date, lacking in SMART targets and in ambition on behalf of the children and young people in care.[14] Partly, in response to this context, local authorities are increasingly implementing electronic PEPs (ePEPs) to try to overcome some of the communication and practical challenges of completing a continuously evolving document that must be completed by a range of professionals in many different settings. There are many obvious advantages to ePEPs such as:

- **one access point to enable a large professional team to contribute**
- **facility for a VS to be able to collate, monitor and evaluate plans faster and more efficiently**
- **templates can be readily updated to keep abreast of, for example, statutory and local requirements**
- **they can be personalised, for example, uploading pupil work.**

Ofsted (2012), in its review of VS, did report that one VS had introduced ePEPs and observed that the percentage of pupils in care with a completed PEP had doubled. The ePEP was functioning as the evolving and living document that it should be. All relevant professionals had access, and pupils were themselves able to record their feelings and views. However, Ofsted also reported that one consequence of the 'remoteness' of the ePEP was that face-to-face meetings were less frequent, and to be mindful that increased completion rates did not always equate with an improvement in quality. So although it would seem that ePEPs offer some potential benefits, there remains much that is unknown about the extent and efficacy of its use.

This case study describes how Surrey VS piloted the introduction of ePEPs in February 2015 with its post-16 young people in care, in preparation for full implementation across the age range. The pilot sought to gain a better understanding of the facilitators and challenges of implementation and to

14 OFSTED (2016). The Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574464/Ofsted_social_care_annual_report_2016.pdf.

investigate how to evaluate the impact of the ePEP, in the short and medium term. Surrey VS planned to use lessons from the implementation to support the planned roll-out of ePEPs for all school aged pupils in care the following year.

What did the Virtual School do?

In February 2015, the VS introduced ePEPs for 229 post-16 students in care, almost 50 per cent of whom were in education provision outside Surrey. Surrey conducted a small-scale evaluation of the post-16 ePEP while they were being rolled out, to elicit the views of professionals on the quality of the content of the ePEP and the experience of completing a PEP online. To support the implementation of the new initiative, the VS delivered four half-day training events for social workers, education professionals and independent reviewing officers (IROs) in January 2015. Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the training and what elements of their learning they might implement on return to their settings. The feedback was also used to inform how the training might be improved for the eight half-days planned in June 2015 linked with the roll-out of ePEPs to all pupils in care from September 2015 (Reception to Year 13). An e-survey was sent to social workers, education professionals, IROs and social care managers to gather their views on the technical aspects of the ePEP, the content and quality of the ePEP and how it might be improved. Funding was also allocated to further education providers, in recognition of the initial changes to working practices required of colleagues in further education colleges.

Outcomes for the Virtual School

The initial response to the half-day ePEP preparation training event was very positive. The learning objectives of the session were to understand the needs and benefits of the ePEP for young people in care and to assist participants in the production of a

quality ePEP for students in care, using the ePEP process. Over 70% of participants reported that the training fully met the learning objectives. The participants were asked to prioritise actions for their own development as a result of the training. The most common themes were: signing up early to the ePEP site, improving ePEP targets, taking more time to prepare for review meetings, and analysis of the best use of Pupil Premium funding. The response rate to the e-survey was low (15%), however, for those respondents who had completed the ePEP, over half reported that it had been easy to complete and that the average time to complete the first ePEP for a student (which will always take the longest time) was approximately 1.5 hours.

Respondents were asked to report their views on the strengths of the new ePEP for post-16 pupils. The most common themes were: the plan focused on forward planning for the young person; it would be a positive experience for young people; tracking and recording for each young person was quick and straightforward; and there was less paperwork and chasing of professionals. The areas for development highlighted by the respondents included: ensuring students' ability to get their information; communication and training for staff not in the county on how to complete the ePEP; and the length of the document.

Four months after the launch of the ePEP, the Surrey team concerned with the implementation of ePEPS completed a 'Strengths, Challenges, Achievements and Next Steps' (SCAN) analysis. The project clearly demonstrated that there was a recognition of the need for post-16 ePEPs among professionals as it allowed young people to engage more effectively around decisions about their education and training. The meetings and dialogues that had taken place had improved communications and links between the VS, the LA and local

colleges. The ePEP process and review meetings facilitated greater information sharing on a range of education and training provisions. On a practical level, there was now a secure and accessible portal for staff to work on at any time. Already, the benefits of a reduction in entering repetitive information in a PEP from term to term were evident, and staff could now extract specific data items that had not previously been readily available. It also assisted in streamlining Pupil Premium funding. An initial half-day's training on the system, bringing all professional groups together, was sufficient for most professionals to go away and begin using the system.

Over the last two and a half years Surrey VS has seen a significant improvement in both the quantity and quality of ePEPs for those in post-16 provision. Figures on completion rates show the rise from an overall 23.6% in 2015 to over 80% by the end of the 2017 academic year. Included in the monitoring figures are further breakdowns by groups which show all students under the age of 18 years, except those very new to care, and all Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers had received regular educational feedback for several terms. The Surrey team has raised expectations that three termly PEP meetings are held for Year 13 students, despite many transitioning to Adult Services during the academic year, to ensure full support until the end of Key Stage 5 studies.

