



Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Self-evaluation Report 2014-15



NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Profile of the learners in Northumberland's Virtual School (at 31.08.15)



**Creating the right context for children looked after to flourish requires a partnership between social care professionals and schools. The context is important, many children and young people living in care have been traumatised before entering the care system; around two thirds have special educational needs, but they are not a homogenous group and can vary widely from year to year. There are some common factors however in academic success. Those pupils who were continuously looked after, had placement stability and did not move school during Key Stage 4 are more than six times more likely to leave schools with good GCSEs.*

The Report of the Director of Education and Skills, Northumberland County Council 2014-15

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References

1. *The Report of the Director of Education and Skills*, Northumberland County Council 2014/15
2. *Children's attachment: attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care*, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 25 November 2015
3. *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*, REES Centre, University of Oxford, University of Bristol, November 2015
4. *What's the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children?* REES Centre, University of Oxford, September 2015
5. *The Educational Achievement of Children in Care Joint Policy Paper*. ADCS, NCER, National Association VSH, December 2015

A note about the data: *the Department for Education's statistical first release of outcomes for children looked after by Local Authorities in England has been deferred from December 2015 to March 2016. It was not therefore published at the time of writing this report so where data is used to make regional and national comparisons then 2014 data or unvalidated 2015 data has been used. The official cohorts reviewed in this report are small and the individual pupils comprising the cohorts change during the course of each phase. Percentages can therefore vary considerably so that comparisons with other groups of pupils or establishing trends in performance over time are not always meaningful.*

Executive summary

1. At Northumberland's Virtual School for Looked After Children we know that we can improve outcomes for our children in care by being aspirational corporate parents and working with partners, particularly schools, to create the right context for learning where children feel safe and can flourish. Reducing school moves to improve placement stability, providing targeted additional support and minimising the impact of disruptions to learning we know will help us achieve our ambition. This Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher sets out how we delivered on our promise to our looked after children to improve their educational achievement in the academic year 2014-15.
2. Careful commissioning of alternative provision by the Virtual School, the use of managed moves and effective challenge to schools, academies and alternative providers have sustained our record of **no permanent exclusion of a Northumberland looked after child since 2008**. This has been achieved despite DfE evidence that children in care are nearly twice as likely to have a permanent exclusion than all other children and the significant rise in permanent exclusions in Northumberland during the last two years.
3. Compared with other looked after children our children make **good progress from their starting points**. Monitoring of progress from the starting point of date of entry into care by the Virtual School for each national curriculum year group shows that for reading/English and maths 76% of pupils are making at least expected progress, and for writing 87%, with 100% of pupils in Year 6 making better than expected progress across the board. This provides compelling evidence of the **positive impact of the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+)**, captured in PEPs, which show that the majority of pupils have achieved their personal targets.
4. **Northumberland's looked after children continue to get a better deal in terms of stability of school placement** because of effective multi-agency working co-ordinated by a well-embedded PEP mechanism. **The PEP completion rate for 2015 is 98.2%**. Every child has an allocated Education Support Worker who works alongside the Designated Teacher, carer and social worker to improve education achievement and to intervene swiftly when issues arise.
5. Looked after children at Key Stage 2 in Northumberland have a better chance of achieving in line with their non-looked after peers than they did three years ago. **For successive years their overall achievement at Key Stage 2 has continued to improve, despite all pupils in the 2015 cohort having an identified special need, half of whom have statements. The gap in attainment at Key Stage 2 between Northumberland looked after children and all pupils nationally has halved over the last 5 years** and is consistently above the attainment of all looked after children nationally.
6. In 2015 those achieving 5+A*-C including English and mathematics declined compared to 2014 when Northumberland ranked 3rd amongst all Local Authorities for looked after children's achievement at GCSE. This decline is related to the idiosyncratic character of the 2015 cohort with a much higher than average proportion of learners with SEND.
7. **Very effective Designated Teachers** make a measurable and significant difference to looked after learners. We have developed a comprehensive core training offer which focuses on the factors which most affect children's readiness to learn. By becoming a

strategic partner of the Ponteland Middle School Teaching Alliance the Virtual School was able to start rolling out a programme of 'Thrive' attachment training for Designated Teachers in schools, academies and alternative providers. Initial impact has been very positive. Communication with Designated Teachers is good and our relationships are a strength.

