

***Doctorate in Professional Educational,  
Child and Adolescent Psychology***



**Institute of Education, University of London**

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Psychology**

**Doctoral Thesis**

***A Complex Systems Perspective  
Regarding the Support for Children  
Looked After in Schools in England***

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## **Declaration**

I, Abigail Gilbert, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

In line with guidance, the word count includes any footnotes, endnotes, glossary, maps, diagrams, and tables, but excludes the appendices and list of references, as well as the title page, declaration, abstract, impact statement, acknowledgements, contents page and lists of tables and figures.

## **Abstract**

Despite targeted investment and policy development over the past 20 years, outcomes for 'children looked after' (CLA) by local authorities remain disproportionately poor when compared to peers outside of the care system. Designated teachers (DTs) and virtual schools (VS') have statutory positions within systems of support for CLA and are responsible for promoting the educational outcomes of CLA, a core function of their roles being the facilitation of effective joined-up working between education and social care.

The purpose of this study was to apply a complex systems theory framework to illustrate multi-agency practice within the systems of support for CLA, investigating how these systems function and highlighting challenges and facilitating factors for effective joined-up working. A mixed methods exploratory design with a case study element was used to yield data from national online surveys with DTs (n=307) and VS staff (n=56), and six semi-structured interviews with DTs (n=3) and VS staff (n=3) from a single local authority context. At the start of interviews, a network mapping activity took place to produce sociograms. These are graph databases that depict relationships among individuals in a network. Thematic and social network analysis were used to analyse case study data and descriptive statistics were used to analysis survey data.

Findings illustrate how the systems of support for CLA are complex. Emergence of macro-level behaviour such as collaboration and a child-centred approach can be attributed to the dynamic interactions of micro-level components including the availability of individuals, the consistency of individuals, and core

functions of the DT and VS roles. It is also concluded that Educational Psychologists can have a place in these systems but this should be on a case-by-case basis.

(277 words)



## **Impact Statement**

This study investigated the systems of support for children looked after (CLA) within a complex systems theory framework. These systems contain key players such as designated teachers (DTs), virtual schools (VS') and social workers (SWs), who connect with one another and many others within the systems around CLA in a multitude of ways.

By gathering views from national samples of DTs and VS staff, and using social network analysis (SNA) with a case study sample of these professionals, multi-agency working to support CLA has been illustrated within the context of large complex systems. This study demonstrates the importance of understanding micro level components, such as the consistency of individuals supporting CLA and their availability, and their dynamic interactions which produce macro level behaviour such as collaboration and thus effective joined-up working.

Findings have contributed to the growing body of literature regarding DTs, VS, and outcomes for CLA. This study also highlights the benefit of moving away from component-only linear cause-effect models and embracing a dynamic interaction-dominant model within educational psychology research. Applying methods such as SNA within educational psychology facilitates understanding of CLA within the context of the complex systems that surround them.

In line with findings that access to and capacity of Educational Psychologists (EPs) can be limited, it will be important for the government to facilitate policies that ensure significantly more EPs are being trained than there are currently. One of the ways this could be achieved is by the government providing more funded training

placements on the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy) courses.

Despite the statutory guidance stating the DT role should be held by a teaching member of school staff (Department for Education, 2018), this study has exposed the challenge teaching commitments can have on the time to fulfil the DT role in contexts with high numbers of CLA, and availability to others, which in turn can have a detrimental impact on collaborative working and effective support for CLA and therefore I propose a ratio of hours for the DT role against numbers of CLA in a school.

Moreover, EPs need to be aware of the emotional labour individuals within the systems of support for CLA can experience. There may be a role for EPs to check-in with individuals and provide supervision when appropriate. In this respect, EPs should be mindful of their own wellbeing when a part of a system of support for CLA and previously children looked after (PCLA).

The findings of this study will be disseminated through a research briefing sent to DTs and VS staff who contributed to this research and there is potential for findings to be published in an academic journal. In addition, the implications for EP practice could be disseminated to LA services throughout the country in the form of a research briefing via established professionals' networks and organisations.

(474 words)

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## **Glossary of Terms**

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CLA	Child Looked After / Looked After Child
CYP	Children and Young People
CWSW	Child With a Social Worker
DEdPsy	Doctorate in Educational Psychology
DES.	Department of Education and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
DoH	Department of Health
DSL	Designated Safeguarding Lead
DT	Designated Teacher
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
HoY	Head of Year
LA	Local Authority
MHL	Mental Health Lead
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PCAL	Previously Child Looked After
PEP	Personal Educational Plan
PP	Pupil Premium
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SWE	Social Work England
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist

VS	Virtual School
VSH	Virtual School Headteacher

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview**

This chapter defines key terminology, outlines the current context for children in care, the statutory support that exists, and the historical context behind such support. The relevance to Educational Psychology is explained and the rationale for the study is presented. The aim of this chapter is to also provide the reader with an understanding of a relevant theoretical framework that underpins the research before the research questions are stated.

### **1.2 Key Terminology**

Throughout policy and research, the term Looked After Children (LAC) is used to refer to children and young people (CYP) aged 0-18 who are subject to a care order or who are accommodated by the local authority (LA) (Section 22, Children Act, 1989). When a child becomes 'looked-after' the LA undertakes the role of the 'corporate parent' and the welfare and safeguarding of the child become the LA's legal and moral responsibility. CYP can become 'looked-after' if they are at risk of or suffering significant harm (Section 31, Children Act, 1989) or if the CYP is to be remanded to youth detention or LA accommodation (Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012).

Advocates within the care community have raised concerns about the acronym 'LAC', suggesting it can create the impression that such individuals are 'lacking' in something. Alternative terms have been gaining popularity such as 'Care Experienced', which has been introduced by the Scottish government to describe

any child that has been in care, is currently in care, or is from a looked-after background. For the purpose of this thesis, the term 'Children Looked After' (CLA) will be used to refer to all CYP whose care is the responsibility of the LA. The acronym PCLA will be used to refer to those CYP who have left the care of the LA - they are 'Previously Children Looked After'. PCLA are CYP who have experienced either an Adoption Order, Special Guardianship Order (SGO), or a Child Arrangements Order.

The legal status of CLA vary and include care orders (section 47, Children Act 1989), voluntary agreements (section 20, Children Act 1989), placement orders (section 21, Adoption and Children Act 2002) and those detained for child protection reasons (section 37, Children Act 1989) or under youth justice legal status (section 92, Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012). When a CYP is 'looked after' a primary duty of the LA is to '*act as a good cooperate parent to enable each looked after child to achieve his/her full potential in life*' (Section 22(3), Children Act 1989). This includes promoting the educational achievement of CLA (Children Act, 2004).

Hare and Bullock (2006) highlighted how individual factors, such as a child's length of stay in care, experience of domestic violence, drug-misusing parents, anti-social behaviour and educational difficulties will be unique to each CLA. Therefore, whilst labelled and referred to as a categorised group, it is important to recognise that CLA and PCLA are not a homogenous group, but individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and needs.

### **1.3 Current Context for Children Looked After in England**

Government statistics show that by the end of March 2022, there were 82,170 CLA in England (Department for Education (DfE), 2022). This is the highest number ever following a year-on-year rise. The DfE (2022) reported that the reasons for CYP being 'looked after' included abuse or neglect (66%), family dysfunction (13%), family being in acute stress (7%), no parents available to provide for the child (7%), the child's or parent's disability or illness (5%), and low income or socially unacceptable behaviour (1%).

Historical data has shown that CLA and PCLA are one of the lowest performing groups in terms of educational outcomes (Flynn et al., 2013). For the academic year 2021/2022, 11% of CLA (for at least 12 months), and 8% of CLA (for less than 12 months), achieved a grade 5 or above in English and mathematics at GCSE. This compares to 49.8% of the overall population who met or exceeded this 'pass' threshold. A similar picture has consistently been reported over previous years (DfE, 2022).

CLA are over twice as likely to present with a special educational need (SEN) compared to the overall pupil population (DfE, 2022). As of March 2022, 57.4% of CLA (for at least 12 months) were identified as having SEN, compared to 16.3% of the overall population (DfE, 2022). The data from the DfE highlights that for approximately 50% of all CLA with SEN, the primary presenting need was 'Social, Emotional, and Mental Health' (SEMH).

It has been highlighted in research that in the long term, CLA and PCLA have poorer life chances and outcomes compared to their peers. CLA and PCLA have poorer employment prospects (Hook & Courtney, 2011) and health outcomes (Dixon, 2008), and are over-represented in the homeless (Davison & Burris, 2014) and prison populations (Centre for Social Justice, 2015). Poor educational progress and low attainment are known to be associated with these longer-term outcomes (Feinstein & Hammond 2004).

Several factors have been identified as having the potential to contribute to poor educational progress and low attainment for CLA and PCLA. These include low attendance, low expectations, high exclusion rates, failure to prioritise education, placement instability, numerous school changes, and inadequate collaboration between education and care services (Berridge, 2007; Cameron et al., 2015; Harker et al., 2003; Harker et al., 2004).

Promoting the academic achievement of CLA and PCLA has rightly been a high priority in more recent government policy (Carroll & Cameron, 2017; Ferguson, 2018). Calls for collaboration between education, care services, and other individuals in the wider systems of support around CLA have been consistently reported throughout policy.

#### **1.4 Statutory Support for Children Looked After - a Multi-Agency Approach**

Robust multi-agency systems of support are crucial for preventing and mitigating factors that can foster poor outcomes for CLA and PCLA. Developments in government policy regarding support for CYP over the past 75 years have consistently been in response to the failings of multi-agency working. In the present

day, statutory roles are situated within the systems around CLA and PCLA to support their progress - Designated Teachers (DTs) and Virtual Schools (VS). Promoting the educational achievement of CLA and PCLA is the core function of these roles, with statutory guidance on how to achieve this pointing to a commitment to and facilitation of joined-up working. Information about DTs and VS will be covered in this chapter, but first, to understand the context of how these positions came to be, development of policy and the introduction of key government initiatives over time must be explored.

#### ***1.4.1 Historical Context of Key Policy Development and Government Initiatives***

Following the Children Act 1948, LA Children's committees and officers were first introduced. The Act was directly influenced by the Monkton Report following the death of fostered child Dennis O'Neil. Among the issues that contributed to Dennis' death was a lack of partnership working and a lamentable failure of communication between staff and agencies involved (Hopkins, 2007). It was not until 1970 that social services departments were created, amalgamating existing social welfare provision for adults and children. However, a new focus on the development of social work as a credible profession resulted in an inward-looking service and a limited remit to work with other agencies (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2007). At the same time, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Condry (1970) wrote about the importance of a national approach to 'joined-up', collaborative working to support CYP:

*It is a sobering fact that, neither in our communities nor in the nation as a whole, is there a single agency that is charged with the responsibility of assessing or improving the situation of the*



*child in his total environment. As it stands, the needs of children are parcelled out among a hopeless confusion of agencies... no one... is concerned with the total pattern of life in the community. (p.163)*

Joined-up working and collaboration between agencies and with families was first promoted in the late 1970s - see The Court Report (Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), 1976) and The Warnock Report (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 1978), which point to such an approach for effective identification, assessment, monitoring and reviewing of provision for CYP with special educational needs (SEN). In the early 1980s, research highlighted the detrimental impact of inadequate collaboration between education and social care on outcomes for the CLA population (see Millham et al., 1980; and Stein & Carey, 1986 as cited in Rivers, 2018). Unfortunately, this was a pattern that would be reflected in practice in the years to come.

The Children Act (1989) was one of the most significant pieces of legislation of its time for establishing a collaborative and joined-up approach to children's services delivery, outlining a statutory obligation for professionals to "*work together better*" when supporting children and young people (Cheminais, 2009, p.1). The Act aimed to give children a voice by keeping them, and their wellbeing, at the centre of all decision-making, and gave LAs a particular duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of CLA (section 22). One year later, the first national study evaluating education arrangements for CLA was published (Fletcher-Campbell & Hall, 1990).

The report highlighted that CLA were disproportionately disadvantaged by failures in the system and greater liaison and collaboration between education and social care was called for.

In an attempt to promote coordination and information sharing between education and social care, the government published Circular 13/94 (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1994), recommending LAs and schools cooperate effectively with social services in supervising the education of CLA. However, no formal requirement was enforced (DfEE & Department of Health (DoH), 2000; p.31). The system of support around CLA continued to fail throughout the rest of the 1990s. A detrimental lack of communication and coordination between education and social care was again attributed to poor educational outcomes for CLA in a joint report from the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (1995), and within Utting's government commissioned review (1997). Utting (1997) described the underachievement of CLA as a failure to ensure their welfare under the Children Act 1989, and called for government agencies and LAs to take immediate action to redress such issues.

The election of a New Labour Government in 1997 saw the introduction of a range of policies and progressive initiatives in an attempt to improve outcomes for CLA, combat social exclusion and narrow attainment gaps between social classes (Berridge, 2012). One of the key strategies for change within New Labour was the idea of 'joined-up thinking', which referred to the "*interrelatedness of children and family needs in the fields of health, education, social services, law enforcement, housing, employment and family support*" (Anning et al., 2006, p.4). Further key initiatives included the Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000) (DoH, 2001), Adoption

and Children Act (2002) and the Quality Protects Framework (DoH, 1998) . The latter introduced national data collection and set specific education targets for LAs to monitor, track and report rates of attainment, attendance, and exclusion. The Quality Protects Framework (DoH, 1998) also introduced the concept of ‘corporate parenting’, placing a legal and moral duty on LAs to take joint responsibility for CLA.

As part of the Quality Protects programme, the government published *Guidance on the Education of Children and Young People in Public Care*, to assist LAs in promoting education outcomes for CLA (DfEE & DoH, 2000). To facilitate coordination and cooperation between services, it was recommended that LAs appoint “*a skilled senior officer with a clear remit to establish and enforce joint procedures and protocols and provide a permanent resource for all involved in corporate parenting: a champion for young people in public care*” (DfEE & DoH, 2000, p. 23). This role would later be known as the Virtual School Headteacher (VSH).

Despite the progress made in policy, failings in joined-up working between multiple agencies continued to fail CYP in practice, and were reported as key factors in the most extreme child protection cases. Following the death of Victoria Climbié at the hands of her legal guardians in 2000, the Laming Report (2003) triggered major re-conceptualisation and re-structuring of policy and practice in children’s services (Laming, 2003). While et al. (2006) suggested that while the Laming Report (2003) highlighted the need for multi-agency collaboration to effectively safeguard children, in fact, “*children with mental health needs, children with disabilities or chronic illnesses, excluded pupils and looked after children*” also needed to be supported through effective collaboration (p. 87).

In response to the Laming Report (2003), the government produced the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* 2003 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) and amended the Children Act 1989 to reinforce the joint responsibility held by services to safeguard children. The Children Act 2004 placed statutory duties on LA's to integrate education, health and care services to support children and families (Walker, 2018). LAs were also required to appoint a Director of Children's Services to coordinate service delivery (Children Act, 2004). To further improve coordinated working between education and social care, the government piloted the VSH role in 11 LAs (DfES, 2007). This pilot came as part of the care system reforms proposed in the *Care Matters* White Paper (2007).

#### **1.4.2 Virtual Schools**

Review of the VSH pilot concluded that VSHs successfully raised the profile of CLA, and importantly contributed to improving outcomes through multi-agency working and the integration of education and social care (Berridge et al., 2009). This was significant, given that lack of communication and collaboration between agencies had remained a consistent contributing factor to the underachievement of CLA and PCLA (DfEE & DoH, 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001), as previously outlined in this chapter. Following the success of the VSH pilot, it became a statutory requirement for LAs in England to appoint at least one person to hold responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of its CLA and PCLA (Children and Families Act 2014).

Whilst VS' are not physical schools, these sub-systems are often made up of a team of individuals who are responsible for overseeing and directing CLA's

education in the same way that ordinary heads do for their pupils. VS' provide advice, training and support for individuals in the systems around CLA, such as DTs, foster parents, and CYP themselves. In 2018, a review of the statutory guidance for VS' resulted in an extension of the role to include PCLA (DfE, 2018b). In 2021, the duties of VS' were extended to include promotion of the education of CYP subject to a Child in Need plan or a Child Protection plan aged 0-18 in an education setting, and those who have previously had a SW (DfE, 2021). This is a non-statutory duty but significantly increases the size of the population of CYP who could be supported by VS'.

### ***1.4.3 Designated Teachers***

As part of the Quality Protects programme (2000), the government recommended that LA-maintained schools appoint a DT who would be responsible for raising the attainment of CLA in their school. Following the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, the DT role became a statutory requirement for all LA-maintained schools and academies. In 2018, a review of the statutory guidance for DTs resulted in an extension of the role to include PCLA (DfE, 2018b). In 2021, the DfE recommended that in other education provisions, an appropriately trained teacher should take the lead for raising the attainment of CLA and PCLA (DfE, 2021). The statutory guidance sets out many duties and responsibilities for DTs to ensure they can be effective in promoting the educational achievement of CLA and PCLA.

Within the statutory guidance for DTs (DfE, 2018b), it is stated that they are to be the central point of contact in the school and should provide a link between home and school. For this to be successful, DTs should be open and accessible to parents,

carers, and social care and education professionals alike. Guidance explicitly states that DTs are required to “proactively build strong links” with the VS (DfE, 2018b, p.24). DT should also take lead responsibility in ensuring a whole-school approach in meeting the needs of CLA. To achieve this, DTs are to ensure that policies reflect CLA’s needs, all staff hold high expectations for these pupils and be a source of advice for teachers regarding differentiated teaching and assessment strategies, and that school staff understand the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on learning, mental health, and attachment needs (DfE, 2018b). Statutory advice also states that DTs should not work in isolation, further ensuring a joined-up and collaborative approach within the systems of support around CLA and PCLA.

#### **1.4.5 Social Workers**

Children and family social workers (SWs) are responsible for ensuring that CLA are in placements which meet their needs, reflect CYP’s right to safety and security, and are encouraged to reach their full potential at every stage of their development. This includes supporting all CLA to meet their full educational potential and promoting their physical and mental health. Following the Children and Social Work Act (2017), Social Work England (SWE) was appointed as the regulating body for SWs. SWE upholds several professional standards that SWs must meet. These include ‘promote the rights, strengths and wellbeing of people, families and communities’ and ‘establish and maintain the trust and confidence of people’ (SWE, 2019).

Under section 10 of the Children Act 2004, SWs have a duty to co-operate and work collaboratively with the other individuals within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. However, the SW workforce is currently under significant pressure

with frequent staff turnover cited in research as a challenge to successful joined-up working (see Boesley, 2021; De La Foss, 2022; Moorhouse, 2022). Between October 2021 and September 2022, 5,400 SWs left the profession, this figure is up 9% from the previous year. This has contributed to the number of vacancies in England standing at 7,900, an increase of 21% from the previous year (DfE, 2022).

#### ***1.4.6 Monitoring and Funding Processes***

It is the responsibility of SWs to convene a Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting for CYP and those in the system around them within the first 10 days of a CYP becoming 'looked-after'. The purpose of a PEP is to act as a record for CYP's education and progress; they are used to identify strengths, needs, outcomes and objectives that will enable the child to progress academically and support their emotional development (DfE, 2018a).

Attendance, progress and attainment data, along with other key documents, such as SEN support plans, are shared in PEP meetings. Along with their carers, CYP are invited to their PEP meetings. However, if they do not feel able to attend, it is the responsibility of DTs to gain their views to share in the meetings. After the first PEP, meetings are convened by DTs at least three times a year. PEPs are a joint responsibility of the LA and schools, with a VS role in quality assurance and signing off the final documentation. PEPs are an explicit way of ensuring a collaborative multi-agency approach within the system of support for CLA. However, if a CYP becomes PCLA, there are no requirements for PEPs (DfE, 2018a).

Pupil Premium (PP) is grant funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged 5-16 year-olds in state-funded schools in England (DfE, 2023). PP has been available since 2014 and the current amount available for CLA and PCLA is £2,530 per pupil. Interventions supported by this funding should be evidence based and in the best interests of the child. To ensure the most effective use of PP, the government has recently introduced a 'menu of approaches' based on the evidence of how best to improve attainment (DfE, 2023). The menu consists of three tiers, from high quality teaching, to targeted academic support, and finally wider strategies, including supporting SEMH needs and breakfast clubs (DfE, 2023). During PEP meetings, all stakeholders must collaboratively agree how to use the funding, and PEP documentation must outline how the funding will help to meet a child's targets and outcomes (DfE, 2018a). Responsibility of PP for CLA resides with the VS, whereas for PCLA this funding is paid directly to schools to manage.

### **1.5 Relevance to the Profession of Educational Psychology**

This area of research has important implications for educational psychologists (EPs). Whilst the role and distinct contribution of EPs has long been debated (Ashton and Roberts, 2007; Squires et al. 2007) there is a general consensus recognised by the British Psychological Society practice guidelines (2017) that the EP role encompasses five core functions: consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research. These core functions are considered to operate at three levels: individual, group and organisational. EPs, therefore, can support CLA in a variety of ways from a number of positions within the systems of support around them.



Notably, almost half of all CLA in England (46.1%) have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), compared to 3.9% of all pupils (DfE, 2022). EHCPs identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support required to meet those needs (DfE & DoH, 2015). EPs play a key role in EHC needs assessments and therefore most EPs may already be familiar with the systems of support for CLA.

EPs have the skills and knowledge to support all areas of child development, including SEMH needs. Given that access to specialist services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) can be restricted by extensive waiting times and strict admission criteria (Cameron, 2017), EPs may have a key role in supporting in this area. Within their training, EPs also cover psychological theories about systems and group dynamics. EPs are therefore well suited to supporting the systems of support for CLA and PCLA with effective joined-up working.

## **1.6 Rationale**

Despite huge investment, focus and policy development over the past 20 years, outcomes for CLA and PCLA remain disproportionately poor compared to that of their non-looked after peers. The statutory positions of DTs and VS', and guidance regarding fulfilment of such roles, place a number of individuals within a complex system of support around CLA and PCLA along with expectations for effective joined-up working. However, barriers to and examples of poor joined-up working within these systems have consistently been reported throughout research. Of the finite existing body of literature in this area, a common limitation is that studies are small-scale with limited samples, impacting on generalisability. Furthermore, it has

not yet been attempted to understand the complex picture and functioning the systems of support within a complex systems framework. This study aims to address such a gap in the literature and contribute a unique complex systems theory perspective on the current multi-agency practice of DTs and VS staff.

### **1.7 Researcher's Position**

This research project was undertaken as part fulfilment of the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy) at the UCL Institute of Education. I first worked with CLA and PCLA prior to starting the DEdPsy course as a teaching assistant in a special school and then as an assistant psychologist in a children's home. Such roles led to an initial interest in the experiences and educational outcomes for CLA and PCLA. Whilst on placement in my first year as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) on the DEdPsy course, I had the opportunity to contribute to joint project work between the LA VS and EP team. This experience helped me to understand the role and processes of the VS and fuelled my interest in the systems of support around CLA and PCLA.

It was not until the end of my first year of professional training that I learnt about the role of the DT. Whilst attending a TEP research conference, I learnt not only of the existence of the DT role, but that some DTs taking part in a TEP's research project did not attend initial training for the role. I was curious about why and how this could be the case, given the importance of their role in supporting CLA and PCLA. This motivated me to focus my research project on the systems of support for CLA and PCLA.

Reflexivity involves acknowledging one's own position within research and the research context, including a self-reflection of one's own biases, preferences, preconceptions and assumptions (Dodgson, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity is a continual process of engaging with, challenging and acknowledging the social and cultural influences that can impact the context of the research (Barrett et al., 2020). In addition to having the potential to influence data analysis, even the choice of thesis topic and reviewed literature are in some way shaped by the researcher's beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and worldview (Braun & Clark, 2013). It was important for the researcher to consider their position as a TEP and how this could have shaped the research, specifically their interactions with the data and the conclusions drawn.

My experiences of working within the systems of support for CLA both as a TEP and when gaining relevant experience for the professional doctorate course as a teaching assistant and assistant psychologist, meant that I went into this research with pre-existing constructs about some of the facilitating factors and tensions. These included assumptions about access to EP involvement and the possible cause of tensions within working relationships between education settings, and both VS' and residential home staff. To mitigate the potential impact of my pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and worldview in this study, I engaged in regular formal supervision with two research supervisors, my university tutor, and both TEP and professional peers. This provided me with the space and time to reflect on my assumptions and methodological choices, and to hear alternative viewpoints.

## **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

### ***Complex Systems Theory***

The systems of support for CLA are complex by nature. It would be foolish and reductionist to attempt to understand such systems with a simple linear cause-effect model. For this reason, this study was explicitly framed, developed and empirically investigated within a Complex Systems Theory (CST) framework.

Complex systems are comprised of many micro level components that interact dynamically to produce an unpredictable but often occurring outcome at a more macro level that could be described as complex, meaning it is not perfectly determined (Jacobson et al., 2016; Sawyer, 2004). The mechanism by which this occurs is known as emergence and is what differentiates a complex system from a merely complicated one (Holland, 2006).

Emergent outcomes are more than the sum of their parts, meaning the complex behaviour of a system cannot be reduced to the components within it (Holland, 2006). For example, the collaborative behaviour of a system of support for a CLA could not solely be attributed to the joint working of individuals. Instead, emergence of such behaviour would be the result of a multitude of interactions between several factors, such as the time and availability of individuals, the degree of trust and the nature of rapport between individuals, communication skills, the ethos of a solution-focussed approach, and many more.

Importantly, Kauffman (1995) suggests that the complexity of emergent behaviour comes from the co-existence of linearity and non-linearity across and within multiple levels of an open system. This means that complex systems exhibit

opposing properties of behaviours: randomness and order, predictability (e.g. highly connected nodes or hubs) and unpredictability, stability and instability, and so on.

Another fundamental assumption of CST is that components within a system can be both internal and external (personal factors and contextual factors) (Bunge, 2000) and can be both inter-dependent and intra-dependent on one another, where ultimately all components are dependent on one another (Hilpert & Marchand, 2018). Interactions of components in a complex system are not fixed or clearly defined, but are subject to ongoing co-adaption (Davis & Sumara, 2008), where system behaviour results from the interactions between components, and such interactions alter the dynamics of the components themselves (Anderson et al., 2012; Kello et al., 2007; Van Orden et al., 2011). The adaptability of complex systems is known as self-organisation (Silva & Guerrini, 2017).

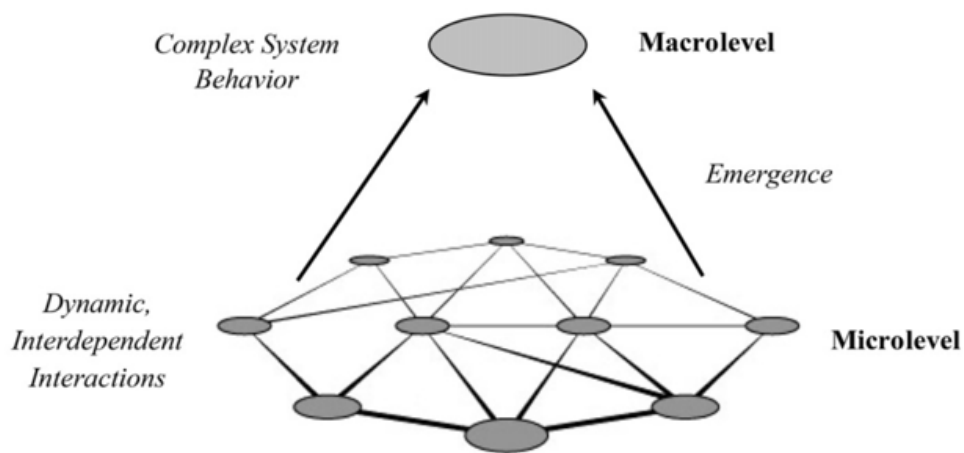
Given complex systems contain countless interacting and changing parts, they are often described as interaction-dominant models (Richardson et al., 2014). This means that the components within the system are softly assembled - *“The role of components in producing the outcome and the strength of the relationships between them shift and change over time”* (Hilpert & Marchard, 2018, p.186), see *Figure 1*.

Another unique feature of complex systems is their architecture. Complex systems are composed of subsystems, which are in and of themselves composed of subsystems (e.g. pupils and teachers make up classes, classes make up schools, schools can make up multi-academy trusts, etc.) (Simon, 1962). Components within and between subsystems interact with each other through multiple, non-linear,

recursive feedback loops (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008), contributing to self-organisation and emergence within the wider system context.

**Figure 1**

*Graphical representation of an interaction dominant model. From Hilpert and Marchand (2018).*



The word *complexity* has been used to describe self-organising, adaptive phenomena since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Davis & Sumara, 2008). Complex systems research methods and ways of thinking originated in the natural sciences, gaining significant momentum in the late 1990s (Mitchell, 2009). A challenge when conducting empirical research within a CST framework can be to accurately capture the socially embedded complexity of individuals within a dynamic system (Mercer, 2014).

However, interaction-dominant models can be examined using intensive data such as time-series and network data (Hilpert & Marchand, 2018). Whilst it can be difficult for researchers to conceptualise the context of a study in such a way that

time-series data can be collected (Richardson et al., 2014), conceptualising data into a network “can provide useful maps for disentangling complex and interwoven systems” (Caldarelli & Catanzaro, 2012, p.41) and “the network paradigm offers a powerful lens and methodology with which to model these complex system” (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010, p.29).

Alignment between CST and research methods in educational psychology requires a shift from looking at component only linear cause-effect models to embracing a dynamic interaction-dominant model (Hilpert & Marchand, 2018). However, there has been a reluctance to embrace such a shift by those unfamiliar with CST (Symonds et al., 2019; Kaplan and Garner, 2020).

Aspects of CST have also been criticised for appearing too ambiguous on account of their exploratory nature (Hiver et al. 2021). Additionally, the very nature of complex systems means that knowledge of any phenomena within such systems will always be proximate and never absolute (Capara, 1977). This is because the complete architecture of a complex system is impossible to recreate in a data set (Avila de Lima, 2010). No matter how many connections are taken into account, there will always be some that are missed. For example, DTs only have knowledge of the individuals and connections they are aware of, yet many more may exist within the system of support for a CLA.

However, Hiver et al. (2021) reported that research studies underpinned by complex dynamic systems theory offered a “fuller, more multidimensional understanding of the phenomena under investigation” (p.18), particularly in respect of contextual interactions. Additionally, despite some resistance, complex system approaches to inquiry have recently gained popularity in education research (Kaplan

& Garner, 2020; Marchand & Hilpert, 2020) and have been the subject of “increasing use” within educational psychology and other social sciences (Jacobson, 2019, p. 375). In line with a CST perspective, Nolen (2020) highlighted that educational psychology phenomena are complex, socially situated and culturally embedded. Turner and Christensen (2020) also emphasise that such contexts are dynamic and socially negotiated. In line with the nature of the systems of support for CLA and the assumptions of CST, the researcher decided it was most appropriate to apply such a framework in this study.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview

The following section will review the existing literature concerning the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. Literature was reviewed that explored the experiences of a variety of individuals within these systems of support. This both ensured a holistic understanding of such systems and attempted to overcome the challenge of a finite existing body of literature.

### 2.2 Search Strategy

To find appropriate literature, searches took place in the databases Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis Online, and UCL Library Explore (IOE Journals, IOE LibGuides, UCL LibGuides), which searches a wide range of databases including PsycINFO, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, British Education Index, ProQuest and Wiley Online Library. The searches were concerned with exploring research that documented the experiences of key individuals as a part of the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. With the use of Boolean operators, variations of the following key terms were used to identify relevant literature in three separate searches.

<b>Search A</b>
'Looked After Children' OR 'Children in Care' OR 'Care Experienced Children'
AND
'System' OR 'Network' OR 'Multiagency' OR 'Joined-up Working' OR 'Collaborative'

<b>Search B</b>
'Looked After Children' OR 'Children in Care' OR 'Care Experienced Children'
AND
'Designated Teacher' OR 'Virtual School' OR 'Social Worker' OR 'Social Care'

<b>Search C</b>
'Looked After Children' OR 'Children in Care' OR 'Care Experienced Children'
AND
'Experience' OR 'Perspective' OR 'Views'
AND
'Support' OR 'Network' OR 'Multiagency'

Alternative words such as 'relationships' could have yielded further search results in this literature review. However, in line with a CST framework and resulting research questions used in this study (see section 2.5) the decision was made to use key terms that would ensure a focus on a holistic perspective of the systems of support for CLA instead of individual connections and relationships.

To ensure that the literature reviewed was contemporary and could contribute to the current picture of practice, only papers published after the year 2008 were reviewed, in-line with the statutory requirement for the DT role in schools. Abstracts were read and all sources were screened for disciplines relating to education, psychology, social sciences, or foster care. Moreover, only articles published in English were included. Finally, due to the limited published literature in the area, 'grey' literature, including doctoral theses and independent reports were also included in the search and literature review.

Searches were conducted between November 2022 and February 2023. A total of 23 papers were selected to be used in the literature review. The papers were then organised and put under the relevant headings for clarity of synthesis and understanding (Wakefield, 2015).

## **2.3 Discussion of Literature**

Discussion of the literature is organised by professional group or individual involved in the systems of support for CLA.

### ***2.3.1 Designated Teacher Role***

Part of De La Fosse's (2022) doctoral thesis included semi-structured interviews with five DTs. In-line with statutory guidance (DfE, 2018), DTs emphasised that multi-agency working was a key aspect of their role. DTs reported facilitating reciprocal information-sharing between families and school staff. However, multiple obstacles to effective joined-up working with others were shared by participants. Successful joined-up working requires a genuine commitment to collaborative working by individuals (Golding et al., 2010), yet DTs perceived a lack of engagement from other professionals and at times families.

DTs also reported the loss of documentation for CLA, which resulted from ineffective information-sharing processes, and highlighted the challenges of inconsistencies in processes across LAs. Additional roles and responsibilities within their schools, as well as high numbers of CLA on roll, limited DTs availability to others in the system. The sample of DTs in this study was limited to those supporting younger children, up to 11 years-old, and to the South East region of England. Therefore, findings cannot be confidently generalised to the wider context in England, or transferred to the experiences of DTs supporting CYP over the age of 11 in secondary school and college settings. However, findings are consistent with those reported in previous research within samples of DTs with a variety of characteristics (see Boesley, 2021; Goodall 2014; Waterman, 2020).

Further highlighting the need for effective joined-up working, Waterman (2020) concluded that when individuals within the systems of support for CLA develop good working relationships, it has a significant positive impact on the CYP's school experience. However, DTs in this study reported challenges within their role and obstacles to effective joined-up working. A main theme reported was '*Frustration with communication from children's services*'. In addition, and echoing findings from De La Fosse (2022), DTs reported finding it challenging to protect time for the DT role alongside competing responsibilities within their schools. For DTs where this was less of an issue, senior management appeared to recognise the value of the DT role and allocated protected time, acknowledging the significant amount of time that can be required.

Despite the DT role having a statutory footing for 12 years at the time Waterman's (2020) study was conducted, VS staff reported that a challenge when working with DTs could be a limited understanding of the requirement of their own role, which resulted in reliance on others in the system such as the VS staff. This finding suggests that training experiences might be insufficient for some DTs and is an area of need to promote effective support for and joined-up working around CLA and PCLA.

To contribute to a three-year longitudinal study following 20 CLA in England, Driscoll (2013) interviewed 12 DTs across eight LAs and four VSHs across four LAs to explore their experiences of supporting the transitions of CLA to post-16 education settings. Such transition periods are crucial to consider when exploring the systems of support for CLA because at these times, such systems are subject to significant

change. Unfortunately, several challenges in transition planning and processes were reported by participants. Connections between DTs and colleges were limited, and DTs reported variability in the willingness to communicate from these post-16 settings, a genuine desire for collaborative working was absent (see Golding et al., 2010). Limited joined-up working left DTs, and thus YP, with no knowledge about the available support for CLA at college settings. Lastly, DTs were again unsure about the remit of their role (Waterman, 2020), lacking clarity about who holds responsibility for liaising with colleges. Such reports from DTs suggests a segregated approach with individuals holding isolated responsibilities, instead of a joined-up and collaborative approach. However, this study took place before the statutory implementation of the VSH role in 2014. Given a key function of VS' is to facilitate joined-up working, the current picture should look more collaborative and Driscoll's (2013) findings may no longer be representative of practice.

Another doctoral thesis contributing a wealth of evidence for the experience of the DT role comes from Boesley (2021). A mixed-methods approach was used to explore the alignment of DT practice with the statutory guidance. The mixed-methods approach taken by Boesley enabled triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data from a more representative sample of DTs compared to other studies, which gives these findings greater credibility.

Boesley reported several themes relating to DT's experiences of working within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. DTs reported positive experiences of working with the VS', citing good communication, availability of individuals and dedication from VS staff as contributing to effective joined-up working with these

professionals. Whilst some DTs experienced effective contact and communication with SWs, others did not, and high staff turnover and limited SW capacity were also cited as contributing to the challenges of working with this professional group. With regards to EP involvement, the majority of DTs felt that this was relevant for supporting the needs of CLA and PCLA. DTs interactions with EPs varied, the most commonly reported type of EP involvement was consultation, however assessment, training, direct interaction work and systemic support were also quoted by DTs.

It is important to consider individual factors that have the potential to influence macro level behaviour within the complex systems of support for CLA and PCLA. Participants in Boesley's (2021) study identified a number of facilitators and barriers to effective practice in the DT role. VS participants emphasised the need be available and maintain regular contact with DTs to facilitate positive working relationships, collaboration and enable DTs to work proactively instead of reactively. Consistent with findings throughout the rest of the literature, barriers to the DT role included inconsistencies in processes across LAs (De La Fosse, 2022) and limited time due to additional roles and responsibilities (De La Fosse, 2022; Goodall, 2014). Comprehensive understanding and awareness of the DT role was also cited by participants (see Driscoll, 2013; Waterman, 2020). This related to both DT's own understanding of their role, and understanding from other school staff and senior management.

Within one LA, Goodall (2014) interviewed six DTs from both primary and secondary contexts to gain an understanding of their experiences and explore how DTs could be better supported. Similar to most of the existing literature in this area,

this study was limited by the sample, both the size and lack of geographical representation, thus findings cannot confidently be generalised. However, the barriers to the DT role and opportunities for effective multi-agency working that are stated in this study are consistent with those reported in more recent research, suggesting a potential lack of progression to joined-up working.

As with findings from Boesley (2021) and De La Fosse (2022), additional roles and responsibilities were cited as limiting the time available for fulfilling the DT role. This barrier to providing effective support for CLA was exacerbated in cases with high levels of complexity. Also, DTs did not always feel ‘kept in the loop’ with information sharing throughout the system, and described feeling invisible to people both within the school subsystem and to external professionals in the wider system (Goodall, 2014).

### ***2.3.2 The Virtual School***

Both Bridge et al. (2009) and Ofsted (2012) set out to evaluate the impact of VS’. In both reviews it was concluded that VSHs contributed to improving outcomes through multi-agency working and the integration of education and social care, ensuring that educational considerations remained central in care planning and reviews of plans.

In 2012, two years before the VSH role became statutory, Simpson explored the current and future role of the VS within their doctoral thesis. At the time, the VS role included providing schools with support around funding, training, placement breakdowns and providing emotional support for DTs (Simpson, 2012). Simpson

described the function of the VS acting as a bridge between education and social care as a real advantage of the VS model, a characteristic of the VS also raised by participants in Pickles et al., (2023).