For some colleges where there were large numbers of care experienced students, the introduction of the ePEP has been difficult to implement fully. However, with flexibility built into the system and the willingness of staff and students to work with social workers and the VS these challenges are being met. Resources are now being found in all but a few colleges to support the process as the benefits are clear and include:

- **Supporting the young person to make their own decisions and develop independent skills by taking responsibility for their future**

- **Enabling college staff to become involved with other professionals whom they may not have been involved with otherwise and form links to better support the progress of a young person**

- **Supporting a progression route through post-16 and into higher education or employment.**

Shortly after the introduction of the post-16 ePEP, the Surrey team took the decision to roll out ePEPs for all age groups, including Early Years and this process is now embedded across Surrey social services with full co-operation from schools across the country.

Implications for practice and research

If relationships and recognition are integral to wellbeing and development, we need to consider opportunities strategically across the academic year as well as from day to day, to demonstrate (openly and obliquely) how important and valued each young person in care is within their community. The PEP process is perhaps the most obvious opportunity to demonstrate commitment to young people but, it remains an opportunity that has yet to be consistently seized. This case study from Surrey VS shows how ePEPs can contribute strategically and at an individual level to better education, employment and training outcomes for care experienced young people.

South Tyneside Virtual School
KS4 Checklist

Background

'Are we doing all we can for our students in care?' is a question that reflective school practitioners regularly ask of their own practice and that of their setting as a whole. The question is at the heart of the work of any virtual school (VS) as part of their role to challenge and support head teachers and colleagues across the schools in their local authority. The extension to this question and one asked by Ofsted is 'How do you know that you are doing all you can?'

To respond with confidence to such questions is challenging but with the emerging evidence base it is more than possible. Firstly, it requires that SLTs know and understand what effective current practice in schools looks like at different levels in the school. The recent publication of evidence based, whole school audits ensure that SLTs now have the tools needed for leadership in this area.[15] Secondly, school practitioners require a sensitive understanding of the varied lives of children and young people in care beyond the school gates. Finally, this breadth and depth of knowledge held by practitioners across the school needs to be personalised for each student despite some of the commonalities experienced by children and young people in care. The SMART targets in the PEP are central to this process.

The VS in South Tyneside supports at any one time approximately 300 children and young people in care across the authority and in neighbouring authorities. As part of the PALAC programme, they wanted to investigate how they might best support schools at Key Stage (KS) 4 to answer the question 'Are we doing all we can?' and their response was to devise the 'KS4 Checklist'.

What did the Virtual School do?

The VS wanted to write a concise, evidence-informed document that would serve as an aide-memoire to schools when reviewing termly progress and in preparation for an annual review. The result was the KS4 Checklist shown in Figure 4. The Checklist was based on the following principles:

- **It adopts a strengths based, holistic and proactive approach to planning for each student whilst raising awareness of the potential vulnerabilities specific to the young person**
- **It includes whole school approaches as well as one to one methods for ensuring better academic and wellbeing outcomes**
- **It focuses the team around the young person to consider the quality of communication and collaboration between school, home and care.**

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15 Carroll, C. and Cameron, C. (2017). *Taking Action for Looked After Children in School*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Pupil strengths	Pupil vulnerabilities
Has people that care around them	Trauma from pre-care experiences and/or coming into care
Has a full care order	Two or more placements changes in the past two years
In care for over a year	Two or more changes of school placement in the past two years
In a borough school	Two or more social workers in the past two years
Demonstrates agency in their lives	EHC plan for SEN
Supported with high expectations	Two or more school exclusions in the previous year
Receiving encouragement and support	Experience of mental health difficulties
Is able to make and maintain stable relationships	Placement in an out of borough school
Is able to participate and achieve outside school	Evidence of substance abuse
Current school placement is stable	Other:
Met national academic expectations at KS2	
Met national academic expectations at KS3	
Meeting current academic targets	
Is able to participate and achieve inside school	
Student feels a sense of belonging in school	
Support and intervention	

Support and intervention	Priorities for action
Whole school	
SLT has completed PALAC audit	
Student has a key worker in school	
Emotional support/counselling is available	
Designated teacher	
Has personal overview and responsibility for PP	
Involved in PEP meetings	
High quality PEP and SMART targets in place	
PP is linked to individual learning and targets	
Impact of PP for each student is evaluated	
Curriculum support	
1:1 tuition (English and maths if needed)	
Opportunities for involvement in mentoring programmes	
Group or 1:1 strategies used have an evidence base	
Effective communication	
Within school	
Between home and school	
Involvement of other agencies	
The PLACE (South Tyneside VS team)	

Figure 4: Key Stage 4 Checklist

Outcomes for the young people and school staff

Members of the VS team have used the KS4 Checklist with the designated teacher (DT), especially in preparation for PEP meetings. The feedback from schools to date has been very positive.

"The Checklist was a useful tool for summarising everything I needed to support the student."

"It highlighted his vulnerabilities and pointed me to the most appropriate course of action. I am not sure I would have been able to see the full picture otherwise."
(Designated Teacher)

It is proving a motivating tool to use with young people on an individual basis by revealing their strengths, identifying gaps in their learning experience and finding solutions to education barriers. In addition, it provides a structure for presenting the evidence base to schools in terms of sharing 'what works' for children and young people in care. Finally, it is a framework from which to hang solution focused meetings to synthesise all the information – especially in complex cases.