8. Our looked after children, particularly our teenagers, still face significant challenges which affect their learning. Validated data to 2014 shows that overall absence for Looked After Children measured over 5 and 6 terms has declined but is still above North East and England averages. **The % of persistent absentees fell significantly from 2013-14 and is now below North East and England averages** over 5 and 6 terms.
9. **We were disappointed that fixed term exclusions stayed the same** from for the previous 2 years (validated data is lagged) but needs to reduce. We know that since September 2014 8 pupils faced challenges in their school placements and have missed in excess of 10 sessions due to fixed term exclusions for disruptive and usually physical behaviour. Changes for 2016 have already been implemented, including a Key Stage 4 inclusion support worker to work intensively with a small group of targeted pupils. The early impact of this work since September 2015 is very encouraging.
10. **More learners remain in education post 16** thanks to careful planning of vocational and academic pathways with the 14+ Leaving Care team from as early as Year 9. By September 2015 19 of the 23 pupils in the Year 11 cohort had already engaged in education and training. 20 pupils from the 2013 Year 11 cohort are still engaged on courses in sixth forms or at colleges. In 2014 only 5 of Northumberland care leavers were in higher education which is the same as the national average. **However, between the 19th and 21st birthdays of care leavers the NEET figure is increasing which is more in line with the national picture.**
11. **The percentage of looked after children in education, employment or training (EET) is high and is improving, from 79% in 2012 to 83% in 2015.** The preferred pathway for Northumberland looked after children is further education and since 2012 more learners have chosen school sixth forms. **It is very pleasing that by September 2015 19 of the 23 pupils from the Year 11 cohort had already engaged in further education and training, and that the Virtual School had successfully planned with those young people from as early as Year 9 clear academic or vocational pathways to support their continued journeys beyond Year 11.**

Background

12. Northumberland recognises the importance of education for children and young people, and particularly those most at risk of under-achieving. Significant improvements were made in 2014-15 to drive improvement in schools, academies and education settings across the Local Authority. This annual report of the Virtual School Headteacher for Looked After Children (VSH) therefore needs to be read alongside the Annual Report of the Director of Education and Skills 2015* which provides evidence to show that standards are improving as a three year strategy is rolled out and which demonstrates the commitment of elected members and officers as aspirational and committed corporate parents.
13. The Virtual School is part of that strategy and in January 2015 an organisational re-structure in the Education and Skills Service strengthened the statutory role of the VSH to have senior management oversight of a broad service area which fulfils the Local Authority's statutory duties to ensure that all pupils receive their entitlement to good quality full time education in inclusive settings where they are safe to learn. Predominantly this means providing individual targeted support for vulnerable learners who are at risk of underachieving academically and also involves providing challenge and guidance to the settings themselves. The impact of these structural improvements on our looked after children is evidenced in this report.
14. The Virtual School service area shares a core purpose with other services and agencies which support vulnerable learners to improve education outcomes, promote social mobility and therefore influence life chances. Those services and agencies include Children's Social Care, the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) services, Northumberland Adolescent Services (NAS), schools/settings and health services. The interface with these partners is already well established. During 2014-15 the Virtual School became a strategic partner of the Ponteland Middle School Teaching Alliance to provide a means of influencing the quality of teaching of our children in care. In time we hope to work with all of Northumberland's teaching schools.
15. Although there is much to celebrate regarding the achievements of our looked after children there is still work to be done to strengthen impact and improve outcomes at national as well as local level. We welcome the newly created National Association of Virtual School Heads and are encouraged that Ofsted is working with partners - including the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Department for Education (DfE) and the Rees Centre (Oxford University) - to not only support the work of VSHs but to ensure that we share a common understanding of why children in care might under-achieve and measure their journey through our education system in a more meaningful way.
16. This Annual Report is part of a self-evaluation of the impact of the Virtual School which was driven by priorities identified in the operational School Improvement Plan 2014-15, in the context of our School Information 2014-15, and based on our Outcomes 2015. Detailed information to support the content of this report can be found in those separate documents.

Stages of the journey in 2015

17. There is much to celebrate about achievement in 2015 and the positive impact of the Virtual School on the journey of each child is evident. Our approach is to first understand the individual circumstances of each child, to acknowledge that they don't all start at the same place, and to also plan for the future so that there are clear pathways and better opportunities lying ahead.

EARLY YEARS

18. In 2015 Northumberland's Looked After Children performed below national averages for all other children in all of the assessment areas as is the case across England as a whole. As the majority of our children enter care in the category of 'neglect' then this legacy of underachievement is not unexpected .

19. In Northumberland in 2015 there were 20 pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) cohort aged from 3 to 5:

- a. the percentage of all children achieving the expected level or better in all prime areas of learning is 68%, for looked after children 46%;
- b. the percentage of all children achieving the expected level or better in all specific areas of learning is 58%, for looked after children 31%;
- c. the percentage of all children achieving the expected level or better in all learning goals is 55%, for looked after children 31%;
- d. the percentage of all children achieving a good level of development (achieving the expected level or better in all prime areas, all literacy and all mathematics) is 57% (nationally 52%), for looked after children 38%;
- e. the average total EYFS point score in 2014 is 33.4 (nationally 32.8), for looked after children 28.5.

We need to improve outcomes for children in care across England and we have made a significant start in Northumberland, children do begin to catch up and close the gap.

20. In the Early Years. the introduction of a Personal Education Plans (PEPs) to pre-school age children has had a positive impact on transition into Year 1 and have enabled us to capture more meaningful EYS data. Combined with the introduction of an Early Years pupil premium during 2015 it is predicted that gaps in learning will close before the end of Reception. However, it is too early and cohort sizes are small to measure the impact of the grant so far.

21. As a response to this gap in achievement the Virtual School added two inclusion workers to the ESLAC team to engage Early Years and Primary children in their learning through play. They have already had an impact with very positive evidence from schools and the workers about the outcomes for young people, especially the very young age groups. Schools report that the 7 children they have worked with since April are now able to participate more fully in lessons and socialise with other pupils.