Following data collection from semi-structured interviews with six VS staff and a survey completed by 51 DTs, facilitators to the work of the VS were outlined. Participants reported that clear communication and strong relationships within the systems of support around CLA were important factors. Additionally, dedication to joined-up working and to support the needs of CLA from individuals in the system was highlighted as a facilitating factor. Despite insightful perceptions about the role of the VS before it gained a statutory footing, transferability of findings was limited by the small-scale sample within a single LA.

In Drew & Banerjee's (2019) peer reviewed paper, 29 VS staff from 29 different LAs completed an online survey to share their views and experiences regarding the ways in which VS supported educational outcomes for CLA. Consistent with other findings, effective multi-agency working was raised as an important area of practice (see literature review in De La Fosse, 2022). DTs were highlighted as key members of staff with whom VS staff set out to build effective working relationships. VS staff positioned DTs as a vital link between themselves and school subsystems.

Rivers (2018) emphasised that a key function of VS' is to advocate for the voice of CLA and PCLA through challenge. However, VS' must accomplish this whilst being mindful of maintaining good working relationships, again pointing to the



importance of facilitating collaborative and effective joined-up working within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. Whilst Rivers' (2018) report of a VS perspective is limited by its nature of being a personal account from one VSH in one LA, the key conclusions echoed those from previous research.

Pickles et al. (2023) conducted a small-scale qualitative study with eight VSHs and one occupational therapist. Pickles et al. (2023) concluded that VSHs work from a position in-between education and social care, which can present a challenge for effective communication, support and joined-up multi-agency working. Participants in Pickles et al.'s (2023) study discussed the challenges associated with the Education (Areas to Which Pupils and Students Belong) Regulations 1996, commonly known as the 'Belonging Regulations'. Responsibility for CLA's care lies with the LA within which they were taken into care. However, if a child has an EHCP then the responsibility for assessment and provision lies with the LA where they are currently placed, even if that is in a different part of the country.

This can cause tensions and hinder the timely nature of processes such as arranging and implementing provision. Moreover, this means that VS staff are required to potentially liaise with every LA in the country. However, inconsistencies in processes across LAs is commonly cited within the literature (Boesley, 2021; De La Fosse, 2022; Pickles et al., 2023) and reported as a barrier to effective multi-agency working. Whilst again this study is limited by a small sample size, tensions between care for CLA and statutory SEN processes have previously been reported by participants in other studies (see Norwich et al., 2010).

Sebba and Berridge (2019) aimed to explore how VS' helped improve educational outcomes since the role became statutory. After collating data from 16 interviews with VSHs from two separate studies, completed in 2015 and 2016, it was concluded that VS' work with a wide range of individuals and subsystem and take on a strategic role. In line with the statutory guidance (DfE, 2018b) DTs were identified as a key relationship for VS staff, and high-quality relationships with schools was attributed to minimising exclusions. Participants in this study also reported challenges when working with SWs and the wider social care team within the LA. Very few VSHs described work with SWs as highly collaborative and cited insufficient priority given to education from SWs which became clear in PEP meetings. Furthermore, Sebba and Berridge (2019) found that the location of many VS' within the education department of LA children's services could present as a major challenge for VS', as this hindered the development of rapport and relationships with the social care team, a finding also reported by Berridge et al. (2009).

De La Fosse's (2022) undertook a systematic literature review to explore how VS' promote multi-agency working. A total of 13 papers were reviewed by De La Fosse (2022), the following have been included in the literature review for the present study: Drew & Banerjee (2019), Driscoll (2013), Rivers (2018), Simpson (2012), and Waterman (2020). Following review of the literature, De La Fosse (2022) concluded that VS staff work with a broad range of individuals and professionals from different disciplines, and that such multi-agency working is central to the operation of VS'. De La Fosse (2022) discussed the theme 'promoting a shared understanding', within which she located evidence for the ways in which VS' bridge

the gap between education and social care (Driscoll, 2013; Pickles et al., 2023). VS' role here is to mitigate the potential challenges that come with competing priorities and differing perspective, as this has been identified as a barrier to successful multi-agency working (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

### **2.3.3 Social Care**

Empirical research relating to the experiences of SWs working with DTs and VS' is significantly lacking in the current body of literature. In May 2022 findings from an independent review of children's social care were published. This independent review was commissioned by the government and chaired by Josh MacAlister, a former teacher and founder of the social work charity Frontline. Following engagement and partnership work with over 1,000 people in focus groups and workshops, and receiving 207 responses to a call for evidence, a breadth of data was taken into account.

The central focus of the review related to current concerns around the social work workforce, staff turnover, staff wellbeing and workload pressures. The review called for a dramatic whole-system reset to children's social care. Within multi-agency working, the review calls for greater transparency around decision-making, and better information sharing between professionals and families and a need for trusting relationships within the systems of support. The need for professionals to listen to CYP and families without judgement is also raised, and to involve CYP, families and carers in decision making is emphasised, as it is 'paramount that CYP have a powerful voice'. These recommendations suggest such characterises are

limited or absent within current practice. Furthermore, the majority of views regarding the current practice of multi-agency working was that joined-up working was lacking.

#### **2.3.4 Educational Psychologists**

Drew & Banerjee (2019) reported a positive view of EPs from VS participants where EPs were located within the VS team. Some participants also expressed a desire to extend EP and mental health provision within their team, highlighting the value placed on these professionals. However, EPs are seldom cited in this area of literature and Waterman's (2020) Activity Theory diagram approach in interviews with DTs and VS staff highlighted how rarely EPs were considered or present within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA.

To explore DT's perceptions of the EP role in the systems of support for CLA Whitehouse (2014) conducted a small-scale sequential mixed methods study in one LA. Surveys were completed by 73 DTs and semi-structured interviews conducted with nine DTs. EPs were considered to have appropriate knowledge for supporting CLA and PCAL, and DTs placed 'some value' on EP practice and involvement. However, many DTs felt that EP capacity was limited, suggesting greater access to EPs, input for CLA over time, and having a link EP would be real benefits within the systems of support for CLA. This is an area in which little improvement may have been made over time, given EP capacity was also a raised as challenge by EPs themselves in Samul's (2021) study.

Despite calling for greater EP involvement, DTs in this study appeared to see EPs as having a limited remit, generally only requesting EP support for concerns

regarding learning and reaching out to other services for support with SEMH needs. The majority of DTs had also not worked with an EP at a multi-agency level to support CLA (Whitehouse, 2014). It seems that participants in this study were not aware of the full scope of the EP role as outlined in Chapter 1.

Both Norwich et al. (2010) and Samul (2021) provide a unique EP perspective on the systems of support for CLA. When supporting the needs of CLA and PCLA, EPs in Samul's study (2021) emphasised the importance of developing good rapport with those in the system around these pupils, and suggested there is a need for openness from all. The majority of EPs in Samul's study (2021) reported working with Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), with very few citing DTs. This suggests a lack of liaison with DTs when involved in supporting the needs of CLA and PCLA. EPs in Norwich et al.'s (2010) study cited limited availability of school staff, high frequencies of staff changes, and difficulties with arranging timely meetings with school staff as barriers to effective working when supporting the needs of CLA.

Participants in both of these studies felt that the remit and scope of their EP role was misunderstood by DTs and school subsystems, as reported by Whitehouse (2014). Additionally, communication both throughout school subsystems and with EPs was reported as lacking and poor. Finally, participants in both studies also raised the issue of placement instability for CLA. Frequent placement moves obstructed access to both the CYP they were supporting and effective information-sharing. The vast majority of EPs in Samul's (2021) study endorsed more effective multi-agency working when asked what would improve their work with CLA.

Both of these studies contribute to the limited existing literature base and the use of mixed methods promoted the credibility of the findings; however, the studies should be considered in context. Norwich et al. (2010) conducted their research before the VSH role became a statutory requirement, therefore the distinct challenges raised by EPs at that time may no longer be as pressing in current practice. Additionally, the data in Samul's (2021) study was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, where remote working and social distancing were enforced. Therefore, participant's responses may have been skewed by their present experiences of working in such unprecedented times.

### ***2.3.5 Mental Health Professionals***

To highlight examples of success from a multi-agency approach when supporting the mental health needs of CLA, Miller et al. (2023) analysed three case studies of CLA. Collaborative working between agencies was found to be crucial for decision-making, promoting shared perspectives on the utility of previous treatments, and ensuring holistic pictures of underlying issues for CLA. The researchers concluded that the distribution of work between multiple agencies, including a combination of public and private providers, led to a lack of cohesion within the systems. Challenges within individual subsystems also had the potential to cause tension within the wider system, such as progress with life-story work, as recommended by mental health professionals, being hindered by the time it took for the SW to retrieve the CYP's historical information. It should be noted that whilst case-studies contribute quality in-depth data, findings lack generalisability due to smaller sample sizes.

In a small-scale inquiry, semi-structured interviews were used to explore the perspectives of CLA and key stakeholders who support mental health needs of CLA (Moorehouse, 2022). Data was collected from a workshop comprising of eight CYP, one interview with a CYP, and 14 interviews with professionals from health, social care and educational psychology backgrounds. CYP articulated desires to feel heard, supported and understood by the adults around them. Professionals shared factors they found impacted on the ability of the systems around CLA to function effectively. One such factor was the inconsistency of individuals due to high staff turnovers with SWs. This limited effective communication, opportunities to build relationships and waylaid or prevent decisions from being made and thus CLA receiving support.

Advocacy for the needs of CLA and mental health awareness was also highlighted as an essential approach for securing support for CLA. All professionals emphasised the importance of information sharing and the availability of others when working within a multi-agency system. Finally, the impact of government cuts to funding over the past ten years resulted in a decrease of support available. This caused tensions around decision-making and contributed to a reactive nature within these systems, instead of a proactive approach, a characteristic also highlighted by Robinson et al. (2020) during times of crisis.

A challenge experienced by Moorehouse was recruitment of social care professionals. The inclusion of only one such participant meant that this professional group was underrepresented in the findings. Additionally, all data in this study were data collected from a single London borough context limiting generalisability.

However, findings align with that of previous research and crucially add to the finite body of existing literature in this area.

In their peer-reviewed paper, Robinson et al. (2020) share the experiences of nine child psychotherapists working within the systems of support for CLA. It was suggested that the current organisation and functioning of these systems may not be in the best interest of those in the system: professionals, other individuals and the CYP at the centre. Participants reflected on the often '*large unwieldy*' networks, and how this fostered the potential for CYP's needs to be overlooked. The extensive range of professionals within the systems of support for CLA was also highlighted by Rivers (2018) from a VS perspective. Organisational pressures, which impacted on the availability of individuals, were also raised as a challenge to effective working within these systems. For example, education staff often have teaching commitments and residential home staff are restricted by shift patterns, therefore coordinating whole network meetings could be difficult.

Whilst psychotherapists may be less frequently involved in the systems of support for CLA compared to other professionals, findings in this study contribute to, and align with trends observed in the findings across the other literature. However, the small sample size should be taken into consideration and specifically how six interviews were conducted via telephone; the lack of visual cues to guide these interviews may have impacted rapport and the depth of answers (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Golding et al. (2010) provides case examples from a multi-agency LA service to highlight the strengths, challenges and barriers of multi-agency and specialist



working to meet the mental health needs of CLA and PCLA. Golding et al. (2010) outlines how multi-agency working enables individuals to gain a greater understanding of the roles of other agencies. This clarity between subsystems facilitates more appropriate referrals between services, thus improving access to services. Additionally, shared understandings of CLA and their mental health needs were facilitated by open lines of communication between individuals (Golding et al., 2010).

Individuals may be required to overcome several barriers to effective working within the systems of support for CLA. Golding et al. (2010) highlighted that inconsistencies of individuals can be problematic given the time required to build relationships and foster a team identity and a shared vision. Heavy workloads and time pressures, exacerbated by limited existing resources were also reported to be problematic for the system. Finally, Golding et al. (2010) points out that it is important to recognise how different professionals will bring with them different cultures, languages, and expectations. To overcome challenges, a genuine commitment to collaborative working is required from all individuals within these systems. Golding et al. (2010) also calls for the need to create a culture of optimism and realism. Golding et al.'s (2010) paper shares the strengths and limitations of the other literature where a case study research method has been employed.

### ***2.3.6 Children Looked After at the Centre of these Systems***

With a focus on the systems *around* CLA, it is important not to forget about the CYP at the heart of these networks. There is very limited literature on CYP's experiences of interacting with, or the functioning with the systems of support around them.

Recognition of a limited CYP voice within the literature more broadly concerning their experiences of being 'looked-after' was highlighted by De La Fosse (2022), and Pickles et al. (2023) and supports calls for more research to feature the voice of CLA and PCLA.

However, Lipkin's (2016) doctoral thesis is a source of literature that features the voice of CYP. When seeking the views of post-16 care leavers to gain an insight into their experiences of education, Lipkin (2016) reported the theme '*challenging systems*'. Challenges experiences by YP related to decisions made about their care, as well as support and communication from the individuals and subsystems. Over half of the YP in the study experienced insufficient support from social services, reporting a lack of communication and practical support which resulted in feeling '*let down*'. Similar to findings from Moorehouse (2022), participants also emphasised not feeling heard.

Importantly, when asked what could have improved their educational experiences, YP cited information sharing and effective communication between home and school (Lipkin, 2016). It seems that poor and ineffective joined-up working is directly experienced by CYP, as well as compromising outcomes for them. Given the potential adversities CLA and PCLA may have experienced, such failings in the systems set up to support them are not good enough.

Whilst Lipkin's study was small-scale, recruiting 10 interview participants from two London boroughs, the findings provide crucial insights about CLA's experiences, from the most under-represented group in an already limited body of literature.

CYP's views have been sought in few other studies relating to their experiences of being 'looked-after', see Cann (2012), Jackson (2011), Nazie (2017) and Sugden (2013). However, the research aims and findings of these studies did not directly concern the experience of and within the systems of support.

## **2.4 The present study**

SWs and CYP views and experiences are drastically underrepresented in the existing literature. However, significant challenges to recruitment of these groups in research are recognised (Moorehouse, 2022; Murray, 2005). In comparison, DTs and VS staff were easily accessible to the researcher from their position as a TEP. In addition to the practical aspect of recruiting such professionals for this research project, statutory expectations around joined-up working for DTs and VS places them within the complex system around CLA and PCLA. It was therefore appropriate to gain the views and experiences of DTs and VS staff to inform this study. To overcome common limitations in previous literature, the researcher set out to collect data from a large national sample representative of multiple LAs in England, and employing a mixed-methods approach to promote the validity and credibility of findings.

## **2.5 Research Questions**

To address the current gap in the literature and to contribute a unique visual and comprehensive picture of the systems of support for CLA from the experiences of DTs and VS staff, four research questions (RQs) were developed within a CST framework.

**RQ1:** What do the systems of support for CLA look like?

**RQ2:** How do the systems of support for CLA function and how do the individuals within them interact?

**RQ3:** What challenges exist within the systems of support for CLA?

**RQ4:** What factors facilitate the systems of support for CLA?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter sets out the philosophical position of the researcher, and outlines the research design and sampling approach. The materials and measures used to gather data are described, along with the processes of data collection and analysis. This chapter also asserts the researcher's reflexivity before providing reflections on research quality and ethical considerations.

### **3.2 Philosophical Perspective**

All research is underpinned by assumptions that guide the way data is collected and interpreted. It is paramount that researchers have a clear understanding of the assumptions they bring to their research and how it affects their procedures (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Philosophical assumptions vary according to ontology (how the researcher views the nature of reality) and epistemology (how the researcher believes knowledge is produced) (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975) can be thought of as a philosophical position of both ontology and epistemology (Ayers, 2010), and is the position taken in this study. From a critical realism perspective, it is assumed that there is an observable reality, and that knowledge of this reality is subjective, fallible, and theory dependent. Knowledge is social and historical, shaped by culture, language, and political interests. It is therefore accepted that it is not possible to capture a completely objective view of reality and research is influenced by the subjective agency of individuals and the societal structures in which they exist (Bhaskar, 2009). In this

way, critical realism overcomes a significant epistemological limitation of positivism, which by nature can ignore the complex interaction of multiple factors.

Critical realism also goes beyond the potentially limited perspective of constructivism. From a critical realism position, it is believed that research should, at least in part, attempt to identify causal mechanisms and how they act as tendencies to influence the world we observe (Fryer, 2020). By gathering, analysing, and interpreting data, it is possible to begin to explore evidence for underlying mechanisms that impact experience and the contexts that they operate in (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In this way, a critical realism position aligns with the fundamental assumptions of CST, as this theoretical framework recognises that individuals are fundamentally social beings embedded in multiple layers of contexts and social relationships stretching across time and place.

### **3.3 Research Design**

The present study employed a mixed methods exploratory design with a case study element. The intention of using this approach was to provide both a deep and broad understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006). A case study design aligns with a core assumption of Complex Systems Theory, given that an important task in the study of complex systems is identification of the boundaries (Lauman, 1989; Pažitka & Wójcik, 2021). In the instance of this study, it was decided that only professionals from one LA would be invited to take part in interviews. This allowed for an in-depth picture of the systems of support within the context of one LA where variables such as the VS approach and access to EP involvement was relatively consistent.

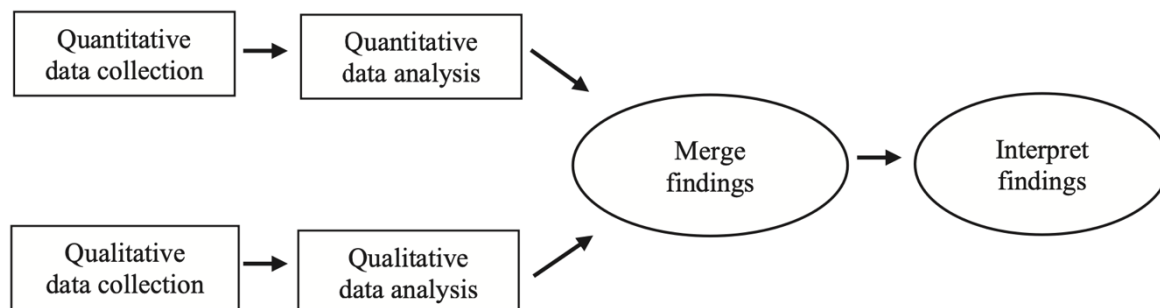
Despite being fairly new, mixed methods approaches within research have been established as an acceptable and scientifically legitimate approach to inquiry (Biddle & Schafft, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Creswell and Creswell (2018) define mixed methods research as an approach that collects and integrates quantitative and qualitative data to gain additional insight beyond what could be provided by using either method alone, a view also shared by critical realists (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Quantitative methods value objectivity and generalisability of findings, and can help to identify patterns among large populations. On the other hand, qualitative methods recognise contextual data and endeavour to understand complex accounts with in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes, thoughts and actions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Triangulation of such data has the potential to maximise the strengths and offset possible limitations or bias introduced within each respective approach (Creamer, 2018) which, in turn, facilitates the potential to increase confidence and credibility in findings (Bryman, 2012).

A defining feature of mixed methods research is that both the quantitative and qualitative data are integrated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2017). When interpreting the findings, researchers can also seek to corroborate results from all strands of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A convergent mixed methods design was adopted within the present study; see *Figure 2*.

**Figure 2**

*Convergent Design (One-Phase Design). From McCrudden, Marchand and Schutz, (2019), adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), and Plano Clark and Ivankova (2016).*



Data was collected from national online surveys alongside semi-structured interviews. During interviews, social network mapping activities took place to produce sociograms, these are graph databases that depict relationships among individuals in a network (Moreno, 1941) (see full details in 3.5 *Materials and Measures*). Survey responses and sociograms provided both quantitative and qualitative data. Findings from all three sources were analysed separately before being merged and interpreted (see *Chapters 4 Findings* and *5 Discussion*).

## **3.4 Participants**

### **3.4.1 Sampling Strategy**

The participants in this study were DTs and VS staff in England. The sampling approach used was volunteer sampling, which is a form of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants due to their unique knowledge and experience of the phenomena of interest (Etikan et al., 2015).



The volunteer characteristic of this approach involves willing individuals self-selecting to participate (Jupp, 2006).

Parallel samples from DT and VS staff populations were recruited for the separate national survey and case study aspects of the study. This means that no participant took part in both a survey and an interview. To be eligible to participate in any part of the study, individuals had to be either a current DT or a member of staff in a VS. All participants had to work within a LA in England and participants taking part in interviews had to work within the designated LA for the case study. There were no exclusion criteria regarding school type, education phase, role within the virtual school, or years within their current role.

### ***3.4.2 Participant Recruitment***

Participants for the surveys were recruited through a participation request email sent by the researcher, which outlined the context of the study, participation requirements, and links to both a DT and a VS survey (see appendix A). An information page outlining the aims of the research and GDPR information was attached to the email (see appendix B).

As with most research, it is neither practical nor feasible to gather the views of every member of the population, and despite being most practical, the opt-in volunteer approach had the potential to result in lower response rates and a less representative sample. In an effort to maximise the number of email recipients and to promote representation of the larger population within the sample, several approaches to email distribution were utilised.

Initially, the participation request email was sent to the contact email addresses for all EP training courses in England, with the request for it to be forwarded to all TEPs. The first few lines of the email were addressed to TEPs and it was requested that they forward it to the VSH within their placement LA. VSHs were asked to complete the survey as well as cascade the email to their VS team and DT network. Following Google searches for all VS' in England, the researcher also directly contacted all VSs who's contact information was available online. In addition, the researcher directly contacted a minimum of ten schools randomly selected from every LA in England who's contact information was publicly available online.

In an effort to maximise participation, the reader of the email was advised of the average time it would take to complete the survey and a closing date was included to prompt hasty completion. An open invitation to contact the researcher with any questions was also included and participants were given the opportunity to leave their email address at the end of the surveys if they wished to receive a research briefing following completion of the study.

Participants for interviews were sent a similar participation request email. Recipients were advised about the time required to complete the interview and information about what to expect from the social network mapping activity. This email was initially sent directly to VS staff members by the researcher, and distributed to all DTs within the LA by the VSH. After a period of one week with no responses from DTs, the researcher directly contacted DTs with whom they had worked previously within their TEP role.

A maximum variation sampling schema was used to increase the range of perspectives within the case study sample. DTs from a variety of education phases and VS staff with differing roles were invited to take part. In an effort to maximise participation, potential benefits of the social network mapping activity were highlighted in the recruitment email. This included the protected time and space it afforded to take a step back and reflect on the case for a CLA. All interview participants were also offered the opportunity to receive a research briefing following completion of the study.

### **3.4.3 Final Sample**

Participants comprised of DTs (survey n=307; interviews n=3) and VS staff (survey: n=56; interviews n=3). Throughout the surveys, response rates reduced from 307 to 285 from DTs, and from 56 to 49 from VS staff. The researcher was not contacted with any requests to withdraw data from the study and given the anonymity of responses, the decision was made to include all partial survey responses within the final data sets. Given the variation in response rates, percentages were calculated based on the total number of responses per item - please see ' $(n=X)$ ' in the title of each table reported. It should therefore be noted that data about participant's age and gender were collected at the end of the surveys and given the decline in response rates, such demographic data is absent for 22 DTs and 7 VS staff who did not complete the full survey. It should also be noted that all percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

While there is little agreement about what constitutes an adequate response rate (Robson & McCartan, 2016), Gillham (2007) suggested that 30% can be considered an average rate for surveys sent externally. The DT survey participants represented 33% of LAs across England (105/318). VS staff survey participants represented at least 20% of VSs in England (30/153). It should be noted that whilst there are 153 LAs with child and social care responsibilities in England, and therefore required to appoint a VSH, the DfE does not hold information centrally on the numbers of VSHs in post and the exact number could be less than 153 where some VSHs may support across more than one LA. The geographical distribution of participants varied across all nine regions in England - exact figures can be seen in *Table 1*. A minimum of 3,300 schools and 127 VSs were directly contacted by the researcher. Given the cascading nature for distribution of the recruitment email, the total number of DTs and VS staff who received the participation request (and therefore the exact response rate) is unknown.

**Table 1**

*Regional Demographics for Survey Responses: Designated Teachers (n=307) and Virtual School Staff (n=56)*

Region	Designated Teachers	Virtual School Staff
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
North West	48 (16%)	4 (7%)
North East	13 (4%)	4 (7%)
Yorkshire and the Humber	12 (4%)	1 (2%)
East Midlands	22 (7%)	1 (2%)
West Midlands	44 (14%)	8 (14%)
East	39 (13%)	4 (7%)
Greater London	31 (10%)	18 (32%)
South East	74 (24%)	11 (20%)
South West	24 (8%)	5 (9%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>307 (100%)</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>

Within the survey participants, a range of school types were represented by DTs, with over half (55%; n=169) from LA maintained schools, and one third (33%; n=101) from academies. Private and independent schools, special schools, colleges, and free schools are amongst the other types of schools represented in the DT survey sample. No grammar schools or pupil referral units (PRU) were represented within the sample. See *Table 2*.

**Table 2**

*Designated Teacher's School Type for Surveys (n=307)*

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Local Authority Maintained	169 (55%)
Academy	101 (33%)
Private or Independent School	11 (4%)
Special School	17 (6%)
Sixth-Form College	3 (1%)
College	4 (1%)
Grammar School	0 (0%)
Free School	1 (<1%)
Pupil Referral Unit	0 (0%)
Other*	7 (2%)

\*'Other' responses represent foundation trust, voluntary aided, grant maintained, and multi-academy trust schools.

*Note.* Participants were able to select multiple responses. Four participants selected two options 'Private or independent school' AND 'Special School'. Two participants selected two options 'Private or independent school' AND 'Academy'. The total is therefore over 307 and 100%.

Education phase supported by the DTs ranged from Early Years to Further Education. The education phase most commonly reported was primary (80%; n=245). See *Table 3*.

**Table 3***Education Phase Supported by Designated Teachers for Surveys (n=307)*

<b>Education Phase</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Early Years	81 (26%)
Primary	245 (80%)
Secondary	53 (17%)
Further Education	11 (4%)
Other*	2 (1%)

\*Other' responses included an infant school and a junior school.

*Note:* participants could select more than one response, for example 'Secondary' AND 'Further Education' for schools with sixth-form programmes attached.

Of the VS staff surveyed, 39% (n=22) were VSHs, just under a third (29%; n=16) were in a role directly supporting education, and 5% specifically supported with post-16 CLA. The sample of VS staff also included deputy head teachers, inclusion support staff and an EP. See *Table 4*. It should be noted that job role titles with VSs are not standardised. Therefore, the same job role may have different titles across different VSs such as 'education advisor', 'education officer', and 'education support'. For the purpose of reporting demographic information of the participants in this study, roles have been collated under overlapping titles.

**Table 4***Virtual School Staff Job Roles for Surveys (n=56)*

<b>Role</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Head Teacher	22 (39%)
Co-Head Teacher	1 (2%)
Deputy Head Teacher	2 (4%)
Education	16 (29%)
Education and Employment Officer	1 (2%)
Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Advisory Teacher	1 (2%)
Key-Stage Lead	1 (2%)
Post-16 Officer	3 (5%)
PEP Officer	3 (5%)
Inclusion Officer	2 (4%)
Educational Psychologist	1 (2%)
Quality Assurance Officer	1 (2%)
Operations Manager	1 (2%)
Business Support	1 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>56 (100%)</b>

The vast majority of participants in both the DT and VS staff survey samples were female. See *Table 11 in Appendix J*. The most commonly reported age group for both DTs and VS staff was 45 to 54, (44%; n=124) and (39%; n=19) respectively. The vast majority of participants fell within the 25 to 64 age range. See *Table 12 in Appendix J*.

In line with a case study design and a CST framework, interview participants were representative of one LA. The LA is situated in the south east of England and at the time of data collection the population was just under 300,000. Within this LA the percentages of people from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds are at least two percentage points higher than the national average in England. There are around

100 schools within the LA and just over half of all students within are from Ethnically Diverse backgrounds. 160 different languages are spoken within schools in the LA. In the years immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic, the LA saw a slight decrease in the percentage of YP gaining 5 GCSEs at a grade 4 and above. This compares to a 5.2% increase in such grades for YP nationally.

Around 30% of all children within the LA are characterised as living in poverty, where just over 10% of neighbourhoods and estates within the LA fall into the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England. Please note that broad demographic information has been provided without a level of detail that includes decimal points. This is to maintain anonymity of the LA, interview participants and the CLA cases that have been shared.

It should be noted that at the time of the study there were no EPs directly linked to any schools or the VS within the LA. All participants were female and the years of experience in their current roles ranged from less than a year to over 12 years. For the DTs, holding the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and / or SENCO role(s) in addition to their DT role was common. Two out of the three DTs held senior leadership roles within their school, and all DTs supported in mainstream schools. Overall, participants supported CYP from 4 to 18 years of age. See *Table 13 in Appendix J*.



## **3.5 Materials and Measures**

### **3.5.1 National Online Surveys**

Two surveys were created using the online software Qualtrics (see Appendix C). The surveys were distributed via email to schools and VSs in England. Both surveys were live for nine weeks between January and March 2023.

Surveys enable a large amount of data to be collected in a relatively short period of time. Data from surveys can also provide a broad picture of practice by reaching a large portion of the target population. For participants, surveys serve as a convenient means for taking part in research, where the timing and pace of completion is chosen by them (Bryman, 2012). There is the potential for survey data to be affected by characteristics of respondents, such as social desirability, memory, and motivation. However, the anonymity afforded by surveys can encourage participants to be honest and open about their experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In the present study, development of survey items was guided by the four RQs. The DT survey comprised of 32 questions and the VS survey comprised of 26. A combination of closed and open questions was used to explore features of a participant's role, and their experiences and reflections regarding training, professional support, and the systems they work within. Participants were also given the opportunity to share their reflections on the strengths and challenges within the systems of support for CLA, and their experience of EP involvement for CLA.

When developing the surveys, thought was given to the participant experience. To maximise the number of fully completed responses the wording of items was kept as short and simple as possible, and items that required lengthy text responses were kept to a minimum, as recommended by Punch (2003). A variety of response options were included, such as multiple-choice, sliders to report percentages, and Likert-scale options. A progress bar was also included at the top of the screen to encourage completion, and amendments made following piloting of the surveys ensured the average time for completion was less than 10 minutes.

The researcher took a reflexive approach when considering potential response options within the surveys. Participants may have had experiences beyond those that the researcher was already familiar with, and therefore prescribed response options had the potential to limit and prejudice the data. For this reason, 'other' boxes were included where possible to allow participants to provide additional responses. The researcher utilised supervision to ensure the surveys were fit for purpose, unambiguous, and provided valid information in line with the RQs.

### **3.5.2 Social Network Analysis (Sociograms and Semi-Structured Interviews)**

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a rich picture of systems of support for CLA within one LA. At the start of interviews, a social network mapping activity took place to produce visual graphs (sociograms) of such systems.

Sociograms are graph databases that depict relationships among individuals in a network (Moreno, 1941). Individuals are characterised by dots, referred to as 'nodes', and relationships between individuals are characterised by lines that connect nodes, referred to as 'edges'.

The suitability of using network data to examine interaction-dominant models have been outlined in Chapter 1 (see *1.7 Theoretical Framework*). Additionally, graphical representation of qualitative data can be advantageous for exposing patterns within networks and gaining better coherence of issues (Chi, 1977). In line with RQ 1 '*What do the systems of support for CLA look like?*', sociograms also enable clear presentation and communication of such data to the reader (Chi, 1977).

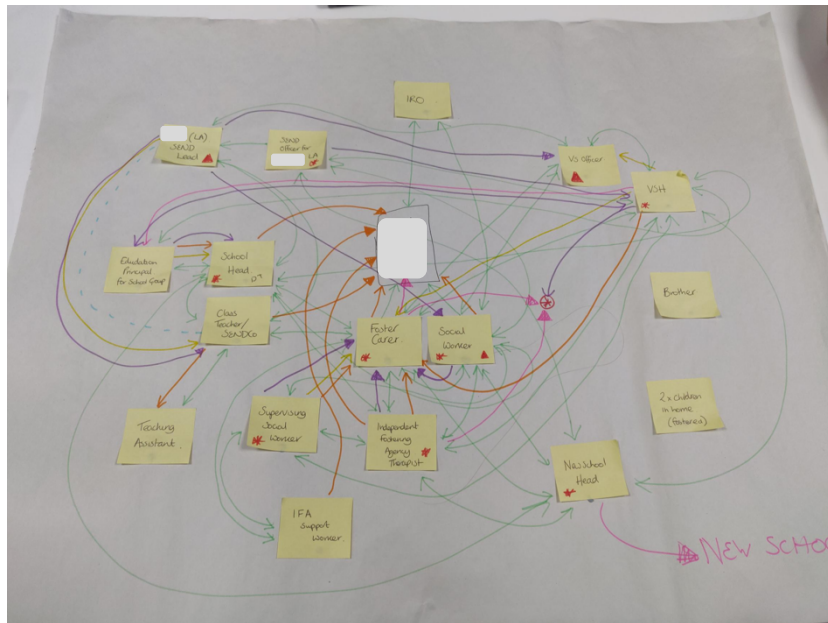
Social Network Analysis (SNA) has emerged as a key method for investigating social structures and networks. SNA first gained momentum as a research method in the 1920s, with several contributions from developmental and educational psychologists who researched children's' interpersonal relationships (Freeman, 2004). In 1934, Moreno coined the term 'sociometry' to explain his theory of society, which focused on the networks of interpersonal relations that join individuals (Moreno, 1934). Since the 1970s, SNA and the use of sociograms has gained exciting momentum (Otte & Rousseau, 2002), successfully being applied in a range of contexts including anthropology, communications, computer science, medicine, political science, public health, psychology (Marin & Wellman, 2011) and within CLA-focussed research (see Munro et al., 2017). In this study, a SNA approach is strongly aligned with the CST framework. As suggested by Barabási (2003) "*networks are the prerequisite for describing any complex system, indicating that complexity theory must invariably stand on the shoulders of network theory*" (p.238).

To generate sociograms in this study, post-it notes, large paper, coloured pens and blue-tack were used. Participants were first asked to provide a brief summary of a case for a CLA or PCLA that they have been a part of and knew well. The task was then for participants to write the names of all of the individuals involved with the pupil on post-it notes and arrange them around the pupil's initial on a large piece of paper. The distance each post-it note was placed from the pupil's initial represented the level of responsibility the participant felt each individual had.

Once all nodes were placed on the paper, coloured pens were used to draw connections between them. Each colour represented a different type of connection - for example, green for information sharing and orange for emotional support (see interview schedule in Appendix F for the full key of pen colours). Participants were also asked to indicate the direction of connections by drawing arrow heads on the edges. Connections could be either one-directional or bi-directional, and collaborative groups were connected with undirected edges. A pair of nodes could have multiple different types of connections between them and some participants chose to use dotted lines to indicate weak connections. See *Figure 3* for an example of an original sociogram. See Appendix G for further examples of original sociograms.

**Figure 3**

*Example of an Original Sociogram Created by Hand by a Participant*



To establish the boundaries of the systems, both a position-based and a relation-based approach were used (Lauman et al., 1983). This means that participants were asked to start with writing down all individuals who they knew directly supported the pupil, such as themselves, SWs, foster parents, etc. Participants were then asked to expand the network to include others who were connected to these initial ‘seed’ nodes, such as foster parent’s SW and siblings. Another important practice consideration was whether to use recognition or free recall to support participants with labelling all individuals within the systems (Avila de Lima, 2010). To overcome the limitations of either option, the researcher first asked participants to use free recall and then provided a prompt list of potential individuals who may have been missed. See the interview schedule in Appendix F.

A mixed-methods approach was utilised for SNA to facilitate exploration of the network structures and to gain information about these systems in context.

Participants were asked about their reflections on the sociograms and specifically about the nature of the connections with key nodes in a semi-structured interview (see the interview schedule in Appendix F). In line with RQ2 '*How do the systems of support for CLA function and how do the individuals within them interact?*', this approach facilitated exploration of how resources, information and support were exchanged through connections (Bellotti, 2008; Coviello, 2005). To address RQs 3 and 4, participants were also asked about the facilitating factors and challenges within key relationships.

During semi-structured interviews, pre-determined open-ended questions were used to guide the conversation, however participants were free to, and were prompted to elaborate on their answers. Opportunity for additional dialogue can result in a labour-intensive analysis process, compared to that of structured interviews. However, the nature of semi-structured interviews enables the researcher to build a rapport with participants and for additional insights to emerge from the dialogue (Whiting, 2008).

To ensure best practice for obtaining in-depth opinions in the interviews, the researcher met face-to-face with participants (Dialsingh, 2008) in quiet and private rooms (Burns & Grove, 2005). The researcher also remained neutral in their responses, both with the language and tone used. This was to limit any social desirability for the participant and any bias from the researcher.

The researcher consulted supervisors throughout development of the interview schedule to ensure clarity and validity of the questions, in line with the four RQs. All interviews were conducted individually on six separate occasions between February and March 2023 and typically lasted 90 minutes. Before starting, participants were asked to give their informed consent to take part and for the interview to be audio recorded by completing a detailed consent form (see Appendix E).

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

In line with a convergent mixed-methods approach, qualitative and quantitative data from all three sources (surveys, sociograms, and interviews) were analysed separately before being merged for side-by-side comparison and corroboration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative survey data was analysed in Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics to explore trends and relationships in the data (Mertens, 2010). Descriptive statistics have been recognised as a well-suited way of presenting numerical data in a manner that is easily digestible to readers (Marshall & Jonker, 2010). Qualitative data from open-ended survey items were analysed using the principles of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were organised into codes, such as '*collaboration*', and the frequency of codes was measured to ensure their prevalence could be accurately reported and taken into account. Responses from both surveys were analysed separately to allow for the distinct perspectives of both DTs and VS staff to

be captured and to provide an opportunity for comparison. See *Chapter 4, section 4.2*.

Data from the social network mapping activity was transferred into the software NodeXL (Hansen et al, 2011) to produce digital sociograms. For each sociogram, the job titles of all individuals (nodes) were entered into a NodeXL spreadsheet. The individuals with whom each node had a connection was entered into the cell next to the corresponding node. The types of connections between nodes were recorded in the spreadsheet and the edges within the sociograms were labelled with the total number of connections between a pair of nodes (see Appendix H for an example of a dataset in NodeXL). The colours and sizes of the nodes were amended in line with the type of individual and the level of perceived responsibility they had - see the full explanation within the sociogram key in *Chapter 4*.

Analysing qualitative data in sociograms involves looking at the structure that emerges from the connections between nodes. This is known as the 'architecture' (Kandushin, 2012) and can be crucial to understanding how the network functions by highlighting weak points, central points of influence, and dense clusters of highly connected nodes (Mercer, 2014). In the present study, such aspects were analysed and interpreted by the researcher. In addition, nested networks were analysed, where nodes were organised into collaborative groups. Visual depictions of these collaborative groups, along with all complete sociograms are presented in *Chapter 4, section 4.3*.



An understanding of the different kinds and qualities of connections within sociograms can help to identify power structures (pathways for the flow of information and resources), as well as opportunities for growth and cooperation (Mercer, 2014). To explore the characteristics of the connections between nodes, quantitative data from the sociograms was analysed. The total number of nodes and connections in each sociogram were counted, as well as the directionality of connections (whether connections were one-way or reciprocated). The proportion of different types of connections (such as information sharing, emotional support, and giving advice) in each sociogram were totalled, and the nodes with the highest numbers of multiple connections with other nodes were explored.