Implications for practice and research

Since the introduction of the PEP in 2000, reports from Ofsted and the limited research available on PEPs, have described a lack of consistency across local authorities (LAs) in the quality of PEPs.[16,17] This national picture across England remains largely unchanged and as recently as 2016, Ofsted reported the quality of PEPs as inconsistent in nearly half of LAs inspected.[18] The two main causes for

concern were the lack of ambition for the students and the lack of SMART targets that supported learners to make good progress. All too often PEP meetings lack planning, are piecemeal in their execution and therefore result in fragmented and often repetitive next steps for the young person. As a consequence, a fundamental opportunity for supporting the young person in care to move forward with their lives has been lost. A well-written PEP, is one of the most important ways that a school expresses their commitment to corporate parenting.

The KS4 Checklist is an important tool in supporting practitioners to take a moment to step back in the PEP planning process to look at the young person holistically, but also with ambition. The ambition required is as much for the adults around the young person as for the young person concerned.

Sixteen years after the introduction of the PEP, there has been scant evidence of any gradual improvement in their impact in supporting better outcomes for children and young people in care. Despite the evidence to show the challenge of writing effective education plans, whether they be a PEP or an EHCP, there is little research on the underlying processes, knowledge and skills required of writing effective plans. The KS4 Checklist is an important contribution to that evidence base but more is needed.

16 Ofsted (2012). The impact of virtual schools on the education of looked after children. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-virtual-schools-on-the-education-of-looked-after-children.

17 Hayden, C. (2005). More than a piece of paper?: Personal education plans and 'looked after' children in England. Child & family social work, 10(4), 343–352.

18 Ofsted (2016). The third annual report on the state of children's social care in England. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/574464/Ofsted_social_care_annual_report_2016.pdf.

Section C: Collaborating with carers

Schools and Lifelong Learning Service, Cardiff
Fostering and Enhancing Emotional Literacy (FEEL)

Background

In the UK and internationally, children and young people in care have a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties in comparison to their peers.[19] Some of the most commonly identified difficulties are conduct disorders, hyperkinetic disorders, depression and anxiety.[20] This has worrying implications for the wellbeing and education of pupils in care, as well as the foster placement stability as emotional and behavioural difficulties have been cited by foster carers as causes of placement breakdowns.[21] In addition, studies that have investigated factors associated with foster carer retention and satisfaction have reported the importance of positive foster carer-child relationships and higher carer self-efficacy. An association has also been found between training and foster carer well-being, satisfaction and intention to carry on

with fostering. Increased placement stability, in turn, has consequences for children and young people's education and well-being.

Fiona Prodohl and Jo Pike, two educational psychologists (with specialist roles working with looked after children) in the Schools and Lifelong Learning Service in Cardiff, were knowledgeable, via research as well as their own practice, of the potential of training for carers and the children and young people in their care. Initially, they planned to design and deliver a course just for foster carers on emotional literacy but the final group included teaching assistants (TAs) and residential care practitioners. This case study describes the content, outcomes and learning from the course.

19 York, W., & Jones, J. (2017). Addressing the mental health needs of looked after children in foster care: the experiences of foster carers. Journal of psychiatric and mental health nursing, 24(2-3), 143–153.
20 Meltzer, H., Gatward, R., Corbin, T., Goodman, R., & Ford, T. (2003). The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England. London: The Stationery Office.
21 Randle, M., Miller, L., Dolnicar, S., & Ciarrochi, J. (2014). The science of attracting foster carers. Child & Family Social Work, 19(1), 65–75.

What did the service do?

The course entitled 'Fostering and Enhancing Emotional Literacy' (FEEL) included five, four hour sessions that took place fortnightly at St Teilo's High School. All the practitioners who took part were working with children at the school or with their feeder primary schools. The sessions followed the structure below and participants were asked to complete tasks in between sessions with their young person e.g. keeping an emotions diary, making a memory box, making a firework model.

Session 1: Attachment and an Introduction to Emotional Literacy

Session 2: Self-Esteem and Communication Skills

Session 3: Managing Emotions

Session 4: Social and Friendship Skills

Session 5: Loss and Bereavement

Evaluation of the course was planned from the start, integral to capturing learning across the sessions and took different forms. On the first day participants were asked to complete a reflection sheet outlining what they hoped to learn from the course. At the beginning of every session, participants were asked to reflect on their learning from the previous day to find out what they'd taken from it.

In addition, at the end of every day participants were asked to evaluate the course content itself, for example, had they learnt something new, was there anything that they would have liked to have happened differently? Finally, at the end of the last session participants completed an overall evaluation of the course which collected numerical as well as descriptive data.

Outcomes for the practitioners and service

All of the practitioners found the course very helpful and evaluated it very positively. Following the training all participants rated their knowledge as at least 7 out of 10 for each topic and there was on average a three point increase in each area between baseline and the end of the course.