KEY STAGE 1

22. There were 15 pupils in the cohort in 2015. **Those achieving Level 2+ at Key Stage 1 has improved steadily since 2012, despite a dip in 2015, for the separate measures of reading, writing and maths. Gaps in attainment have closed significantly since 2012 between Northumberland looked after children and all looked after children nationally, and Northumberland looked after children and all Northumberland pupils.**
23. Pupils at Key Stage 1 took the Phonics test (age 6/Year 1) and Phonics re-check (age 7/Year 2). 18 children took the Phonics test in 2015 and 72% were assessed as working towards the expected standard which is a significant improvement on last year's performance. **The gap with all other pupils closed from 39.9% to just 8%.** The 2014 cohort were re-assessed in 2015 and the percentage assessed as working towards the expected standard improved to 73% from 38.5%, indicating that we have been successful in improving rates of progress in Key Stage 1..

KEY STAGE 2

24. There were just 8 pupils in the cohort in 2015 making statistical comparisons very difficult. **However the combined measure of pupils achieving Level 4 and above for reading, writing and maths has improved for the third consecutive year. Indeed, 5 of the 6 pupils who took the test achieved Level 4+ in the combined measure. Outcomes for writing are particularly good with a sharp rise from 50% in 2013 to 75% in 2015 achieving Level 4+. Northumberland's children in care continue to close the attainment gap with their non-looked after peers from 25% in 2013 to 17.5% in 2015.** Attainment at the Key Stage 2 combined measure has consistently been above looked after children nationally since 2012 and the gap is gradually closing with all other pupils.
25. The context for these outcomes is important – all 8 pupils have an identified special education need, including 4 pupils with statements. Only 1 pupil was placed in a school outside of Northumberland but 3 were placed in Special Schools and 1 pupil had a 6 month placement with an alternative provider.
26. **The factors which we know have a positive impact on achievement are all evident for this cohort. 7 of the 8 pupils attend schools which are judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted and 6 pupils had 100% attendance during Year 6. Amongst the cohort there were no fixed term or permanent exclusions and placement stability was very good with only 2 pupils experiencing 1 school move and 1 pupil experiencing 2 school moves throughout the whole key stage.**
27. Progress across the Primary Years is impressive. At the point that a child enters care a PEP is initiated and baseline assessments are recorded by the Virtual School. Progress from that starting point can therefore be regularly and accurately recorded and we can intervene and celebrate in equal measure, whichever is appropriate. Highlights are progress for Years 1 to 6 for looked after children in Northumberland which are tracking above the national average in all three areas of reading, writing and maths. 100% of pupils in Year 6 are making better than expected progress compared to progress reported in the recent 2015 unvalidated RAISE Online which indicates that looked after children nationally are tracking at 80% for reading and maths and 85% for writing.

28. The 3 year trend in RAISE Online for levels of progress from Key Stage 1 to 2 indicates that looked after children in Northumberland consistently performed above the national average in writing and in 2015 Northumberland looked after children performed above the national average and non-looked after pupils in all three disciplines. In Year 6 our looked after children are meeting the floor standards for expected levels of progress.

KEY STAGE 4

29. **There were 23 pupils in the cohort for 2015. The idiosyncratic character of this cohort is important – it was relatively small for a Key Stage 4 cohort in Northumberland and the number of pupils with SEND was very high. 18 pupils have an identified special educational need and disability, including 10 with statements and 5 pupils did not have access to GCSE courses.**

30. **Despite their complex needs, of the 18 pupils entered for GCSEs 11 pupils achieved at least 5 (which is 61%).** 1 pupil achieved 5A*-C including English and maths. So statistically in 2015 the number of looked after pupils in Northumberland achieving 5+A*-C including English and maths at GCSE has declined and the gap in attainment has not closed, however given the context of the cohort this is not surprising. All pupils performed in line with the ambitious expectations of their schools and the Virtual School.

31. Type of school placement is also significant, for example 4 pupils were in Alternative Provision during Key Stage 4, two were in residential special schools and one was in a secure children's home during Year 11 (ie non-mainstream settings). Although no new school placements were made in schools judged to be less than good by Ofsted (our policy), 11 pupils were in schools/academies which became requires improvement or inadequate before the end of their GCSE courses. The Local Authority is concerned about the state of its secondary schools and has taken robust action to put matters right. The 2015 results give us some reason for optimism, although there is much still to be done.

32. Exclusions from school were low but a high proportion of the cohort exhibited disturbed behaviours which made them particularly difficult to reach during Key Stage 4 and this has had an impact on their achievement. 7 pupils in the cohort were classed as persistent absentees during Key Stage 4 (attendance below 85%). This is a key focus for improvement next year.

33. We had to rise to the challenge of an unexpected influx of admissions into Years 10 and 11 from January 2015. 9 pupils had joined the Virtual School by that time and the impact that this disruption had on their education was evident. Nevertheless ESLAC workers were persistent and the 2 pupils admitted to Year 11 were able to continue on individual pathways into further education.