All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants. The data was then transferred into Microsoft Word as audio files, and the '*transcription*' function used. The researcher checked for accuracy within all transcriptions against the audio recordings. Transcripts were manually amended to correct errors, remove additional text such as '*umm*' and repeated phrases, and to ensure anonymity. The researcher changed the names of professionals, LAs, and the accidental use of a young person's name.

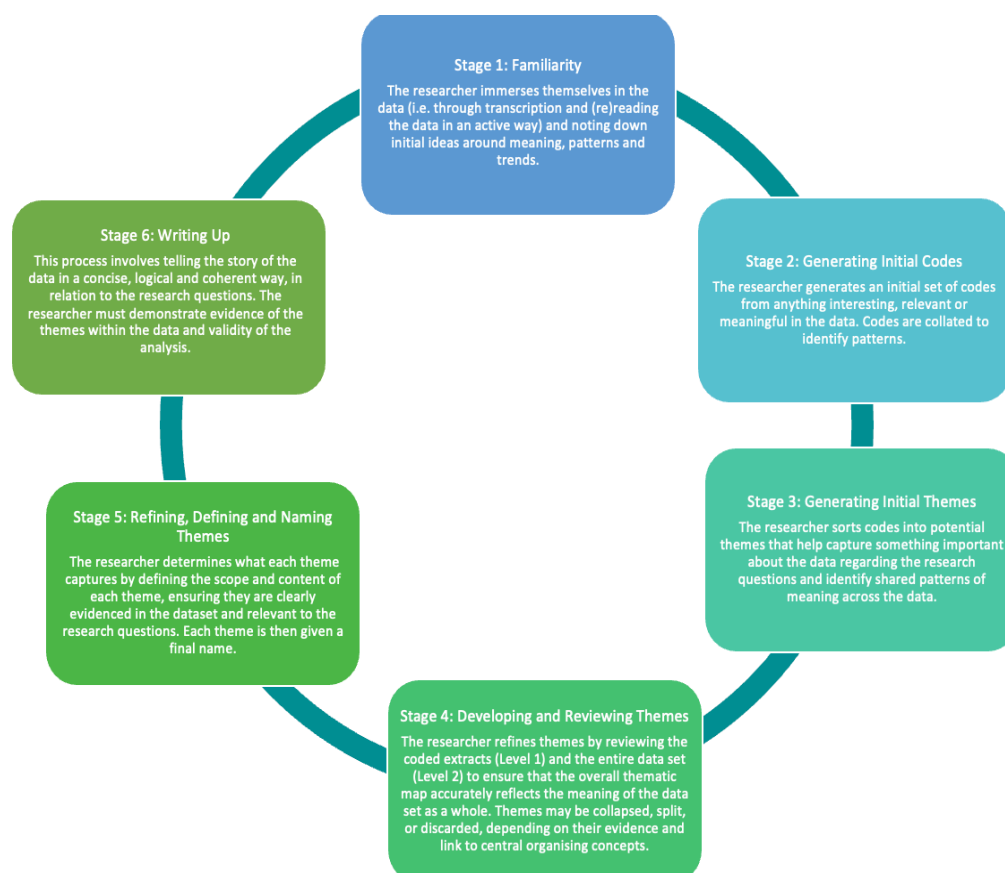
Interview data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a process which involves the systematic search for common threads of meaning, before grouping data into categories and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2022; Willig, 2013). Thematic analysis is commonly used within qualitative research (Braun et al., 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013) and is not linked to a particular epistemological or theoretical paradigm, unlike other methods of qualitative

data analysis such as discourse analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis (Terry et al., 2017). In line with a critical realist paradigm, thematic analysis allows the researcher to acknowledge the way individuals make sense of their experiences, while recognising the broader social context that influences such meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thematic analysis, therefore, was deemed an appropriate approach within this study.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance outlines six phases of the process which were followed in the present study to ensure a thorough and rigorous analysis of the data. These phases are outlined in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Phases of Thematic Analysis, Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022)*



After familiarisation with the data, the researcher recorded initial codes in 'comments' boxes within each Microsoft Word document. All codes were then written on post-it notes and organised into potential themes according to shared patterns of meaning (stage three). The researcher returned to the transcriptions to re-read both the coded extracts and entire data sets during stages four and five. Initial and developing codes, themes, and sub-themes were re-arranged and collapsed, and the wording revised to ensure accurate reflection of the data and relevance to the RQs.

As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022, p.34) "*the different phases of reflexive thematic analysis are not always sharply delineated*" and the process of thematic analysis is '*unidirectional*'. In this study, the researcher found themselves returning to stage three when developing and reviewing themes (stage four), and returning to stage four when refining, defining and naming themes (stage five). See *Table 8* in Appendix I for example codes and extracts associated with a final theme and sub-themes.

To ensure a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, the researcher practiced critical reflection when approaching the data at every stage. The researcher continuously reflected on whether their thoughts and beliefs about the systems of support for CLA, based on their own experiences, were being imposed on the analysis. The researcher took the lead from the data and recorded their reflections in a journal at different points during the analysis and shared their process and reflections in supervision. The researcher also took an inductive approach to

analysis, meaning the coding and generation of themes were not guided by pre-determined constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **3.7 Research Quality**

The quality of both quantitative and qualitative research relies on whether findings can be demonstrated as being reliable, valid and generalisable (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

#### Reliability

In quantitative research, reliability is concerned with whether results are replicable, consistent and stable over time (Bryman, 2012). To ensure reliability of quantitative data, all DT participants received an identical survey to complete. Similarly, all VS staff participants received an identical survey to complete. In an attempt to mitigate social bias, participants were also made aware that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential (Mertens, 2010).

In qualitative research, reliability is concerned with the methods used to collect and analyse data, and whether these are consistent, dependable and trustworthy (Willig, 2013). The use of thematic analysis with the interview data allowed for a systematic and iterative approach. The researcher also engaged in reflexive conversations with both their supervisors and peers who were familiar with the thematic analysis process and research context. To further ensure reliability, the same semi-structured interview schedule was used with each case study participant, including a prompt list of professionals to be considered for all sociograms.

To mitigate the potential for human error when inputting sociogram data from hardcopies into NodeXL, the researcher used a systematic approach, checked for

errors and omissions, and listened back to audio recordings for clarification about connections. The researcher also ensured interviews took place in a quiet room without distractions. Finally, triangulation of multiple forms and sources of data further increased the reliability of findings in this study.

### Validity

In quantitative and qualitative research, validity examines the integrity of findings and conclusions, and the extent to which the research describes, measures and explains the phenomenon it intends to (Bryman, 2012). To ensure validity in the present study, the researcher used triangulation of multiple sources and types of data, kept clear audit trails of data such as audio recordings of interviews to refer back to for clarification throughout analysis, and has ensured transparency regarding the process of qualitative data interpretation of. Validity is also concerned with a researcher's reflexivity, see *Researcher's Position* in Chapter 1.

### Generalisability

Generalisability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts or individuals outside of the sample groups (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In-line with a critical realist paradigm, it may be possible to generalise findings from the current study beyond the sample if the underlying mechanisms impacting the systems of support for CLA and the contexts in which they operate are clearly evidenced (Robson & McCartan, 2016). To mitigate against generalisability issues the researcher endeavoured to obtain large samples to provide data via the surveys. The characteristics of the final samples were also clearly outlined.

Yardley (2000) identified further criteria for measuring research quality; commitment, rigour, coherence, transparency, and reflexivity. To demonstrate the trustworthiness and credibility of this study, the researcher has set out ways in which all of these criteria have been met in *Appendix K*.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained in June 2022 from the UCL Institute of Education Doctoral Research Ethics Committee. The researcher adhered to the ethical principles set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the Institute of Education Doctorate in Educational Psychology Regulations (UCL, 2021) which outline the requirements of this thesis. As part of that process, the research was registered with the UCL Data Protection Office, where their ethics screening was applied to ensure this thesis was compliant with the UCL policies around data protection and GDPR. The researcher also completed a risk assessment and an online UCL GDPR training course.

All participants were required to provide their informed consent before taking part in the research. For survey participants, an information page was attached to the participation enquiry email. At the start of the survey, participants were required to tick a box agreeing with the statement '*I have read and understood the information form and give my consent to take part in this survey*' before they could progress any further. Case study participants were provided with an information page via email and in person. These participants were asked to complete and sign a consent form by hand before data collection began. All participants were made aware that their responses would be anonymised and confidential, that any personal information they

shared, such as email addresses, would be stored securely, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Please see the completed Ethics Application Form in Appendix L for further information regarding informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, data storage and debriefing. Please also see information pages and consent form in Appendices B, D, and E).

## **Chapter 4. Findings**

### **4.1 Overview**

The findings of this study are presented in this chapter. National survey findings are presented in tables and graphs with short descriptions and summaries of key findings. Trends in survey data paint a broad picture of practice from multiple LAs across England and are relevant to all four RQs. Case study data is presented in sociograms and thematic maps. Contextual information of the case informing each sociogram is provided, alongside a description of the data and summaries of the key findings. The themes and sub-themes from interviews are explained and excerpts from the transcripts provided. Case study data provides detailed insight into the systems of support for CLA from the perspective of three DTs and three VS staff in one LA and address all four RQs. In Chapter 5 all data is discussed jointly - comparison and triangulation are used to answer the four RQs.

### **4.2 Survey Findings**

The DT and VS staff surveys differed with regards to wording and the inclusion or omission of some items, however they both covered similar areas of the phenomena under investigation. From a complex systems perspective, items in the surveys addressed individual factors relating to the DT and VS staff roles, schools as sub-systems, the wider system, and participants' views and reflections regarding the tensions and facilitating factors within such systems. This is the order in which survey data has been grouped and presented in this chapter.

Response rates varied across questions; therefore, percentages represent the proportion of participants that provided specific responses relative to the number



of respondents for each question. N values are included in graphs and tables or within the titles, representing the total number of responses. 284 DTs and 49 VS staff completed 100% of the respective surveys. See *Tables 11* and *12* in Appendix J for a breakdown of survey progress by the number of participants.

#### **4.2.1 Individual Factors**

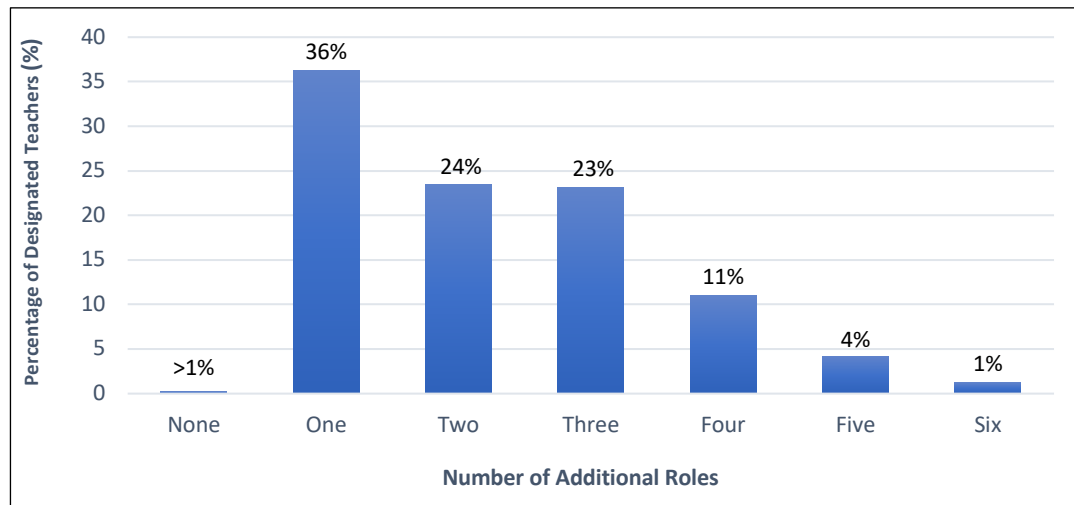
In line with RQ1, '*What do the systems of support for CLA look like?*', survey items addressed individual factors for DTs and VS staff to explore patterns of such factors across the systems of support.

Participants' years of experience within their respective roles varied. For DTs (n=307) this ranged from less than one year to 30 years (M = 5.92 years; SD = 4.29). 17 DTs (5%) had held DT responsibilities for over 14 years, before it became a statutory role in 2009. For VS staff (n=56) years of experience ranged from less than one year to 13 years (M = 3.69 years; SD = 3.12).

It was common for DTs to hold additional roles within their education setting. All but one DT held at least one other role (>99%; n=305), with over one third of DTs holding one additional role (36%, n=111), and just under one quarter of DTs holding two (24%; n=72) or three (23%; n=71) additional roles. See *Figure 5*.

**Figure 5**

*Number of Additional Roles Held by Designated Teachers (n=306)*



The additional roles held by DTs varied. Almost two thirds of DTs were headteachers, deputy, or assistant headteachers (65%; n=200). Half of DTs were DSLs (50%; n=153), just under one third were SENCOs (32%; n=98), and just under one quarter were Designated Mental Health Leads (DMHLs) (24%; n=73). The other roles held by DTs were wide-ranging and included class teachers, pastoral roles, inclusion leads, and learning support roles. See *Table 5*.

**Table 5***Additional Roles Held by Designated Teacher Survey Participants*

<b>Role</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Headteacher, Deputy Head or Assistant Head	200	65%
Designated Safeguarding Lead	153	50%
SENCo	98	32%
Class Teacher	35	11%
Subject Lead	46	15%
Pastoral Lead	44	14%
Pastoral Team Member	14	5%
Designated Mental Health Lead	73	24%
Other*	56	18%

*Additional Roles Held by Designated Teachers (n=306)*

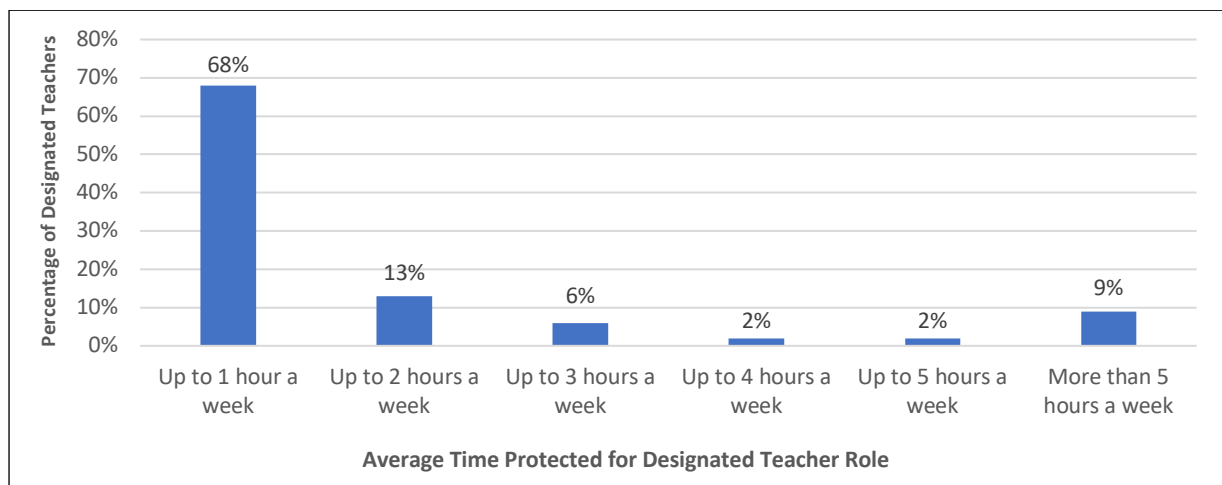
*Note.* \*Other role titles varied and included inclusion leader, mentor, learning support teacher, Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), student services lead, key stage phase leader.

*Note.* Participants could provide multiple answers - the total percentage for responses is therefore over 100%.

DTs were asked on average how much time was protected to carry out their role within a typical week. The majority of DTs reported having no more than one hour a week of protected time (68%; n=208). See *Figure 6*.

**Figure 6**

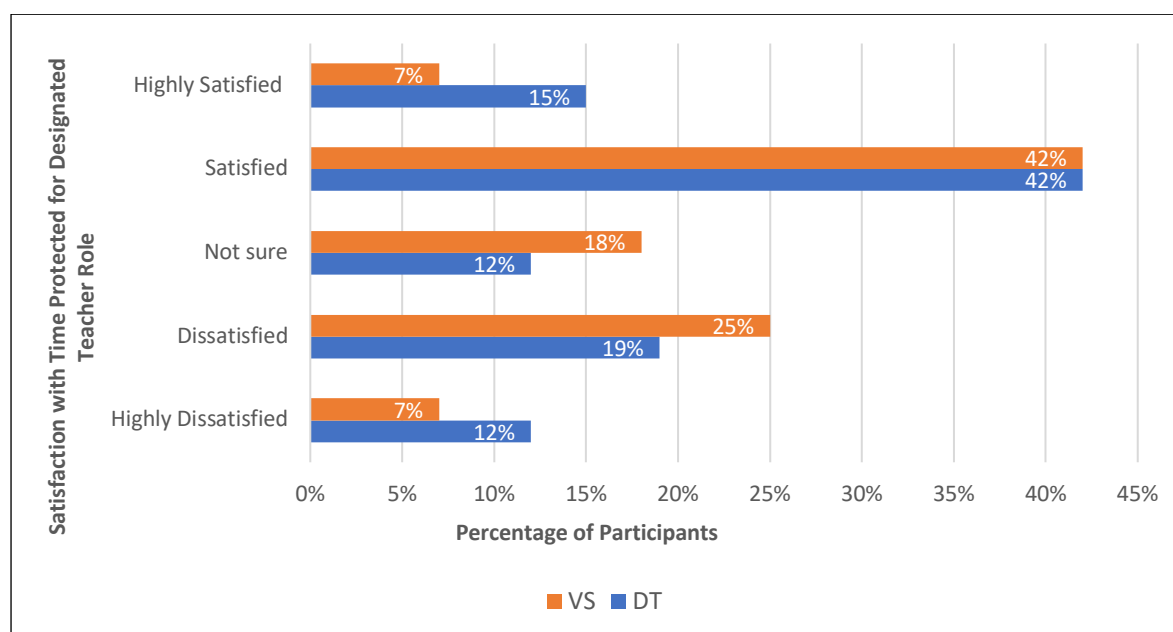
*Average Time Protected in a Typical Week for Designated Teachers to Carry Out the Role (n=307)*



Both VS staff and DTs were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction with the amount of time that is protected to fulfil their roles. '*Satisfied*' was the most commonly reported degree of satisfaction for both VS staff (42%; n=23) and DTs (42%; n=130). One third of VS staff (33%; n=18) and just under one third of DTs (31%; n=94) reported being either '*Dissatisfied*' or '*Highly Dissatisfied*' with the amount of time protected to fulfil their roles. See *Figure 7*.

## Figure 7

*Virtual School staff and Designated Teacher's Degree of Satisfaction with the Time Protected to Fulfil their Roles (VS: n=55; DTs: n=307)*



Of the DTs who reported being '*Highly Satisfied*' or '*Satisfied*' (n=177), around half attributed this to the flexibility they have with managing their time (51%; n=90). DTs reported being either autonomous with their time management or receiving support from the senior leadership team (SLT) to manage and protect time for the DT role. Sharing the role between colleagues, such as the pastoral team was also cited as positively impacting on time available for the DT role. See *Table 6*.

Of the DTs who reported being '*Highly Dissatisfied*' or '*Dissatisfied*' (n=94), over one quarter reported having no protected time for the role (27%; n=25). For DTs who had some protected time, just under one quarter felt that it was not enough (23%; n=22), and others highlighted the challenge of holding multiple roles (20%; n=19) - see *Table 6*. DTs reported a range of practice examples that contributed to the reason for their level of satisfaction. Whilst some DTs had time to work directly

with pupils, others only had protected time to attend PEP meetings. For these DTs, data collection and completion of paperwork in preparation for PEPs encroached on their time protected for other roles, or it had to take place in their own time out of employed hours. DTs also highlighted the impact of limited time on reviewing the progress and support for PCLA.

**Table 6**

*Explanations Given by DTs for Their Level of Satisfaction with Protected Time for Their Role*

	Code	Frequency (%)
<b>'Highly Satisfied' and 'Satisfied' with time protected for DT role (n=177)</b>	Flexibility of Time	90 (51%)
	Non-Teaching Staff Member	33 (19%)
	Appropriate Amount of Time for Role at Present	32 (18%)
	Job Share	14 (8%)
	Current low number of CLA on roll	11 (6%)
<b>'Highly Dissatisfied' and 'Dissatisfied' with time protected for DT role (n=94)</b>	No Protected Time	25 (27%)
	Not Enough Time	22 (23%)
	Demands of holding multiple roles	19 (20%)
	More Time Wanted for Direct Work with CLA	5 (5%)

Responses varied from the VS staff who provided an explanation for their degree of satisfaction regarding the time available to fulfil their role. Having both an appropriate amount of time (28%; n=12) and not enough time (21%; n=9) were reported. A need to prioritise complex cases and paperwork proved difficult for VS staff who wanted to be able to dedicate more of their time to CYP cases not of major concern, such as those who could be accessing higher grades with additional input (21%; n=9). Increased demands on the VS were also cited as having a negative impact on time to fulfil roles (14%; n=6). Such demands included an increase in the

number of CLA, complexity of need, and scope of the VS role. Challenges to time protected to fulfil roles were cited by VS staff who reported all degrees of satisfaction. See *Table 7*.

**Table 7**

*Explanations Given by Virtual School staff for their Level of Satisfaction with Protected Time for their Role*

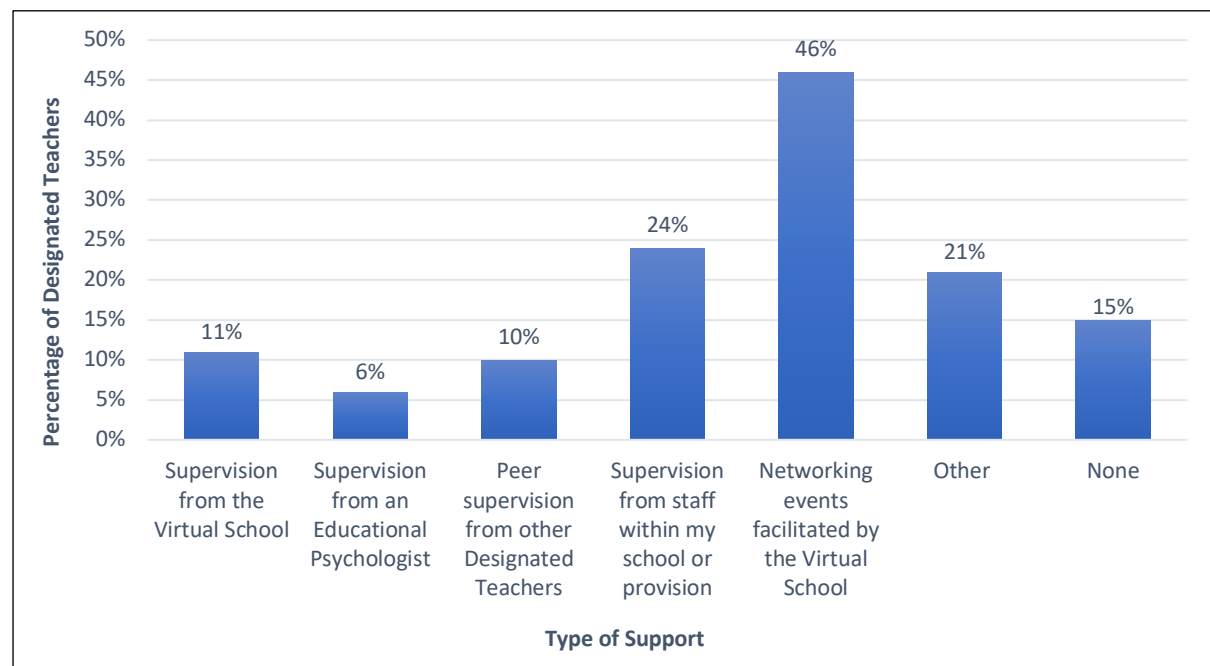
	<b>Code</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
<b>All levels of satisfaction for VS staff role excluding 'Not Sure' (n=43)</b>	Appropriate amount of time	12 (28%)
	Not enough time	9 (21%)
	Having to prioritise complex cases or paperwork	9 (21%)
	Increase in Demands (number of CLA, complexity of need, scope of VS)	6 (14%)

*Note.* \*'Not Sure' responses (n=10) were not included because eight participants explained that they did not case hold and therefore the question was not relevant to them. The other two VS staff referenced the ever-changing time demands for the role and therefore did not feel able to comment.

The majority of DTs received support in their role, although the type and source of support varied. Networking events facilitated by their VS were reported by almost half of DTs (46%; n=141). Supervision was reported by over half of DTs (51%; n=156), the most common source coming from staff within their education setting (24%; n=74). 'Other' types of support included advice from the VS upon request, advice from a LA behaviour support team upon request, and networking events facilitated by the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL). See *Figure 8*.

**Figure 8**

*Types of Support Received by Designated Teachers (n=307)*

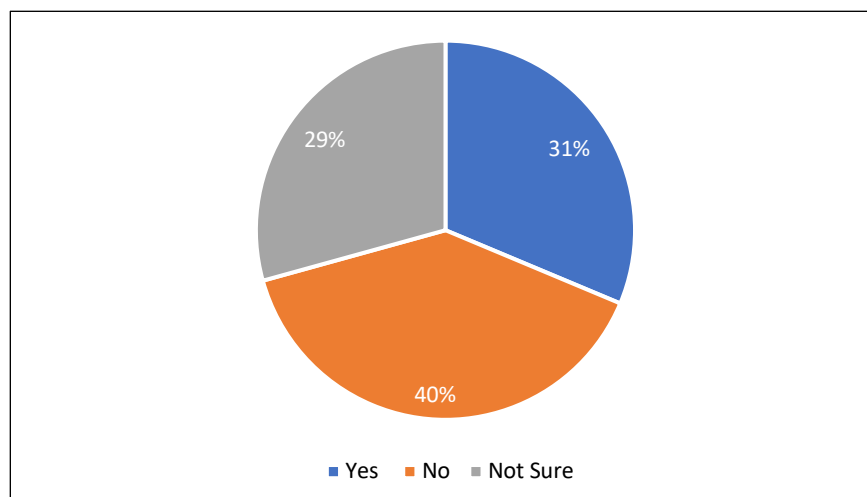


Forty percent of DTs felt that they currently had enough support and they did not want any more (n=119). More support was desired by 31% of DTs (n=94), and all other DTs did not feel strongly about receiving more support or not (29%; n=89).

Overall, responses were divided. See *Figure 9*.

**Figure 9**

*Designated Teachers Desire for More Support (n=302)*

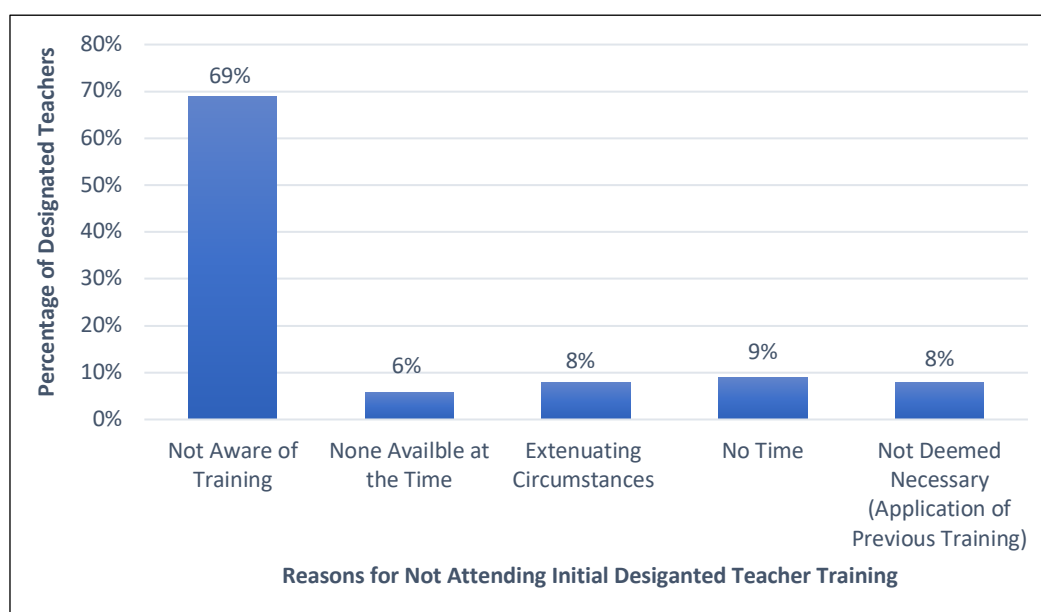




Training experiences varied considerably for both DTs and VS staff. One quarter of DTs did not attend initial training for their role (25%; n=77). Of these DTs, the majority reported that they were not aware of training opportunities when they took on the role (69%; n=53) with an expectation to “*pick up*” the role being highlighted by some. For other DTs, despite being aware of training opportunities, either none was available at the time they started the role (6%; n=5), or they had no time to attend (7%; n=9). Both COVID-19 lockdowns and Ofsted inspections prevented some other DTs from attending initial training (8%; n=6). See *Figure 10*.

**Figure 10**

*Reasons Given by Designated Teachers for Not Attending Initial Training (n=77)*

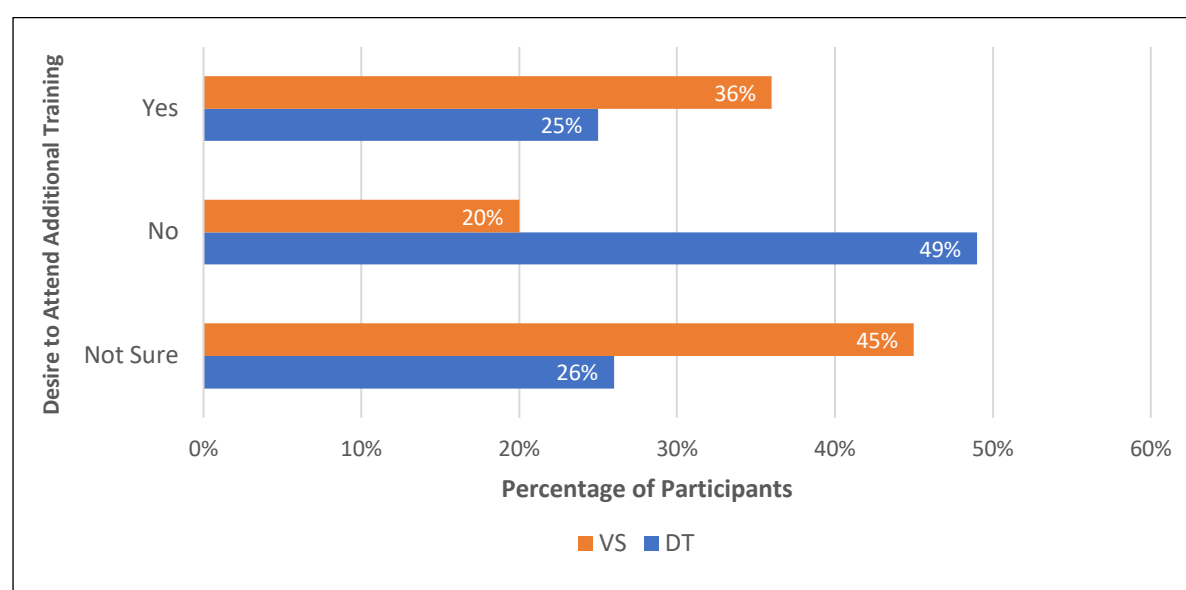


Over half of VS staff did not attend initial formal training (61%; n=34), with the most common approach being ongoing informal training (84%; n=47). All VS staff received at least one, if not multiple modes of training including those just highlighted, as well as continuing professional development (CPD) and mentoring.

Almost half of all DTs were content with the training they have already received, reporting that they would not like to attend any additional training (49%; n=149). However, other DTs (25%; n=75) and over a third of VS staff (36%; n=20) would like to attend additional training. See *Figure 11*.

**Figure 11**

*Virtual School Staff (n=56) and Designated Teachers (n=302) Responses to the Question 'Would you like to attend any additional training?'*



#### **4.2.2 Schools as Sub-Systems**

To further address RQ1, the architecture of education settings and VSs was explored. The make-up of these sub-systems varied drastically. DTs were supporting in education settings ranging in capacity from 20 to 4,500 pupils ( $M = 511$ ;  $SD = 632$ ). The number of CLA on roll within an average year ranged from 0 to 40 ( $M = 7$ ;  $SD = 9$ ). It was highlighted by one DT that with four meetings to attend for each CLA in a year, three PEPs and a CLA Review, having over 20 CLA on roll results in a minimum of 100 separate meetings to attend. All meetings last an hour on average

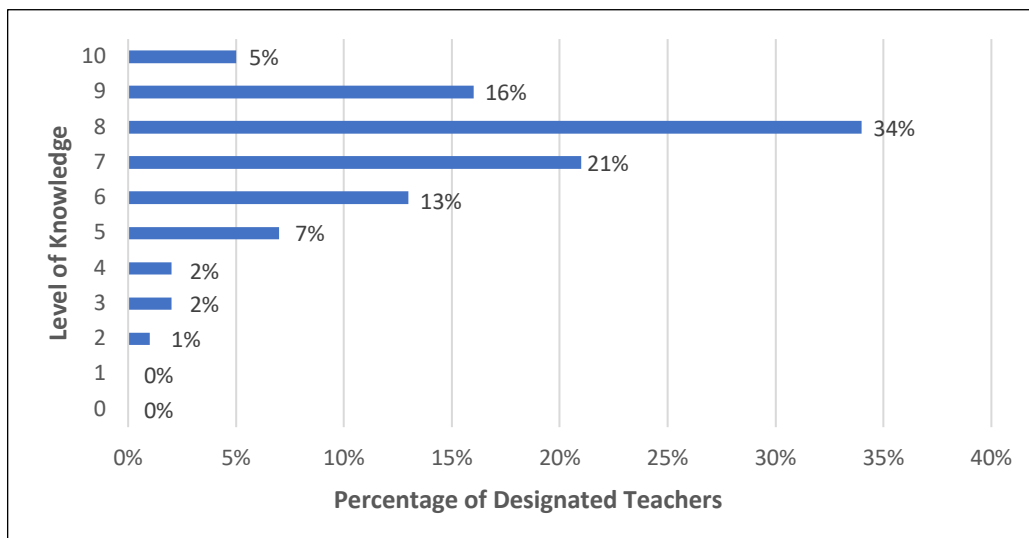
and require additional time for preparation. With a 38-week school year, they reported a shortage of time.

VSs ranged from having 145 to 1,097 CLA and PCLA on roll ( $M = 471$ ;  $SD = 277$ ). For the VS staff who held a case load, their capacity ranged from 6 to 847 ( $M=134$ ;  $SD = 175$ ). VS headteachers frequently cited all CLA and PCLA on roll within their VS as on their caseload. The combination of low staffing numbers and again an increase in the number of CLA were reported by VS staff as contributing to large caseloads. VS staff also reported that high caseload numbers restricted a proactive and preventative approach to working.

DTs were asked to rate the levels of knowledge and support in their education settings for staff working with CLA and PCLA. Ratings of 0 to 10 represented none to maximum knowledge and support. Over half of DTs felt that within their education settings there was a high level of knowledge - ratings of 8 to 10 (55%;  $n=164$ ). All DTs felt there was at least some degree of knowledge about the needs of these pupils. See *Figure 12*.

**Figure 12**

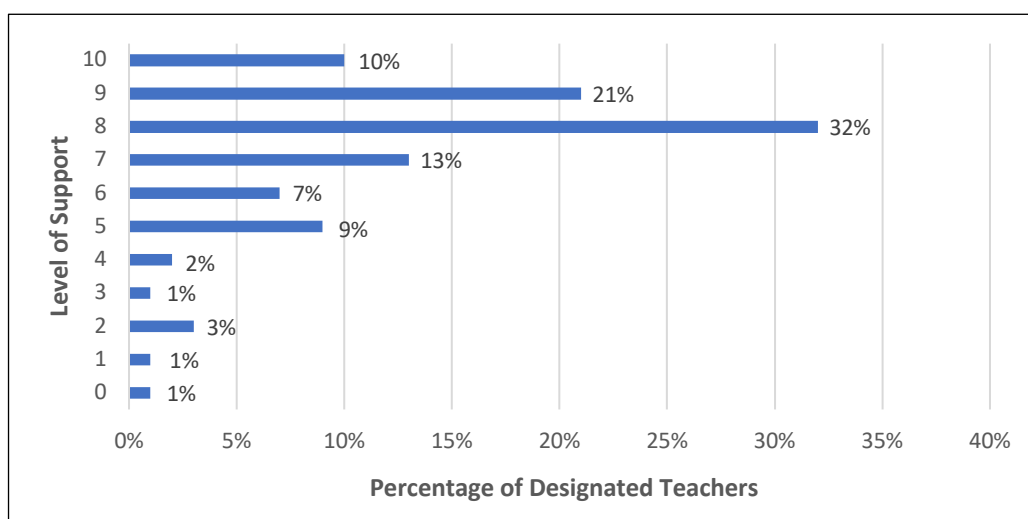
*Levels of Knowledge About Working with CLA and PCLA Within Education Setting as Perceived by Designated Teachers (n=301)*



Similarly, over half of DTs felt that there was a high level of support for CLA and PCLA - ratings of 8 to 10 (63%; n=190). It is concerning that a small proportion felt that there was little to no support for CLA and PCLA in their settings - ratings of 0 to 2 (5%; n=15). See *Figure 13*.

**Figure 13**

*DT's Perceived Levels of Support for CLA and PCLA Within their Education Setting (n=301)*



### **4.2.3 The Wider System**

To explore the picture of the wider system, in line with RQ1, and to contribute to answering RQ2 '*How do the systems of support for CLA function and how do the individuals within them interact?*', survey items addressed the nature of working with professionals and individuals both within and outside DT's and VS staff's own sub-systems.

Both DTs and VS staff worked with a large number of professionals and individuals. DTs reported working with up to 28 other people and VS staff reported working with up to 36 other people<sup>1</sup>. Social workers, foster parents, SENCOs, headteachers, and class teachers were all reported by the majority of both DTs and VS staff (>80%). This data suggests that the systems of support for CLA would typically include the same key people, as well as DTs and VS staff. All VS staff reported working with DTs (100%; n=56), and the majority of DTs reported working with VS staff (83%; n=245) and/or VSHs (63%; n=185). See *Figure 14*.