Participants had learned:

- **to understand a child's behaviours and the reasons behind these behaviours**
- **how to open a discussion about feelings with a young person**
- **to be more open when talking to young people**
- **that it's ok for young people to be angry but we need to help them express it in the best way**
- **to have more confidence when addressing the issue of loss and bereavement**
- **to think more carefully about the words they use when talking to young people**
- **ways of building self-esteem.**

They had enjoyed:

- **sharing and hearing the views and experiences of other people**
- **hearing about research and evidence**
- **doing practical activities**
- **understanding the child from another person's perspective**
- **hearing about new ideas and tools.**

Implications for practice and research

There is much for schools and multi-agency services to learn from this innovative course with three noteworthy features and strengths. Although recruiting foster carers was challenging, hosting the course in the school where the pupils attended rather than in a community venue meant that the foster carers felt familiar with the people and setting and therefore they were more confident about coming forward to engage with the course. Having a mixture of participants – foster carers, residential staff and teaching assistants – turned out to be a real strength of the project as it meant that the participants gained a better understanding of each other's roles and could see things from different perspectives and have a deeper appreciation for their work and contribution to supporting the individual pupils. A second strength of the course was the task to be completed at home as it allowed carers to put their learning into practice with the young person in their care: this enabled them to see behaviours and aspects of the young people that were less familiar and more positive. The chance to then share these observations and learning in the next session was particularly valued and enjoyed. Lastly, running the course over a number of weeks meant that the group bonded which meant they felt safe talking about their experiences. Foster carers do a very difficult job and very much appreciated and valued having the opportunity to share and to support each other.

The findings of this case study lend further support to the benefits of extended professional learning and development opportunities for foster carers in terms of improved feelings of self-efficacy as a carer. Despite the many responsibilities held by schools, this case study also points to the potential benefits of some of that training taking place in school with other staff and professionals who work with the same pupils as the foster carers. We know from the research on teacher professional learning and development that, for better results, pupil outcomes and where appropriate outcomes for individual pupils need to be the focus of learning. It would seem from this case study that research is needed to explore the benefits of extending this same approach to carers.

South Tyneside Virtual School
Working with carers

Background

Research, including the large scale, longitudinal Effective Pre School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE), indicates that no single educational influence acts as a 'magic bullet' that can overcome disadvantage. However, parental actions that provide a better home learning environment and also supportive educational environments can make a difference to children and young people's academic and other educational outcomes.[22] The limited research that has been undertaken has shown that this the same for pupils in care.[23,24] Studies from the UK and US have demonstrated that higher educational aspirations on the part of carers were associated with better outcomes and carer involvement in a greater number of school activities predicted significant improvement in the pupils' average marks.[25] A research team from Norway investigated what foster carers could do to support successful academic outcomes from the perspective of 16 young adults who had studied in HE and 13 foster carers.[26] The findings highlighted the importance of the promotion of a feeling of belonging in the foster home, valuing education and providing order and structure in the lives of the young people.

In terms of specific interventions, a paired reading literacy programme for children in care and their carers that required weekly liaison between teachers and carers demonstrated an average improvement of each child making progress of one year in just over four months.[27] Additionally, the average amount of progress made for each month the child participated in the intervention resulted in a reading age increase by just below three months. The impact of literacy interventions can also extend beyond literacy skills alone – including reported increases in the children's confidence and interest in reading.[28] Not only do children get to spend one-on-one

22 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Toth, K., ... & Welcomme, W. (2012). Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education 3-14 project (EPPSE 3-14)-Final report from the Key Stage 3 phase: influences on students' development from age 11-14.4.
23 Cameron, C., Connolly, G. and Jackson, S. (2015). A Practical Guide to the Education of Children in Care: Learning Placements and Caring Schools JKP.
24 Cheung, C., Lwin, K. and Jenkins, J. M. (2012). Helping Youth in Care Succeed: Influence of Caregiver Involvement on Academic Achievement. Children and Youth Services Review, 34, 1092–1100.
25 Flynn, R., Tessier N. & Coulombe, D. (2012). Placement, Protective and Risk Factors in the Educational Success of Young People in Care: Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Analyses. European Journal of Social Work, 16 (1): 70-87.
26 Skilbred, D. T., Iversen, A. C., & Moldestad, B. (2017). Successful Academic Achievement Among Foster Children: What Did the Foster Parents Do? Child Care in Practice, 23(4), 356–371.
27 Osbourne, C., Alfano, J. and Winn, T. (2010). Paired Reading as a Literacy Intervention for Foster Children. Adoption & Fostering, 34, 17–26.
28 Griffiths, R. (2012). The Letterbox Club: An Account of a Postal Club to Raise the Achievement of Children aged 7 to 13 in Foster Care. Children and Youth Services Review, 34, 1101–1106.

time with their carer, the interventions also facilitated partnership working, building the trust and confidence in the relationship between carers, teachers and social workers.[29] This was very much the findings of evaluations of The Letterbox Club project in England which sends parcels of literacy materials directly to children in care not only to encourage learning with their carers but to also focus their energy on engaging with and owning educational materials.

Finally, findings from the London Fostering Achievement Programme, a project across London LA that aimed to improve the confidence and skills of carers to engage with schools and make a positive contribution to the education of children in care, found positive results from the introduction of Education Champions who were employed for four hours per week by five of the LAs. They were experienced foster carers, often with education experience, who worked with less experienced foster carers to boost their confidence around supporting educational needs by, for example, attending meetings with them, working with them and their foster child at home on reading or maths or helping them to navigate the educational system.

Three members of the South Tyneside VS team, Michael Bettencourt, Dr Emma Black and Vicky Borrell wanted to investigate how carers can contribute towards the learning of children in care. This included questions around the facilitators and barriers carers can experience in order to have a deeper

understanding of how to support carers to implement strategies, behaviours, mind sets or ways of being that contribute towards learning in the home.

What did the Virtual School do?
In order to find out about the different perspectives, the team from the VS undertook three main activities.