KEY STAGE 5 AND DESTINATIONS

34. The percentage of looked after children in education, employment or training (EET) is high and is improving, from 79% in 2012 to 83% in 2015. The preferred pathway for Northumberland looked after children is further education and since 2012 more learners have chosen school sixth forms.

Age 16 – 18	Sept -12	Sept -13	Sept -14	Sept-15
Number of LAC	29	62	57	23
Number in EET	23 (79%)	53 (85%)	48 (84%)	19 (83%)
Number in FE	10 (34)	25 (40%)	17 (30%)	14 (61%)
Number in 6 th form	9 (31%)	20 (32%)	19 (33%)	5 (22%)

35. It is very pleasing that by September 2015 19 of the 23 pupils from the Year 11 cohort had already engaged in further education and training, and that the Virtual School had successfully planned with those young people from as early as Year 9 clear academic or vocational pathways to support their continued journeys beyond Year 11. Indeed for the last three years an increasing number of young people have continued into further education, from 40% in 2013 to 61% in 2015. The Virtual School provided intensive careers information and guidance to pupils throughout Key Stage 4 alongside their school/academy or education provider. **4 pupils enrolled for sixth form courses in year 12 at school, 13 pupils enrolled at Further Education Colleges and 2 pupils started apprenticeships. The remaining 4 pupils are engaged with Northumberland Adolescent Services.**

36. Since 2013 all Looked After Children who progress to Year 12 in school settings continue to be supported by the Personal Education Advisor in the Virtual School and the PEP is maintained to Year 13. The Advisor is now studying for a Level 6 NVQ in Careers Information and Guidance and other ELSAC members are able to discuss pathways with pupils from 14+. From January 2015 a Personal Advisor (IAG) from the Employability team has been deployed to target vulnerable learners, including looked after learners and care leavers. **Better retention on school sixth form courses is evidence of the impact of that support. In 2014 there were 17 pupils in the official cohort, 8 of whom completed Year 12 courses in school sixth forms this year. 5 of those pupils are continuing with A'level courses in Year 13, 1 has started an apprenticeship and 2 have enrolled on college courses.**

37. All 3 of our care leavers who progressed to Year 13 successfully courses and have continued into higher education. One pupil is now following a foundation degree in Child Care at Newcastle College, one pupil has secured an apprenticeship and one pupil is now enrolled at The Art Academy in London. 2 of our care leavers completed the first year of degree course at Northumbria and Sunderland universities and will continue into their second years this September. Year on year comparisons are difficult to make for Key Stage 5, but an increasing number of learners remain in contact with us and we enjoy sharing their considerable achievements with them.

NORTHUMBERLAND PUPILS PLACED IN OUT OF AUTHORITY SCHOOLS

38. It is a strength of our Virtual School that our looked after children continue to benefit from the support of their ESLAC worker when their education placement is outside of Northumberland. The PEP, Pupil Premium Plus and social and emotional support continue and the ESLAC workers have good relationships with schools whichever Local Authority they might be in. Outcomes for that group of learners demonstrate the impact of this

continuity and persistence: at all Key Stages learners out-performed their looked after peers in Northumberland schools and in some cases all non-looked after Northumberland pupils.

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN FROM OTHER AUTHORITIES

39. Looked after learners from other Local Authorities benefit from the inclusive approach which characterises Northumberland schools, and although they are not supported directly by the Virtual School we do facilitate dialogue between our schools and Virtual Schools in other authorities. The positive outcomes for these learners in 2015 are of course to be celebrated, and is a strong indicator of the impact of our training and development of Northumberland's Designated Teachers. 3 pupils from other authorities were in Northumberland schools in Year 6, 2 with SEND. 1 pupil achieved Level 4+ in the combined measure of reading, writing and maths and there have been no fixed term exclusions from the time they were admitted to the schools. Outcomes at Key Stage 4 were also good, and the in all measures the 8 Year 11 pupils in our schools performed at least as well as Northumberland looked after learners in 2015.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

40. 53% of our looked after learners have a recognised special educational need or disability. Expertise within the ESLAC team, experience and integrated working between the Virtual School and specialist support services means that those needs are understood well and the progress of individuals with SEND is monitored closely. The impact of this support is evident in outcomes at Key Stages 2 and 4 for the 2015 cohorts: all 8 of the pupils in the official KS2 2015 cohort have SEND including 4 pupils with statements and 5 of them achieved Level 4+ for reading, writing and maths combined; 18 of the official KS4 cohort have SEND including 10 pupils with statement and 6 of them achieved 5+A-G in any combination of GCSE subjects. A plan is in place to fast track all looked after learners with statements onto Education Health and Care Plans by the end of July 2016.

KEY FOCUS 1 - Improving teaching and learning

41. Creating the right context for looked after children to flourish requires a partnership between schools and social care professionals. The Virtual School has a role in this partnership and can provide targeted support when it is most needed. We aim to identify the diverse and complex needs of our looked after children early to further develop a range of interventions so that their learning improves and recognise the contribution to learning by all involved with the child.

Teachers and school staff were identified by young people as the main determinants of educational progress. For many young people, carers, teachers, and school pastoral support services played an important part on a daily basis in their educational progress.

