

ANNUAL REPORT

of the
Virtual
School
Headteacher



2021



Northumberland
County Council

We want the very best for our care-experienced children and young people. We want our children to tell us we are doing a good job and that they are doing their very best at school. We want them all to have clear academic or vocational pathways when they leave school so that their lives continue to improve and they feel a sense of belonging in their communities. We want schools and support services to see themselves as corporate parents and do a good job for their children in care.

JANE WALKER

Virtual School Headteacher

PROFILE OF PUPILS AGED 5 - 16

286

**Looked after
children**

448

**Previously
Looked after
children**

Male **52%**

48% Female

EHCP
31.5%

SEND
50%

SEND Support
18.5%

**Pupils attend
schools in
other local
authority areas**

69



1 PARENT
2 Pregnancies

Largest age group
14-16 years
Secondary
Aged Pupils

55%

91%

White British
0 unaccompanied
asylum seekers

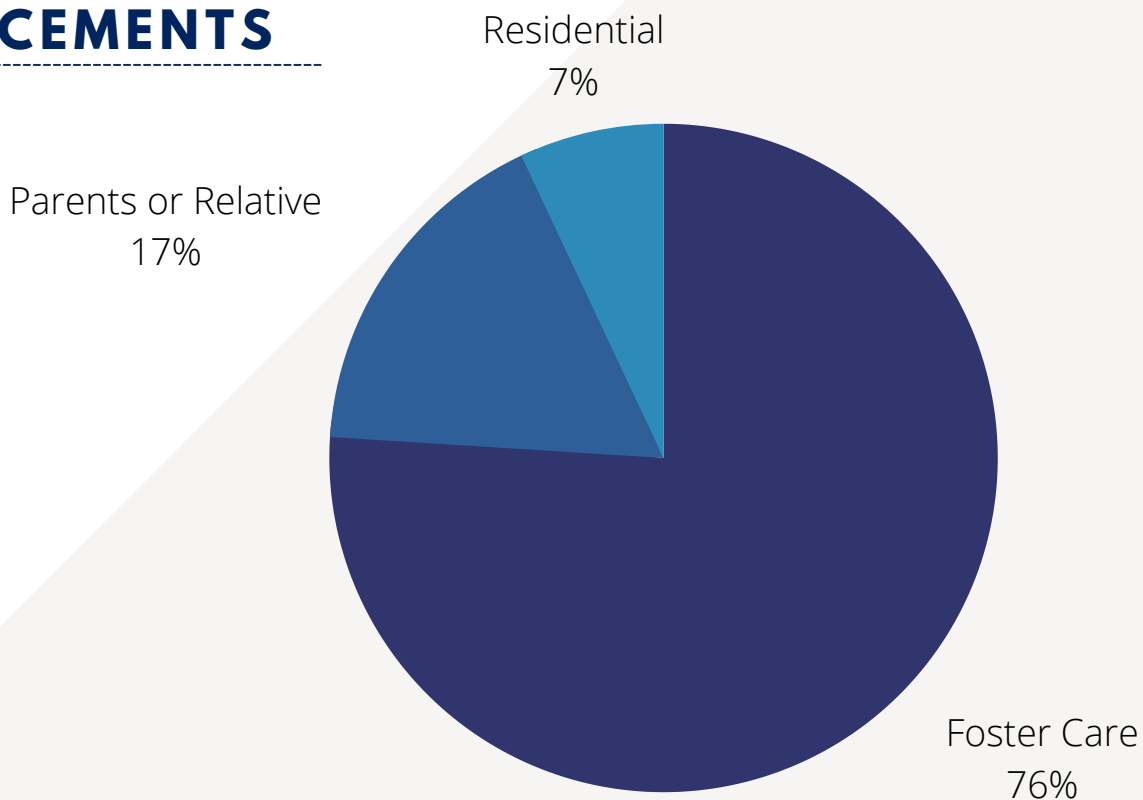
62

children
new to care



100
left care

PLACEMENTS



2021 HEADLINES

GOOD



No permanent exclusions

13th consecutive year



80%

Looked after children progressing into further education

92%

PEPs quality assured as green or amber

98%

PEP Completion

IMPROVING

33%

Achievement at Key Stage 4 - the basics!

51%

Looked After reviews aligned with EHCP reviews



Children missing education

75%

Pupils attending good and outstanding schools

33%

Year 11 Progressing to level 3 qualifications

NOT YET GOOD ENOUGH

91.1%

Overall attendance

21.6%

Persistent absence

94

mid-school moves for

81

pupils

Fixed term exclusions

35

Pupils

22

different schools

66

sessions lost

WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

COVID

On January 1, 2021 schools were closed to pupils again and a system of remote learning was put in place. Our two priorities were then to keep our children safe and to keep our children learning.