The first activity was to work with a focus group of five carers over a term to reflect on the different learning opportunities that can happen at home such as: reading; homework; planning a trip; shopping or making something together and to complete a diary (approximately five entries) which asked them to:

1. **Describe the activity**
2. **What did you feel when it was happening?**
3. **How did the activity go?**
4. **What helped or did not help with supporting the child?**
5. **Could you have done anything differently?**
6. **What are you going to do next?**

The second activity was a six-week programme with children in care run by the VS in collaboration with Headliners. Headliners (UK)[31] is a charity which gives young people a voice by using journalism and media as a tool for learning and exploring issues. Children were asked to investigate how they were supported to learn at home. They participated in a number of learning activities and were supported by

29 Dymoke, S. and Griffiths, R. (2010). The Letterbox Club: the Impact on Looked-After Children and their Carers of a National Project Aimed at Raising Achievements in Literacy for Children aged 7 to 11 in Foster Care. Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 10, 52–60.
30 Sebba et al. (2016). Evaluation of The London Fostering Achievement Programme Final Report. https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_fostering_achievement_evaluation_final_report.pdf.
31 Headliners UK. https://www.headliners.org/.

the Virtual School to interview foster carers and other LA staff. They worked with an artist practitioner, creating two characters and depicted learning at home through comic strips. They also created five models of the 'Ideal (Learning) Home'.

Finally, interviews took place with four experienced DTs from four very different school contexts (including primary, secondary and a special school). Teachers were asked to consider the attributes of foster carers where the care and support for children and young people had been very strong. The DTS were asked what the carers did or said to support the education of children in their care.

Outcomes for pupils, carers and staff

The pupils were able to articulate the practical things that supported them at home like a desk, computer, books and resources. They also demonstrated an emerging understanding of the principles of social pedagogy which was introduced to them through the learning activities. The comic strips were nuanced and demonstrated numerous examples of children getting alongside foster carers, discovering and learning together in a number of informal contexts. They articulated that learning was not confined to schools but understood it in its broadest sense and in the everyday.

Some of the main themes which emerged from the carers' focus group included the importance of adopting a solution-focused approach, being aware of and using various support networks and being attuned to the emotional needs of children and young people in care. The message from teachers echoed the emerging themes from the discussions in the foster carers' focus group. The more effective carers were described as pro-active and could not be distinguished from other parents. They

attended every meeting that was required whatever their home circumstances. Their role was akin to a vocation and was characterised by professionalism and a personal commitment. The stronger foster carers were curious, unrelenting and were often described as the 'model' that DTs wanted for all of their parents.

Using the findings from the three different activities with the carers, pupils, children and from the evidence base, the team devised a 'checklist' for carers (Figure 5). This was to be used as a basis for informing practice generally in schools and with carers but also as a quick reference tool during meetings with parents that could be used by practitioners in schools and in the VS and provided to carers for their own reference.

Implications for practice and research

Carers regularly report that they would like to increase their knowledge and understanding of how to better support the education of children in their care. Findings from this case study show that schools and VS can be an important source of information and support for carers and that it is important for settings to take a proactive approach with carers, especially carers new to a school. Some schools, for example, aware of the bureaucratic demands on carers, have introduced a slimmed down school prospectus for carers which can be quickly referenced to support the transition of a child in care into a new school setting. It is in the interest of schools to work proactively with carers, even during settled periods, in order to be aware of any early warning indicators that a pupil may be experiencing difficulties in their school and/or foster carer placement.

We know from research that behaviour difficulties, particularly in adolescence, are strongly associated with foster carer placement breakdown.[32] Therefore, research that focuses on how to strengthen links between foster placements and schools in the first instance might help to prevent breakdown or at the very least enable a more responsive and collaborative approach between foster carers and schools when difficulties arise.

Working with schools	Learning culture in the home
Take part in and contribute to Personal Education Plans meetings	Talk about high expectations
Attend parent/carer meetings	Talk about high aspirations
Attend school functions	Study space
Annual South Tyneside Virtual School Carers' Conference	Study resources
Carer school prospectus	Discover together (let's find out)
	Look for opportunities for learning in the everyday

Sources of support/information	Learning activities
Know your Virtual School contact	Reading
Does your LA have an Education Champion for foster carers?	Homework
The Letterbox Club	Planning a trip
Paired Reading	Making something together
Using Pupil Premium	'Remember when we …'
Connexions Officer	Shopping
National Curriculum website	A visit to …
Other websites – e.g. Home Education UK	Talking, listening …
National Association of Virtual School Headteachers	Discussing the film, book or TV programme watched together
The Fostering Network	Practical activities like gardening, fixing the car

Figure 5: Carer Education Checklist

32 Vinnerljung, B., Sallnäs, M., & Berlin, M. (2017). Placement breakdowns in long-term foster care – a regional Swedish study. Child & Family Social Work, 22(1), 15–25.

Section D: Multi-disciplinary working

Lambeth Education Psychology Service
Developing working collaborations between Educational Psychology services and Virtual Schools

Background

Pupils in care come into contact with a range of multi-agency professionals, including Educational Psychologists (EPs). There is, however, very little published research about the nature and impact of the work of EPs with this group of children and young people. There is even less research that helps to describe and assess any formal working relationships and collaborations between EPs and VS. One early paper concerned with the education of pupils in care in 1996 described how EPs identified different roles including educational advocacy, preventative approaches, multi-agency working and early intervention.[33] A more recent study of 107 EPs across five local authorities in the south west of England found that the majority (83%) of EPs worked with pupils in care as part of their school work as opposed to any formal collaboration with the VS. Fifteen per cent of the group did hold a specialist children in care role which accounted for an average of 0.33 of their time.[34] Table 4 summarises the activities undertaken by the EPs in these specialist roles with an emphasis on support, training, promoting achievement and multi-agency working.