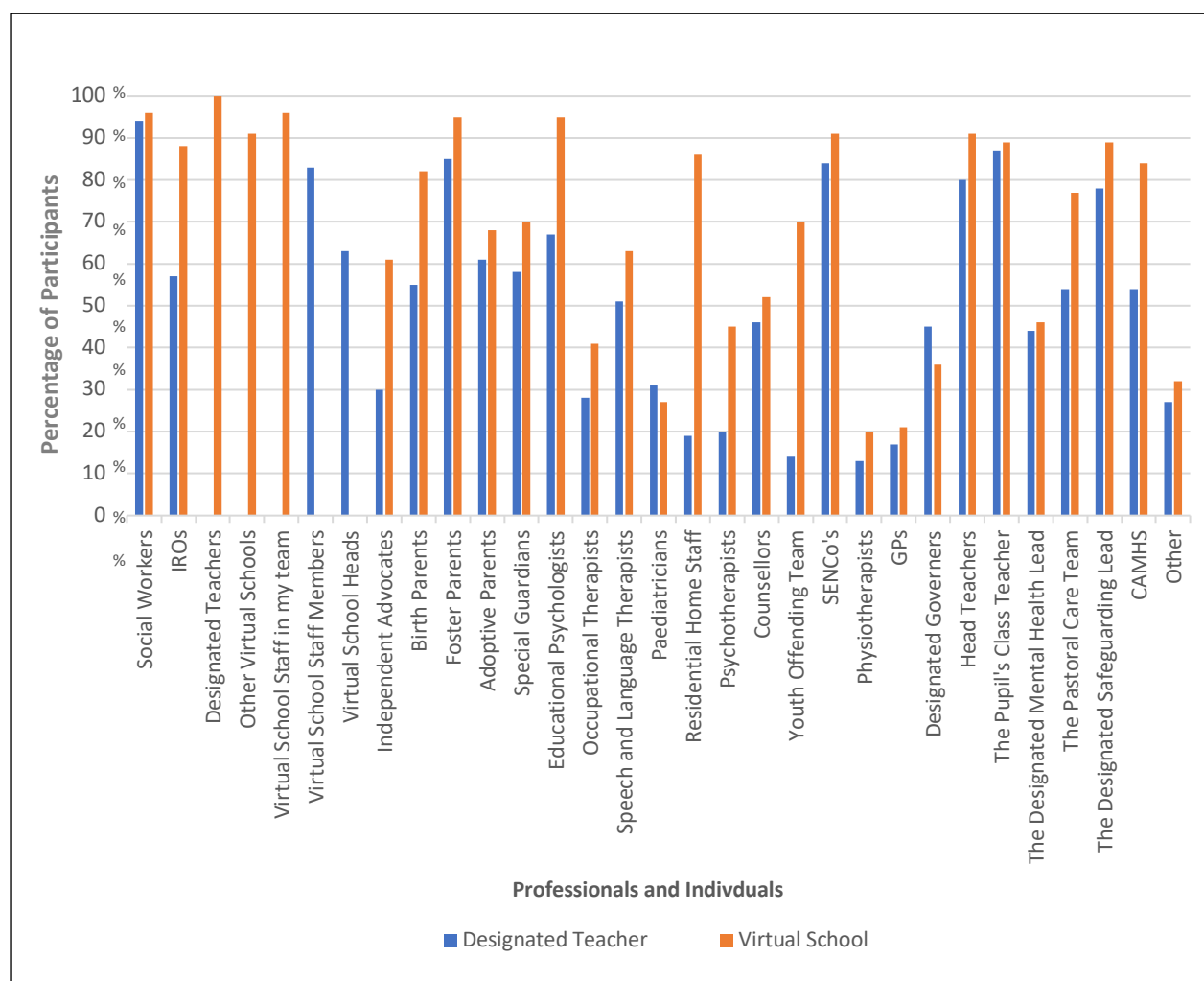
It was common for VS staff to work with colleagues within their VS team (96%; n=54) and have connections with the other VS teams (91%; n=51). A majority of VS staff also reported working with EPs (95%; n=53), which was the case for just over two thirds of DTs (67%; n=197). See *Figure 13*.

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<sup>1</sup> These numbers do not reflect the total number of people for individual cases but those worked with by DTs and VS staff across all cases.

**Figure 14**

*The Professionals and Individuals who Designated Teachers (n=296) and Virtual School staff (n=56) work with when supporting CLA and PCLA*



In addition to the 27 multiple choice responses provided, 23 other professionals and individuals were identified by participants. These included therapists, mentors, police, interpreters, children's services leaders, semi-independent living providers, advisory teachers, and inclusion officers. See *Figure 33* in Appendix J for further details.

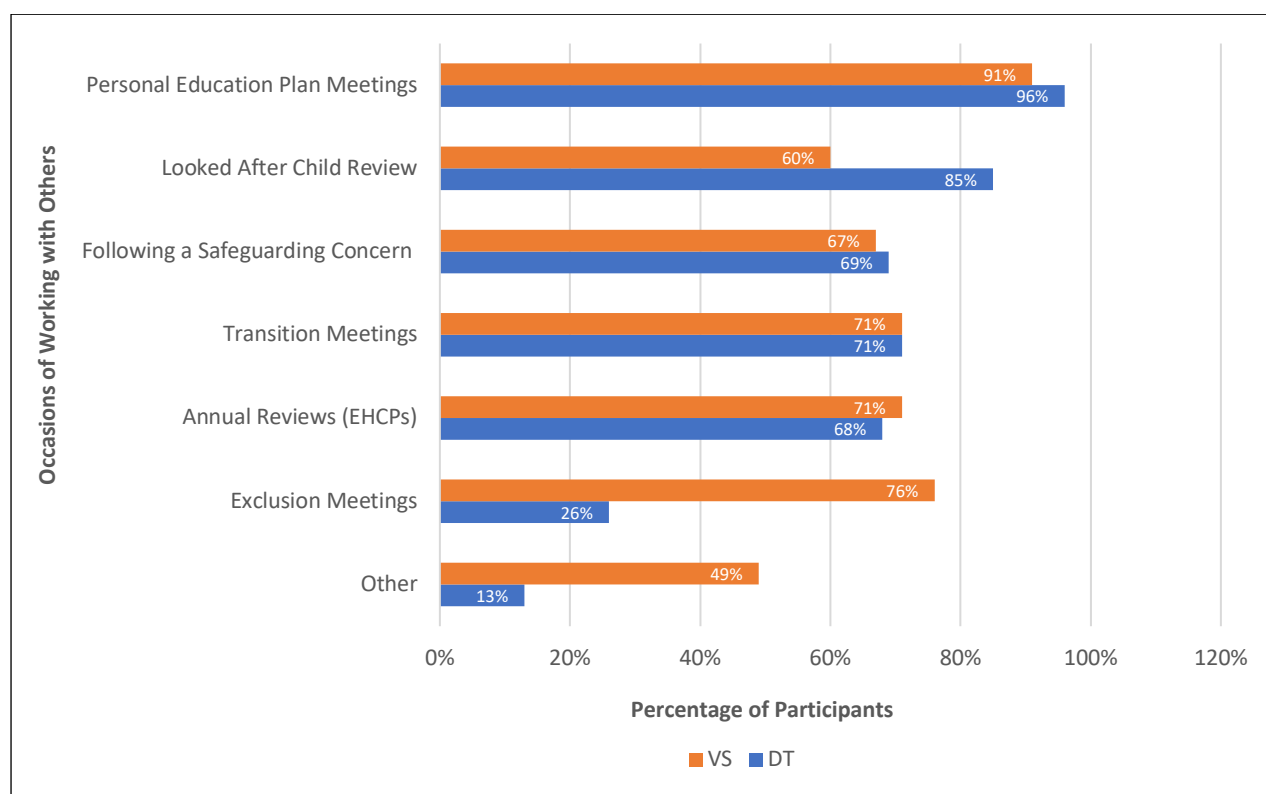
DTs and VS staff were asked to rank the top three individuals they work with most often to provide an insight into who the key players within the systems of

support for CLA could be. DTs, VS staff, SWs, and foster parents were cited by the vast majority of both participant groups (aside from their own roles). In addition, headteachers were ranked in the top three by a large number of VS staff, and DTs commonly cited class teachers within their top three. This suggests that DTs may hold an important position within the system, providing a link between class teachers and individuals external to the school subsystem, such as VS staff.

The majority of DTs and VS staff reported working with professionals and individuals on multiple occasions for a variety of reasons. PEPs were the most commonly reported occasion for both DTs (96%; n=284) and VS staff (91%; n=50). Attending transition meetings, annual EHCP reviews, and meetings following a safeguarding concern were all reported by a similarly high proportion of DTs and VS staff. Interestingly, exclusion meetings were attended by around three quarters of VS staff (76%; n=42) compared to around one quarter of DTs (26%; n=77). It may be less common for DTs to attend such meetings, or it could be that with a higher number of CLA to support, there are more occasions in which VS staff attend such meetings. See *Figure 15*.

**Figure 15**

*Occasions when Designated Teachers (n=296) and Virtual School Staff (n=55) work with Other Professionals and Individuals*



Almost half of VS staff reported working with professionals and individuals on ‘other’ occasions (49%; n=146). These included professionals’ networks and meetings, training, and panels such as school admissions and SEND panels. Other occasions in which DTs reported working with professionals and individuals (13%; n=39) included care planning and placement meetings and Team Around the Family or Child meetings. See *Table 14* in Appendix J for further details.

### Educational Psychology Involvement

As highlighted in Chapter 1, EPs have the skills and knowledge to support the needs of CLA and PCLA in many ways from a number of positions within the



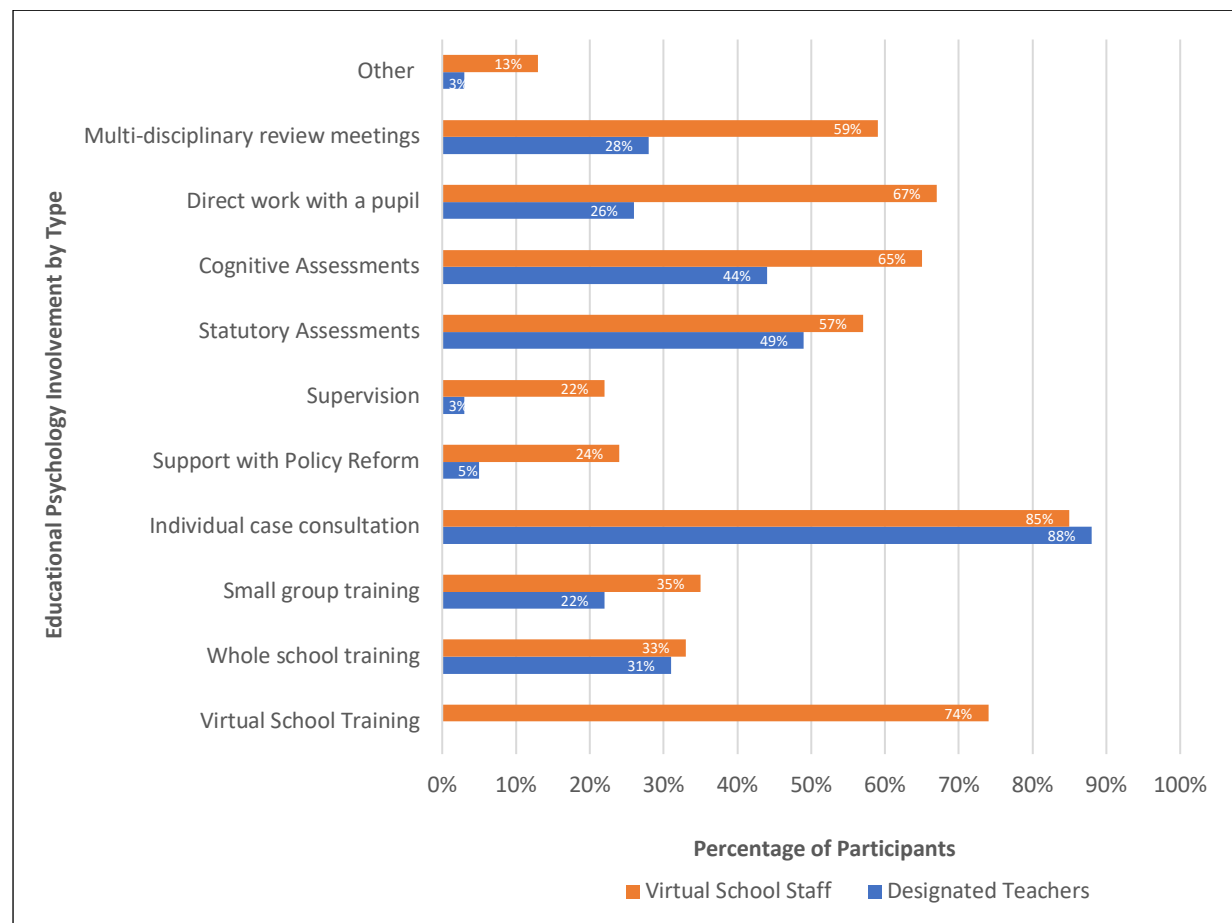
systems around them. Items in the surveys, therefore, addressed DT's and VS staff's experiences of working with EPs when supporting the needs of CLA and PCLA.

Almost every VS staff member had worked with an EP to support the needs of CLA and PCLA (94%; n=46), which compares to 69% of DTs (n=197). Despite the vast majority of VS staff reporting working with EPs, the average frequency for EP involvement in cases was less than 50% of the time (M=38.67%; SD=31.00), ranging from 5% to 100%. Similarly, the frequency of EP involvement reported by DTs was wide ranging, with some DTs reporting 0% and others reporting 100%. On average, DTs experienced EP involvement in less than a quarter of cases (M=22.4%; SD=25.29).

The types of EP involvement were broad, the most common being individual case consultations for both VS staff (85%; n=39) and DTs (88%; n=174). Training for VSs was cited by almost three quarters of VS staff (74%; n=34) whereas whole-school training was cited by a third of VS staff (33%; n=15) and almost a third of DTs (31%; n=62). Supervision and policy reform were reported the least by both DTs and VS staff, although these were a lot more common for VS staff compared to DTs. See *Figure 16*.

**Figure 16**

*Types of Educational Psychology Involvement Experienced by Designated Teachers (n=284) and Virtual School Staff (n=49)*



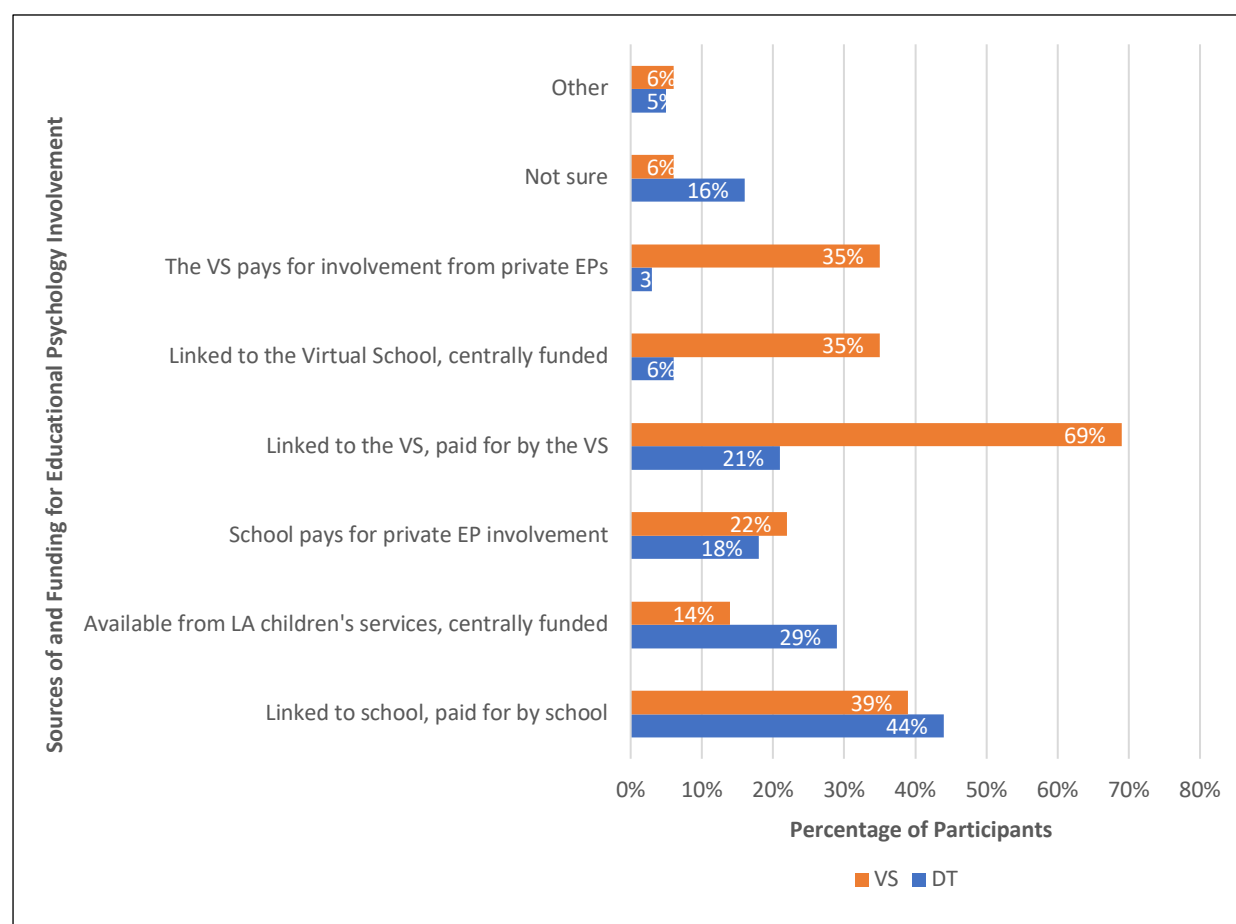
Other types of EP involvement included working groups to support PCLA and inclusion forums for DTs. For VS staff, other involvement included involvement in DT support groups, sharing advice to schools through newsletters, strategic development within social care, and having an EP within the VS team.

Means for accessing and paying for EP involvement were inconsistent across and between DTs and VS staff. EPs linked to and paid for by VSs was the most common response from VS participants (69%; n=34). However, DTs' experience of such access to EPs was a lot less (21%; n=61). The most common

response from DTs was 'Linked to school, paid for by school' (44%; n=126), suggesting that funding for such involvement comes directly out of their school budget. See *Figure 17*.

**Figure 17**

*Ways EP Involvement is Sourced and Funded from Designated Teacher (n=285) and Virtual School Staff (n=49) Experiences*



*Note:* Participants could select multiple responses

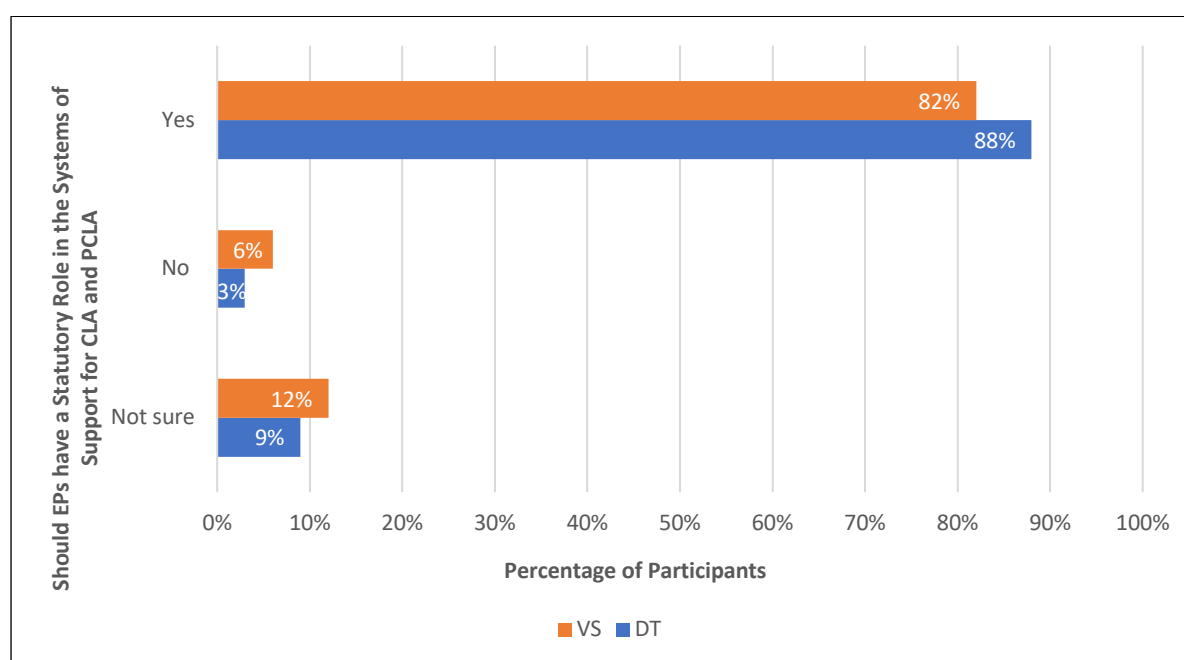
A number of DTs who selected 'other' in response to access and funding of EPs used the open text box to describe tensions they have experienced within the system (5%; n=15). A shortage of EPs and limited EP capacity was commonly cited by these DTs. For one DT this resulted in 'waiting for months or years', and another

DT explained that their school had paid for EP time from the LA but the EP service had not been able to deliver.

The vast majority of DTs (88%; n=250) and VS staff (82%; n=40) felt that EPs should have a statutory role within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. See *Figure 18*. VS staff were asked to give an explanation. Out of the VS staff that provided an explanation (n=34), a good proportion felt that a statutory EP role would enable a proactive and preventative approach to support for CLA and PCLA (18%; n=6). Other VS staff highlighted that access to EPs could be quicker if there was a statutory role (21%; n=7). However, given the breadth of examples from current EP involvement within these systems, the expectations and functions of a statutory EP role are unclear. Some VS staff suggested that the nature of any EP involvement should be on a case-by-case basis.

**Figure 18**

*VS Staff (n=49) and DT (n=284) Views Regarding EPs Having a Statutory Role in the Systems of Support for CLA and PCLA*



#### **4.2.4 Reflections on the Systems of Support**

To contribute towards RQs 3 and 4, participants were asked to share their views about the strengths and challenges within the systems of support for CLA and PCLA. See *Table 15* and *Table 16* in Appendix J for full details.

##### Strengths

Both DTs and VS staff cited '*collaborative*' and '*child-centred*' approaches as strengths within the systems. However, higher proportions of VS staff participants reported these factors compared to DT participants.

Over one third of VS staff provided examples of collaborative working (37%; n=17) and included descriptions of the VS acting as a '*bridge*' between social care and education, which they felt facilitated relationships and partnerships with schools and other agencies. Many VS staff participants (41%; n=19) also described the dedication from individuals wanting the best for CYP, and the position of the VS to challenge decisions made by others to ensure they were in the best interests of the CYP. Within such a child-centred approach, VS staff also emphasised their role in championing the voice of CYP and it was suggested by some that with high numbers of individuals in every system, there are multiple positions from which advocacy for CYP can arise.

For DTs, the most commonly reported examples of support were '*support for subsystems (schools)*' (48%; n=112) and '*monitoring and accountability processes*' (19%; n=45). Many DTs described their VS as '*available*' and cited clear communications with them as a strength. DTs also explained that regular PEP and

other meetings facilitated '*holding the story*' for the many individuals involved in each system of support.

Both DTs and VS staff also cited '*funding*', such as PP and PCAL funding, as a strength within these systems, however the rates of reporting this were low (DTs: 6%; n=13) and (VS: 13%; n=6). Access to a range of free training for DTs and the skills and knowledge of VS staff were also reported by a small number of participants. See Table 15 in Appendix J for full details.

### Challenges

Despite being cited as a strength by over one third of VS staff, challenges to collaborative working were most commonly reported by DTs (30%; n=77). Limited availability of other professionals particularly SWs resulted in the need to chase them, which required additional time, slowing down processes such as arranging appropriate provision, and hindering a collaborative approach. DTs also explained that they can find it challenging to organise multi-agency meetings to facilitate a collaborative approach. Significantly, challenges to collaborative working were not reported by VS staff. This could suggest a difference between the way individuals such as SWs view DTs compared to VS staff. Perhaps DTs are seen as less important and their communication attempts less urgent or less of a priority compared to that of VS staff.

Difficulties resulting from the '*changing nature of the systems of support*' were reported by both DTs (17%; n=44) and VS staff (26%; n=12). High staff turnover within social care presented a challenge for both CYP and the individuals within the systems, as this caused disruption - requiring the need to frequently

establish new relationships and work with individuals who do not yet '*know the story*'. Moreover, DTs explained that they were not always informed of such staff changes. Another challenge reported by participants related to placement instability for CYP. Participants focussed on the impact this has on the time a CYP spends out of education, given the processes for arranging a new school placement in a new area can take time.

Both DTs and VS staff reported the challenges associated with '*inconsistencies of processes across LAs*'. Participants explained that PEP processes and funding stream differ in each LA which can be a challenge to navigate, and especially for DT when supporting multiple CLA cared for by a number of different external LAs. Challenges unique to the experiences of DTs were also raised (13%; n=34). These included the time needed to complete paperwork, such as that required for PEPs, limited knowledge and confidence in their role and ability to support the complex needs of CLA and PCLA, and a lack of support with, and clarity around, processes from others such as SWs.

Among other challenges reported (see *Table 16* in Appendix J) was '*funding*', cited by 10% of DTs (n=25) and 15% of VS staff (n=7). Some of these participants felt that there was not enough funding for CLA and highlighted the impact this had on their ability to provide SEMH support. Participants also explained that funding can be difficult to access and some were unsure about how best to use it. The lack of funding for post-16 YP was also highlighted by a small number of VS staff participants (n=4), described as a '*cliff edge*' and an '*absolute disgrace*'.

### 4.3 Social Network Analysis of Sociograms

All sociograms and a key for interpreting them are presented in this section.

Contextual information and key points of the case informing each sociogram is presented above each image, before a summary of the main findings across all six cases is set out. Additional images that depict collaborative groups within each network are also presented in *Figure 26* and *Figure 27*. Sociogram data directly contribute to both RQ1 and RQ2.

It should be noted that sociograms were created from the knowledge and perspective of one individual within each system, DTs or VS staff. As outlined in *Chapter 1*, the complete architecture of a complex system is impossible to recreate in a data set (Avila de Lima, 2010). There may be nodes and edges that participants were not aware of.



### Key for Interpreting the Sociograms

- **Dark blue circle:** Education and social care professionals involved in the case.
- **Light blue circles:** External professionals, such as police and therapists, involved in the case.
- **Green circles:** Non-professionals, such as family and friends, involved in the case.
- **Orange circles:** The young person each system/network belongs to.
- **Size of circle:** Degree of responsibility held, as perceived by the participant.
- **Lines between circles:** Relationships where information sharing, advice, emotional support, professional support, training or advocacy takes place.
- **Numbers on lines:** The total number of different types of relationships between individuals, e.g. information sharing and advice between individuals (2).
- **Arrows:** The direction of relationships, whether for example emotional support is one-way or reciprocated.
- **Positioning of individuals and distance between people:** this is NOT significant. Types of individuals are presented in similar areas across all sociograms for familiarity, however the exact positions are to ensure clarity and that nodes (circles) do not intersect un-related edges (lines).

*Note:* Names and minor details have been changed in each case to protect the anonymity of those involved. The alterations do not distort the findings and conclusions drawn.

*Note:* Collaborative groups have not been included in the overall sociograms to enable clarity when reading.

*Note:* Nodes represent both individuals and professional organisations or services such as police and a sibling's school.

*Note:* Job titles have been abbreviated where appropriate to enable clarity.

*DT* (designated teacher), *HT* (headteacher), *Class T* (class teacher), *SW* (social worker), *SENCO* (special educational needs coordinator), *DSL* (designated safeguarding lead), *HoY* (head of year), *FP* (foster parents) *VSO* (virtual school officer), *VSH* (virtual school headteacher), *IRO* (independent reviewing officer), *SLT* (senior leadership team), *DG* (designated governor), *SG Governor* (safeguarding governor), *Ex/L SEND* (external / local special educational needs and disabilities team), *LA* (local authority), *CAMHS* (child and adolescent mental health service), *GP* (general practitioner doctor), *RC* (residential care), *LM* (learning mentor), *MHL* (mental health lead).

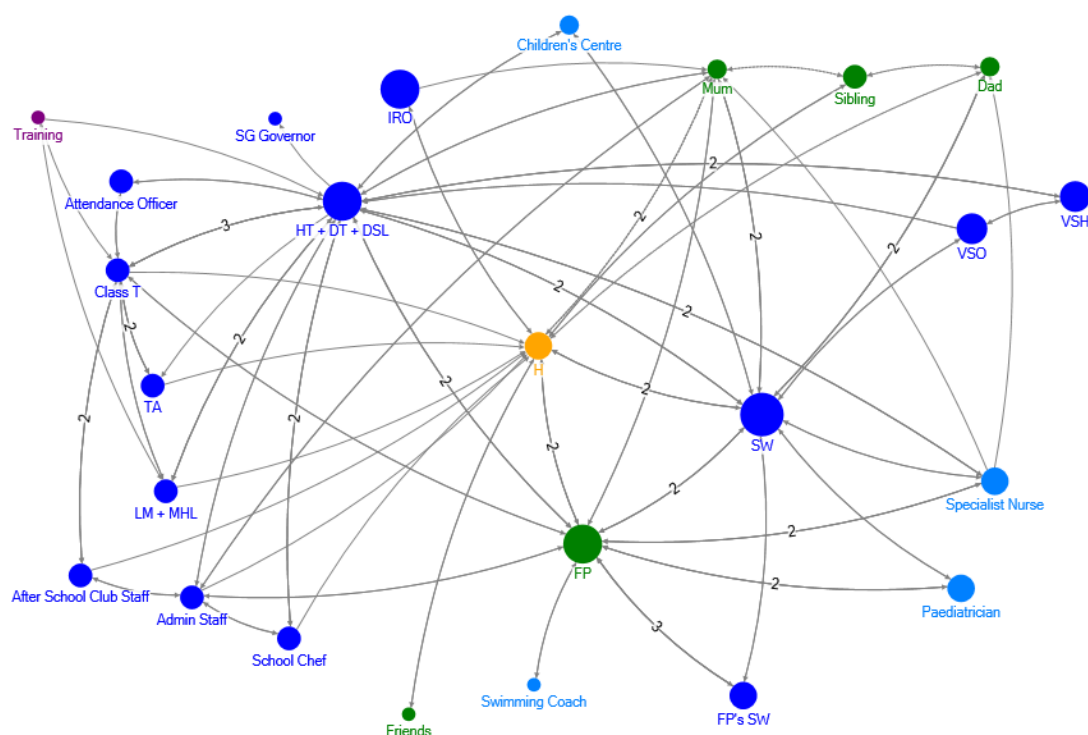
### H's Sociogram (created by DT1)

At the time of data collection, H was a year 1 pupil who became a CLA two years prior whilst attending their current school. The headteacher at their school was also the DT and DSL. H has food and skin allergies so has had involvement from medical professionals most of their life. H has been with the same foster family since becoming a CLA. Their foster family have always been 'short-term' fosterers, so H may be moving to a new family and location in the near future. However, in H's case, there is potential for them to stay with their current foster family long-term. H is supported by social care to have contact with their parents and older sibling throughout the year.

DT1 described H as very well known in school by all staff, "*I mean, everyone knows them in school to be fair, they're like little celeb for lots of reasons*". Overall, DT1 felt that H could not have been better supported by the system around them.

**Figure 19**

*Sociogram for H, created by DT1*



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>)

### L's Sociogram (created by DT2)

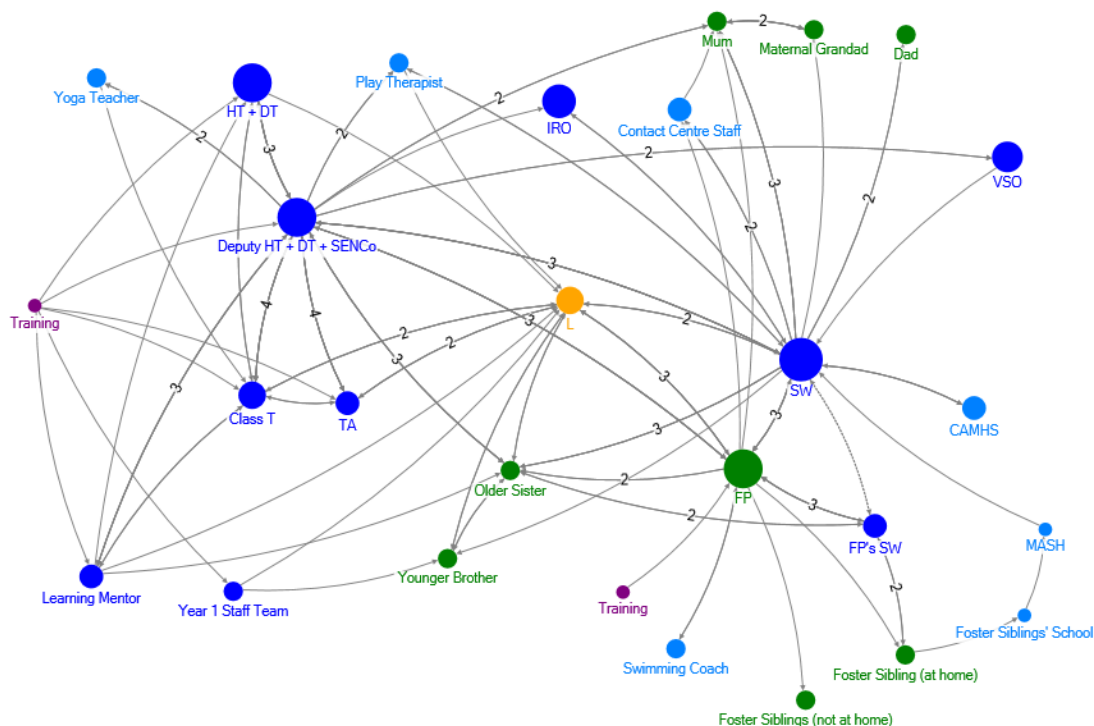
At the time of data collection, L was a year 1 pupil who became a CLA around two and a half years prior. L started attending their current school at the start of the academic year after moving into the LA to live with a new foster family. L and their siblings had been placed with three foster families prior, two of which were short-term. The plan is for the current placement to be long-term. L and siblings have supervised contact with mum and grandad at a children's centre at limited times throughout the year. L and siblings have not seen dad for a long time. Within the foster family there is an older YP who is a biological child of the foster parents and lives at home. Foster parents also have older biological children who do not live at home anymore but were described by DT2 as supporting the family unit. Despite

being primary school age themselves, L's older sibling was described as taking on a parenting role for L and their younger sibling.

DT2 highlighted a current challenge within the system of support for L regarding the flow of information and working relationships between professionals. L's SW was made aware of a safeguarding concern reported to MASH from the school of L's foster parent's biological child. Foster parent's SW was aware of this information, but did not raise it with L's SW. For this reason, DT2 used a dotted line to represent a weak connection between foster parent's SW and L's SW.

**Figure 20**

*Sociogram for L, created by DT2*



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>)

### D's Sociogram (created by DT3)

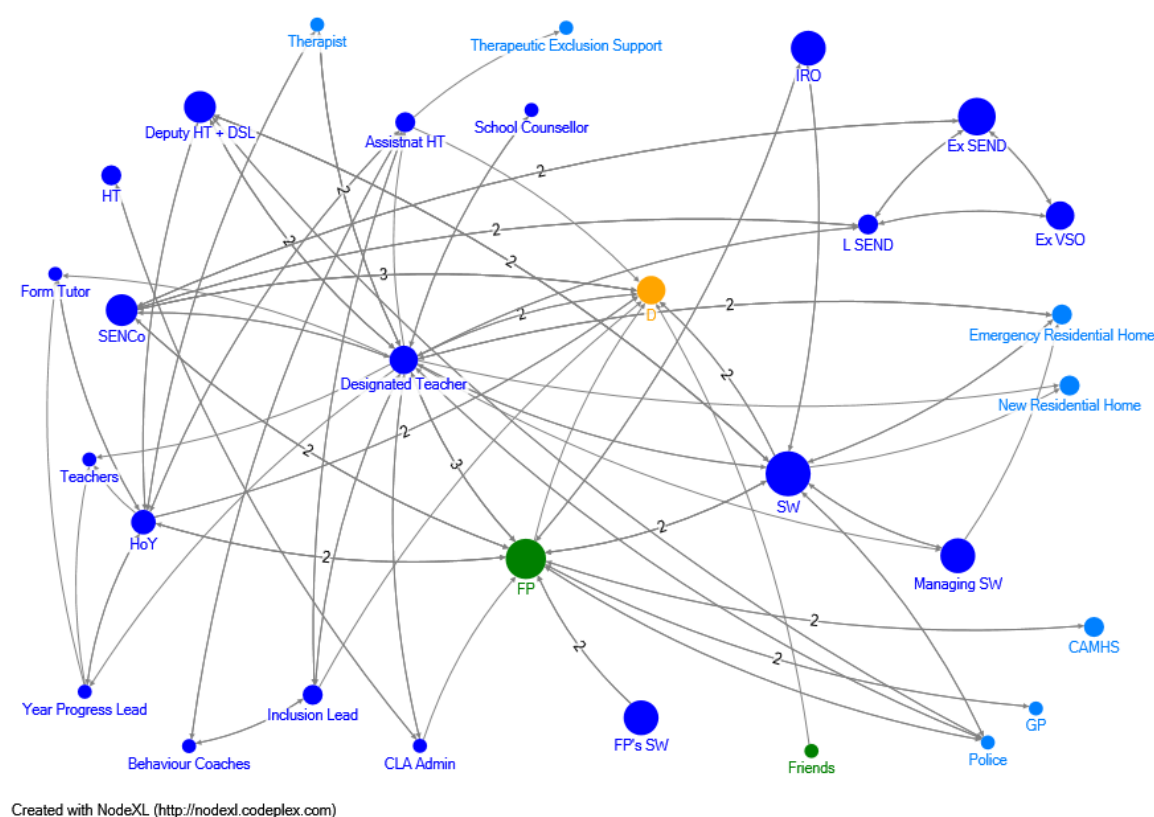
At the time of data collection, D was a year 10 pupil and had attended their current mainstream school for one and a half years after moving from a special school. It was felt that "*D's behaviour had improved so much (since attending a special school) that they could join a mainstream secondary school*". Up until the end of year 9, D had lived with the same foster family for five years, experiencing a number of placements before this. Over the previous 18 months, D experienced a number of challenges at home, socially and in school. These involved drug use, police involvement, going missing, violence, and safeguarding concerns.

After leaving the care of their foster family, D resided in two unsuitable short-term placements before being placed in a residential home in another LA. At the time of data collection, D was looked-after by one LA, on roll at a school in a second LA, and resided in a third LA in a residential home.

DT3 highlighted a challenge that arose in the system of support for D regarding communication. DT3 had arranged for therapeutic involvement for D. At the same time the assistant headteacher had made arrangements for a separate therapeutic exclusion support service to meet with D. DT3 was unaware of this until D said themselves that there were too many people to talk to and so they were not going to engage with anybody.