[The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England, p6]

42. The look of our PEPs changed during 2015 – we listened to feedback from schools and Voices Making Choices (our Children in Care Council), we prepared for life without levels and changes to Key Stage 4 courses and arrangements. PEP completion rates remain as high as 98%, driven by the robust quality assurance process developed by the ESLAC team manager. Assessment using National Curriculum levels will be phased out at 6 monthly PEP reviews starting from September 2015 and our own framework for tracking pupil progress, developed with Gateshead’s Virtual School, will commence implementation at the same time. ESLAC team members have been involved in the development of the framework.

43. The VSH holds schools and education settings to account for the impact of the Pupil Premium Plus. Our expectations are high and captured in the Pupil Premium Plus agreement, now part of every PEP. There is an outcomes based approach to allocating the funding, and Designated Teachers have to agree specific targets for improvement with an ESLAC worker which is then signed off by the school’s Headteacher and VSH before the funding is released. Currently schools are able to claim the full £1 900 if justified on the Pupil Premium Plus agreement. In 2015 the majority of outcomes for individual pupils were achieved, with the largest type at 35% relating to academic targets then 21% relating to academic/social. Pupil Premium Plus agreements were completed for 229 children, 76% of those children achieved or exceeded their PEP targets. Progress of pupils in all year groups indicates that the funding had a positive impact on achievement.

44. Pupil Premium Plus retained by the Virtual School supported a number of initiatives to raise achievement: all non-eligible looked after learners also received the grant; post-16 learners were provided with resources for courses; licenses were purchased to access the Nimbl on-line learning platform; resourcing of the broader training programme for Designated Teachers; alternative provision was commissioned to stabilise placements; one to one tuition was provided; incentives and rewards for attendance, progress and achievement were purchased. Now supported by a recommendation from NICE that,

Schools and other education providers [should] ensure that all staff who may come into contact with children and young people with attachment difficulties receive appropriate training on attachment difficulties (recommendation 1.2.2)

45. Thrive licenses were purchased so that trained practitioners can now apply this approach to support individual children. We are also offering awareness sessions regionally so that all Designated Teachers can easily access this approach to managing attachment and

resilience in the classroom. In partnership with Ponteland Middle Teaching Alliance we are supporting the roll out of the training as core professional development for all teachers.

46. Using Pupil Premium Plus a partnership with the Children's University was negotiated through Leading Link and every Virtual School pupil became a member, as well as all non-looked after siblings in their foster families. Everyone now has access to exciting and innovative learning activities and experiences outside of the normal school day known as Learning Destinations. Raising children's aspirations is important to the university and they aim to develop the understanding that learning can be a system to better places in life. Each child has a Passport to Learning to record their experiences and which contribute to a National Children's University Award. It is too early to quantify the impact of this initiative, but our learners and their foster families are well engaged and enjoying themselves!
47. An ambitious but targeted programme of training was delivered by the Virtual School to Designated Teachers for Looked After Children and both participation and feedback was very good. Induction and refresher training is available for all schools, academies and alternative providers, funded by the Virtual School; the LSCB delivered attachment and resilience training; the Virtual School started to roll out a Thrive attachment programme and delivered Pupil Premium Plus training with a focus on what works for looked after children. Of the 145 Designated teachers who attended training, 100% said they would recommend it to others and 87% scored 10/10 for enjoyment. Guidance for Governors was also published.
48. An Expert Learner Award has been developed for learners who make good or better progress from their own starting point across a number of areas including learning, attendance, exclusions and participation. Foster carers are crucial partners in minimising disruptions to learning and work continues to develop this relationship.
49. Every ESLAC team member benefited from a workforce development programme in 2014-15 which was both motivating and complementary to the priorities of the Virtual School. Everyone started an accredited course or achieved an accreditation including: a Level 6 NVQ in Careers Information and Guidance; Thrive practitioner training, therapeutic stories, attachment, and the team manager is enrolled on a Master's degree in leadership and management.

KEY FOCUS 2 - Achieving stability

50. The Virtual School has a considerable influence on school placements and we know that this promotes stability which then has a positive impact on achievement for pupils of all ages. Close partnership working between the Placement Referral Co-ordinator and the ESLAC team at the point of admission into care of every child ensures that action is swift and social workers communicate regularly with ESLAC team members to identify concerns about a school placement early. Often placement changes cannot be avoided but we can achieve continuity with the school placement. For example, the Year 11 cohort in 2015 was a mobile cohort with half of the learners experiencing 2 or more home moves since Year 9. Robust action by the Virtual School however meant that in more than half of those cases the school placement was sustained, minimising disruption and giving learners a better chance of achieving well.
51. School placement stability is good with only 18% of pupils experiencing more than one school placement in the last two years. The pattern varies between national curriculum year

groups with Years 10 and 11 being the most mobile. The impact of the number of school moves in each academic year on progress and attainment is monitored. In previous years it has been the case in Northumberland that those in a single placement during their period in care performed better than those with two or more placements. That pattern is difficult to identify in the smaller cohorts for 2015. Historically the learners placed in our residential homes under-achieved in comparison to their looked after peers and were challenging to place in provision which engaged them. During 2015 these homes were closed and Northumberland now has 3 homes with 4 beds currently accommodating 11 young people. Although individuals with complex needs and facing huge challenges in their lives, they share a history of being mobile in their placements and challenging to engage in education provision. It is too early to establish firmly whether the change of home placement has had a positive impact on their learning.