These are the interventions from the ESLAC team that worked:

- supported schools to maintain stability for the majority of looked after pupils
- from our Educational Psychologists
 - school training
 - drop ins
 - bereavement and loss support
- EMDR resourcing (eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing)
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy approaches
- ensured high quality education by ensuring that all pupils had an up to date laptop (provided by the Virtual School since 2017) and monitoring access to online learning provided by schools
- provided tuition, both online and face to face, and in class 1 to 1 support
- gave all children a 'back on track pack' when schools re-opened
- prioritised transition planning and support through ePEPs and with Designated Teachers for those children with a planned school move in September
- funded and monitored the use of Lexia licences
 - increased pupil usage by 60%
- prioritised planning for Year 11 progressing to education, training or employment Post 16
- careers advice drop-ins
- broadened multi-agency working to identify and meet needs as early as possible.

We re-structured the staffing in the ESLAC team to introduce a Deputy Virtual School Headteacher, who also fulfils the role of the Virtual School's SENDCO. Lead roles of Teacher, Educational Psychologist and Careers' Adviser were created to develop specific areas and responsibilities within the team, and Educational Psychology and careers' adviser capacity were increased.

With the right risk assessments in place, continued face to face working with children in schools, or at home if appropriate

143

Schools

Delivered 1:1 behaviour support intervention and emotional and mental health and wellbeing support

98

Pupils

Delivered Drawing and Talking therapeutic intervention

33

Pupils

WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

SEND

Improving the experience of looked after children with SEND was a priority.

- The post of SEN Lead Officer for Looked after children was created (based in the SEND Monitoring and Assessment Team, funded by the Virtual School), who works closely with the Deputy Virtual School Headteacher (fulfilling the role of Virtual School SENDCO).
- The Deputy Virtual School Headteacher now attends the SEND Panel and Early Years Inclusion Panel.
- PEP and EHCP reviews still took place during lockdown so that Designated Teachers in 'new' schools could understand and prepare to meet our children's needs as soon as they arrived in September 2021.
- An improvement in PEP outcomes aligned with EHCP outcomes was achieved through the PEP quality assurance process.
- Educational Psychologists worked with Designated Teachers to develop child centred approaches to assessment, planning and review processes.
- There was an increase in the number of children entering care with unidentified and therefore unmet special educational needs. We supported schools to refer 13 pupils for statutory assessment when they entered care.
- Good progress was made to deliver on the action plan from the 2020 multi-agency themed audit – what it's like to be a looked after child with SEND in Northumberland – addressing 4 main themes:
 1. Looked after children with SEND are recognised as a priority group
 2. Timeliness of decision making
 3. Voice of the child
 4. Information sharing
- Work started to improve education, training and employment opportunities for Care Leavers with SEND - part of the Care Leavers' Covenant that has leadership from the Virtual School.

8

Basics

Outcomes at GCSE were good, with 8 of the 15 children achieving the Basics having SEND including

3

with EHCP plans.

1

pupil with an EHCP plan achieved the Basics at grade 5+.

An improvement to 51% of Looked After reviews were aligned with EHCP reviews.

51%

Reviews

WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

PUPIL PREMIUM PLUS

In 2020-21 our total Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) budget was £755 090. In line with our PP+ policy we retained £850 from each grant of £2345 and used that centrally held funding of £273 700 to provide:



Staffing - Educational Psychologists for looked after and previously looked after children, Virtual School teachers, Careers' advisers, SEND Lead Officer for Looked after children, data support



Crisis funding for pupils with high level and complex needs in unstable school placements



Additional support, including 1 to 1 tuition for Year 11 pupils



Thrive approach attachment training (childhood and adolescent) for Designated Teachers and foster carers; Thrive licences for trained practitioners



Development of globalbridge careers' portal for looked after children and care leavers



Laptops for looked after children



ePEP development



Education resources eg licences for Britannica and Lexia



Rewards for pupils- including Expert Learner, progress and attendance.

Schools were allocated a maximum of £1450 of the DfE allocation of £2345 for each eligible pupil and dependent on the quality of the pupil's PEP. Schools received a total of £417,023 during the financial year. The funding was used by schools to support the outcomes for pupils recorded in their individual PEPs. The disruption in education means that it is not possible this year to meaningfully evaluate the impact of PP+ received by schools on the academic achievement of pupils. However, individual stories of success and the difference that PP+ made is captured in the good quality PEPs.