**Figure 21**

*Sociogram for D, created by DT3*



N's Sociogram (created by VS1)

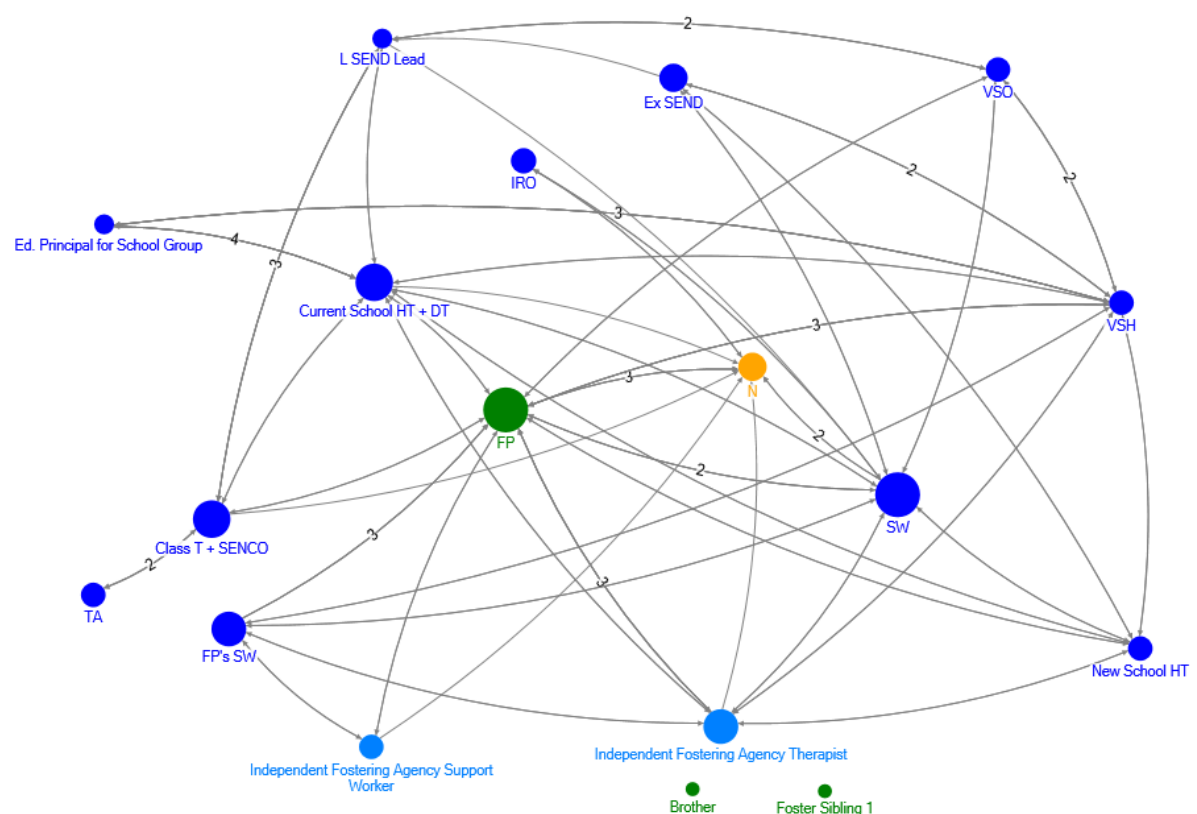
At the time of data collection, N was a year 6 pupil and had attended their current school for a few months. N had lived with their foster family for around two years. VS1 became involved following a breakdown in SEN processes and relationship between N's previous school and home. N has an EHCP and complex needs - they can present with physical aggression towards adults and the school felt they could not meet the needs.

The system around N was emotionally charged. N's previous school did not start the official process of removing N from their roll after stating they could not

meet the needs. Yet they were not expecting N to return to the school at the start of the next academic year. There was a high risk of exclusion for N and they voiced not feeling wanted at their previous school. VS1 described N's foster parent as very protective of N and taking a strong adversarial approach. VS1 described needing to take on an adversarial role themselves, reminding the school that N was entitled to an education. N moved to a new school where experiences of SEN support, working relationships, and communication were described as positive by VS1.

**Figure 22**

*Sociogram for N, created by VS1*



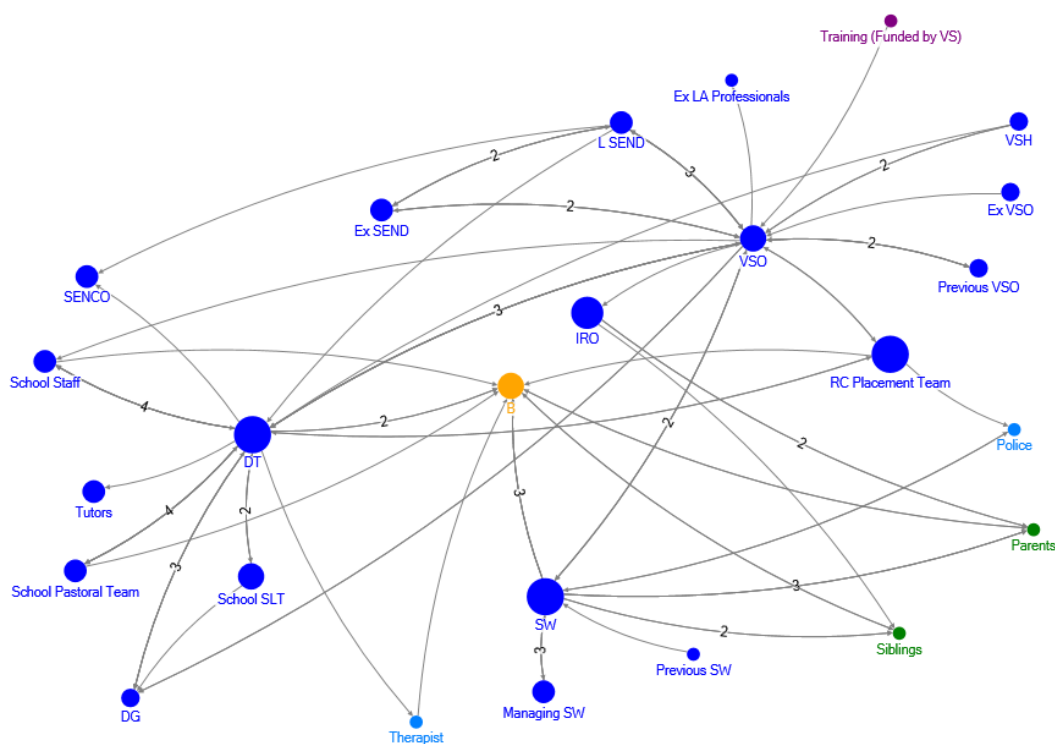
Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>)

B's Sociogram (created by VS2)

At the time of data collection, B was a year 9 pupil out of an education setting. B became a CLA around the age of six and has experienced multiple care placements. Whilst attending a mainstream secondary school, B experienced five care placement moves. B was described by VS2 as very academically able and aspirational - however the disruption in care made it challenging for B to engage in school.

B was recently given an EHCP and has voiced wanting to go to school. The VS, social care, and LA SEND teams are working through a consultation process to find B an appropriate school placement. B receives input from online tuition but this has not been successful. B currently lives in a residential care placement in another LA.

**Figure 23**  
*Sociogram for B, created by VS2*



Created with NodeXL (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>)



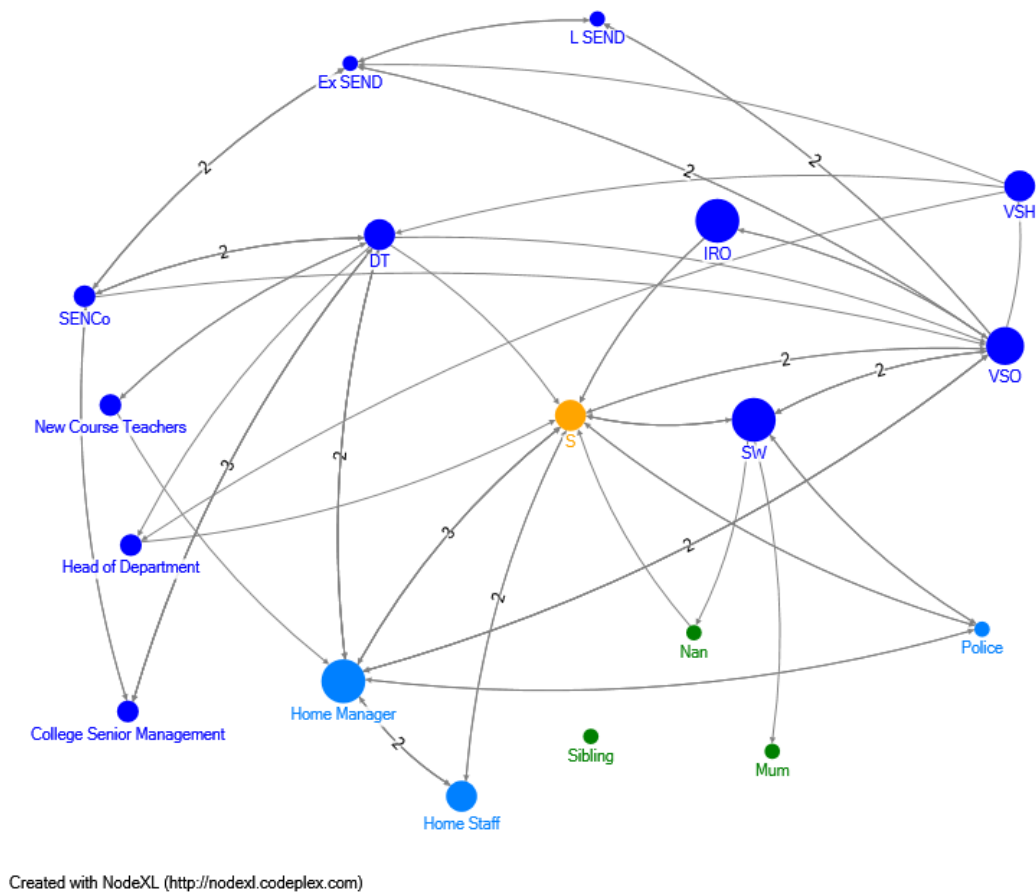
### S's Sociogram (created by VS3)

At the time of data collection, S was a year 12 pupil attending a college in another LA. At the end of Year 11, S moved into a residential care placement in the same LA as the college they attend. Before starting college, S was looked-after by one LA, in a special school in a second LA, and had moved into a residential placement in a third LA.

S has been a CLA from a young age, experiencing a number of foster placements in and out of the LA. S had a positive transition at the start of college and all appeared settled until VS3 received information from college that S was being withdrawn due to lack of engagement. VS3 explained that there was no communication from college with themselves or the residential home staff before this decision was made. VS3 reported a need to advocate for and challenge the college for S from her position in the VS. VS3 arranged a professionals meeting where college apologised for their approach and a bespoke course was put together for S. The original course was not right for them and they are now experiencing success on their new course.

**Figure 24**

*Sociogram for S, created by VS3*



#### **4.3.1 Summary of Main Findings from Sociograms**

For every YP, there were a large number of individuals within the system of support around them. This meant that DTs and VS staff found themselves within networks containing at least 18 to 30 nodes. The total number of direct connections between nodes differed between the sociograms created by VS staff (34 to 45) and those created by DTs (57 to 63). The difference in this data could be explained by DTs ability to provide a more complete data set from their position and knowledge within the school subsystem. For example, DT1 highlighted the roles and connections to the school chef, admin staff and after school club staff, individuals who the VS staff

member in that systems may not be aware of. Therefore, there may be many more nodes and connections within the school subsystems in the sociograms completed by VS staff, yet they would not be aware of them so did not include them during data collection. This provides a clear example of a core limitation of a SNA approach which is explored further in *Chapter 6* of this thesis.

A defining characteristic of relationships in a network concerns directionality. The proportion of connections that were one-way ranged from 18% to 60% ( $M = 38.83$ ;  $SD = 15.82$ ). Therefore, the proportion of reciprocated connections ranged from 40% to 82% ( $M = 61.17$ ;  $SD = 15.82$ ). Gregarious central nodes, those connected to the highest number of other nodes, were mostly consistent across all sociograms. The common central nodes were DTs, SWs, VS staff, YP, and foster parents. Head of year and residential home manager were also central in D's and S's sociograms respectively. The highest number of connections from a single node was 18, to and from DT3 in D's sociogram. This could be explained by contextual factors for D such as a high number of placement moves (three within seven months) which would have required involvement and information sharing to and from DT3 throughout. Additionally, D was struggling to attend school, has an EHCP, and their case included police involvement. Therefore, DT3 was required to connect with additional individuals and agencies, from school SLT and LA SEN teams, to the police.

At least half of the nodes in all sociograms had multiple types of connections with other nodes, such as information sharing, giving/receiving advice, and providing/receiving emotional support. Such connections are known as multiplexity

and are considered to be stronger than connections formed of just one type of interaction (Mercer, 2014). Out of the nodes with the highest degrees of multiplexity connections (three to four different types of connections with another node) the vast majority were between nodes within the same subsystem, such as schools (between DT and TA, class teacher, or pastoral team) and care (between foster parents and foster parent's SW). Within one sociogram there was a high degree multiplexity connection across sub-systems, this was between DT and foster parents in D's sociogram implying DT3 facilitated a strong link between home and school in this case. See *Table 17* in Appendix J for further details.

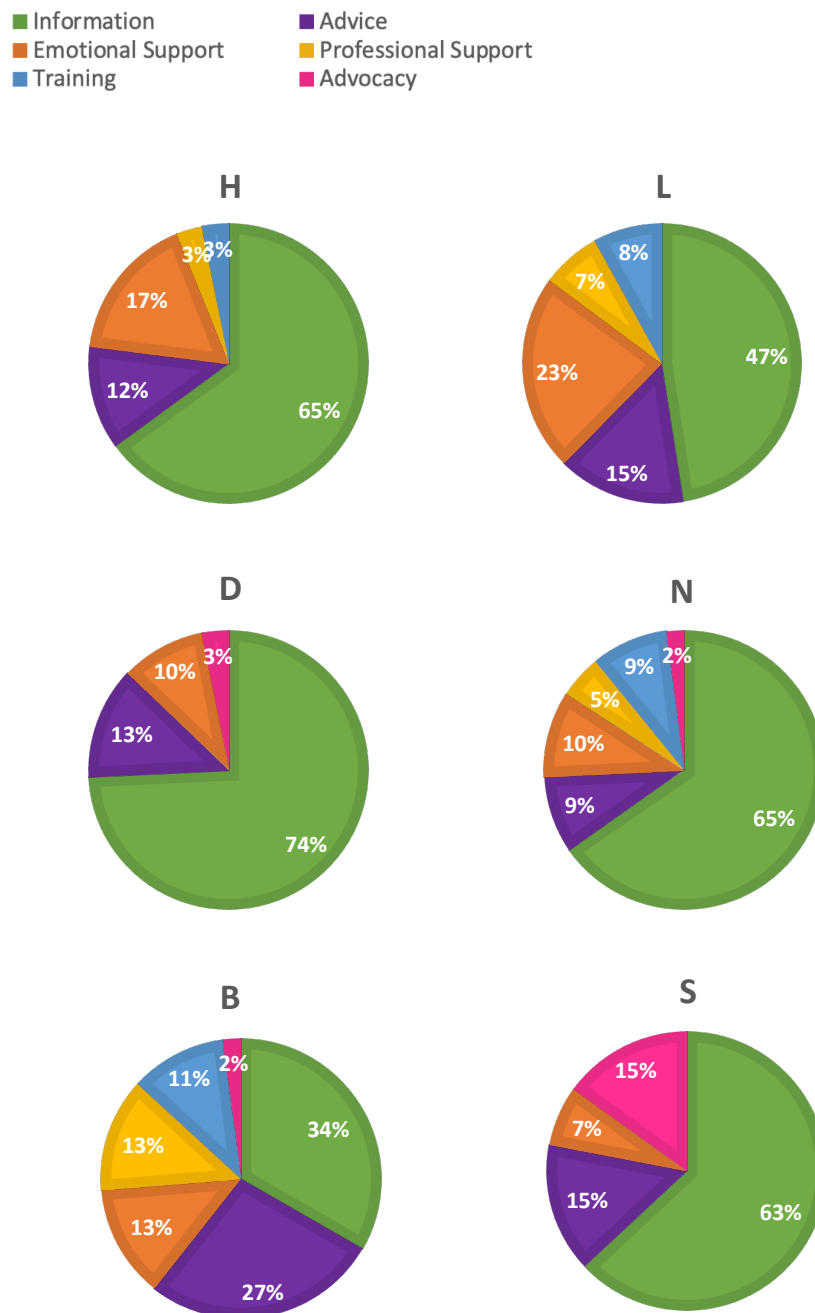
As illustrated in *Figure 25*, all sociograms contained information sharing, advice and emotional support. Information sharing was the most frequent relationship type, representing over half of all connections in four of the sociograms. The information shared between individuals included process timelines updates on the CYP between school and home. The presence of advocacy (such as challenging potentially detrimental decisions made about CYP, sharing their views in meetings, and requesting additional support to ensure CYP's needs are met), professional support (such as supervision) and training varied across the sociograms. See *Figure 25*.

Within H's and L's sociograms, no advocacy was present. It should be noted that DT1 and DT2 reported no need for advocacy when asked by the researcher. These participants felt that the system of support around H and L functioned effectively with a child-centred approach. Advocacy connections were included by other participants in response to decisions being made without a child-centred

approach (see *Figure 25*). Examples of such include the decision made by college to withdraw S because they were having difficulty engaging in their course, and when D was placed in unsuitable and unregulated care placements.

**Figure 25**

*Proportions of Connections Between Nodes in Each Sociogram by Type*



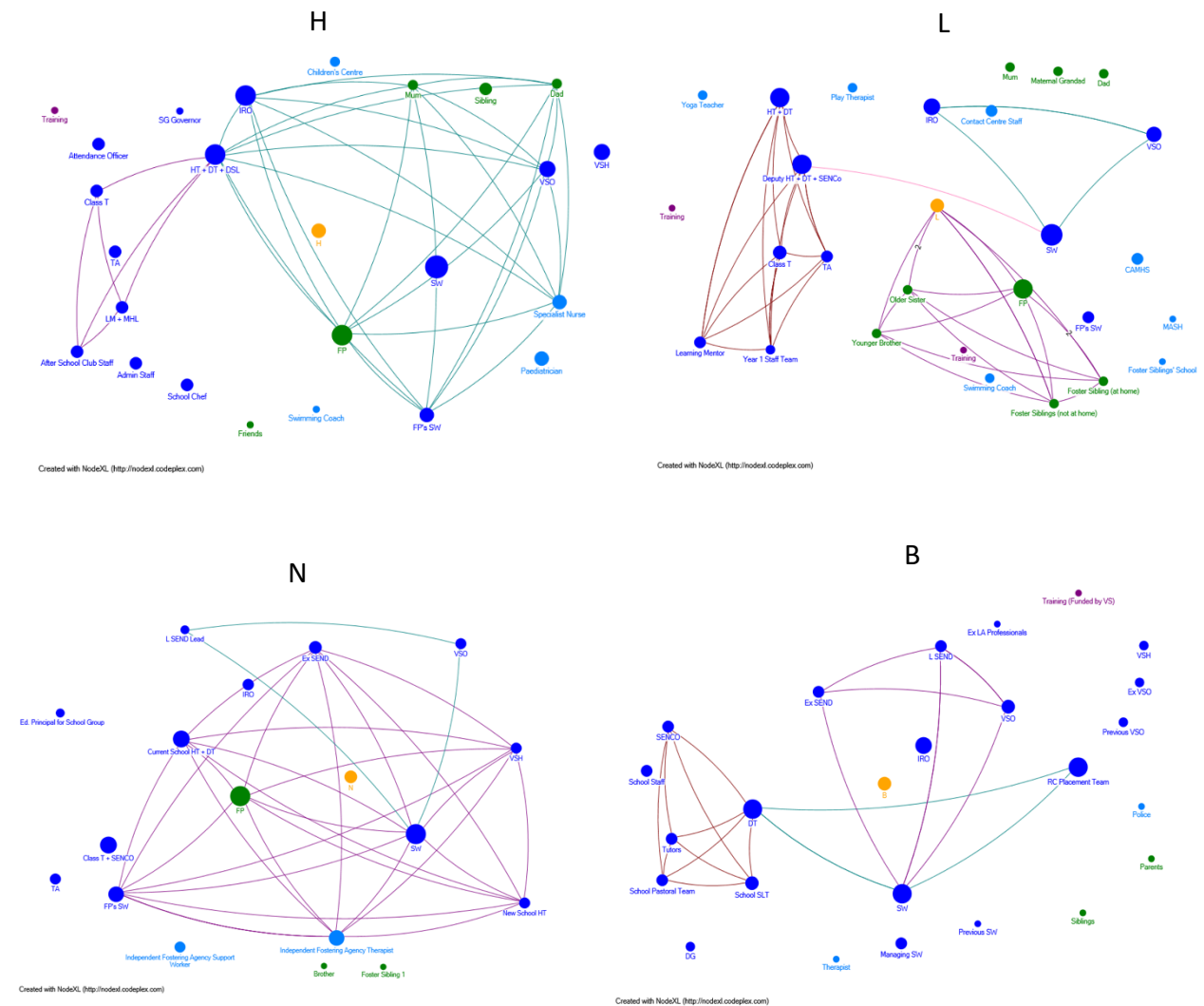
Training made up less than 12% of connections in all sociograms, whilst for two sociograms (D and S), no training was present. It should be noted that the training may exist within these networks that participants were not aware of and therefore could not include in the sociograms. However, DT3 and VS3 did not include any training received by themselves. See *Figure 25*.

Within each sociogram, collaborative groups had formed through the process of emergence. Collaborative groups are defined as specific individuals working together towards a common goal. DTs, SWs and VS staff were positioned as key individuals, they were all part of at least one collaborative group across the sociograms. In some sociograms, established professionals working groups were explicitly created to resolve an issue. For example, in N's case school felt that they could not meet N's needs but did not formally start the process of taking N off of their school roll. VS1 explained how they therefore set up a working group with key individuals to facilitate a plan for next steps. In other sociograms, collaborative groups had formed more implicitly, such as those within the school subsystems in H, L, and B's sociograms (see *Figure 26* and *Figure 27*).

Within four of the sociograms (H's, L's, B's, N's) collaborative groups were mostly distinct from one another, where either the DT or SW provided a link between collaborative groups (see *Figure 26*). This highlights that such individuals can be crucial for connecting different parts of the systems of support for CLA.

**Figure 26**

*Distinct Collaborative Groups within Each Sociogram*

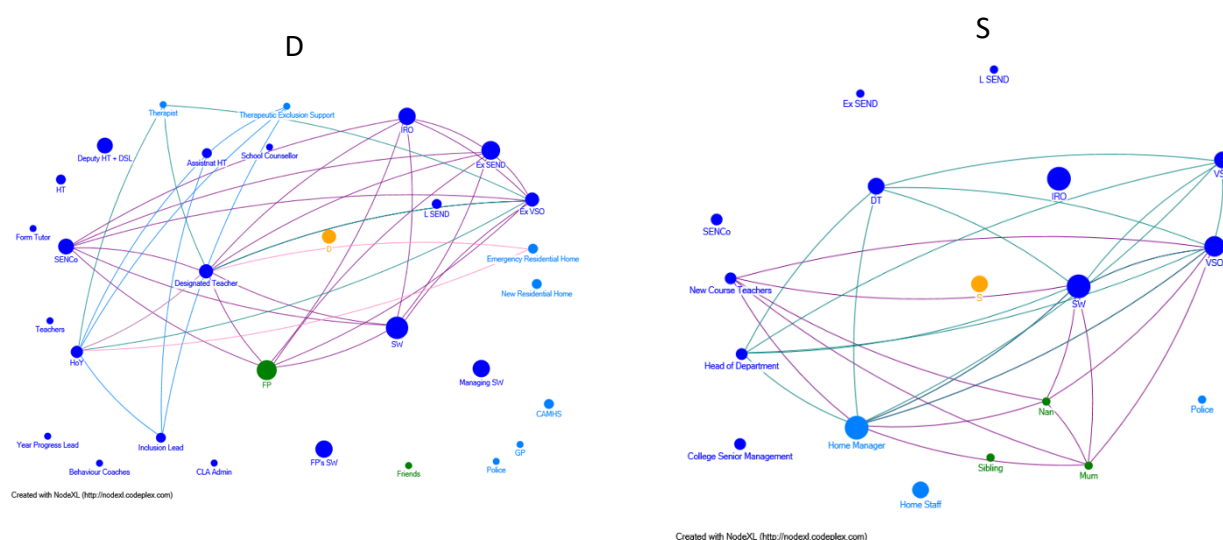


However, within D's and S's sociograms, collaborative groups overlapped with more than one individual in multiple groups. See *Figure 27*. The presence of multiple overlapping collaborative groups suggests a sense of disorganisation, potentially with many competing goals within the case. For example, in D's sociogram it seems that one group collaborated in relation to an emergency residential placement (pink), a second group was focussed on organising input from a therapist (green), whilst another group simultaneously arranged therapeutic

exclusion support for D from an agency (blue), and a final group collaborated for overall CLA and SEN monitoring processes such as PEPs and EHCP reviews (purple).

**Figure 27**

*Self-organised collaborative groups within each network*

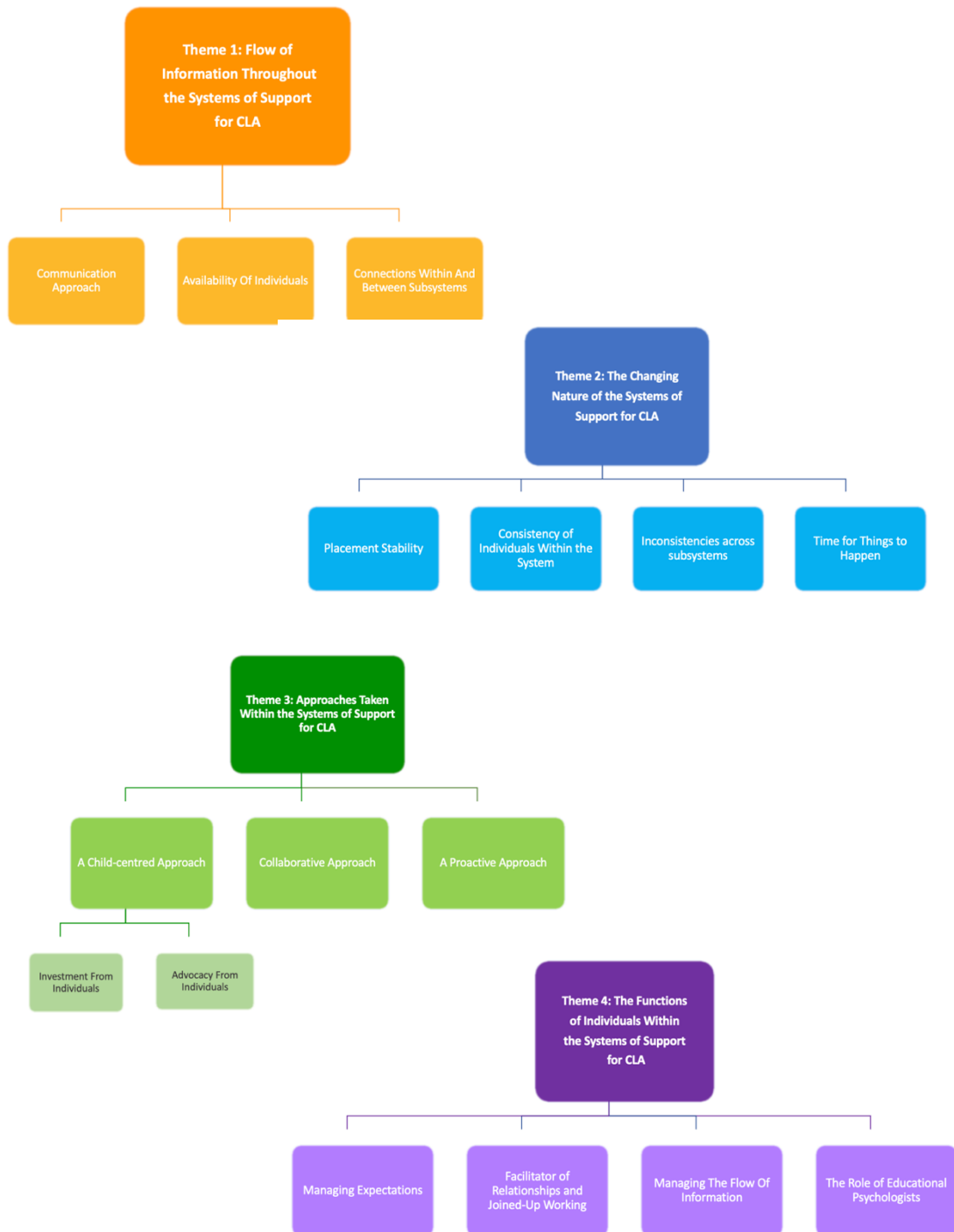


## 4.4 Interviews

This section will present the findings from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data. This captures the views and experiences of three DTs and three VS staff. There were four themes in the data: flow of information throughout, the changing nature of, the approach of, and the functions of individuals within the systems of support for CLA. See *Figure 28* for a full thematic map.



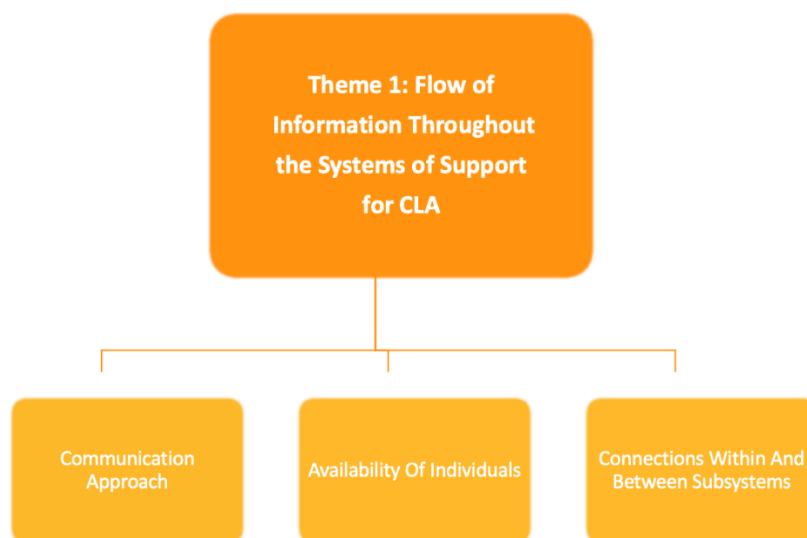
**Figure 28**  
*Full Thematic Maps for Semi-Structured Interviews*



#### **4.4.1 Theme 1: Flow of Information Throughout the Systems of Support for CLA**

This theme outlines how individuals and/or subsystems can act as facilitators and obstacles to the flow of information throughout the systems of support for CLA. This theme is made up of three subthemes and highlights the need for transparency, the availability of individuals, and robust connections within and between subsystems.

**Figure 29: Theme 1 Thematic Map**



##### Communication Approach

All participants cited styles of and approaches to communication when discussing how the systems of support for CLA functioned and when reflecting on how they themselves interact with others. When asked about facilitating factors within the relationships they held with key individuals, participants explained that, “*one of the biggest things is that really clear communication*” [DT1] and that “*we kept it transparent*” [VS1]. Specifically, VS1 explained that copying everyone into emails

promoted this transparency. Within some systems, transparency and the fact that everyone was on the same page ensured a solution-focussed approach:

*I think it almost could have ended with finger pointing and let's pick it apart and let's start a complaint process and let's do all of those things. That didn't happen because I think lots of people knew what had happened. [VS1]*

Participants also felt that honesty and a sense of openness facilitated the flow of information and supported effective system functioning: “*the primary thing is that there's that open and honest communication*” [DT2]. The overall approach and attitude from foster parents was a particular strength for facilitating the flow of information within one system:

*They're (foster parents) very open and very happy, which I know, you know, we can't all be open and happy all the time and I get that, but it does really help when people are open and you know happy and want to talk, because then everybody kind of understands what's going on. [DT1]*

When describing their experiences of communicating with others, participants also cited a variety of informal approaches with foster parents, who may “*Just pass a message via class teacher when dropping off at the classroom door you know, 'just get DT2 to give me a call'*” [DT2], or they may “*ring up and chat*” [DT1]. DTs explained how they facilitated such rapport and communication styles with foster

parents by being open, welcoming and available from the first day. DT2 highlighted how *“first impressions are very important”* [DT2].

Participants also described informal means for communication with other professionals: *“I think that in terms of thinking about different ways of communicating, you know I've got their number (SW's) and we'll WhatsApp or you know, more kind of informal kind of communication with them as well”* [VS2].

For some participants, formal processes, such as safeguarding, fostered a closed communication approach, serving as an obstacle to the flow of information. When CLA move schools, all information about them should be transferred to their new school: *“However, in this situation, schools would not necessarily know or be allowed to know where the children have moved to”* [DT2]. Additionally, due to a lack of clarity around expectations following a safeguarding disclosure, one participant felt that:

*There were things that I had to be quite cagey talking to the foster parents about because I wasn't sure what was happening with the allegation. So initially they were still ringing the school asking about the YP, and I wasn't sure how much I was able to share.* [DT3]

### Availability of Individuals

With regards to the availability of others, such as how likely they are to answer the phone, reply to an email in a timely manner, or have the time to attend a meeting,

individuals including SWs and DTs had the potential to obstruct the flow of information. Having to chase SWs was commonly reported by DTs and described as “*frustrating*” [DT3] and a challenge within working relationships: “*It was difficult working with the social worker, I found him not that easy to get hold of*” [DT3]. Participants attributed the challenges they encountered with SW availability to the limited capacity SWs often have: “*SW involvement can be varied depending, and you know we all know the reasons why, it's again incredibly underfunded, there aren't enough of them and they're juggling far too much*” [DT2].

DT availability was cited by VS participants as a challenge within the system. Participants explained that for DTs who hold multiple roles, especially teaching positions, they are less available: “*They're (DTs) teaching all the time*” [VS3], which can result in DTs working outside of employment hours:

*Yeah, obviously they normally have a teaching commitment as well, and this DT has a teaching commitment. It is within that kind of scope that they are very, very dedicated and respond to emails even if it is late at night, or when they shouldn't really be. I don't ever feel that they ignore you for weeks. Some DTs absolutely, but not that one.* [VS2]

Additionally, VS participants described their own availability as being dependent on their capacity, within which they required flexibility. Participants emphasized how “*these complex cases take up a disproportionate amount of time*” [VS2]. When outlining how frequently they would communicate with college staff,

VS3 explained: *“So that would be 3 times a year for PEPs. But obviously with S, when things go wrong you communicate all the time with them. So the 2-3 weeks that that was happening (potential withdrawal from college), lots of communication”* [VS3].

To ensure availability to others and facilitate the flow of information, participants offered multiple means for being contacted: *“So it’s very clear you know; you can always come and speak to me. You can e-mail, phone, pop in. You know, just grab me if you see me on the gate, however you want to communicate”* [DT2]. Participants also reported being flexible with their chosen medium for communication when considering other’s availability: *“although I’d like to speak on the phone more, I think sometimes in the e-mail, I think at least I know I’ve done that job, I’ve made that communication link”* [VS2].

As well as various means for communication, DTs explained that often more than one individual within their school subsystem would be available to contact: *“Equally the class teacher does a lot of that (checking-in) because she will see the foster parents at the end of the day”* [DT1]. It was also important to have more than one connection between external individuals and members of a subsystem to ensure consistency in availability:

*They know that I am here. If I am not here, here’s your next person, your next person, your next person. So like I say because I was away the last couple of days. That was all right. They had other people.* [DT2]

## Connections within and between subsystems

As explained in Chapter 1, a unique feature of complex systems is that they are composed of subsystems, which are in and of themselves composed of subsystems. When observing the architecture of sociograms, participants reflected on the connections within and between subsystems that facilitated the flow of information. *“You've got sort of, in the different organizations you've got sort of little mini circles and mini loops and communication sort of cycles. And there is sort of work across organizations”* [VS3]. See Figure 26 for depictions of such patterns within and between subsystems via collaborative groups.

The robust flow of information through established connections between subsystems was highlighted by participants as facilitating effective working. For example, when explaining their working relationship with SWs, VS2 stated:

*Sometimes they've moved completely (CLA), their placement's broken down. You want that social worker to be able to go 'I need to tell VS2, that person needs to be involved', because otherwise we'd spend the whole time going through case notes, trying to find that information. And we just haven't got the capacity to do that.* [VS2]

Poor and absent connections between subsystems was highlighted by participants as a common issue: *“It's this information sharing bit here between agencies, that is representative to a degree, but that is always the issue that we have, is that there's a lack of communication sharing between them”* [DT2]. This was

a characteristic of S' case, where information was not shared with VS3, S, or their residential home manager about the challenges S was experiencing with engagement on their college course until the point they were told S was going to be withdrawn from the college.

This was also clearly illustrated in L's sociogram, between their SW and foster parent's SW following a safeguarding disclosure made at the foster sibling's school:

*One social worker was aware of it (FP's SW), chose not to share that with any other professional. At which point then it found its way back to me, via the social worker who it was flagged up to via their LA system. So we've gone all around the country for something that happened across the road. [DT2]*

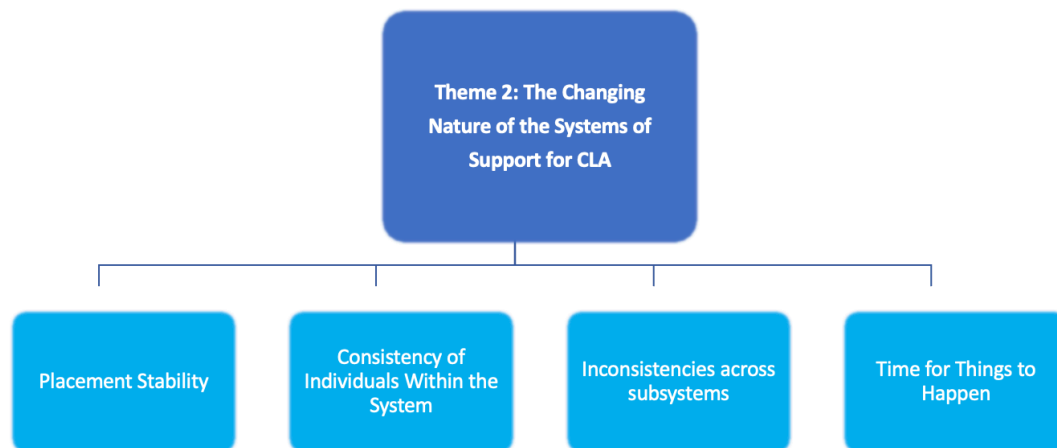
#### **4.4.2 Theme 2: The Changing Nature of the Systems of Support for CLA**

This theme addresses the impact of inconsistencies within and across systems of support for CLA. This theme is made up of four subthemes and highlights the need for stable placements and consistencies in people and processes. This theme also outlines the potential detrimental impact extended periods of time taken for changes to occur can have on CYP

#### **Figure 30**

*Theme 2 Thematic Map*





### Placement Stability

All participants highlighted CLA's experiences of care placement instability, where multiple placement moves were common, see contextual information for L, D, N, B, and S. Some CLA experience a significantly high number of moves within a relatively short period of time: *"when the child moves through six primary schools, and when a child moves through 4 placements in two years"* [DT2]. Participants explained that previous and current placements *"broke down"* [DT3]. For other CLA, care placements were intended to be temporary:

*I think these first carers, they're brilliant don't get me wrong, but I think they are classed as temporary, which means you can have a child up to two years because then something normally happens in the system, whether they return back home, or whether there is then a long-term plan that the local authority go with. [DT1]*

Changes to placement, whether for care or education, into new LAs cause disruptions to the processes of working within the systems of support: *“you kind of have that stop start every time”* [VS2]. However, when placements are stable and long-term, the system and components within it function in with a *“lighter touch”* [VS2]:

*But there are a good chunk of children that you know, go to school every day. They don't have the wider issues. They're in a stable placement and we meet with them three times a year and we do their PEP, and we give them some money and the school uses it well and things are going okay. And our role is then more of a lighter touch you know, checking-in and seeing that everything is going as it should be.* [VS2]

However, placement instability negatively impacts on both the CLA and the system around them. Participants described a domino effect of care placement moves: *“So to have another move, would be quite big for them, and potentially then that could mean a school move”* [DT1]. Placement instability can impact on school engagement: *“They've had a number of placements, foster placements in and out of this LA, and they haven't been successful. And because of that, their school engagement has been really, really low”* [VS3], behaviour: *“One year 9 has had several moves of placement and this has affected his behaviour in school”* [DT3], and ultimately a CYP's emotional wellbeing: *“they said, ‘I don't want to go back in another foster placement cause they all let me down’”* [DT3].