52. In 99% of cases our Looked After Children are consulted about their school placement when being newly admitted in Northumberland and they are generally able to attend their school of choice. When school placements break down or a change of placement is needed for another reason then pupils are always consulted by the ESLAC team and social worker. All looked after learners were admitted within the statutory 20 day school timeframe and the Local Authority has not had to direct a school to admit. This is indicative of the inclusive approach of Northumberland schools and their commitment to children in care.
53. As a principle as good corporate parents and in accordance with statutory guidance the Virtual School strives to place all looked after learners in schools judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. The percentage of looked after learners placed in Good or Outstanding schools/academies dipped to 68% by July 2015, although no new placements were made in schools judged to be less than Good until the summer term. Two thirds of those in Good and Outstanding schools are in Northumberland. We know that transition is an issue for us in September 2015 when a number of learners will progress from first, primary and middle schools to secondary and high school settings. These transitions will be monitored to minimise any disruptive impact on progress.
54. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector cites Northumberland as an example of a Local Authority moving quickly in the right direction and this is encouraging news for our looked after children. For those who are in a school which is not yet good the Virtual School has a robust monitoring mechanism which is triggered promptly when the outcome of an inspection is known. School placement stability is the priority and a range of other factors are taken into consideration as the continued appropriateness of the placement is monitored. To date we have not moved a learner because of the Ofsted grade of a school, a decision justified by the outcomes for those learners. In 2014-15 there were looked after learners in 7 schools judged to be less than good. Data naturally varies from school to school, but those achieving at least expected progress ranged from 73 to 100%. The one school where progress dipped to 66% had some of our most challenging teenagers on roll. There is no correlation between achievement and the Ofsted grade of the school/academy.
55. The type of provision arranged for individual pupils is based on a multi-agency assessment of need, with schools and social workers being closely involved. Progress is a primary factor followed closely by emotional well-being and the content of the Care Plan. A placement which supports the stability of the home placement is prioritised.

56. We know that the length of time in care has an impact on achievement, however a pattern for 2015 is not evident due to the idiosyncratic character of the cohorts. Data from previous years does demonstrate a positive impact, for example in 2014 in Northumberland 62.5% (5 pupils) pupils gaining 5+A*-C including English and maths had been in care for seven to eight years with only 37.5% (3 pupils) achieving 5+A*-C including English and maths who had been in care for two years or less. This correlation is understood in Northumberland and affects the way school placements are planned.
57. Placement stability is affected by the number of looked after pupils who have special educational needs. In Northumberland, as nationally, there is a pattern emerging that those pupils with behavioural difficulties are more likely to have more placements than those with physical disabilities. Consequently, further consideration is being given to how we might best achieve placement stability for particularly vulnerable children, for example Looked After with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD).

KEY FOCUS 3 - Attendance and exclusions

58. It was a priority this year to improve attendance and reduce fixed term exclusions and our plans for delivery were outlined in the School Improvement Plan 2014-15. The VSH is also the Senior Manager for Alternative Education and this meant that the driver for improvement was the development of a county-wide strategy for inclusion ensuring that all pupils receive their entitlement to full time education. The importance of attendance has been raised with foster carers.
59. Every PEP has an attendance target which is monitored by ESLAC and Designated Teachers. Trends are identified quickly both on the PEP itself and by Designated Teachers. Monthly attendance data is collected from schools and action is taken as soon as attendance is less than 95%. For the target group whose attendance is less than 90% then fortnightly data is provided by schools and we work in partnership, with other services when necessary, to get individual back on track. The impact of this strategy is evident through the Virtual School's popular reward system, with over 130 learners receiving a reward for excellent attendance at school, over 21 of which were Platinum Awards for 100% attendance in all three terms.
60. Our looked after children, particularly our teenagers, still face significant challenges. Validated data to 2014 shows that overall absence for Looked After Children measured over 5 and 6 terms has a downward trend but is still above NE and England averages. The % of persistent absentees fell significantly from 2013-14 and is now below NE and England averages over 5 and 6 terms, but the statistical sample is too small for meaningful comparison over time. This figure is unacceptably high, although the individual cases are known well and the under-pinning reasons for absences.
61. Planning an engaging curriculum is an on-gong challenge – lack of choice for alternative provision, poor support from relative carers in some cases, complex social and emotional factors all contribute to this. The re-procurement of alternative providers is underway for 2016 (also the responsibility of the VSH), two new posts have been created in the Virtual School as 'inclusion trouble-shooters', multi-agency solution focussed approaches continue through integrated risk management processes. The placements of persistent absentees are monitored and reviewed fortnightly by the VSH and ESLAC team manager to ensure that targeted work by all relevant agencies is co-ordinated effectively.