What is not evident from the study is how the specialist role is positioned alongside or within the VS. EPs will have been supporting pupils in care long before the introduction of VS and collaborations will have developed organically in response to the local context within a LA. There is no blueprint for this collaboration both in establishing responsibilities (for both services) and indicators of the contribution of the EP service to pupil experiences and outcomes. Such knowledge would be helpful to inform and support those VSH looking to bring EP time under the direction of the VS.

33 McParlin, P. (1996). Children 'Looked after' (in care) Implications for Educational Psychologists: Relentless decades of prejudice, disadvantage and appalling educational outcomes. Educational Psychology in Practice, 12(2), 112–117.
34 Norwich, B., Richards, A., & Nash, T. (2010). Educational psychologists and children in care: Practices and issues. Educational Psychology in Practice, 26(4), 375–390.

Table 4: Activities of EPs in specialist roles (Norwich et al. 2010)

Roles	Examples
Supportive	Individual case work/Attendance at planning meetings /Contribute to carer support group/Reintegration of children in care into mainstream schools
Training	Training for trainee EPs, carers, DTs/Developmental work for leaving care service
Promoting achievement	Research work on attainment/Raising awareness of children in care in educational psychology service
Multi agency working	Participate in multi agency team meetings – provide psychological perspective
Overview	Liaise with other services/Specialist adviser/Contribute to parent/carer forum/Chair local practitioner group/Panel work (for children in care and excluded children)

This case study presents an account of how Anne-Marie Buchanan, a Senior Specialist Educational Psychologist (Inclusion and Vulnerable Groups) in Lambeth, a LA in the south of London, explored different ways to build a model of collaboration between the Lambeth EP service and the VS. In September 2016 Anne-Marie took up a temporary secondment of ten sessions over one academic year as part of a traded service agreement. Joining the PALAC project at this point afforded the opportunity to look at this new collaboration as part of an evidence informed programme. At the heart of the PALAC project in particular was an interest in striking a balance between supporting individual pupil case work, currently the most common and significant element of the role and functioning strategically and proactively with the VS.

What did the EP service and VS do?
Phase 1
After reviewing the wider evidence from day one of the PALAC programme alongside the priorities of the VS, it was decided to use the annual DT conference to present and run workshops on two areas:

THINKSPACE[35] Approach
THINKSPACE is a reflecting team model approach that provides a structure for any group of professionals in schools or in multi agency teams to explore individual cases that are, for example, sometimes a source of anxiety for the group. It facilitates discussion of the dilemmas to try and generate next steps that are realistic and rele¬vant to the context of the child. The approach follows the following (summarised) steps:

- **Construction of a genogram of the child (birth and foster family and an eco-map of the network)**
- **History of their life experience and care history and a review of emotional, physical and social development and educational progress**
- **Explore where anxiety about the child/young person is located in the system**
- **Created a shared understanding of a child's behaviour**
- **Explore next steps.**

Various adaptations of the THINKSPACE approach have been used, with success, in a number of PALAC projects to date.

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35 Swann, R. C., & York, A. (2011). THINKSPACE-the creation of a multi-agency consultation group for Looked After Children. Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 16(1), 65–71.

Based on this, Anne-Marie introduced the approach in a workshop with a case study for each group to discuss, based on the THINKSPACE model. It was followed up with a discussion about the potential contribution of the model to support pupils, especially those in Key Stage 4 who were a cause for concern.

PALAC school audit

The PALAC programme has published an audit for whole school provision for pupils in care, based on the seven domains described in the introduction of this booklet (see p. 5). The audit (based on research, practice and policy) allows school practitioners to assess practice in their setting, identify strengths and areas for development. Feedback on the tool with respect to the contribution to practice from PALAC programme evaluations has been consistently high from DTs relatively new to the role and those more experienced practitioners. Anne-Marie asked participants to begin to discuss the tool with a view to how it might be used in their settings. Strategically, the tool can be used by a VS as an audit of current practice in schools to identify for example, priorities for practitioner learning and development.

Phase 2

As a result of positive feedback from the conference, the VS looked to support the use of the THINKSPACE approach within the VS. The conference also highlighted the need for greater multi-agency collaboration on the part of the VS and a 'professional conversation' seminar, chaired independently, was held, including colleagues from CAMHS, the youth offending team, social care and the community paediatrician team.

Outcomes for the EP service and Virtual School

The Lambeth EP is now further embedded in the Lambeth VS. The EP has been commissioned as a part of a Service level agreement for 35 sessions over the academic year 2018/19. Not only has direct work with young people in or out of the borough been commissioned but the EP role has been extended to contribute and help plan wider strategic intervention such as the 'Designated Teacher Conference' focusing on building resilience. The EP helped the Virtual School to organise guest speakers such as Dr Amber Eliott and source a guest speaker for the Lambeth Mental Health Day - Dr Ruth MacConville, Educational Consultant.