### Consistency of Individuals Within the System

'Holding the story' was highlighted by participants as a facilitating factor within the system of support for CLA. When the individuals in the system stay the same: *"there is lots of people currently who consistently hold a lot of the information and can tell the story"* [DT1]. However, high staff turnover within individual subsystems was commonly reported by participants where: *"Quite often the social workers change quite regularly"* [VS1] and: *"I think with care home staff, I find that their staff turnover is quite high"* [VS2].

When describing the impact of such changes to individuals on CYP and the expectation for them to build relationships with new people over and over again, VS2 explained that *"It's almost like they're at capacity in terms of that what they can cope with almost... Because when some others have tried to access them and support, they've kind of flipped them off"* [VS2]. Inconsistencies of individuals within the system can present a challenge for the adults also:

*So I think that almost you're kind of, 'who's who' again, each time we meet, because we meet termly and things change quite quickly within that... So we might come back together again, but it's a new lot of people. [VS2]*

*But when there is lots of changes within a system that's happening, it can be much more difficult and much more, I think, frustrating for all professionals. Those that come in as the new person who are halfway through the journey, those that*

*are already halfway through the journey, they get frustrated cause kind of gotta go back to the beginning. [DT1]*

### Inconsistencies Across Subsystems

Participants reported that a challenge to effective joined-up working can be navigating the differing processes and approaches across LAs and school settings, especially with regards to SEN:

*And when you go to another authority, whilst there are overarching national SEN guidelines, there are also then other processes that each local authority, you know, each one will do their special school panel differently. You know, they might have a different way of managing looked after children within their SEN departments. [VS2]*

*Even with an education, health and care plan moving, doing a removal-in, some local authorities won't even look at it until it's on their paperwork. They won't send it out until... they won't do a consultation until they've transferred it all across. [VS2]*

Participants also reflected on how the quality of collaborative working can differ across LAs: “All agencies involved in their lives would have constant good communication, this is sometimes inconsistent across different authorities” [DT3], as well as the overall approach: “I feel that their processes are very child-centred, which is not to that level with all local authorities” [DT2]. Even when all individuals in the

system are located within the same LA, VS staff experience inconsistencies across schools:

*Despite there being regulatory authorities that try to uphold standards across schools, everyone does it differently. Pastoral care is so different, SEND is different, that's why some schools are absolutely overrun with applications, because that school knows what they're doing. [VS1]*

Such a situation has been experienced by DT2: *"We've been told that social workers have recommended us to families. I'm like, oh, you know, which is hugely complementary. But then in its own way provides challenges because then you get more people applying for places"* [DT2].

### The Time for Things to Happen

In some cases, processes can be of a timely and responsive nature, DT2 speculated that collaborative working can facilitate this: *"funding for this (Yoga) was given very quickly, so there's no, there was no lag. So, I guess in that sense that is collaborative because they are responding very quickly to what we are saying the needs are"* [DT2].

However, most participants emphasised the significant amount of time it can take for processes to happen and for the right support and education provision to be arranged:

*It can be incredibly difficult to get the right support for looked after children without it taking a really long time. Which you know that's time that these children, they have already lost an incredible amount of time through one thing or another. [DT2]*

When reflecting on the current situation for N, VS1 shared: *"They're getting on really well. We're really pleased at what happened. It just took a long time"* [VS1].

N's previous school did not start the official process of removing N from their roll after stating they could not meet their needs. Yet they were not expecting N to return to the school at the start of the next academic year. It took a third of the school year for a new school placement to be found for N. This was complicated by the absence of school processes until VS1 stepped in and N's SEN. Collaboration and transparency were facilitated by VS1, resulting in the emergence of a solution-focused approach, as outlined in Theme 1.

And when asked about what stood out to them in H's sociogram, DT1 explained: *"I know this doesn't show it, but the time for me, it has been quite a long time to come to the final plan"* [DT1].

Time was a particular obstacle in the case of SEN processes, where the 'Belonging Regulation' requires the LA in which the CYP first came into care to remain as the funding LA, yet the SEND team in the LA within which the CYP attends school: *"are responsible for finding a placement and maintaining the plan,*

*yet they have to get permission back from the original LA to fund it” [VS2], a process which can take “an eternity” [VS3].*

Finally, when discussing processes around care placements, DT3 shared that the time taken for this was detrimental to D:

*They said they couldn't find anywhere, so I was constantly, he (SW) would constantly say to me, oh, I've I think I've found somewhere, it'll probably be 2 weeks. And then we'd get to 2 weeks and it wouldn't happen. [DT3]*

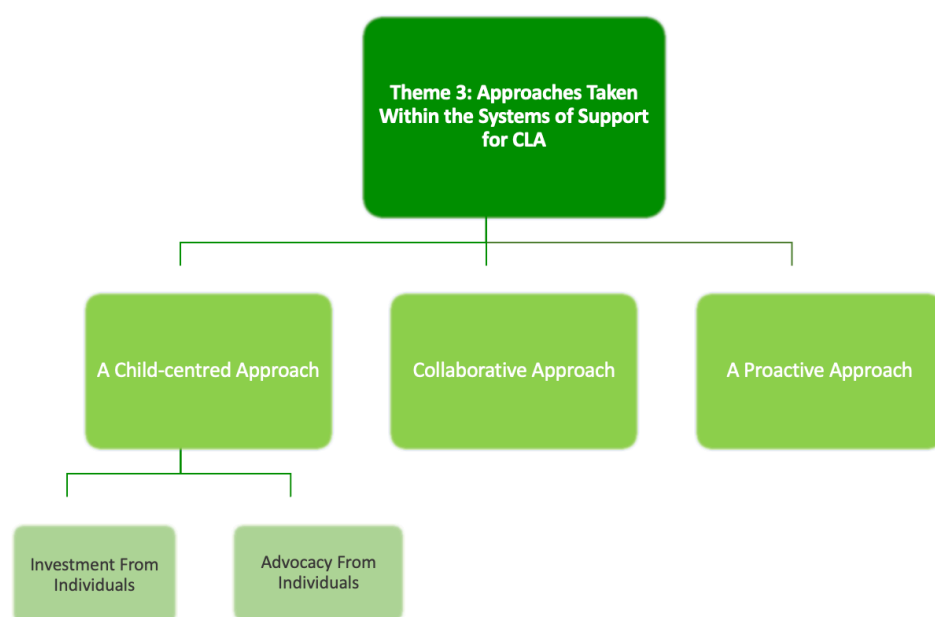
This meant that D remained in: “*a non-regulated placement for more than 28 days*” which DT3 explained was illegal.

#### **4.4.3 Theme 3: Approach Taken Within the Systems**

This theme is concerned with the ways in which systems work to ensure the best outcomes for CYP, highlighting a real sense of care for and the positive impact of both a collaborative and proactive approach to joined-up working. This theme is made up of three subthemes, one of which ‘*A Child-Centred Approach*’ incorporated two subsequent subthemes.

**Figure 31**

*Theme 3 Thematic Map*



### A Child-Centred Approach

When taking a child-centred approach, the individuals in the system keep the CYP in focus when making decisions about their lives and work in partnership with them and their families. Participants shared many practice examples of the care they have for the CYP they support and a strong desire to get it right for them: *"You desperately want the best for that child"* [VS2] and:

*Ohh, absolutely because we don't wanna get it wrong for them... and therefore, if we were to do it wrong, we're having a negative impact on their emotional well-being, aren't we?...*

*Ultimately for me, they are the most important person in all of this.* [DT1].



When talking about the residential home manager in S' case, VS3 explained: *"He really cares for the young people under his care. He very much takes sort of a parental role and he wants the best for S, so that really helps"* [VS3]

### Investment from Individuals

Participants also described occasions of both time and emotional investment from themselves to ensure the best for the CYP: *"I made contact with the social worker during the Easter holidays just to see how things were progressing and that everything was OK"* [DT1], and following a placement breakdown, DT3 explained:

*I spoke to the social worker, and I said did foster parents ask to have any contact with D? And he said they didn't, but I suppose maybe people would say I was being nosey, but it wasn't, I felt like I wanted to know whether there was any relationship there at all.* [DT3]

Participants also highlighted the investment from foster parents in the system: *"But the foster carers did the leg work, they just needed the information from us"* [VS1].

### Advocacy

A degree of advocacy is present and at times required by professionals in the systems, especially when things go wrong. This is clearly illustrated in S' case, following the college's decision to withdraw them, and VS3's response to this of facilitating a professionals working group and championing S' views about attending

a college course that suits them. See Figure 25 for proportion of advocacy within S's sociogram.

Participants also emphasised the assertive and advocating approach of foster parents and residential home managers, ensuring that the needs of their CYP are met and the decisions made about them are in their best interests:

*They have a really good understanding of what their young person needs, has always had those strong feelings about their young people and therefore will challenge quite a lot. And I think that that's right and proper, it's what parents do. It was actually a presentation I recognise from working in schools, working with assertive parents. [VS1]*

However, such advocacy was inconsistent. When reflecting on their experiences of working with residential home staff in PEP and other meetings, VS3 explained: *"They just don't turn up or don't dial in. So, he (S' home manager) is always there, very present, and a big part of it and a real advocate for S"* [VS3].

### A Collaborative Approach

Within each system, collaborative groups came to be via emergence, some organically such as those within school and family subsystems (illustrated in L's sociogram, see *Figure 20*), and others were explicitly created and labelled 'professionals working group' in response to challenging situations such a

breakdown between school and home and a high risk of exclusion, illustrated by N's case. See *Figure 22*.

However, collaboration more generally across the system as an established approach varied. For example, some participants described an inclusive approach which facilitated collaboration with the system: *"Everyone who needed to know knows what's going on and actually ultimately when we needed, everyone worked together, there isn't someone in isolation"* [VS1]. Moreover, when describing the collaborative nature of their work within the school subsystem, DT2 explained that they share all decisions made about CLA and PCLA pupils with the headteacher: *"And that's where the key is that no one person on their own should be making the decisions. And in the ideal world, this is just constant"* [DT2].

Yet in other systems of support, collaboration was diminished when individuals had alternative views and competing priorities:

*Initially social worker said they were trying to get them into another school, then there was, so virtual school was saying we need to look for a special school. Then social worker was saying we don't want to do that at this moment because if we move them out of the area then there'll be another move.* [DT3]

A fragmented approach was also reported in some cases, where the sense of shared responsibility was absent: *"But that is a common issue that we have as*

*schools - other professionals will say get school to get an EHCP for you. So yeah, that's challenging" [DT2]*

### A Proactive Approach

Participants explained that the individuals within a caring role often operate with a proactive approach: He's (home manager) quite proactive if he thinks of something or wants to share a bit of information [VS3], which can facilitate effective working within the system:

*So things like if H has an appointment, they're gonna be late in, we know, and we don't know that on the day, we know that before. And so people then aren't ringing up when we do our cold calling in the morning to ring up to check where people are. [DT1]*

Both DT and VS staff participants also reported taking a proactive approach themselves, and described how this was a facilitating factor for effective joined-up working. For example, as a post-16 VS officer, VS3 explained their approach when CYP transition onto her caseload:

*Also I'll go to the last couple of year 11 PEPS or CCRs to wave, so that they know who I am. And so the other professionals also, it's not just about the young person, it's the other professionals know that this is coming... So the home manager*

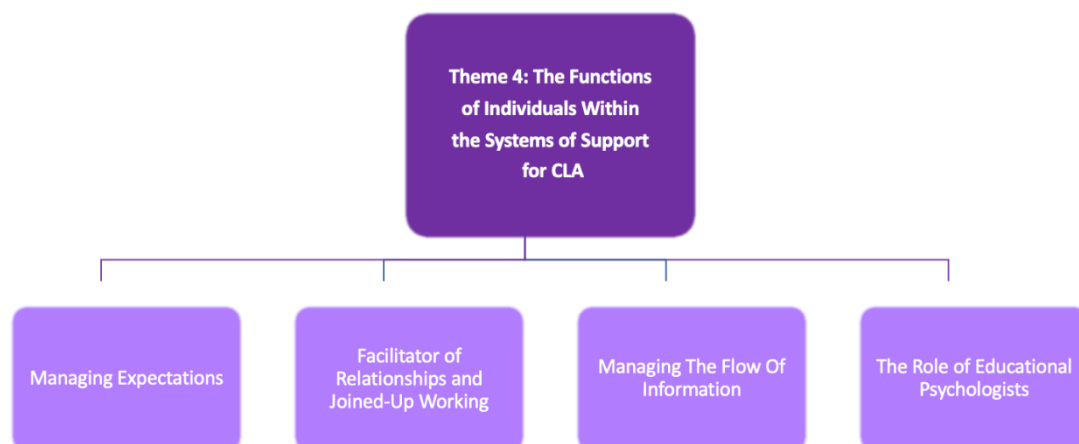
would be aware, right they're moving to VS3 now. And since he's known who I am and my job role, he's been really good at communicating. [VS3]

#### **4.4.4 Theme 4: The Functions of Individuals Within the Systems of Support for CLA**

This theme outlines the unique functions that individuals can have with the systems of support to promote effective joined-up working and facilitate support for CYP. This theme is made up of four subthemes, two of which were only reported by VS participants, in line with the statutory guidance and expectations of their role, 'Facilitator of Relationships and Joined-Up Working' and 'Managing the Flow of Information'.

**Figure 32**

*Theme 4 Thematic Map*



## Managing Expectations

Both DT and VS staff participants emphasised the need to manage other individual's expectations around available support, and that this had the potential to cause challenge and tension within the system:

*It's also about honesty though, because obviously, if somebody comes and says I need XYZ, I have to have XYZ for my child, then obviously we will be honest about what we can and cannot do in terms of support, provision, staffing levels and resources... you know, it's not just about being nice all the time. Sometimes it has to be 'well, actually, we can't do that', and if the answer is no, explain why the answer's no. So the challenge is the point of saying no. [DT2]*

Another area in which participants felt the need to manage expectations was around statutory SEN assessments for EHCPs, given: "*now everybody really wants an EHCP for children*" [VS2]. From a school perspective, DT2 shared: "*And as if I can just snap my fingers and get one just for everybody. And so, it's sort of, then I then have to manage that expectation down a bit*" [DT2]. One participant pointed out the fact that individuals within the systems of support for CLA can arrive with their own expectations based on previous experiences. However, given the inconsistencies in processes across LAs, as discussed in theme 2, this can present a challenge:

*So I think there's sometimes an element of just managing expectations a little bit and also managing expectations around what processes exist... So it's sometimes about sharing that process knowledge, and their previous experiences might be different, or their understanding of the education system, which can sometimes be challenging. [VS2]*

### Facilitator of Relationships and Joined-Up Working

As outlined above, VS participants described a key part of their role was to facilitate relationships between other individuals within the systems:

*But my job, I almost have to make sure the other people in their life have good relationships with others. That's how I see my job. I am checking up on other people's relationships and facilitating their relationships so they (YP) can make progress. [VS1]*

To facilitate joined-up working between subsystems, the VS was described as:

*“being a little bit of a bridge between lots of other things, kind of little bit of a conduit between services” [VS2].* Participants also emphasised the importance of facilitating relationships between others to ensure the most appropriate dynamics for support when moving forward:

*but what we need to manage now with the foster carer as they've had incredible amounts of support from the virtual school, but we need to make sure that the relationship between them and the new school is as it should be. [VS1]*

### Managing the Flow of Information

One VS participant explained the need to manage the flow of information to the most appropriate people at the most helpful time to ensure de-escalation of an emotionally charged situation: *"it was also a case of when school needed to be involved, school were involved, when school didn't need to be involved, they didn't need to be involved. And we kept those sort of two streams clear"* [VS1].

Another participant recognised that they were not always the best person to be sharing information, and felt that other professionals such as social workers had better knowledge about what was most appropriate and helpful to share:

*And there is an element that some of the circumstances mean that I won't always share information to the family, because I allow the social worker to... they know what's appropriate to share and what's not at each point. And that can change quite frequently. [VS2]*



## The Role of Educational Psychologists

As previously explained, the participants in this case study work within a LA where EPs are not linked to schools, nor is there an EP within the VS team. It is therefore likely that such an EP service model is the reason for EPs not being present in any of the sociograms. However, participants were asked if they think an EP should be positioned within the CYP's systems of support, and if so where and how.

Most participants felt that EP involvement would not have changed anything in the cases of these CYP at the time. Potentially contributing to this was the perception that EP involvement related directly and sometimes exclusively to learning needs: *"not sure that EP advice would have helped D as their spiral to disengagement with school was linked with his home difficulties and not related to his education"* [DT3] and *"There was at no point did I think an EP would sort this out or be needed. I think if they want to progress with their education, there are gonna be things that crop up that would..."* [VS3].

However, participants also reflected on the possible role and function of EPs earlier on in CYP's cases to prevent and minimize the crisis situations that eventuated: *"maybe an EP should have been consulted before D moved from special education to mainstream as I feel that was a mistake"* [DT3], and *"it would have been lovely to have had an EP present in that summer term to inform the school"* [VS1].

Participants also felt that EP advice carries a certain weight, perhaps more weight compared to how their own advice is received and taken on board by others:

*And I think an earlier assessment by educational psychologists might be able to shut down, where we spend a huge amount of time with people going 'we need an EHCP', it's not always the answer. It doesn't always create anything else for these children. Sometimes it actually slows things down for them. You know, they've now got a period of time out of education because we've got the consultation and everything... it's a bit like everybody wants an ASD diagnosis, and the overlap between those two (impact of developmental trauma) are so significant that you think, 'does it matter?'. Can we just do this rather than talk about this? [VS2]*

Finally, when asked if they thought EPs should have a statutory role within the systems of support, all participants said yes. One participant felt that EP involvement should be part of the "VS package" [DT1], to have access to:

*that person who holds more knowledge about 'actually this could impact on this young person', 'have you thought about...?' 'We can do this' or 'there is a great course for the young person to access, this is how you can go about it, this is what it would mean, this is what it could look like'. [DT1]*

Another participant explained that: *“to have an EP as part of the network, a team around a child could be hugely positive”* [DT2] because it would facilitate direct access to additional support and EP involvement: *“if there was an opportunity to access that advice without having to go through so many other services and wait on other waiting lists. You know, to me, these children should have a direct route through”* [DT2].

From a VS perspective, it was felt that EP involvement: *“has never been more needed”* [VS1] now that the responsibility of the VS extends to PCLA and CYP with a SW: *“because they don't have the system surrounding them that can support them unless the school does it themselves”* [VS1]. However, it was cautioned that EP involvement should be on a *“case-by-case basis”* [DT2] and that the system needs to be mindful not to *“muddy the waters”* [DT2] as: *“There is a bit of a tendency to ‘let's throw everything at it’* [DT2].

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Overview**

This chapter outlines key findings from the study. To address the four RQs, policy and statutory guidance regarding the expectations of the DT and VS roles are outlined. Findings from previous research are also considered before key findings from the present study are discussed.

It should be noted that survey data provides more generalisable data regarding practice and experiences of DTs and VS within a broad sample, whereas SNA data provides an illustration of practice in one LA context with a small sample of six cases. Within the case study context, EP service delivery was atypical; there were no EPs linked to schools with either a traded or non-traded offer, and no EPs attached to the VS. However, this data still provides a holistic perspective of how the systems of support for CLA can function, which is in line with CST.

### **5.2 Complex Systems Theory**

The findings in this study demonstrated how a multitude of micro level components interact dynamically to produce complex outcomes at a macro level in the systems of support for CLA. These multi-agency systems exist to improve outcomes for CLA and are guided by statutory expectations for key individuals such as DTs, VS staff and SWs. This study illustrated the ways in which DTs and VS staff meet the expectations for their roles, such as DTs acting as a central point of contact within schools and VS staff facilitating links between education and social care. This study has also highlighted several facilitating factors and challenges within these systems of support. However, in line with CST, this study demonstrated how such factors do

not exist in isolation nor are they part of linear cause-effect processes. Instead, all components within the systems of support for CLA interact within one another over time; the systems are dynamic. Therefore, all findings need to be considered with a holistic perspective.

### **5.3 RQ 1: What do the systems of support for CLA look like?**

The sociograms created in this study clearly illustrated a picture of the systems of support for CLA. Additionally, triangulation of all data and corroboration of findings from the existing literature highlighted four specific features of such systems. Firstly, systems of support for CLA contain a large number of individuals from a wide range of professional and non-professional backgrounds. Secondly, key players are consistently present within these systems, however thirdly, the individual factors experienced by key players can vary. Finally, EP presence and type of involvement differs across these systems.

In the Care Matters White Paper 2007, it was highlighted that CLA often have a number of professionals involved in their lives (DfES, 2007). In previous research the accumulation of individuals involved in a CYP's life have been described as large and unwieldy networks, with involvement from an extensive range of individuals (Rivers, 2018; Robinson, 2020; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). The findings in the present study not only echo this description, but extend our understanding where sociograms provided illustrated examples for specific cases. Triangulation of data from surveys and sociograms suggested that the number of individuals involved in any one system of support can be at least 30. Moreover, case study participants were aware of at least 63 direct connections between individuals within a system. Actual figures were

likely to be higher than these, given sociograms were completed from the position of one individual within these systems who would not have a meta-perspective of the whole network.

De La Fosse (2020) concluded that VS staff work with a broad range of individuals and professionals from different disciplines. An extensive range of individuals were cited by participants throughout the present study when asked about who they work with. Extending findings from the previous literature, this study provided quantitative data for both the range and quantity of individuals and professionals who work with VS staff and DTs. Within survey responses, DTs reported working with up to 28 different individuals within their role, and for VS staff this number was 36. Whilst this does not mean that participants would work with that many people within each case, they would have been expected to work with them all when supporting all of their CLA pupils. Importantly, findings suggested that it could be expected of DTs and VS staff to work with a total range of 50 different individuals from a wide range of disciplines, these include those in therapeutic roles, social care roles, criminality, and education.

To facilitate a collaborative approach from all these individuals at a micro level, policy positions DTs and VSHs within the systems of support for CLA, and statutory guidance outlines their roles in facilitating effective joined-up working (DfE, 2018b; DfES, 2007). Findings in this study illustrated that current practice aligns with such policy, where DTs function as a central point of contact within schools and VS staff function as a source of advice and facilitator of connections between schools and social care. Therefore, from a complex systems perspective, findings

demonstrated that these roles are facilitating the necessary networks for collaborative macro level behaviour.

For example, DTs, VS staff, SWs, and foster parents were cited by the vast majority of the large survey samples in this study as individuals with whom participants work with most often. Furthermore, within the sociograms created by VS staff participants, DTs, VS staff, SWs, foster parents and CYP had the highest numbers of connections to other nodes. It should be noted that in the sociograms created by DTs, VS staff were not included in this list. A plausible explanation for this is the fact that participants are likely to be most informed about their own connections within the systems compared to those of others, and therefore will always only ever be able to provide incomplete data sets. Therefore, the DTs in the case study may not have known about additional connections from VS staff to other individuals despite them existing. However, it seems that DTs were positioned as key players within these systems both from their own and from VS staff participant's perspectives. Such conclusions align with that of Drew (2019) who labelled DTs as key members of school staff.

Throughout policy and practice, DTs and VS staff are stable key players, present in every system of support for CLA. However, for these individuals, especially DTs, micro level components regarding individual experiences of the role may vary. With regards to the way in which the role of the DT is carried out, it is acknowledged in the statutory guidance that this can vary depending on the number of CLA and PCLA on roll and their individual needs (DfE, 2018b). However, there are expectations for consistency within the experiences and skills of DTs to promote effective macro level behaviour within the systems of support for CLA.

Section 20 of the 2008 Act places a duty on school governing bodies to ensure that the designated teacher undertakes appropriate training. However, previous research has highlighted that training experiences of DTs can vary, with some not attending any initial training when taking on the role (Boesley, 2021). In the present study, 25% of DT survey participants did not attend initial training, for the majority of these participants, they were unaware of any training opportunities. This highlights how for some systems of support, DTs could be less aware of processes or may not have an appropriate understanding of CLA and PCLA needs. In a complex system, such factors have the potential influence the way DTs interact with others and thus the self-organisation of the system – this is the adaptability of a system (Silva & Guerrini, 2017) where interactions of components in a complex system are not fixed or clearly defined, but are subject to ongoing co-adaption (Davis & Sumara, 2008). For example, for DTs who have not attended training, the function of interactions with VS staff may be more of an advice seeking nature compared to DTs who have attended training.

In addition, to ensure that they can represent CLA effectively, policy states that the DT should be a member of the school's senior leadership team (SLT) and either a qualified teacher or head teacher (DfES, 2007). This recommendation takes into consideration the importance of DTs having the appropriate seniority and skills to ensure all school staff understand and meet CLA and PCLA needs, and to be able to work with the school's SLT and governing body to ensure policies reflect the needs of these pupils (DfE, 2018b). As components within a complex system, a DT's level of seniority, leadership skills, and communication skills would all impact on the



macro level functioning of the system of support for a CLA such as collaboration and a child-centred approach.

However, previous research has highlighted inconsistencies with the additional roles held by DTs, where some DTs do not hold leadership positions nor are they teaching staff (Boesley, 2021). Findings in the present study echoed this, where only 11% of DT survey participants held teaching roles, and despite 65% of DTs holding a headteacher, deputy or assistant headteacher role, 'other' roles were cited by 18% of participant which included mentors and learning support assistants. Importantly, these DTs would not have the same level of seniority, and potentially leadership and communication skills compared to headteachers and/or teaching staff.

Finally, statutory guidance states VSHs should ensure that there are effective arrangements in place to work with a range of professionals who will play a role in supporting the education of CLA and PCLA. As part of fulfilling this, VSHs are advised to build relationships with individuals with the skills to support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of these pupils, including CAMHs and EPs (DfE, 2018a). This guidance was reflected in the present study, where the majority of VS survey participants cited working with CAMHS (84%) and EPs (95%). Previous research has demonstrated how EPs can have a position within the complex systems of support for CLA and PCLA. Samul (2021) and Boesley (2021) both reported that consultation was a common form of EP involvement when supporting the needs of CLA, survey responses in the present study mirrored these findings.

Survey responses in this study also demonstrated the breadth of EP involvement, where over half of VS staff participants also cited EP work encompassing VS training, direct work with CYP, cognitive assessments, statutory assessments, and multi-disciplinary review meetings. It has been suggested in previous research that the remit and scope of the EP role can be misunderstood by DTs and schools, and therefore opportunities for EP involvement can be limited (Norwich et al., 2010; Samul, 2021; Whitehouse, 2014). However, in the present study DTs reported over 10 different types of EP involvement, seven of which were cited by 22% to 88% of DT survey participants. This suggests an understanding of a wide range of possible types of EP involvement.

However, the prevalence of EP involvement within these systems can vary. Survey participants in this study reported EP involvement with supporting the needs of CLA in 22.4% (DTs) and 38.7% (VS staff) of cases on average. Overall, the frequency of involvement was broad, with participants reporting EP involvement in 0% of cases up to 100% of cases. The access to and funding for EP involvement also varied within the survey samples. As previously explained, the SNA data in this study came from a small sample in a single LA context with an atypical EP service model. The absence of linked EPs to schools and the VS with either a traded or non-traded offer in this LA is likely to explain the lack of EPs depicted in the sociograms. It is therefore not possible to draw generalisable conclusions from the sociograms regarding EP presence and involvement within the systems of support for CLA.

Nevertheless, case study participants were asked, along with the wider survey sample, if EPs should have a statutory role within the systems of support for CLA

and if so, how would they be positioned. Whilst the vast majority of participants felt that EPs should have a statutory role within the systems of support for CLA, it was highlighted that such involvement should be on a case-by-case basis, not a standardised offer.

These findings all further illustrates the complexity of these systems, specifically their interaction-dominant nature where professional's involvement, such as EPs, is dependent on the micro level component of CYP's needs and wider system factors such as the route to accessing and funding for EP involvement.

#### **5.4 RQ2: How do the systems of support for CLA function and how do the individuals within them interact?**

The unique SNA approach to data collection and analysis in this study again clearly illustrated the ways in which components within the systems of support for CLA can interact. SNA also highlighted that these multi-agency systems can function in a joined-up way to produce macro level collaborative working with a child-centred approach. Such findings extend what has previously been explored in the existing literature by providing illustrative examples of these systems.

Four key conclusions arose from triangulation of the data within this study. Firstly, the dynamic interactions between individuals at a micro level manifested in a variety of ways. For some individuals, relationships comprised more than one type of connection, an important finding contributing to our understanding of how these systems function and extending the previous literature. Secondly, it seems that an effective joined-up approach can be attributed to the key players VS' and DTs. Thirdly, the emergence of collaborative groups within the systems of support for CLA

was common. Finally, DTs and VS' helped to operationalise the formation of the correct multi-agency team around CLA to ensure decisions are based on the individual needs of CLA, promoting a child-centred approach.

The statutory guidance for supporting CLA and PCLA in education states that VSHs are integral to ensuring that LAs discharge their duty to provide suitable advice and information for the purpose of promoting the educational achievement of these pupils (DfE, 2018a). DTs are also required to provide information which helps all who are supporting the child's educational achievement to understand what works for them during the PEP process (DfE, 2018b). The importance of information sharing within the systems of support for CLA to improve outcomes was emphasised by Moorehouse, 2022.

In the present study, both information sharing and advice were present in every sociogram within the case study element, where information sharing was the predominant form of interaction between individuals. However, subthemes within *Theme 1: Flow of Information Throughout the Systems of Support for CLA* highlighted how the fulfilment of the VS and DT roles alone may not facilitate the degree of information sharing, this would be a reductionist cause-effect explanation. Instead, from a complex systems perspective, a high degree of information sharing could be conceptualised as a macro-level behaviour of the system, resulting from the dynamic interactions of components such as the availability of others and the communication approach taken by all. These components in themselves were dependent on other factors such the time and capacity professionals such as DTs and SWs had for their roles, and the communication skills of individuals. This is an important and unique contribution of the present study within this area of literature.

The implications of such findings need to be considered when looking to enable an effective system of support around CLA.

Secondly, this study showed that the DT and VS roles are significant in facilitating communication and development of the necessary support systems for each CYP. The Children and Families Act 2014 positions VS' as a facilitator of joined-up working between education and social care. Success of this has consistently been evidenced in previous studies, and the VS has been described as a '*bridge*' between the school and social care subsystems (Berridge, 2009; De La Fosse, 2022; Driscoll, 2013; Pickles et al., 2023; Simpson, 2012). Survey and interview data in the present study highlighted this further, where the VS was again been described as a "*bridge*" [VS2], and VS participants explained that a key part of their role was to facilitate relationships between other individuals.

Statutory guidance for the DT role states that they should be a central point of contact within the school, are required to "*proactively build strong links*" with the VS (DfE, 2018b, p.24), and should be open and accessible to parents, carers, and social care and education professionals alike (DfE, 2018b). Findings in the existing literature have evidenced how DTs are positioned by VS staff as a vital link between themselves and school subsystems (Drew, 2019), and De La Fosse (2022) highlighted how DTs promote joined-up working between families and school staff. Both survey and interview data echoed and extended these findings, where a majority of DT survey participants reported that VS staff, foster parents, and class teachers are individuals with whom they work with most frequently. Sociograms also illustrated how DTs operationalised their role as a vital link between VS' and school

subsystems through types, frequencies and directions of interactions, and involvement in collaborative groups.

Thirdly, sociograms in this study demonstrated how it is common for the systems of support for CLA to contain nested networks of collaborative groups. Collaborative groups are defined as specific individuals working together towards a common goal. The importance of collaborative working when supporting CLA and making decisions about their care and education has been highlighted in policy and statutory guidance (DfE, 2018b; DfES, 2007) and emphasised in previous research (Samul, 2021). A unique contribution of the present study was that findings demonstrated how collaborative groups can be explicitly organised to resolve conflicts, for example, when a CYP's school placement was at risk. From a complex systems perspective, such findings clearly demonstrate how DTs and VS' help to operationalise the formation of the correct multi-disciplinary team around CLA based on their individual needs and the current context.

Collaborative groups can also come about implicitly, such as general collaboration between individuals contained within a school sub system. Crucially, the key players, DTs, VS staff, and SWs were likely to find themselves in more than one collaborative group and facilitating a link between them. Key players should be mindful of the common goals within these collaborative groups to ensure competing priorities and goals do not cause issues in systems that contain multiple overlapping collaborative groups.

Finally, in the past research has highlighted that a child-centred approach can vary or be lacking within the systems of support for CLA (Goodall, 2014; Norwich et al., 2010). However, De Le Fosse's (2022) found evidence of a child-centred approach in her more recent study. From a complex systems perspective, such progress within the macro level behaviour of these systems could be explained by policy development over time, including statutory guidance for DTs and introduction of the statutory VSH role – micro level components that did not exist within these systems in the past. Specifically, DTs are to ensure that CYP's views are taken seriously and that they are involved in their own target setting (DfE, 2018b). Statutory guidance also states that "*VSHs need to be the educational advocate that parents are for others*" (DfE, 2018a, p.5).

Findings in this study demonstrated how these professionals are fulfilling their roles, contributing to the emergence of a child-centred approach in the system. For example, VS survey participants emphasised their position to challenge decisions made about CLA as a strength of the role, advocating for these CYP as parents do for others. Importantly, triangulation of all data in this study suggested that a crucial micro level component for the emergence of a child-centred approach is also the passion and care rooted in individuals, where the dedication, investment and a strong desire to '*get it right*' for CLA and PCLA was apparent in many VS and DT participants.

### **5.5 RQ3: What challenges exist within the systems of support for CLA?**

A multitude of challenges experienced by DTs and VS staff were shared throughout this study. Many of these challenges echo findings from previous research. In line

with a complex systems approach, all challenges outlined should be understood within the interaction-dominant context they are a part of and should not be considered in isolation or the result of linear cause-effect processes.

### ***Collaboration***

As highlighted in *Chapter 1*, inadequate collaboration between education and social care services has long been identified as contributing to poor outcomes for CLA (Berridge, 2007; Cameron et al., 2015; Harker et al., 2003; Harker et al., 2004). 30% of DT survey participants in this study reported experiencing challenges to collaboration when working within the systems of support for CLA. When 'collaboration' is understood as macro-level system behaviour from a complex systems perspective, it is important to subsequently understand the multitude of micro-level components, and the dynamic interactions between them that contribute to the emergence of such behaviour, these are outlined next.

### ***Availability***

The importance of the availability of others within the systems of support for CLA for macro-level collaborative working has been highlighted in previous research (Boesley, 2021; Moorehouse, 2022). This is the degree to which others for example reply to emails or phone calls in a timely manner, or the available time they have to attend meetings. Components such as teaching commitments for DTs and shift working patterns for residential home staff have been cited in the existing literature as challenges to the availability of such individuals (Norwich, 2010; Robinson, 2020). Findings in the present study mirrored these conclusions, suggesting that the



additional roles held by DTs can be a highly important micro-level component with these systems.

The limited availability of SWs was also commonly cited by both DT and VS staff participants. This resulted in the need to chase SWs, which required additional time and slowed down processes such as arranging appropriate provision. However, most participants voiced an understanding of the pressure and strain SWs can experience. Components and macro-level outcomes in the social care workforce complex systems, such as high workloads and low staffing levels, were cited. Evidence of promoting one's own availability was also shared by case study participants who explained that they offered multiple means of contact to others, ensured foster parents had connections with multiple people within the school subsystem, and prioritised responding to emails or missed calls in a timely manner.

### ***Time and Workload***

The negative impact of heavy workloads and time pressures on effective joined-up working to support CLA was cited by Golding (2010). In line with this previous research, DTs in the present study emphasised that the role could be time-intensive, particularly with higher numbers of CLA on roll as this required attendance at an accumulation of PEP and CLA Reviews. This challenge was also reported by Boesley (2021), Goodall (2014), Simpson (2012) and Waterman (2020). Furthermore, DTs in this study reported that competing responsibilities when holding additional titles in school exacerbated difficulties with time for the DT role, another challenge also reported by Boesley (2021), De La Fosse (2022), Goodall (2014), Simpson (2012) and Waterman (2020). In addition to providing complementary

findings to those outlined in the previous literature, findings in the present study also highlighted that nearly a third of DTs did not have protected time for the role. This extends what is understood about challenges to time and workload for DTs and raises a crucial area for consideration when understanding the barriers to operationalisation of the DT role and how it is valued and understood within the school subsystems.

For VS staff participants in the present study, the interaction of several pressures on capacity seemed to restrict their time to fulfil their role. These included an increase in the total number of CLA, an increase in the complexity of presenting needs for CLA, and the relatively recent extensions of the VS to promote the educational outcomes of PCLA (DfE, 2018) and CYP with a SWs (DfE, 2021), a pressure not previously outlined in the literature.

### ***Placement Instability***

Placement instability has also long been identified as contributing to poor outcomes for CLA (Berridge, 2007; Cameron et al., 2015; Harker et al., 2003; Harker et al., 2004). Participants in this study suggested that placement instability can have a negative impact on CYP's engagement in school, emotional wellbeing, and presentation of complex needs. Policy calls for professionals to work together to limit the disruption to a CYP's education as a result of care planning decisions, such as ensuring the continuity of education where possible (DfES, 2007) and ensuring education provision for CYP is arranged at the same time as a care placement (DfE, 2018a).

Unfortunately, findings in this study suggest that multiple placement moves are common for CLA and that CYP can spend extended periods of time not attending an education provision. This is due to the time it takes to make arrangements for an appropriate education provision local to their new care placement. From a complex systems perspective, not only is it important to consider the dynamic interaction of components leading up to placement moves for CYP, but also how new placements result in drastic changes to the professionals and care givers within the systems around these CYP. Importantly, participants emphasised how there is a potential for the CYP's story to be lost when the individuals within their system of support change.

### ***Inconsistency of Individuals***

Whilst in some systems of support for CLA, care and education placements remain stable, components such as the professionals within the system can change all together. High levels of staff turnover in the social care workforce have been recognised in previous research as a challenge to successful joined-up working (Boesley, 2021; De La Foss, 2022; Moorhouse, 2022). Both survey and interview participants in the present study similarly reported this as a challenge. Extending on these findings, participants explained how changes to individuals fulfilling the SW position can impact on interactions within the system regarding communication and rapport.

### ***Inconsistent Processes Across LAs***

Mirroring findings in the existing literature, inconsistencies in processes across LAs was cited in the present study as a challenge when working within the system of

support for CLA (Boesley, 2021; De La Fosse, 2022; Ofsted, 2012; Pickles et al., 2023; Waterman 2020). Specifically, participants in this study highlighted the challenge of navigating LAs with differing monitoring processes such as PEPs, funding streams for PP, and SEN processes such as special school panels for admissions. It is important to note that such challenges were exacerbated for DTs who support multiple CYP 'looked-after' by different LAs.