62. Fixed term exclusions stayed the same from for the previous 2 years (validated data is lagged) but needs to reduce. We know that since September 2014 8 pupils are facing challenges in their school placements and have missed in excess of 10 sessions due to fixed term exclusions for disruptive and usually physical behaviour.
63. Changes for 2016 to minimise disruptions in learning have already been implemented, including a Key Stage 4 inclusion support worker to work intensively with a small group of targeted pupils who are persistent absentees. We know that young people need to be open to the support which is offered if the support is to be effective, and this new role will focus on developing emotional readiness for engagement in learning. The early impact of this work from September 2015 is very encouraging.

KEY FOCUS 4 - Alternative provision

64. The commissioning of alternative education provision for vulnerable learners is one of the wider responsibilities of the VSH which benefits our looked after learners – the 21 alternative providers on the Council's procurement framework are quality assured through the Virtual School and we are able to fast track looked after children into provision and act swiftly to intervene if placements become unstable. Relationships with those providers are very good.
65. In 2015 8 looked after learners attended alternative providers on a part time basis, and 1 learner attended full time. Integrated working with other professionals enables us to plan curriculum packages, often at short notice, to meet individual pupil needs. Always mindful of the need to plan an academic or vocational pathway into age 16+, alternative providers continue to play a crucial part in engaging and motivating our learners. 4 of our Year 11 learners attended alternative provision during Key Stage 4 and all of them progressed into further education from September, 1 with the same alternative provider. The attendance overall for Key Stage 4 for 3 of those learners averaged over 95%. However we do need to monitor more closely the rate of successful re-integration into mainstream settings and pathways into further training and employment for this group of pupils.
66. There has been a sharp increase during the last three years in the number of pupils attending an alternative provision, either on a full or part time basis. This has generally improved achievement and the evidence from 2015 demonstrates the value of alternative provision in creating vocational pathways Post 16. Pupils can achieve clusters of qualifications through carefully arranged programmes. Plans are underway to create our own Virtual School Pathways Provision to re-engage our most stubborn cohort of persistent absentees at Key Stage 4.

KEY FOCUS 5 - Children missing

67. We know who our children missing are and are able to use a persistent and often creative approach to find and engage them, working closely with the Children Missing from Education co-ordinator who is also a member of the VSH's management team. Unfortunately we are not always successful at engaging all CME in learning, but we never give up. During 2014-15 there were 3 looked after children missing from education, 2 were in Year 11 and one in Year 10. 1 learner had a statement and the Year 10 learner was given an EHCP during the year with a view to securing a special school place. All 3 learners had input from ESLAC, EOTAS, social care and other services and a range of options were provided for them including the offer of tuition, alternative providers and college. The 2 year 11 pupils gained no qualifications and the 14+ leaving care team is working with them to

engage in employment, education or training. Both are refusing to engage with professionals. The Year 10 learner is now in a secure residential placement.

68. Northumberland's 'Missing Out' Guidance recognises looked after children as an 'at risk' group and this protocol provides for fast track admission arrangements and specific procedures to monitor carefully their school attendance to take early action where a pattern of non-attendance is identified. The protocol provides for the monitoring of attendance by Education Welfare Officers who must alert ESLAC when a looked after child or young person has 5 consecutive days of absence or 5 days of absence in any school half-term period. On receiving the referral the ESLAC Team manager liaises with the child's Social Worker to decide if further action is needed. If action is required then a multi-agency meeting is convened within 5 working days, to include an Information, Advice and Guidance Personal Advisor if the child attends a high school.

KEY FOCUS 6 - Creating the right context

69. In Northumberland we want to keep looked after children safe from harm in environments where they feel safe to learn. We know that attitudes to learning and feeling safe have an impact on educational achievement.

Having someone whom they felt genuinely cared about them was very important to the young people in this study...Young people needed to feel that they would not be let down – which had been their past experience – and that their life mattered. It needed to matter to others before it mattered to them
[Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England p6]

70. Under-pinning all of our priorities as a Virtual School is a commitment to motivating our learners to plan for the future and our track record for raising aspirations is good. Key Stage 4 pupils participate in the Choices Together programme offered by Sunderland and Newcastle Universities, to raise aspirations and broaden their horizons by introducing them to the concept of higher education. For the third successive year Northumberland has enrolled the highest number of learners in the region on the Choices Together the programme which accounts for the steady increase in numbers progressing into school sixth forms and further or higher education. 20 pupils from the 2013 Year 11 cohort and 20 of the 2015 cohort are now in sixth forms or at college.

'You can reach your goals if you try'
Choices Together student

'It has given my foster child aspirations for his future. He has made new friends and built his confidence up. He has enjoyed every session.'
Foster Carer

71. Feedback from all participants on the programme indicates how inspired young people are by this offer of support into higher education. The percentage of students who strongly believed they would go to university one day increased from 61% before the programme to 79% after the programme.

72. We listened carefully to the voices of our looked after learners to implement a monitoring system for bullying incidents and gathered evidence for a Virtual School anti-bullying accreditation. This work involved the participation of young people in our residential homes, some of whom regard themselves as having been perpetrators of bullying incidents in the past. When the Council's new website is fully operational the monitoring system will go live online and we expect to report a positive impact described by our looked after children themselves for 2016. The Participation team collaborated with us to gather more robust pupil views on school behaviour policies, including triggers for pupils feeling unsafe. With schools we have started to investigate how to use SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties

Questionnaire) scores more effectively to support our learners and will develop this work for 2016.