Implications for practice and research

The Lambeth case study provides two specific examples that demonstrate the contribution of EPs to the work of a VS at a strategic level. Firstly, it shows that EPs' understanding of the complexities around multiagency working, which can be a challenge within the context of the lives of children and young people in care, can be utilised to support VS and DT practice. Secondly, their knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning more broadly can help to develop DT practice over time through VS conferences and regular networking groups. The PALAC audit can strengthen this work by providing an evidence informed framework and route for practitioner learning and development.

EPs are working closely with pupils in care every day to improve their education experiences and outcomes. To date, we have little research evidence to document their specific contribution to these outcomes. As with investigating the contribution of teachers to outcomes, this is a research challenge. However, a first step might be for VS and their EP colleagues to monitor in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and additional needs the pupils EPs support and elicit from DTs the contribution of the EP service to their practice.

Nottingham City Virtual School
Strengthening links between education and social care

Background

When a child or young person enters the care system for the first time, his/her social worker must ensure that the needs of the child and how they will be met by the LA are documented in a care plan. One element of the care plan is the PEP. This is a record of what needs to happen to enable that the child or young person to reach their full potential. Social workers have a statutory duty to initiate and subsequently support the completion of a termly PEP.

Therefore, having an informed understanding of the school system, including the role of VS, DTs, how to write SMART targets and contribute meaningfully to review meetings, is essential for all social workers responsible for children and young people in care. However, the social work profession, including child and family social workers is subject to a high turnover of staff and a heavy reliance on temporary agency staff.[36] This national context for social work was reflected in the City of Nottingham and in response the VS wanted to try and mitigate any potential negative impact on the lives of children and young people in care by offering a programme of workshops. The aim of the workshops was for newly qualified and experienced social workers to have an enhanced understanding of how to support better education outcomes for children and young people in care.

36 Bowyer, S., & Roe, A. (2015). Social work recruitment and retention. Research in Practice. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/RiP_Strategic_Briefing_social_work_retention_web.pdf.

What did the school do?

The following activities were undertaken by the VS:

- **A rolling, differentiated and personalised training programme consisting of one-hour slots and drop-in sessions was devised**
- **Four training slots were held from December 2015 to June 2016 with individual one-hour individual follow-up sessions and included subjects such as an introduction to the role of the VS and how it can support the education of looked after children, how to complete a PEP and how to apply for a school place.**

Outcomes for staff

A total of 18 social workers attended the training with six of these coming to at least two different workshops. Their years in service ranged from four months to 27 years and they represented different social care teams including, for example, Children in Need. Their roles were varied, including social workers and family support workers.

The workshops were very well received by those who attended:

- **84% of the attendees felt that the workshops were very good or excellent**
- **All of the attendees agreed that the training had increased their knowledge and understanding of how to support the education of looked after children (57% strongly agreed)**
- **All of the attendees would recommend the training workshop to others (63% strongly agree).**

The attendees particularly liked the sessions on the statutory responsibilities of social workers, VS head teachers and schools, funding sources, how to complete a PEP and time for question and answer sessions.

The attendees reported that the workshops could have been even better if they had included a timeline of social worker responsibilities and more exemplar forms. Comments from the evaluations also mentioned that training with teachers and SENCos would have been welcomed. As a result of the feedback received the VS team were planning to run the training again the following year supported with a training handbook for social workers.

Implications for practice and research

The City of Nottingham VS workshop programme did successfully meet the expectations and training needs of those social workers who attended. It provides a template for other VS in terms of content and structure for similar social worker training and collaboration. The participants appreciated the flexibility offered and the balance of whole group sessions with opportunities for individual follow-up sessions. Nevertheless, despite the flexibility and relevance of the content of the programme, the attendance rates were low despite this being an area of interest and need on the part of the social work profession. The project answered the question about the type of training that can be offered and was positively received by social workers but highlighted the strategic need, on the part of leaders of social care teams, to enable social workers to attend such training.

Lincolnshire Early Years Service
Identifying and supporting children in care in the early years with communication and language development

Background

Children who suffer trauma at a very early age are at significant risk of delays in their development including their language skills, cognitive skills and social and emotional skills. A study of 55 preschool children who had suffered maltreatment identified 91% as having a significant developmental delay in one area and/or a significant behavioural difficulty, while two-thirds had both a developmental delay and a behavioral difficulty.[37] Acquiring strong early language levels is essential as it is well established that language skills are one of the strongest predictors of educational success.[38] Moreover, research has shown that, without support, children who enter school with poorly developed speech and language are at risk of literacy difficulties and educational underachievement in primary and secondary school.[39]

Almost three quarters of children in England who enter the care system do so because of abuse and/or neglect and are therefore at risk of language delay. However, there is currently little empirical data on the prevalence of language difficulties for children who enter foster care in the early years and how best to address their language needs. One recent Australian study of 82 primary aged school pupils showed that the cohort performed significantly below the normative mean on both tests assessing language and social skills. However, the limited research available on language support for children in care, indicates that being placed in care does promote the likelihood of a language rich environment that was reduced or absent before care.[40]

Concerns about the extent of communication and language delays for children in care and the implications for development if not addressed, led to the Early Years team in Lincolnshire piloting a programme that screened children for communication and language difficulties and implemented an early intervention programme for children identified as requiring further language

37 McDonald, J. L., Milne, S., Knight, J., & Webster, V. (2013). Developmental and behavioural characteristics of children enrolled in a child protection pre-school. Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, 49(2).