## **Funding**

Survey participants in this study raised a variety of concerns regarding funding, such as a lack of funding, echoing findings from Boesley (2021) and conclusions drawn from a thorough literature review of VS research by Waterman (2020). Participants in this study highlighted the particular challenge this posed for accessing provision to support CYP with SEMH needs. However, participants also explained how a lack of funding can contribute to the emergence of disagreement and limit collaborative macro-level behaviour, where individuals with competing priorities can find it a challenge to agree on how best to spend funding.

### **5.6 RQ4: What factors facilitate the systems of support for CLA?**

Despite the identification of several challenges, mostly related to collaborative macro-level behaviour within the systems of support for CLA, a number of facilitating factors were identified. However, as previously explained, in line with a complex systems approach, all facilitating factors within the systems of support for CLA should be understood within the interaction-dominant context they are a part of and should not be considered in isolation or the result of linear cause-effect processes.

### ***Collaborative Working***

A lack of collaboration was previously outlined as a challenge to effective joined-up working and a barrier to positive outcome for CLA. However, the need for collaborative working when supporting CLA and PCAL has been emphasised throughout policy (see Section 10 of the Children Act 2004; Children and Families Act 2014; Children and Young Persons Act 2008). The presence of a collaborative approach has also been identified as a facilitator to effective support for CLA in previous research (Miller, 2023; Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

In the present study, many VS staff cited '*collaboration*' as a strength within the systems of support in which they work, where over one third of VS staff provided examples of collaborative working. These included descriptions of the VS acting as a '*bridge*' between social care and education, and VS staff taking on specific roles such as management of expectations and the flow of information to support positive working relationships and collaboration between home, school and social care. Within the case study data, collaborative working was also proven to contribute to the resolution of issues, such as threats to education placements (exclusions), and to ensure the most helpful next steps for the CYP.

### ***Transparent Communication***

Previous research has highlighted the need for open lines of communication within the systems of support for CLA as this can lead to a shared understanding of the CYP and their needs (Golding, 2010). Building on this, in the present study, open, honest, clear and an overall transparent communication approach were cited by all case study participants when describing what facilitated effective joined-up working.

Specifically, transparency was crucial for building trusting rapport with others, promoting a solution-focussed approach as well as avoiding conflicts, blame and formal complaints processes. Greater transparency around decision-making within multi-agency working has been called for in the recent independent social work review (MacAlister, 2022) suggesting this is an approach valued across education and social care.

### ***Support for DTs and VS'***

An important strength to highlight in the networks around CLA was the support received by DTs and VS staff. As key players in these systems, DTs and VS staff have many important responsibilities. However, as explored in this study, time for these roles can be limited and the work they do can encompass an emotional load. The type and prevalence of support for DTs in the survey sample varied, the most common was networking events facilitated by the VS. Ofsted (2012) described these events as a productive forum for exchanging information, sharing good practice and delivering training.

Overall, support from VS' was cited by almost half of all DT survey participants as a strength within the systems of support for CLA. Boesley (2021) positioned VS' as champions for DTs as DTs are advocates for CLA. Many DTs in the present study described components such as clear communication with and availability of their VS as strengths. For VS staff, it seems that support for them often came from established regional VS groups and the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH). From a complex systems perspective, it is important to consider the interaction of all components and how for example the availability of a

VS to DTs could be dependent on the capacity of VS staff, the level of rapport between individuals, and/or the needs within the system, such as the CYP's vulnerability for exclusion.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Overview

Many important findings about the functioning of the systems of support for CLA have been obtained throughout the process of this study. In this chapter, final conclusions are presented, followed by discussion of the strengths and limitations of this study. Suggestions for future research, based on the questions that remain unanswered, are also set out, before discussion of the implications for practice.

### 6.2 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of joined-up working within the systems of support around CLA. The researcher moved away from a more traditional component only linear case-effect model to explore the phenomena, and instead a dynamic interaction-dominant model was used in accordance with CST. This allowed the researcher to take a holistic approach to understanding these systems, which can be described as focussing on the “*people, processes, activities, settings and structures – and the dynamic relationships between them*” (Wutzke et al., 2016, p.2).

The systems of support for CLA can be considered complex because they contain many components, notably a large number of individuals from a wide range of professional and non-professional backgrounds. These systems can also be considered complex because there is much interdependence among the components, such as information sharing and the availability of individuals, pressures within the social care workforce and high staff turn-over, and the skill level required for DTs and their time and capacity to fulfil the role.



This study has highlighted many micro-level components and interactions within the systems of support for CLA. However, in line with CST these findings should not be considered in isolation or part of linear cause-effect mechanisms. Instead, component parts of these complex systems interact over time, both among themselves and in conjunction with the overall macro-behaviour of the system. For example, a key finding from the study is that DTs and VS staff are among the key players that fulfil crucial roles within the systems of support, such as integrating families, schools, social workers and other professionals. However, despite DTs being consistently present within these systems of support for CLA, individual factors such as training experiences and time for the role can vary. From a complex systems perspective, it is important to recognise how the challenges raised in this study, such as competing demands from additional roles, a lack of protected time for DT responsibilities, and the number of CLA on roll, are all dependent on one another and all other components within the system.

Findings from this study also highlight the value and effective practice from VS' in that they can serve as a 'bridge' between education and social care, and support with managing and resolving conflicts such as CLA being at risk of exclusion. Notably, the most effective VS' appear to be those who are available to DTs, communicate clearly, ensure transparency for all individuals within the systems of support for CLA, and provide explicit support for DTs such as organising networking events. From a complex systems perspective, again such factors need to be considered as interacting with one another, all other components within the systems, and the macro-behaviour of the system.

SWs are also present within every system of support for CLA, however components regarding tensions and pressures within the complex system that make up the social care workforce seem to be related to high levels of staff turnover and limited SW availability. These factors can contribute to the emergence of in-effective joined-up working where other professionals can find themselves chasing responses from SWs and feeling as though the CYP's story is lost when SWs frequently change.

EP presence and type of involvement within these systems differs across schools and LAs and can be dependent on access to and funding of EP involvement. For example, in some LAs EPs hold positions within the VS and in others schools pay for EP time out of their school budget. In some cases, access to EP involvement is limited due to tensions and pressures within the complex system that makes up the EP workforce such as capacity for non-statutory work. The majority of participants in this study felt that EPs should have a statutory role in the systems of support for CLA, however in line with CST and reflections from participants, EP involvement should be on a case-by-case basis, depending on the individual needs of the system and the existing components, processes and macro-level behaviour.

Ultimately, to improve outcomes for CLA, a holistic approach to understanding the systems of support around them is required. To consider components in isolation, such as the facilitating factors and challenges raised in this study, would serve to ignore the complex dynamic nature of these systems. Where policy requires a whole system approach to supporting CLA, a whole system approach to understanding and improving them is required.

### 6.3 Strengths and Limitations

In the present study, the researcher took specific steps to promote the reliability, validity and generalisability of findings. The researcher also demonstrated their commitment, rigour, coherence, transparency and reflexivity to ensure high quality research and credibility of findings (see 3.7 *Research Quality and Appendix K*). In the end, this study yielded large and geographically representative survey samples. Corroboration of such representative findings with a smaller case study sample increased credibility of findings (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, findings were largely consistent with previous research, installing confidence in the final conclusions.

Whilst largely representative of regional practices and views from DTs and VS staff with a range of years of experience in their role, the vast majority of DT survey participants worked in primary schools and the majority of VS staff participants held the VSH role. The findings are therefore less representative of practice across other education settings such as secondary schools and further education settings, and views from a broader range of VS staff may have yielded slightly different data. Special schools also only made up 6% of the final survey sample.

Although the SNA method to data collection and analysis in this study provided rich data in a unique form, and strongly aligned with a CST framework, it should be noted that the very nature of complex systems means that knowledge of any phenomena within such systems will always be proximate and never absolute (Capara, 1977). This is partly because the complete architecture of a complex system is impossible to recreate in a data set (Avila de Lima, 2010). For example, it is impossible that the case study participants in this study would have knowledge of

the existence of every single node, connection and connection type within the total systems of support they were a part of.

Furthermore, the sociograms in this study depict a somewhat snapshot in time. The challenge of capturing changes over time, especially longer periods of time within SNA are well recognised (Huisman & Steglich, 2008; Rivera et al., 2010; Snijders, 2011), as well as the development of new networks (Carpenter et al., 2012). Participants in the present study used words and phrases such as 'previously', 'recently', 'the plan is that in the future'. This demonstrates that these systems are constantly changing throughout time, but to capture such changes in data would require a longitudinal approach where sociograms are completed on multiple occasions. This is something far out of the possible remit of the present study.

It should also be noted that the qualitative nature of the sociograms means that such findings should not be generalised, and the cases should not directly be compared as if they are representative of a specific age or profile. Findings from the sociograms should instead be interpreted as illustrative examples of how the systems of support can look for variety of individuals from the perspectives of a range of professionals (DTs and different VS staff). This approach was taken due to the unique nature of every CLA's experiences and the dynamic complexity of the systems of support around them. It could have falsely been interpreted from a case study involving CYP of a specific age, school phase or profile that findings were representative and generalisable for all such CLA.

Finally, despite it being “paramount that CYP have a powerful voice” (MacAlister, 2022, p.5), this study did not set out to gain data from the CYP at the centre of these systems of support. The researcher acknowledged the time and practical limitations within this study and the significant challenges to recruitment of CLA in research (Murray, 2005). This is reflected in the lack of CLA views in the existing body of literature and should therefore be a priority area for future research.

#### **6.4 Future research**

To overcome the limitation of incomplete sociogram data sets in this study, future research should endeavour to collect data from multiple individuals within the same systems of support for a CYP. This would provide multiple perspectives and therefore a much fuller picture of the system. As previously highlighted, an important avenue for future research would also be to collect SNA data from the CYP at the centre of these systems of support to explore how they experience the network of individuals around them.

To overcome another limitation in the present study, future research could further explore the experiences of individuals within the systems of support across a broader range of education phases and settings, such as secondary schools, colleges and specialist settings.

In line with the finding that DTs and VS staff may have significant differences in experiencing collaboration as a challenge within the systems of support for CLA, future research should endeavour to obtain the views of SWs and other individuals

with whom DTs work directly with to gain an understanding of the barriers to collaborative working between such parties.

Another avenue for further research lies with reviewing the practice and impact of the recent extensions of the VS responsibilities to promote the educational outcomes of PCLA and CYP with a SW. Furthermore, as raised by participant VS1 in this study, statutory requirements for such systems of support and PEP processes do not exist for PCLA. Therefore, further research should investigate the current picture of support for these CYP and it could be considered if PCLA and their families would benefit from similar processes and networks.

Finally, it should be noted that in this study 'support' is defined as the involvement of, and interactions between, individuals within the network around a CLA. As highlighted in this study, support can include direct connections to CYP, such as emotional support, sharing and receiving information, and providing advice to CYP. However, in future research it could be insightful to investigate the nature, prevalence, and differences between different forms of direct support for CYP, such as wellbeing support and academic support.

## **6.5 Implications for Practice**

This study highlights several implications for practice, for the key players within the systems of support for CLA, specifically for EPs and for policy development:

- Despite the statutory guidance stating the DT role should be held by a teaching member of school staff (DfE, 2018), this study has exposed the

challenge teaching commitments can have on the time to fulfil the DT role in contexts with high numbers of CLA, and availability to others, which in turn can have a detrimental impact on collaborative working and effective support for CLA and therefore I propose a ratio of hours for the DT role against numbers of CLA in a school.

- The DT role is currently held by a wide range of school staff individuals, from SLT positions to learning support assistants. However, to effectively fulfil the role, a DT needs to have flexibility and autonomy with managing their time, the skills to liaise with an incredibly broad range and high number of professionals from varying backgrounds, and have the skills to manage expectations of others and advocate for CYP by challenging decisions where appropriate.
- Following positive feedback from case study participants about the process and outcome of using SNA to discuss a case for a CYP, EPs should consider using a complex systems perspective to unpick cases for CLA and those that involve a number of other professionals. This could look like mapping out the network around CLA by completing sociograms with individuals in the system may highlight areas for development such as weak connections, isolated subsystems or individuals, and overlapping collaborative groups with potentially competing goals.
- A SNA approach from EPs could be most useful at times of crisis such as a high risk of exclusion and the potential for subsequent school placement move. This would allow individuals to consider and see how the system around a CLA might be helping or hindering them, for example, is their current SW the 4<sup>th</sup> this year? Who is holding the story for this CYP? Does this CYP

need more consistency with the people interacting with and supporting them? Are individuals within the system connected and communicating in the most effective ways? Is there a need for someone to take on an information sharing management role to de-escalate emotive situations? Is the system functioning with a child-centred approach? What could be different and better within the system? Whilst a psychological consultation could facilitate thinking around and answers to such questions, SNA would provide a clear visual of the complex busy systems CYP can be situated within.

- To promote joined-up working and strong connections within the systems of support, EPs should hold the expectation for DTs and VS staff to join consultations for CLA and PCLA, even when contracted by the SENCO for SEN related needs.
- EPs need to be aware of the emotional labour individuals within the systems of support for CLA can experience. There may be a role for EPs to check-in with individuals and provide supervision when appropriate. In this respect, EPs should be mindful of their own wellbeing when a part of a system of support for CLA and PCLA.
- Despite the vast majority of participants in this study reporting that a statutory position for EPs would be beneficial, this seemed to be in response to current difficulties with accessing such support. A defined role for EPs was not apparent and as highlighted by participants, involvement should be on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, increasing access to and funding for EP involvement for CLA and PCAL should be explored, such as an EP role within every VS.



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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email for Surveys

Dear Programme Administrator,

I am emailing you to request your support with distribution of a short online survey for Virtual School staff and Designated Teachers in England as part of my DEdPsy thesis project. As you know, recruitment for the Thesis research project can be difficult, so **I would be ever so grateful if you could forward this email (removing this first paragraph and text) to all current TEPs on the DEdPsy course.**

Kindest regards,  
Abi

**Abigail Gilbert**  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
UCL Institute of Education

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Dear TEPs,

**A call for your support in distributing a short online survey to the Virtual School in your placement local authority.**

I am currently recruiting participants for my thesis research project. As you may know, recruitment for participants can be difficult, so I am hoping that as a part of the network of TEPs in England, **you can help by simply forwarding this email to your Virtual School (after removing this first paragraph and above text).** Please see information page attached for details if you are interested in learning more about the project. Research title: **A Complex Systems Approach to Understanding the Statutory Support for Care-Experienced Children and Young People in England.**

Kindest regards,  
Abi

**Abigail Gilbert**  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
UCL Institute of Education

---

Dear Virtual School Head,

As part of the Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the UCL Institute of Education I am conducting important and necessary research looking at the system of support for care-experienced children and young people in England.

**I am emailing to ask for your help with the distribution of a short online survey to be completed by Virtual School staff and Designated Teachers in England.**

Please see full details in the text below. I would be grateful if you could **forward this email (after removing this paragraph)** to your Virtual School team and network of Designated Teachers within your local authority.

Kindest regards,  
Abi Gilbert

**Abigail Gilbert**  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
UCL Institute of Education

---

Dear Virtual School Staff and Designated Teachers,

**You are being invited to take part in important research about the systems of support for care-experienced children and young people in England.**

Please see the information page attached to this email for full details. **Participation in this study only requires completion of a short online survey**(which should take no longer than 15 minutes).

Designated Teachers, please follow link A:  
[https://qualtrics.ucl.ac.uk/jfe/form/SV\\_2mKEoYz1QuMcaQ6](https://qualtrics.ucl.ac.uk/jfe/form/SV_2mKEoYz1QuMcaQ6)

Virtual School staff, please follow link B:  
[https://qualtrics.ucl.ac.uk/jfe/form/SV\\_5gPTZujeF8ZYCTs](https://qualtrics.ucl.ac.uk/jfe/form/SV_5gPTZujeF8ZYCTs)

The research project is run by Abi Gilbert (Trainee Educational Psychologist) as part of the Professional Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the UCL Institute of Education.

As a Designated Teacher or Virtual School staff, you have a crucial statutory role within the system of support for care-experienced children and young people. The aim of this research is to gain an understanding of the system around such pupils from yourselves and your position within the system. This is important to facilitate the sharing of quality practice and to highlight challenges, with the potential for recognition and change at a policy level.

Kindest regards,  
Abi

**Abigail Gilbert**  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
UCL Institute of Education

## Appendix B: Survey Information Pages

Institute of Education



RESEARCH PROJECT

A COMPLEX SYSTEMS APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE STATUTORY SUPPORT FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND

Information Sheet



THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

As a designated teacher or virtual school staff member, you are invited to take part in research about your role and experiences of working with other professionals within the system around children looked after.

Despite holding key statutory roles in promoting outcomes for children looked after and previously looked after children, there is surprisingly little research regarding the work of designated teachers and virtual schools, especially from a systems perspective.

The aim of this research is to capture an understanding of how the systems of support around children looked after currently function in England, exploring any tensions that may exist and highlighting factors that facilitate quality practice.

This Research project is conducted by Abigail Gilbert (Trainee educational psychologist)

Supervised by Katie Hollingworth and Vivian Hill

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CHOOSE TO TAKE PART?

If after reading this information sheet you feel able to take part:

Please complete the **online survey** by following the appropriate link in the email:

- Link A for designated teachers
- Link B for virtual school staff

The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete and you will be asked to give your informed consent at the start.

If you wish to receive a research briefing following completion of the research project, please **leave your email address at the end of the survey**.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CHANGE MY MIND?

All participants have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without needing to give a reason. All unprocessed data will be destroyed.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE INFORMATION I PROVIDE?

Survey responses will be collated using an online, password protected survey platform. Please be assured that your responses will be **kept completely confidential** and held in accordance with data protection regulations. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your data and your **contributions will stay anonymous**.

Only the researcher and supervisors will have access to the data. Anonymised responses from surveys and interviews will form the basis of this research and will be used for academic purposes only.

WHAT HAPPENS WITH THE FINDINGS OF THIS PROJECT?

If you would like to receive a summary of the findings from the research, please leave your email address at the end of the questionnaire. Please note, your email address **will not** be linked to your survey and responses will stay confidential and anonymous.

Findings from this research may also be considered for publication or presented at conferences. However, participant's right to confidentiality will be respected if the data is used in any report or publication.



CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact me directly in the first instance. If you are unhappy with the response, please contact either of my research supervisors:

- Abigail Gilbert (Researcher) Institute of Education:  
Abigail.gilbert.20@ucl.ac.uk
- Katie Hollingworth (Research Supervisor) UCL Institute of Education:  
katie.hollingworth@ucl.ac.uk
- Vivian Hill (Research Supervisor) UCL Institute of Education:  
v.hill@ucl.ac.uk

DATA PROTECTION PRIVACY NOTICE

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@ucl.ac.uk). This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice. For participants in research studies, please search the web addresses: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-research-participant-privacy-notice> and <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/legal-services/privacy/ucl-general-privacy-notice-participants-and-researchers-health-and-care-research-studies>

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data are: 'Public task' for personal data. Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

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## Appendix C: Online Surveys

### Designated Teacher Survey

Survey Completion 0% 100%

**UCL**  
UCL – FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

I have read and understood the information form and give my consent to take part in this survey

☐ Agree

→

Survey Completion 0% 100%

**UCL**  
UCL – FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Please select the education provision you work in as a Designated Teacher

☐ Academy

☐ Local authority maintained

☐ Free school

☐ Grammar school

☐ Private or independent school

☐ Pupil referral unit

☐ Sixth-form college

☐ Special school

☐ Other

In which local authority is your school or provision?

What stage of education do you support with as a Designated Teacher

☐ Early Years

☐ Primary

☐ Secondary

☐ Further Education

☐ Other

Approximately how many pupils are on roll at your school or provision?

In a typical year, approximately how many total Children Looked After (CLA) and Previously Looked After Children are on roll at your school or provision?

← →

Survey Completion 0% 100%

**UCL**  
UCL – FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

How long have you held your current Designated Teacher role for (in years)?

Do you hold any other positions in your school or provision? (please select all that apply)

☐ Head Teacher

☐ Deputy Head Teacher

☐ Class Teacher

☐ Subject Lead

☐ Pastoral Lead

☐ Pastoral Team Member

☐ Designated Safeguarding Lead

☐ Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo)

☐ Designated Mental Health Lead

☐ Other

On average, in a typical week, how much time is protected for your Designated Teacher role?

☐ Less than 1 hour a week

☐ Up to 1 hour a week

☐ Up to 2 hours a week

☐ Up to 3 hours a week

☐ Up to 4 hours a week

☐ Up to 5 hours a week

☐ More than 5 hours a week

To what extent do you agree with the statement 'I am satisfied with the amount of protected time I have to fulfil my Designated Teacher role'?

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

☐ Not sure

Please explain why you gave your answer to the previous question (this could include for example, how much more time you feel is needed to fulfil your Designated Teacher role and what aspects of the role you feel you are not able to fulfil to your satisfaction)

Survey Completion 0% 100%

**UCL**  
UCL – FACULTY OF  
EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

Did you receive initial training when first starting the Designated Teacher role?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other

If you have answered 'No' to the previous question, please provide a brief summary of why this was the case (For example, there was not enough time to attend training, there was no training on offer at the time you started the role, you were not asked to attend any training)

If you have answered 'Yes' to the previous question, please move on to the next question

Please detail any training you have attended since starting the Designated Teacher role

Would you like to attend any additional training?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

What form(s) of support do you receive in your Designated Teacher role? (please tick all that apply)

☐ Supervision from the Virtual School

☐ Supervision from an Educational Psychologist

☐ Peer supervision from other Designated Teachers

☐ Supervision from staff within my school or provision

☐ Networking events facilitated by the Virtual School

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ None

Would you like to receive any additional support in your Designated Teacher role?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question, please detail what support you would like

If you answered 'No' or 'Not sure' to the previous question please move to the next question

How would you rate the overall level of knowledge in your school or provision around working with Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children? (0 = none to 10 = maximum)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Click to write Choice 1

How would you rate the overall level of support in your school or provision around working with Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children? (0 = none to 10 = maximum)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Click to write Choice 1

Survey Completion  
0% 100%



Please select all of the professionals and individuals you have worked with in your Designated Teacher role when supporting the academic progress and emotional wellbeing of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

☐ Paediatricians

☐ Independent Review Officers

☐ Speech and Language Therapists

☐ Virtual School Staff Members

☐ The Designated Mental Health Lead

☐ The Pastoral Care Team

☐ Occupational Therapists

☐ Counsellors

☐ Virtual School Heads

☐ Foster Parents

☐ Independent Advocates

☐ GPs

☐ The Designated Safeguarding Lead

☐ Psychotherapists

☐ Designated Governors

☐ Youth Offending Team

☐ Educational Psychologists

☐ Residential Home Staff

☐ CAMHS

☐ Special Guardians

☐ Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo's)

☐ Physiotherapists

☐ Head Teachers

Please list any other professionals you work with in your Designated Teacher role that are not included above

Please rank the 3 professionals or individuals you work with most often

1 (most often)

2 (second most often)

3 (third most often)

Please select all the occasions in which you have interacted with other professionals and individuals in your Designated Teacher role

☐ Personal Education Plan meetings (PEPs)

☐ Exclusion meetings

☐ Annual Reviews

☐ Transition meetings

☐ Following a safeguarding concern

☐ Looked After Children reviews

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

Survey Completion  
0%100%



Please describe any strengths within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

Please describe the biggest challenges you face when working within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

Have you ever worked with an Educational Psychologist within your Designated Teacher role?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you have worked with an Educational Psychologist in relation to the needs of Children Looked After or Previously Looked After Children, please describe the nature of their involvement (please tick all that apply)

☐ Whole school training

☐ Small group training

☐ Individual case consultation

☐ Support with school policy reform inline with Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children's needs

☐ I have had supervision with an Educational Psychologist regarding my Designated Teacher Role

☐ Providing psychological advice for a statutory assessment

☐ Completion of cognitive assessments

☐ An Educational Psychologist has worked directly with a Child Looked After or Previously Looked After Child in my school to deliver an intervention

☐ Attendance at multi-disciplinary review meetings

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

How often has there been involvement from an Educational Psychologist when academic and/or wellbeing needs of a Child Looked After or Previously Looked After Child arise?

Percentage  
0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70 75 80 85 90 95 100  
Percentage of cases with Educational Psychology involvement



If an Educational Psychologist were to be involved in supporting the needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children, how might they be accessed? (tick all that apply)

☐ There is an Educational Psychologist linked to my school who's involvement is paid for by the school

☐ There is an Educational Psychologists available to access from local authority children's services (they are centrally funded and not paid for by the school)

☐ My School pays for private Educational Psychology involvement

☐ There is an Educational Psychologist linked to the Virtual School who's involvement is paid for by the Virtual School

☐ There is an Educational Psychologists linked to the Virtual School (they are centrally funded and not paid for by the virtual school)

☐ The Virtual School pays for involvement from private Educational Psychologists

☐ Not sure

☐ Other

Should Educational Psychologists be statutorily positioned within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure





Gender

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Age Range

- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+
- ☐ Prefer not to say



Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences.

Your participation is much appreciated and essential for informing best practice for supporting the needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children.

If you would like to receive a research briefing once the study is complete, please leave you email address below.



## Virtual School Staff Survey



0% Survey Completion 100%

I have read and understood the information form and give my consent to take part in this survey

☐ Agree



0% Survey Completion 100%

Which local authority is your virtual school in?

What is your full job title within your virtual school?

How many pupils are currently on roll at your virtual school?

How many children and young people do you typically have on your caseload?

How long have you worked in your current Virtual School? (in years)

How long have you worked in a Virtual School role overall? (in years)

Have you received any training for your current role? (please select all that apply)

☐ Yes, initial formal training

☐ Yes, ongoing informal training (on the job)

☐ Yes, ongoing formal training (specific CPD events)

☐ Other

☐ None

What was the outcome of training you have attended for your current role? (please select all that apply)

☐ I developed my understanding of the needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

☐ I developed my understanding of the statutory support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children (e.g. the function of PEP meetings, the legal exclusion process, how Pupil Premium Plus can be accessed and used, etc.)

☐ I developed my skills for facilitating training for others (e.g. Designated teachers and other school staff)

☐ I developed my understanding of the role of the virtual school

☐ I developed my understanding of the Designated Teacher role

☐ Other

Would you like to receive any additional training?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

If you have answered 'Yes' to the previous question, please detail what you would like to be covered in any additional training

If you have answered 'No' or 'Not sure' to the previous question, please move on to the next page



0% Survey Completion 100%

How satisfied are you with the current time allocated to support each child or young person on your caseload?

☐ Highly satisfied

☐ Satisfied

☐ Dissatisfied

☐ Highly dissatisfied

☐ Not sure

Please explain why you gave your answer to the previous question  
(this could include for example, how much more time you feel is needed to support each child or young person on your caseload and what aspects of the role you feel you are not able to fulfil to your satisfaction)



Please select all of the professionals and individuals you have worked with when supporting the academic progress and emotional wellbeing of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

☐ Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo's)

☐ Psychotherapists

☐ Special Guardians

☐ Virtual School Staff in my team

☐ Social Workers

☐ The Designated Mental Health Lead

☐ Educational Psychologists

☐ Occupational Therapists

☐ Other Virtual Schools

☐ GPs

☐ The Pastoral Care Team

☐ Designated Governors

☐ CAMHS

☐ The Pupils' Class Teachers

☐ Independent Advocates

☐ Head Teachers

☐ Designated Teachers

☐ Foster Parents

☐ Independent Review Officers

☐ Residential Home Staff

☐ Counsellors

☐ Birth Parents

☐ Speech and Language Therapists

☐ Youth Offending Team

☐ Adoptive Parents

Please list any other professionals you work with that are not included above

Please rank the 3 professionals or individuals you work with most often

1 (most often)

2 (second most often)

3 (third most often)

Please select all the occasions in which you interact with other professionals and individuals when supporting the academic and wellbeing needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

☐ Personal Education Plan meetings (PEPs)

☐ Exclusion meetings

☐ Annual Reviews

☐ Transition meetings

☐ Following a safeguarding concern

☐ Looked After Children reviews

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

Survey Completion  
0%100%



Please describe any strengths within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

Please describe the biggest challenges you face when working within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children

Have you ever worked with an Educational Psychologist when supporting the academic and/or wellbeing needs of a Child Looked After or Previously Looked After Child?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If you have worked with an Educational Psychologist in relation to the needs of Children Looked After or Previously Looked After Children, please describe the nature of their involvement (please tick all that apply)

☐ An Educational Psychologist delivered training to my virtual school

☐ An Educational Psychologist delivered whole school training regarding a child on my caseload

☐ An Educational Psychologist delivered small group school training regarding a child on my caseload

☐ Individual case consultation

☐ I have had supervision with an Educational Psychologist

☐ Support with school policy reform inline with the needs of a child on my caseload

☐ Providing psychological advice for a statutory assessment for a child on my caseload

☐ Completion of cognitive assessments with children on my caseload

☐ Attendance at multi-disciplinary review meetings

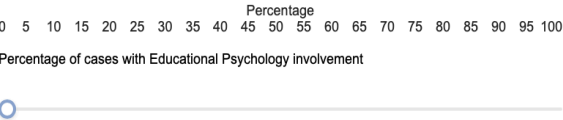
☐ An Educational Psychologist has worked directly with a child on my caseload to deliver an intervention

☐ Other

☐ Other

☐ Other

How often has there been involvement from an Educational Psychologist when academic and/or well-being needs of a Child Looked After or Previously Looked After Child arise?



If an Educational Psychologist were to be involved in supporting the needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children, how might they be accessed? (tick all that apply)

☐ There is an Educational Psychologist linked to my virtual school who's involvement is paid for by the virtual school

☐ There is an Educational Psychologists available to access from local authority children's services (they are centrally funded and not paid for by the virtual school)

☐ My virtual school pays for private Educational Psychology involvement

☐ There is an Educational Psychologist linked to the schools in my local authority who's involvement is paid for by the schools

☐ There is an Educational Psychologists linked to the schools in my local authority (they are centrally funded and not paid for by the school)

☐ Schools in my local authority pay for involvement from private Educational Psychologists

☐ Not sure

☐ Other

Should Educational Psychologists be statutorily positioned within the system of support for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Please provide an explanation for why you selected your answer to the previous question (for example, how and why should Educational Psychologists be, or why should they not be, statutorily positioned within the system?)



Survey Completion  
0% 100%

Gender

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Non-binary

☐ Prefer not to say

Age Range

☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ 55-64

☐ 65+

☐ Prefer not to say



Survey Completion  
0% 100%

Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences.

Your participation is much appreciated and essential for informing best practice for supporting the needs of Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children.

If you would like to receive a research briefing once the study is complete, please leave you email address below.



## Appendix D: Interview Information Pages

Institute of Education



RESEARCH PROJECT

A COMPLEX SYSTEMS APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE STATUTORY SUPPORT FOR CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ENGLAND

Information Sheet



**THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH**

As a designated teacher or virtual school staff member, you are invited to take part in research about your role and experiences of working with other professionals within the system around children looked after.

Despite holding key statutory roles in promoting outcomes for children looked after and previously looked after children, there is surprisingly little research regarding the work of designated teachers and virtual schools, especially from a systems perspective.

The aim of this research is to capture an understanding of how the systems of support around children looked after currently function in England, exploring any tensions that may exist and highlighting factors that facilitate quality practice.

This Research project is conducted by **Abigail Gilbert** (trainee educational psychologist)

Supervised by **Katie Hollingworth** and **Vivian Hill**

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CHOOSE TO TAKE PART?**

If after reading this information sheet you feel able to take part:

Please complete the **online survey** by following the appropriate link in the email:

- Link A for designated teachers
- Link B for virtual school staff

The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete and you will be asked to give your informed consent at the start.

If you wish to receive a research briefing following completion of the research project, please **leave your email address at the end of the survey**.

**WHAT HAPPENS WITH THE FINDINGS OF THIS PROJECT?**

If you would like to receive a summary of the findings from the research, please leave your email address at the end of the questionnaire. Please note, your email address **will not** be linked to your survey and responses will stay confidential and anonymous.

Findings from this research may also be considered for publication or presented at conferences. However, participant's right to confidentiality will be respected if the data is used in any report or publication.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I CHANGE MY MIND?**

All participants have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without needing to give a reason. All unprocessed data will be destroyed.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE INFORMATION I PROVIDE?**

Survey responses will be collated using an online, password protected survey platform. Please be assured that your responses will be **kept completely confidential** and held in accordance with data protection regulations. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your data and your **contributions will stay anonymous**.

Only the researcher and supervisors will have access to the data. Anonymised responses from surveys and interviews will form the basis of this research and will be used for academic purposes only.



**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact me directly in the first instance. If you are unhappy with the response, please contact either of my research supervisors:

- Abigail Gilbert (Researcher) Institute of Education: [Abigail.gilbert.20@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:Abigail.gilbert.20@ucl.ac.uk)
- Katie Hollingworth (Research Supervisor) UCL Institute of Education: [katie.hollingworth@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:katie.hollingworth@ucl.ac.uk)
- Vivian Hill (Research Supervisor) UCL Institute of Education: [v.hill@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:v.hill@ucl.ac.uk)

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The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data are: 'Public task' for personal data. Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

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## Appendix E: Interview Consent Form

Institute of Education



RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE DESIGNATED TEACHER ROLE**

**Consent Form**

Title: A Complex Systems Approach to Understanding the Statutory Support for Children Looked After

Researchers: Abigail Gilbert, supervised by Katie Hollingworth and Vivian Hill

If you would like to participate in the study, please complete the following consent form:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and have these questions answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my responses will be recorded and analysed for the purpose of completing the above research project.

☐

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time; any unprocessed data will be destroyed. I understand that it will no longer be possible to withdraw my data once it has been anonymously collated for analysis.

☐

4. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis and will be confidential as detailed in the information sheet. I understand who will have access to my personal data and how the data will be anonymised, stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

☐

5. I give permission for data to be analysed and used for academic purposes and I understand that results may be shared in research publications and presentations.

☐

6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

☐

Participant's Name (Printed)\*


Participant's Signature\*      Date

If you have any questions or would like further information about this research, including to withdraw consent, please contact: Abigail Gilbert (Researcher) UCL Institute of Education: abigail.gilbert.20@ucl.ac.uk

\*Participants wishing to maintain further anonymity may use their initials (from the British Psychological Society Guidelines for Minimal Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research).

**Thank you for your involvement in the project.**

Institute of Education



RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL ROLE**

**Consent Form**

Title: A Complex Systems Approach to Understanding the Statutory Support for Children Looked After

Researchers: Abigail Gilbert, supervised by Katie Hollingworth and Vivian Hill

If you would like to participate in the study, please complete the following consent form:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions and have these questions answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my responses will be recorded and analysed for the purpose of completing the above research project.

☐

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time; any unprocessed data will be destroyed. I understand that it will no longer be possible to withdraw my data once it has been anonymously collated for analysis.

☐

4. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis and will be confidential as detailed in the information sheet. I understand who will have access to my personal data and how the data will be anonymised, stored, and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

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6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

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Participant's Name (Printed)\*

Participant's Signature\*      Date

If you have any questions or would like further information about this research, including to withdraw consent, please contact: Abigail Gilbert (Researcher) UCL Institute of Education: abigail.gilbert.20@ucl.ac.uk

\*Participants wishing to maintain further anonymity may use their initials (from the British Psychological Society Guidelines for Minimal Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research).

**Thank you for your involvement in the project.**

## Appendix F: Interview Schedule

### **Introduction:**

*Introduce self and revisit information in the Information Sheet to summarise research project, specifically reminding them that they can withdraw at any point and do not have to answer questions if they do not want to.*

*Give participants time to ask any questions and give verbal consent.*

*Explain: The aim of this interview is to gain an in-depth understanding of your experience of working within the system of support around Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children. I am interested in exploring your experiences, perceptions, and reflections. There are no right or wrong answers, and I would like you to be as open and honest as possible. Everything you say will be kept confidential and anonymised during transcription so please do speak freely and take your time to think and talk.*

*We will be starting the interview with a social network analysis mapping activity. The aim is to create a physical map of the system around a specific Child Looked After or Previously Looked After Child. We will be using these resources in front of us (pens, sticky notes, large poster paper, counters). I will then ask you some questions about the map, specifically regarding the key people and relationships in the system.*

*Are you happy to continue with this?*

*If yes: Could I first please ask you to think about a particular child or young person who you have supported recently and whose case could be described as complex. Please do not share their name with me for confidentiality reasons (you could choose a pseudo name a letter for the purpose of this activity) but provide a short summary; tell me a bit about them, how long have they been in the care system, how many school placements have they had that you are aware of, how many care placements have had that you are aware of?*

### **Social Network Analysis Mapping Activity:**

1. Write down all of the ‘actors’ (professionals by job title and/or organisation) on post-its.  
*Support with a list of prompts:*

- Social workers
- Designated teachers
- Independent review offices (IROs)
- Virtual school staff (in or out of LA)
- Other virtual school staff in their team
- Independent advocates
- Birth parents
- Foster parents
- Adoptive parents
- Special guardians
- Residential home staff
- Educational psychologists
- Occupational therapists
- Speech and language therapists
- Paediatricians
- Physiotherapist
- Psychotherapists
- Counsellors
- Play therapists
- CAMHS
- Youth Offending Team (YOT) members
- Special Educational Needs coordinators (SENCo)
- GPs
- Dentists
- Designated governors
- Headteachers
- Class teachers
- Form tutors
- Subject leads
- The designated mental health lead
- Pastoral care team members
- Designated safeguarding leads (DSLs)

- Prompt to consider all actors they know of in the family network around YP (e.g. cousins, siblings in other care arrangements, previous SGO family members perhaps, etc).
- 2. **Stick the post-it's onto the large paper**
  - Place child's 'name' in the middle
  - Arrange actors around child (those who play the most significant roles are placed closest to the child's 'name')
- 3. **Draw lines (connections) between:**
  - The child – and – actors
  - Actors – and – actors

\*\* Use different coloured lines for different types of relationships

Key:

Blue = training

Yellow = support e.g. supervision/networking/peer support/solution circles\*

Red = collaboration

Green = information sharing

Orange = emotional support

Purple = advice

Pink = other

- 4. **Complete lines with arrow heads to show direction of relationship**
  - Are the relationships reciprocal or one way?
  - Are the reciprocal relationships balanced or skewed?

(place 1 arrow counter for one way, one at each end for reciprocal, 2 on one end and one on the other if reciprocal but not balanced)
- 5. **Consider the level of responsibility of each actor in the case**
  - Stack round counters: 1 for minimal (e.g. dentist) 5 for most (e.g. social worker)

### Interview Questions:

1. Let's take a look at the map, is there anything that stands out for you?
  - E.g. number of people involved, any patterns, anything that surprises you?

---
2. Look at key relationships on the map (connected to the DT or VS)
 

*('key relationships' defined by statutory guidance, e.g. SW/VS/DTs/parents and carers/school staff supporting child, those defined as having most responsibility within the system during the activity, those with the most connections with others in the system, those placed closest to the child)*

  - To be identified by participants
  - Key relationships that SHOULD exist (statutory guidance) to be explored (asked by researcher, e.g. why does this relationship not exist?)
    - Can you describe how you work with this person?
      - Information/advice seeking and/or giving?
    - Can you tell me about the process of establishing this relationship?
      - How did it come about?
      - How long did it take to form this working relationship?