73. As corporate parents we aspire to offer our looked after children the same opportunities to participate as their non-looked after peers evidenced by the impact of the Personal Education Allowance (PEA). The allowance is offered to individual looked after children through their schools and the PEP process or directly from the ESLAC team. In 2014-15 the allowance was used to fund education equipment, school trips, enrichment activities, laptops for Year 12 learners and books. Up to 43% was used to provide 1 to 1 tuition which has had a positive impact on achievement, although in future years this provision will be sustained through the Pupil Premium Plus grant. Thanks to the PEA over 99 of our learners have participated in the Letterbox scheme, a literacy programme for Year 3, 5 and 7 pupils. According to foster carers and the professional judgement of ESLAC workers there has been success in accelerating the reading age of participants, particularly for boys, even though the supplier has withdrawn the testing option which provided us with useful progress data in the past.
74. All looked after children in school settings are able to enjoy instrumental tuition from Northumberland's Music Service. No charge is made for instrument hire and tuition fees are subsidised. The number of looked after children participating in these lessons is monitored by the service to ensure that all barriers to accessing the tuition on a long term basis are removed and the service provides termly data to the Arts Council about the numbers of looked after children participating in their programmes. An action plan is in place to work in partnership with the Virtual School to develop provision. PEA funding is made available to Looked After Children who want to enjoy music lessons outside of their school setting. From 1st March 2015 to present the number of LAC receiving regular tuition is 16 and 12 children are involved in the music service programme First Access.

Our key priorities for 2015-16

..the intention is absolutely not to explain away failure by identifying factors that lead to underachievement. Rather, the aim is to provide all concerned – particularly virtual school heads and designated teachers, foster carers and social workers, and of course children and young people themselves – with the information necessary both to set accelerated targets for progression and achievement, and, vitally to provide the targeted support necessary to make these targets achievable.

[What's the relationship between being in care and the educational outcomes of children?.p6]

75. Northumberland's Virtual School aspires to compare with the best nationally and we think we have a unique model in place to achieve that ambition. The wider strategic role of the Virtual School Headteacher in the Education and Skills Service increases our capacity to act swiftly and intensively to properly support our looked after children, and secures sustained integrated working with social care. The VSH's position on the LSCB reinforces that safeguarding dimension and raises the profile of the Virtual School across partner agencies. The MALAP continues to act as the school's governing body with terms of reference agreed in December 2011, through which the VSH is accountable to the Corporate Parenting Panel.
76. We are proud of the achievements of our learners and our school set out in this annual report, which also demonstrates how we met the priorities of our school improvement plan 2014-15. Our priorities for continued improvement are already captured in the school improvement plan for 2015-16 and focus on closing gaps which are still too wide, engaging a hard core of persistent absentees onto a pathway into post-16 participation, promoting placement stability and using intelligence about social and emotional wellbeing to have a positive impact on achievement.
77. School Improvement plan priorities for 2015-16:
- a. deliver on Our Promise to our looked after children in relation to Priority 2 identified by Voices Making Choices (our Children in Care Council) - *Maintain placement stability for children in whatever placement they are in;*
 - b. reduce the number of Looked After Children who are persistent absentees to improve attendance and their engagement in full time education;
 - c. develop new and improve existing strategies to develop clear academic and vocational pathways of education provision for Looked After learners and Care Leavers to at least their 19th birthdays;
 - d. using an approach under-pinned by attachment and nurture principles, work collaboratively with schools/academies/alternative providers to better meet the social and emotional needs of our Looked After Children in education settings to improve their readiness to learn;
 - e. successfully revise assessment and tracking mechanisms which align with new arrangements in education settings so that we can effectively monitor the progress of Looked After learners through the revised National Curriculum and new GCSE courses.
78. This report is part of a continuous self-evaluation process involving:

- knowing our learners well;
- data sets, including those created by the Virtual School, relating to education achievement and safeguarding;
- feedback from looked after children and foster carers;
- a school improvement plan with targets and timescales;
- a multi-agency overview of emerging issues from MALAP;
- participation in the National Association of Virtual School Headteachers and North East Regional Network.

79. The VSH meets with the ESLAC team manager on a weekly basis to monitor those not receiving full time education, progress of pupils placed in requires improvement/inadequate schools or academies, quality assurance and completion rates of PEPs, case file audits, progress with transitions from statements to Education Health and Care Plans, Pupil Premium Plus agreements, progress through the School Improvement Plan, attendance and exclusions (including those at risk of exclusion). Half termly meetings take place with the ESLAC team to monitor progress of pupils in every year group.

80. The statutory status of the VSH role, changing roles and new posts in the ESLAC team and an increasing number of pupils - from 189 to 242 since 2012 and now including Early Years and Post-16 age groups – have accelerated the development of the Virtual School in a positive way. This momentum for change can also be sensed nationally from the newly established National Association of VSHs, a real interest from Ofsted in supporting VSHs to make a difference, the urgency of the ADCS to make sweeping changes to our national approach and attitudes to the education entitlement of children in care, the publication of long-awaited evidence based research to inform our work.