38 Roulstone, S., Law, J., Rush, R., Clegg, J., & Peters, T. (2011). Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes. Project Report. UK Department of Education, Bristol. http://eresearch.qmu.ac.uk/2484/1/DFE-RR134.pdf

39 Dockrell, J. E., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 27(2), 223–237.

40 Nicole Byrne, Tania Lyddiard & Rachel Furniss (2017) Considering the impact of maltreatment on children in Out of Home Care when providing speech language pathology intervention: case examples, Speech, Language and Hearing, DOI: 10.1080/2050571X.2017.1338847.

Table 5: Language difficulties experienced by the children

	Area of Concern %			
	Expression	**Understanding**	**Both**	**Neither**
2-3 years	10.5	42	37	10.5
3+ years	22	25	44	8
Total	18	31	42	9

Table 6: Progress made with language

No. of children who remained in care for the duration of the project		Baseline Attainment			Post Project Attainment			Expected Rate of Progress		
		Below	At	Above	Below	At	Above	Below	At	Above
Male	6	5	1	0	5	1	0	0	2	4
Female	4	3	1	0	3	1	0	1	3	0
Total	**10**	**8**	**2**	**0**	**8**	**2**	**0**	**1**	**5**	**4**
		80%	20%		80%	20%		10%	50%	40%

support. This case study describes how members of the Early Years team including Rachael Brian, Sarah Lawford, Sally Pursey and Amy Walkey worked to ensure that more children in care in the early years were prevented from falling behind with their language development.

What did the Early Years team do?
Based on a review of the evidence, the team adopted the WellComm Speech and Language Toolkit for Screening and Intervention in the Early Years.[41] WellComm is specifically designed for children from six months up to six years old. WellComm bands children into one of three categories; red means extra support is needed along with a referral to a specialist, amber means extra support and intervention

is recommended, and green means no intervention is currently required. After screening, if a child needs further support, suggestions for fun, play-based activities from the Big Book of Ideas linked to the toolkit are recommended to move a child forward.

The pilot programme took place between May and December 2016 and during that time the team screened 33 children in care (Female = 15, Male = 18), aged two to four who attended private, voluntary or independent nurseries. (Children in school nurseries were supported by the speech therapy Specialist Teaching team.) Once the results of the screening assessment were analysed, 22 children were identified for further support by the team and visited once

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41 WellComm Speech and Language Toolkit for Screening and Intervention in the Early Years. https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/case-studies/wellcomm-helping-under-5s-talk-to-learn-at-south-staffordshire-children-s-centres/.

a term over the course of the project. During these visits, progress was reassessed, the next steps were identified, including support activities from the Big Book of Ideas and shared with the setting, carers and the Virtual School.

What were the outcomes for children and staff?

The results of the initial screening showed that 30 of the 33 children (91%) experienced some degree of difficulty either with language expression, understanding or both (Table 5). Almost half the children experienced difficulties with both the expression and understanding of language.

Although a large percentage of the children remained in care for the length of the project they were still below the expected level of attainment on completion of the project, however, 50% of children made at least the expected rate of progress and 40% made accelerated progress, thereby narrowing their attainment gap (Table 6).

As a result of the pilot programme, the relationship between the team and practitioners in the various early years settings was strengthened and the practitioners generally saw the pilot as a supportive process. The advice was seen as relevant and suitable for the children and many appreciated the suggestions from the Big Book of Ideas. From the perspective of the Early Years team, there was a general consensus that the programme was making a difference by raising the communication and language needs of children in care and by improving practice to support stronger language development.

Implications for practice and research

Findings from this case study and the wider evidence of the developmental effects of neglect and abuse, show that the gap in communication and language development between children in care and their peers can develop very early and quickly in a child's life. Therefore, the importance of early screening and additional support if necessary is very clear. One of the strengths of the approach used by the Early Years team was the formative nature of the screening tool used which helped to advise the practitioners about the level of support required and examples of some possible approaches. Using a specific screening tool for communication and language was also observed to be more sensitive than the Early Years assessment framework, with specific gaps in skills and concepts identified, which meant that more pupils at risk of poorer communication and language development were identified.

Although research is emerging to show the extent of communication and language difficulties for children in the early years and in primary school, even less is known about the levels for secondary aged pupils. Bearing in mind the impact of abuse and neglect for development, it is not unreasonable to assume that teenagers entering care, who may have experienced years of maltreatment, will be at risk of impaired levels of communication and language. This will and does have implications for the academic school curriculum, as well as social and emotional development and wellbeing. Therefore, further research that identifies accurate levels of language and communication skills for all phases of education would help to illuminate the extent of any difficulties and help to ensure more accurate and targeted support.

Conclusion

The participants in the PALAC programme implemented a variety of changes in their VS at pupil, practitioner and strategic levels. At the pupil level, initiatives included, for example, improvements in social and emotional development as well as literacy. At practitioner and strategic levels, some of the participants used the PALAC programme as a springboard to improve working with carers and other multi-disciplinary practitioners. Many of the VS in the PALAC programme have continued with their focus on the projects described in this publication and in doing so are ensuring that their work contributes to an emerging evidence base for current practice.

Promoting the Achievement of Looked After Children (PALAC) is a knowledge exchange programme that aims to support the development of practice in schools and to expand the evidence base to ultimately improve outcomes for children in care.

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