- (re. EPS in system ONLY) How was the EP funded and what would have been the pathway for their involvement? (e.g. centrally? attached to the VS? Private? Etc.)
  - Can you tell me about the frequency of contact with yourself in this relationship?
  - Can you tell me about the modes of contact with yourself in this relationship (e.g. mostly via email, online (teams/zoom), face-to-face, telephone. Etc.)?
    - And are they likely to return your call or email the same day/week? /attend meetings on time/at all?
  - What do you feel are the facilitating factors in this relationship?
  - Can you tell me about any challenges within this relationship?
- 
3. Looking at the map there are some / no connections to an educational psychologist (EP).
    - If yes, go to Q2.
    - What do you feel is the value of EP involvement?
    - In what ways do you think the EP could be positioned differently within this network and why?
      - Should they be statutorily positioned and why/why not?
    - OR**
    - If not, do you think it would be helpful to have an EP presence in this network?
    - In what ways do you think an EP could be positioned within this network and why?
      - Should they be statutorily positioned and why/why not?
  4. How representative would you say this map is for all other Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children you have on roll?
    - How would other children's networks differ?
    - What would these differences depend on?
  5. What would this map look like in an ideal world?
    - What would be different and how would it be different?
    - What would be the same?
  6. Contextual information to finish
    - **VS only:** what is your current role within the virtual school?
    - **DTs only:** what type of school or provision do you work in? (e.g. academy, LA maintained, etc. / primary, FE, etc.).
    - How long have you been in your current role?
    - **DTs only:** what other roles, of any, do you also hold within your school or provision?
    - Can you please describe your previous experience, if any, with supporting Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children.
    - If training didn't come up – I wonder if we could talk a bit about training as this has not yet come up
      - What do you feel should training look like in this system (for you, for others and from whom?).

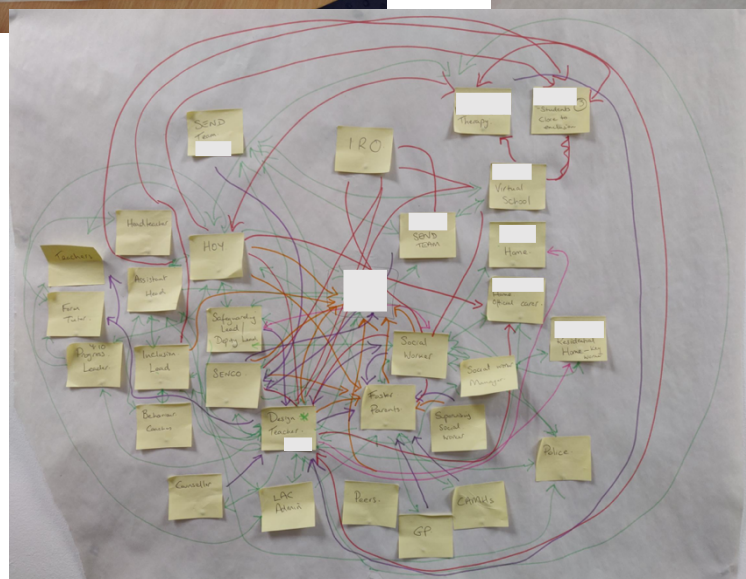
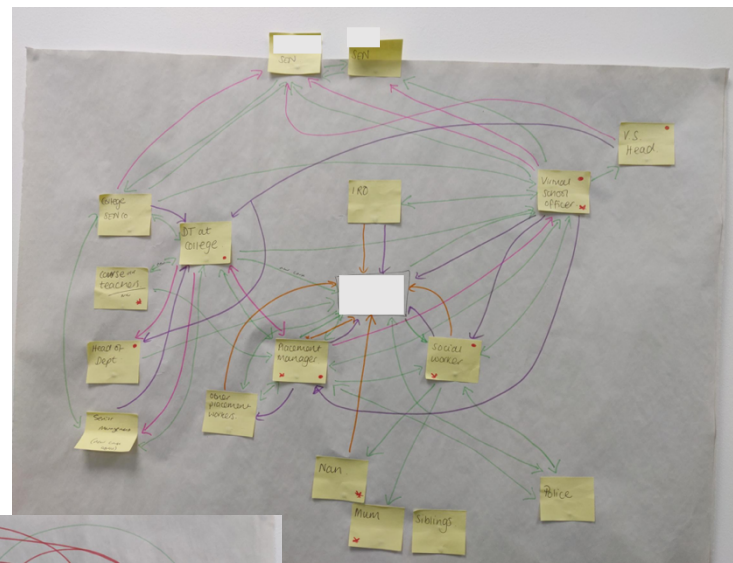
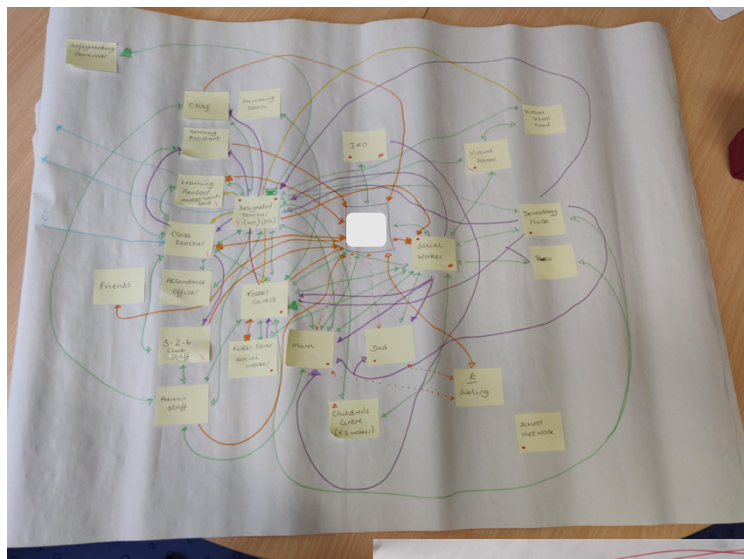
**Debrief:**

- Thank them for taking the time to talk about experiences.

- Highlight information in the Participant Information Sheet about what will happen to the results and who to contact for further information.
- Emphasise to get in touch if they want to discuss anything further.
- Time to process and reflect on the interview. How did they find it? Do they have any additional questions?
- Ask about whether they would like to receive information about the findings.



## Appendix G: Original Sociograms



## Appendix H: Examples of Sociogram Data in NodeXL

Node Characteristics

Vertex	Visual Properties						Labels	
	Color	Shape	Size	Opacity	Image File	Visibility	Label	Label Fill Color
VSH	Blue	Disk	25.0			Show	VSH	
VSO	Blue	Disk	25.0			Show	VSO	
DT	Blue	Disk	40.0			Show	HT + DT + DSL	
SG Gov	Blue	Disk	5.0			Show	SG Governor	
SW	Blue	Disk	50.0			Show	SW	
IRO	Blue	Disk	40.0			Show	IRO	
YP	Orange	Disk	20.0			Show	H	
Mum	Green	Disk	10.0			Show	Mum	
Sibling	Green	Disk	15.0			Show	Sibling	
Chef	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	School Chef	
Admin	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	Admin Staff	
Swim	0, 128, 255	Disk	5.0			Show	Swimming Coach	
Foster P	Green	Disk	40.0			Show	FP	
Friends	Green	Disk	5.0			Show	Friends	
CC	0, 128, 255	Disk	10.0			Show	Children's Centre	
Nurse	0, 128, 255	Disk	20.0			Show	Specialist Nurse	
Dad	Green	Disk	10.0			Show	Dad	
Paeds	0, 128, 255	Disk	20.0			Show	Paediatrician	
Club	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	After School Club Staff	
Staff	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	Class T	
Class T	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	Attendance Officer	
AO	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	TA	
TA	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	LM + MHL	
LM/MHL	Blue	Disk	15.0			Show	FP's SW	
FP SW	Blue	Disk	20.0			Show	Training	
Ex T	Purple	Disk	5.0			Show		

Edges (connections) Characteristics

		Visual Properties					Labels			Other Columns
Vertex 1	Vertex 2	Color	Width	Style	Opacity	Visibility	Label	Label Text Color	Label Font Size	Relationship Type
VSH	VSO									Information
VSO	VSH									Information
VSH	DT						2			Information
DT	VSH									Information
VSH	DT									Support
DT	SG Gov									Information
VSO	SW									Information
SW	VSO									Information
VSO	DT									Information
VSO	DT									Information
IRO	YP									Information
YP	IRO									Information
IRO	Mum									Advice
Sibling	YP									Emotional
YP	Sibling									Emotional
Chef	YP									Emotional
Admin	Chef									Information
Chef	Admin									Information
DT	Chef						2			Advice
Chef	DT									Information
DT	Chef									Information
	Foster P									Information
Swim	Foster P									Information
Foster P	Swim									Information
Friends	YP									Emotional
YP	Friends									Emotional
CC	SW									Information
SW	CC									Information
DT	CC									Information
CC	DT									Information
Nurse	Mum									Advice
Nurse	Dad									Advice
Foster P	Nurse						2			Information
Nurse	Foster P									Information

## Appendix I: Example Table of Codes and Quotes for Thematic Analysis

**Table**

*Example Codes and Quotes*

Theme 1: Flow of Information Throughout the Systems of Support for CLA		
Sub Theme	Example Codes	Example Quotes
1: Communication Approach	Informal communication style	<p>"Social worker, I think, could be quite assured that things were happening. They didn't need to be there pushing things on because from a X local authority perspective, I was doing that and they were copied into every e-mail they could see it. They could review it they didn't need to be there." [VS1]</p> <p>"I think that we kept it transparent." [VS2]</p> <p>"They're very open and very happy, which I know, you know, we can't all be open and happy all the time and I get that, but it does really help when people are open and you know happy and want to talk, because then everybody kind of understands what's going on." [DT1]</p> <p>"He (SW) was really open with sharing stuff with me." [DT3]</p>
	Closed communications	
	Transparency	
	Openness	
	Honesty	
	Clear communication	
2: Availability of Others	People as obstacles	<p>"I feel like the only contact we've had (with new residential home) is when I've emailed and chased." [DT2]</p> <p>"And that just being available and knowing how to get to us, essentially, you know, cause in in some schools that's not as transparent, I don't think, not as accessible." [DT2]</p> <p>"And also, what I was very conscious about is that when she phoned, if I couldn't pick up the phone, I would always call her back." [VS1]</p> <p>"If he needs something he emails me because he knows I'll get back to him, whereas I think he probably when he was trying to communicate with other organisations, you know, other people, probably hit a dead end." [VS3]</p>
	Offer of availability from schools	
	Multiple contact options	
	Having to chase	
	Responsive	
	Attendance at meetings	
3: Connections Within and Between Subsystems	Individual's capacity	
	Systems as obstacles	<p>"So you know, it was the social worker who only emailed me last week to say the final hearing was definitely happening this week." [DT1]</p> <p>"So there was information received. Parent's social worker here to there that wasn't then shared here or anywhere else, and that obviously raised a red flag to everybody and the system" [DT2]</p> <p>"In an ideal world.... all agencies involved in their lives would have constant good communication, this is sometimes inconsistent across different authorities." [DT3]</p> <p>"Again, it would have been, it would have been nice if the college worked more cohesively together." [VS3]</p>
	Kept in the loop	
	On the same page	
	In the know	
	Information sharing	
	Frequent connections	

## Appendix J: Supplementary Tables Regarding Sample Demographics and from Survey Findings

**Table 9**  
*Survey Progress for Designated Teachers*

Survey Progress	Frequency
≥ 100%	284
≥ 78%	287
≥ 68%	294
≥ 57%	302
≥ 32%	307

**Table 10**  
*Survey Progress for Virtual School staff*

Survey Progress	Frequency
≥ 100%	49
≥ 70%	50
≥ 57%	54
≥ 37%	56

**Table 11**

*Gender Demographics for Survey Responses: Designated Teachers (n=284) and Virtual Schools (n=49)*

	Designated Teachers	Virtual School Staff
Gender	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Female	242 (85%)	37 (76%)
Male	35 (12%)	12 (24%)
Non-Binary	1 (<1%)	0 (0%)
Prefer Not to Say	6 (2%)	0 (0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>284 (100%)</b>	<b>49 (100%)</b>

**Table 12**

*Age Demographics for Survey Responses: Designated Teachers (n=284) and Virtual Schools (n=49)*

	Designated Teachers	Virtual School Staff
Age	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
18-24	1 (<1%)	0 (0%)
25-34	20 (7%)	5 (10%)
35-44	83 (29%)	17 (35%)
45-54	124 (44%)	19 (39%)
55-64	47 (17%)	7 (14%)
65+	2 (1%)	0 (0%)
Prefer Not to Say	7 (2%)	1 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>284 (100%)</b>	<b>49 (100%)</b>

**Table 13***Interview Participant Demographic Information (VS staff n=3; DT n=3)*

Label	Main role within school or VS	DT School Phase	Years in VS/DT role	Additional roles for DTs	Total pupils on roll	Total CLA on roll (DT)/caseload (VS)	Participant Gender	YP Initial
VS1	VS Head		10 months		260	N/A*	Female	N
VS2	Deputy VS Head		3.5 (10 years in VS total)		260	70+	Female	B
VS3	VS Post-16 Officer		3.5 years		260	70-120	Female	S
DT1	Headteacher	Infant (2-7)	12.5 years	DT, DSL	166	3	Female	H
DT2	Deputy Headteacher	Primary (4-11)	8 years	DT, SENCO, DSL	298	5	Female	L
DT3	Deputy SENCO	Secondary (11-19)	1.5 years	DT, SEND Teacher	1,873	14	Female	D

Note. \*The VSH does not case hold, they are responsible for all pupils on roll at the VS.

**Table 14**

*‘Other’ Occasions when Designated Teachers (n=296) and Virtual School Staff (n=55) work with Other Professionals and Individuals*

<b>‘Other’ interactions with professionals/individuals</b>	<b>DTs (n=296) Frequency (%)</b>	<b>VS (n=56) Frequency (%)</b>
Care planning and placement	10 (3%)	7 (13%)
Professionals’ meetings and networks	0	12 (21%)
Care relocation	1 (<1%)	2 (4%)
Education	2 (1%)	6 (11%)
Attendance	0	2 (4%)
Panels (admissions, SEND, corporate parenting)	0	6 (11%)
Team around the child / family meetings	7 (2%)	4 (7%)
Reviews (weekly, early help, placement, post-CLA)	5 (2%)	0
Training (delivering and attending)	2 (1%)	10 (18%)
Parents evening	2 (1%)	0
Email/phone calls - informal info sharing	4 (1%)	1 (2%)
SEMH support	4 (1%)	0
SEND support / EHCP reviews	2 (1%)	1 (2%)
Direct provision support	1 (<1%)	1 (2%)
Educational Psychology involvement	5 (2%)	0
Court proceedings	3 (1%)	2 (4%)
Missing from care	0	1 (2%)
Restorative conversations	1 (<1%)	0

**Table 15**

*DT and VS Staff Survey Participant Views About the Strengths Within the Systems of Support for CLA and PCLA*

Code	Details	DT (n=234)	VS (n=46)
<b>Collaborative Approach</b>		17 (7%)	17 (37%)
	'Partnerships' VS as a 'bridge' for joined-up working Relationships Multi-agency working		
<b>Child-Centred Approach</b>		13 (6%)	19 (41%)
	Investment/dedication Advocacy VS position to challenge VS position to champion CYP voice		
<b>Funding</b>		13 (6%)	6 (13%)
	Pupil Premium Plus PPG PCLA funding		
<b>Monitoring and Accountability Processes</b>		45 (19%)	
	PEPs Regular meetings Holding the story		
<b>Support for Subsystems</b>		112 (48%)	7 (15%)
(for schools)	Support from the VS (Availability and clear comms.)		
(for VS')	NAVSH Regional VS groups		
<b>Training</b>		5 (2%)	
	Free and range		
<b>Skill/knowledge of VS</b>			6 (13%)

**Table 16**

*DT and VS staff Survey Participant Views About the Challenges Within the Systems of Support for CLA and PCLA*

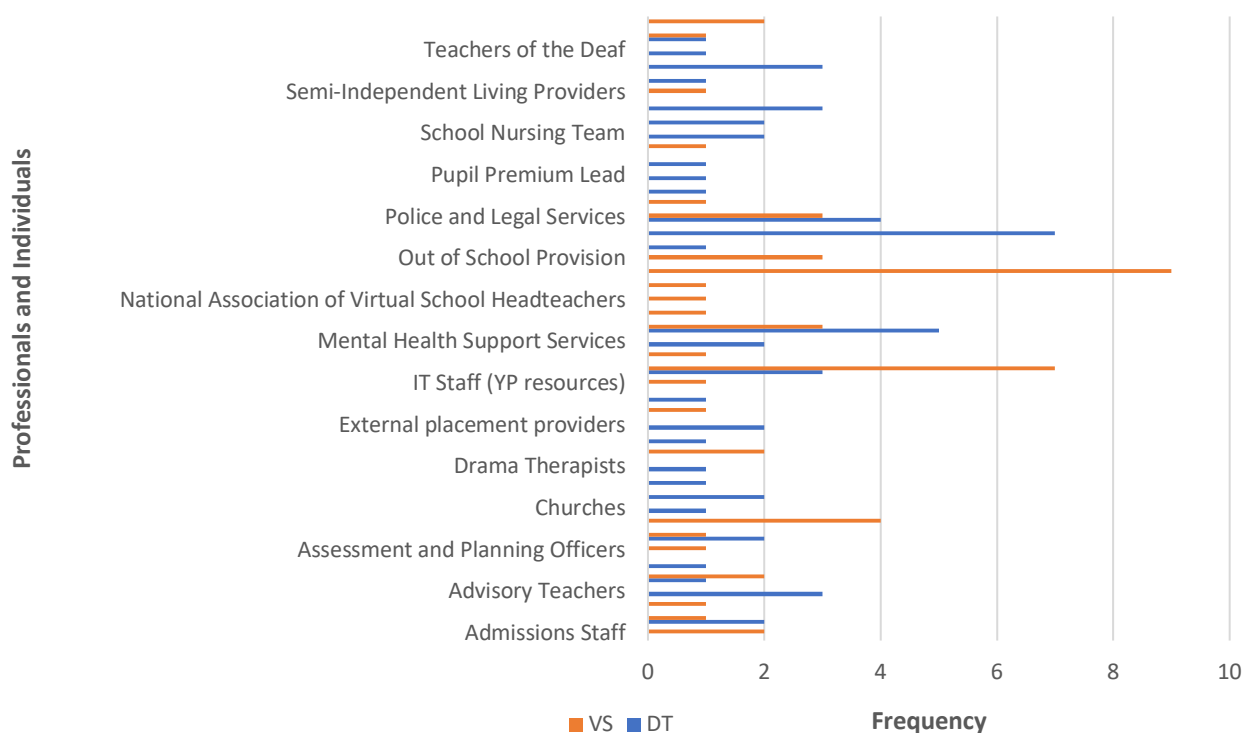
Code	Details	DT (n=259)	VS (n=46)
<b>Collaboration</b>		77 (30%)	
	Difficult Working Relationships		
	Availability of Others		
	Information sharing		
	Challenges in Organising Multi-Agency Meetings		
	Lack of Communication		
<b>Changing Nature of the Systems of Support</b>		44 (17%)	12 (26%)
	Inconsistency of People (SW turnover)		
	Placement Instability		
	Time for Processes (quick and slow)		
<b>Lack of a Child-Centred Approach</b>		4 (2%)	9 (20%)
	Non-Trauma-Informed Schools		
	Exclusions		
	Voice of the CYP Not Listened to		
<b>Access to Support and Resources</b>		45 (17%)	
	Not enough / at capacity		
	Time to access, e.g., SEMH		
<b>Funding</b>		25 (10%)	7 (15%)
	Post-16		
	Not enough (SEMH support)		
	Difficult to access		
	Not known how best to use		
<b>Challenges within the DT Role</b>		34 (13%)	
	Time to complete paperwork		
	Knowledge		
	Confidence		
	Lack of support + clarity for processes		
	Supporting CLA needs		
<b>Inconsistency of Processes</b>		28 (11%)	4 (9%)
	Across LAs		
	Across Education Phases		
<b>Capacity of Subsystems</b>		10 (4%)	5 (11%)
	DT time capacity/other roles		
	VS staff + SWs		
<b>Placement Availability</b>			4 (9%)
	Increase in CLA numbers and complexities		
	SEN school places		
	Care for complex needs		



**Table 17**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Sociogram Data*

	Sociogram					
	H (DT1)	L (DT2)	D (DT3)	N (VS1)	B (VS2)	S (VS3)
<b>Total Nodes</b>	25	28	30	18	25	18
<b>Total direct connections</b>	57	63	60	45	42	34
<b>Frequency/% of Uni</b>	15 (26%)	31 (49%)	20 (33%)	8 (18%)	25 (60%)	16 (47%)
<b>Frequency/% of Bi</b>	42 (74%)	32 (51%)	40 (67%)	37 (82%)	17 (40%)	18 (53%)
<b>Frequency of Multiplexity nodes (multiple types)</b>	14 (56%)	17 (61%)	15 (50%)	13 (72%)	16 (64%)	10 (56%)
<b>Central nodes</b> (those with the most connections)	DT (15), YP(13), SW(10), FP(10)	SW (15), DT (12), FP (11), YP(10)	DT(18), FP(11), SW(9), YP(8), HoY(8)	SW(9), FP(9), VSH(8), YP(7)	VSO(13), DT(12), YP(8), SW(7)	VSO(9), YP(9), DT(8), Home Manager(6)

**Figure 33**  
*Other individuals and professionals in the systems of support for CLA as identified by DT and VS survey respondents*



## **Appendix K: Further Research Quality Considerations**

### **Commitment**

Commitment encompasses prolonged engagement with the topic, the development of competence and skill in the methods used, and immersion in the data (Yardley, 2000). In the present study the researcher developed the survey and interview schedules, conducted the interviews, and analysed all data themselves. The researcher's position as a TEP over the past two and a half years has also providing many opportunities for engagement in the general topic area of systems of support for CLA.

Opportunities for the researcher to develop their skills and competence in the methods used in the present study have been provided by the experience of completing a first-year research project (descriptive statistics), attending lectures and workshops (thematic analysis), and practice with peers (sociograms). The researcher has been able to immerse themselves in the data during analysis, for example through the process of thematic analysis and when transforming hardcopy sociogram data into digital graphs in NodeXL.

### **Rigour**

Rigour is concerned with both the completeness of data collection and analysis, and completeness of interpretation of the data (Yardley, 2000). In the present study, the researcher acknowledged a limitation with participant's ability to supply comprehensive information. Participants only had knowledge of the parts of the systems they have worked with and were aware of, and therefore areas of

sociograms would be incomplete. To mitigate this, the researcher invited more than one professional group to take part in the study, DTs and VS staff. The researcher also used a maximum variation sampling schema for case study data to further increase the variety of experience from participants across education phases.

To further ensure rigour, the researcher employed a mixed-methods approach and used triangulation when interpreting the data. The multiple types, and sources of data provided a rounded and multi-layered understanding of the systems of support for CLA. This also enabled the researcher to explore divergence of corroboration of data between both national survey participants and case study participants, and between DTs and VS staff.

### Coherence

Coherence can be used to describe the 'fit' or suitability of the methods selected for data collection and analysis with the RQs and philosophical assumptions within a study (Yardley, 2000). In the present study, the RQs and critical realist position taken by the researcher are tightly connected to the complex systems theory framework. It was therefore appropriate for SNA to be used as both a data collection and analysis approach. This was explicit within the case study aspect of the study, and was also used to inform survey questions and presentation of such data within the thesis.

### Transparency

Transparency is another criterion by which research can be measured against (Yardley, 2000). The researcher demonstrated transparency throughout the present study and this thesis by detailing the literature search terms and strategy used, as

well as detailing every aspect of data collection and analysis. Explanations were provided for any data not presented. Additionally, example codes quotes from transcripts and images of the raw sociogram data were included in the appendices. Transparency is also concerned with a researcher's reflexivity (see *Researcher's Position* in Chapter 1).

## Appendix L: Ethical Approval Application

Institute of Education



### Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

#### **Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process**

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified you **must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review**. To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form\* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

**Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.**

#### **Section 1 – Project details**

- Project title: [Caught Between Systems – A complex Systems Perspective on the Support for Children Looked After in Schools in England](#)
- Student name and ID number: [Abigail Gilbert](#) (ID number: [20196856](#))
- \*UCL Data Protection Registration Number: [Z6364106/2022/06/35](#)
  - Date Issued: [16.06.2022](#)
- Supervisor/Personal Tutor: [Katie Hollingworth](#) and [Vivian Hill](#)
- Department: [IOE Psychology & Human Development](#)
- Course category (Tick one):  

PhD	<input type="checkbox"/>
EdD	<input type="checkbox"/>
<del>DEdPsy</del>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
- If applicable, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- Intended research start date: [April 2022](#)
- Intended research end date: [September 2023](#)
- Country fieldwork will be conducted in: [England](#)
- If research to be conducted abroad, please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If

the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)

- Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐

External Committee Name: [N/A](#)

Date of Approval: [N/A](#)

No ☒ **go to Section 2**

#### **If yes:**

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

#### **Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)**

- ☒ Interviews
- ☐ Focus Groups
- ☒ Questionnaires
- ☐ Action Research
- ☐ Observation
- ☒ Literature Review
- ☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study
- ☐ Use of personal records
- ☐ Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- ☐ Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**
- ☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
- ☐ Other, give details: [Social Network Analysis and Case Studies](#)

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

In 2000, the UK government recommended LA maintained schools appoint a Designated Teacher (DT) who would be responsible for raising the attainment of CLA. In 2008 the DT role became a statutory requirement (Children and Young Persons Act, 2008). In 2007, Virtual Schools (VS') were also introduced as a pilot. Virtual Schools work predominantly through schools and other services to improve the education of children in care.

Despite the recognition for such support for CLA at a policy level, there is limited research on how these systems function. From the minimal available research, it seems that the system of support around CLA is complex. Findings from previous research suggest there are many inter-dependent and intra-dependent factors that can have both a positive and negative impact on CLA's schooling experience and outcomes.

The level of seniority of a DT within the school system, inconsistencies within the processes, procedures, systems and expectations of the DT role across different LAs, and a lack of shared understanding about the roles and responsibilities of other professionals have all been found to inhibit the statutory support for CLA.

A linear cause and effect model would not adequately describe the nature and processes of the systems around CLA. Therefore, this research will be explicitly framed, developed and empirically investigated within a Complex Systems (CS) framework. Surveys, interviews, and Social Network Analysis maps will contribute data regarding the experiences of DTs and VS', and how they operate within and across systems to support CLA. With these in mind, the aim of this research is to answer the research questions below.

**RQ1:** What do the systems of support for CLA look like?

**RQ2:** How do the systems of support for CLA function and how do the components interact?

**RQ3:** What tensions exist within the systems of support for CLA?

**RQ4:** What factors facilitate the systems of support for CLA?

This research employs a mixed-methods design, consisting of 1. two different national online surveys, one for designated teachers and the other for virtual school staff, and 2. several semi-structured interviews with up to six designated teachers and up to six virtual school staff members. Within the interviews a Social Network Analysis activity will be used to map out the system within which these professionals work. The data collected from interviews will be presented as case studies. Both methods of data collection will be

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conducted simultaneously. A systematic literature search will be conducted to ensure a comprehensive, transparent, and robust approach for the literature review.

Participants will be invited to take part in the research on a voluntary basis. With backing and support from the National Association of Virtual Heads, it is hoped that they will disseminate an email to all virtual schools, inviting designated teachers and virtual school staff to take part in the research project. Attached to the email will be an information sheet, consent sheet and link to the online surveys. Collecting data in this way will allow for a large number of the population to be contacted and invited to take part in the research. Equally, the convenience and relatively small time commitment afforded by an online survey should ensure a reasonable sample size. Data from the surveys will be analysed using a statistical software programme (SPSS) and presented as descriptive statistics.

The virtual school in the researcher's current placement local authority will be contacted directly for recruitment for interviews. The interview information sheet and consent form will be shared with them, and the virtual school head will be asked to disseminate a recruitment email with these documents attached to all schools within the local authority. It has been considered that designated teachers may be more willing to enquire about taking part in this research if approached by their known virtual school instead of an unknown researcher.

A Social Networking Analysis activity (SNA) will also be completed with designated teachers and virtual school staff during interviews. It will be explained that the SNA can take place either in person or via video call. In both instances, an interactive software programme (Miro or Mural) will be used to allow both the participant and researcher to see and construct the network in real-time.

All data from the interview phase of data collection will be presented as case studies and framework analysis used. This is because framework analysis is a well-established form of qualitative data analysis and relatively systematic in its approach, complementing the mixed-methods approach.

Upon completion of the research, an electronic and printed copy of the dissertation will be submitted to UCL's Institute of Education as per course requirements. Findings will be summarised in a research briefing and shared with the National Association of Virtual School Heads and all participant who requested this at the end of the survey. The project may also be considered for publication.

### Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Early years/pre-school
- ☐ Ages 5-11
- ☐ Ages 12-16
- ☐ Young people aged 17-18
- ☒ Adults please specify below
- ☐ Unknown – specify below

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☐ No participants

- Designated teachers
- Virtual School staff

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

#### Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒
- Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒
- Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

#### Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

- Will you be collecting any new data from participants? N/A  
Yes\* ☐ No ☐
- Will you be analysing any secondary data? N/A  
Yes\* ☐ No ☐

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) and if you have answered No to both questions, please go to Section 8 Attachments.*

#### Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- Name of dataset/s: N/A
- Owner of dataset/s: N/A
- Are the data in the public domain?  
Yes ☐ No ☐  
*If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?*  
Yes ☐ No\* ☐

- Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☐

- Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?  
Yes ☐ No\* ☐
- If no, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?  
Yes ☐ No\* ☐
- If no, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?  
Yes ☐ No\* ☐

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

*If secondary analysis is only method used and no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to Section 9 Attachments.*

#### Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

**Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.**

- Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?  
[Adults – Designated teachers and Virtual School staff via a surveys and interviews.](#)
- What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected

Data regarding the designated teacher role (required):

- How long they have been the designated teacher, their other roles within the school, the geographical location and type of the school they work in.

Data regarding the virtual school staff's role (required):

- How long they have worked for the virtual school, their role within the virtual school, the geographic location of their virtual school.

Optional personal data:

- Gender and age for demographic purposes.
- Email address will be collected from designated teachers and virtual school staff to be used if they wish to be sent a research briefing summarising the findings following the completion of the project.

**Is the data anonymised?** Yes ☐ No\* ☒

Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes\* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes\* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes\* ☒ No ☐

*\* Give further details in Section 8 Ethical Issues*

- Disclosure – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?**



Results of the project will be disclosed to research supervisors and presented as a doctoral thesis, submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of the UCL Institute of Education for Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DPEdPsy). Findings from the study will be disseminated in the form of a research briefing to the National Association of Virtual School Heads and all participants who requested a summary of the findings. Results may also be considered for publication following thesis submission.

**Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?**

No - all personal data will be anonymised before processing, and any identifying information about participants will be removed from the survey results and interview transcriptions, making all the data anonymous. Once the final report has been written and research briefing emailed out to participants, all contact information for participants will be destroyed.

- d. **Data storage** – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick\*\*, encrypted laptop\*\* etc.

All personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the General Data Protection Registration (GDPR) (see the Guidelines and the Institute's Data Protection & Records Management Policy for more detail). Specifically, data from the survey will be collected using Qualtrics and analysed using a statistical software programme (i.e. SPSS). For transcription purposes, interviews will be recorded (with consent from participants) on UCL's Microsoft Teams and on a password protected voice recorder.

The interviews will be stored on UCL's Microsoft Teams/OneDrive until they are downloaded onto a UCL password protective drive. The recordings will be securely stored until the end of the research project (completion of the DPEdPsy course – September 2023).

All files will be stored securely on a password protected laptop, in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy. Only research supervisors and I will have access to data files. Any identifying contact information about participants (e.g. email addresses) will be stored in password protected folder, filed separately from the transcribed interviews and survey data.

\*\* *Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?  
Yes ☐ No ☒
- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?  
Once the project is complete, data will be kept in an electronic format on a password protected hard drive until completion of the DPEdPsy course (September 2023).

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. ~~pseudonymisation~~ and short retention period of data'.

Any identifying information will be removed from interview transcriptions, making all the data anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used and in place of participant names. Interview recordings will be deleted once transcribed. Contact information will be deleted following the final dissemination of research findings.

*\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

## Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

### Participants, Recruitment and Gatekeepers

The intention of this research is to collect data from adults only - designated teachers and virtual school staff. Data will be collected in two ways, a national survey and semi-structured interviews involving a social network analysis activity.

### Surveys



It is hoped that once approached, the National Association of Virtual School Heads will support this research project. Following their approval and permission, an email containing an information sheet, consent sheet, and links to the online surveys (one for designated teachers and one for virtual school staff) will then be sent from the National Association of Virtual School Heads to all Virtual School head teachers, asking them to disseminate the email to their staff and all schools within their local authority. Participants are required to provide their informed consent at the start of the survey before moving on to any questions. At the end of the online survey, participants will be asked to provide their email address if they wish to be sent a [research](#) briefing once the project is complete.

#### Interviews

I will personally approach the virtual school head in the local authority of which I am currently on placement. I will share with them the information sheet and interview consent form. I will also ask for these to be emailed to all schools in the local authority, requesting designated teachers contact me if curious about or wanting to take part in the project via interview.

Participants for both surveys and interviews will be recruited with a voluntary opt-in approach. It has been considered how this could limit the overall number of participants and potentially underrepresent designated teachers who are experiencing some of the systemic challenges that underpin the rationale of this research project. For example, designated teachers who are given limited time to enact their role. People may also feel less able to discuss what is not going so well and could therefore wish not to complete the survey or proceed within an interview. However, this is the most practical and ethical approach to take and representation within the sample will be reflected upon in a transparent way in the reporting of findings.

#### **Informed Consent**

All potential participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing the context, rationale, and aims for the research. Attached to the recruitment email will also be a consent sheet. This will detail their right to withdraw at any time without the need to provide a reason. An explanation about how their data will be destroyed if they do wish to withdraw from the project will also be given. Contact information for withdrawal of consent will be provided on the information and consent sheets.

Participant's consent to take part via survey will be documented in their first response in the survey. Before answering any questions, participants will be required to select a box, confirming that they have read and understood the research information and consent sheets and are happy to proceed.

For the interviews, all participants will be asked to return a completed and signed copy of the consent sheet before their interview begins. This will include additional information about the interview being recorded for transcription purposes.

#### **Safeguarding / Child Protection**

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Whilst no children or young people will be directly involved in this research project, it has been considered that during interviews participants may provide examples of their experiences of supporting Children Looked After or Previously Looked After Children. Therefore, before the data is processed it will be anonymised and kept securely under the data protection measures outlined in section 7. All data will remain anonymous throughout the reporting of the research findings to protect the identity of all participants and to prevent any safeguarding/child protection issues from arising.

#### **Sensitive Topics and Risks to the Participants and/or Researcher**

Given the methodology and demographic of participants, there are no obvious risks within this research. A potential risk is that participants may feel uncomfortable sharing information about professional experiences that have not gone well. To mitigate this, participants will be reassured and reminded that they have the right to withdraw their participation and data at any point, and that all data will be anonymous.

It will be explained and highlighted that the purpose of the research is to identify improvements to the system that may ultimately benefit themselves, other designated teachers, virtual school staff and/or the families involved in their work. Whilst both the survey and interview schedules will enquire about what might not be going well, there will equally be questions about what is going well. This will provide a balanced tone and allow for hopeful and positive reflections. At the end of the interviews, participants will be offered a debrief.

Interviews will be conducted either in person or online via a UCL Microsoft Teams account. Face to face interviews will allow for a smoother process when completing the Social Network Analysis activity. However, the option to complete the interviews online will eliminate health risks associated with the recent global COVID-19 pandemic if required, for example if myself or participants experience symptoms.

#### **Confidentiality/Anonymity**

All interviews will take place in a private room, either in person or with both the interviewer and participant joining the virtual meeting from a private room. Interviews will be recorded on a password-protected voice recorder or on MS Teams (with consent from participants) for transcription purposes only and will be deleted at the end of the research project (September 2023). Transcription files will be stored on a password protected laptop, in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy. Any identifying information will be removed from the survey responses and interview transcriptions, making all the data anonymous, and pseudonyms will be used in place of participant name. Any identifying contact information about participants ([e.g.](#) for arranging interview times or for the dissemination of the research findings) will be stored in separate, password protected folder and destroyed after final dissemination is complete. Consent will be stored in a separate location from the linked data with the same regard to the confidentiality and anonymity protocols of the research.

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### Disclosures/Limits to Confidentiality

All data and information collected throughout the research project will be anonymised and remain confidential, this is unless a safeguarding concern is disclosed to the researcher. If a disclosure is made about someone being at risk of immediate harm, the researchers will inform their supervisors and follow the legal safeguarding procedure. This will be explained in the pre-interview brief so that participants are aware and understand the process.

As the researcher will be arranging, undertaking, and transcribing the interviews, complete anonymity of participants during interviews is not possible. Whilst these participant's identities will be known to the researcher, their professional integrity and measures explained above will ensure that the information is kept securely and confidentially.

### Data Storage and Security

All personal data will be stored and processed in compliance with the General Data Protection Registration (GDPR) (*see the [Guidelines](#) and the Institute's Data Protection & Records Management Policy for more detail*). For transcription purposes, interviews will be recorded (with consent from participants) on UCL's Microsoft Teams. The interviews will be stored on UCL's Microsoft Teams/OneDrive until it is downloaded to a UCL password protective drive. Once the interviews are transcribed, the recordings will be deleted and all data will be anonymised and coded to prevent the possibility of any personal or private information revealing the identity of participants.

All files will be stored securely on a password protected laptop, in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy. Only research supervisors and I will have access to data files. Any identifying contact information about participants ([e.g.](#) email addresses) will be stored in password protected folder, filed separately from the transcribed interviews and survey data. Should the laptop be stolen or lost before the data is anonymised and interview recordings deleted, the data will remain on the device but due to the secure encryption, this should not pose a risk.

### Reporting, Dissemination and Use of Findings

All participants will be asked if they would like to receive a follow-up about the project findings. If so, participants will have the choice to leave their email address and findings from the report will be disseminated once the reported has been completed and a research briefing created. Participants' email addresses will not be linked to their survey data to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Once the report has been completed and the research briefing emailed out to participants, all contact information will be destroyed. Upon completion of the research an electronic and printed copy of the dissertation will be submitted to UCL's Institute of Education as per course requirements. The project may be considered for publication.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

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Yes ☒

### Section 9 – Attachments.

*Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received*

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)  
Yes ☒ No ☐
  1. Information sheet for all participants
  2. Consent form for all participants
- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐
- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☒
- d. Full risk assessment Yes ☒

### Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes ☒ No ☐

### I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name [Abigail Gilbert](#)

Date [23.05.2022](#)

**Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.**

### Notes and references

#### Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

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Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

#### Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

#### Further references

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.  
This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

#### Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Abigail Gilbert

Student department: Psychology

Course: Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

Project Title: Caught Between Systems – A complex Systems Perspective on the Support for Children Looked After in Schools in England

#### Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Katie Hollingworth

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature:

Date: 25.05.2022

#### Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: Vivian Hill

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Second reviewer signature:

Date: 25.05.2022

#### Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved ☒

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

**Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: [IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk).**