Early years settings in Northumberland received pupil premium for 72 pre-school children (ages 3 and 4) and used the funding to accelerate their development in preparation for school. Plans are underway to assess the impact of this pupil premium on the school readiness of

WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

STABILITY

As might be expected during a global pandemic, stability in education for looked after children was adversely affected. There were record numbers of mid-year school moves, fixed term exclusions, persistent absentees and numbers of school age children moving in and out of care. Inevitably this had an impact on pupil wellbeing.

This is what we did to maintain stability:

- We worked closely with Family Placement and children’s social care to reduce the number of placement moves and were closely involved in permanence planning. This meant that we could also influence planned moves out of county. Overall stability for looked after children was monitored closely at a strategic level.
- Where school moves were taking place we liaised with both schools and care teams to ensure that joint meetings took place, new schools could meet the needs of children, listened to pupil voice, and if possible provided support to ensure moves were smooth and stability achieved in the new placement.
- With MALAP partners, we reviewed our use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and are now implementing a process that includes this assessment tool in annual reviews.
- The Thrive attachment approach is fully embedded and we piloted the new Thrive senior leadership training.
- In addition to our usual work with pupils, schools and providers to improve engagement and find alternatives to exclusion, we funded holiday clubs, held a lottery funded summer camp at our local forest school Stomping Ground and introduced Educational Psychology drop-in clinics to support Designated Teachers working with looked after children in challenging circumstances.
- The introduction of a new live attendance form in the ePEP has meant that we can monitor individual pupils more closely and provide swifter interventions when needed.
- With the Early Years service, we have access to the Early Years school readiness passports for looked after children, so that we are aware from an earlier age if additional support is needed when children transition to Year 1.

66

Total Fixed term exclusions

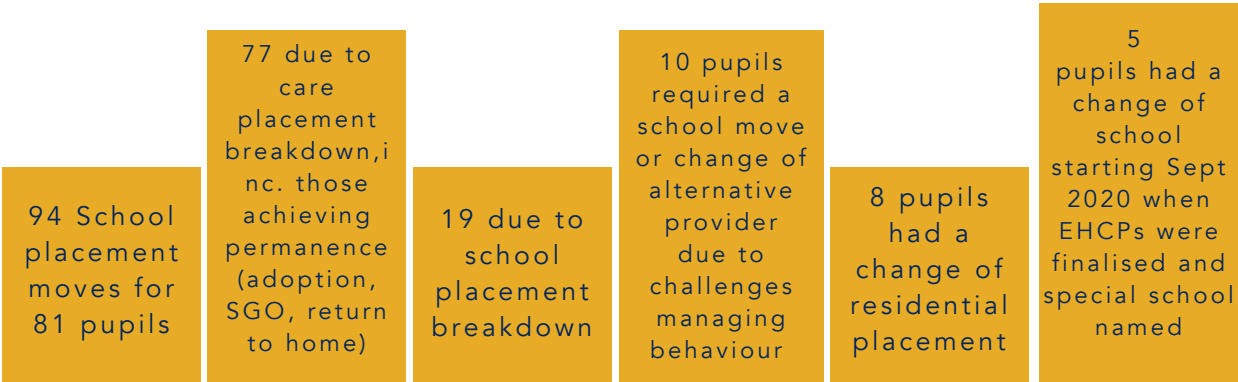
35

Number of pupils

22

Schools using exclusions

School placement moves



WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

CORPORATE PARENTING

This year the Virtual School Headteacher and Senior Manager for Northumberland Adolescent Services worked with the Service Director for Children's Social Care to launch a whole council approach to corporate parenting. This initiative is supported and directed by the council's Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Advisory Group and is a priority for improvement for the Lead Member for Children's Services.

- On-line training and face to face training packages have been developed to support all council services to write a Promise to our looked after children and care leavers.
- Corporate parenting is being promoted through the council's social values in procurement policy and Economic Inclusion and Skills Forum.
- The Care Leavers' Covenant was in place for the fourth year and through partnership working this continued to have a positive impact on getting more care leavers into education, training and employment. The covenant is now part of the council's corporate parenting strategy and continues to have management oversight from the Virtual School Headteacher through the newly formed Corporate Parenting Management Group.
- Founded in Northumberland, the digital platform globalbridge is working with education and industry across the UK to connect talent to opportunity on academic and vocational pathways into education, training and employment. The Virtual School worked with globalbridge and the council's digital team to create a secure area on the platform for care leavers where they can create their own 'e-portfolio' to evidence their knowledge, character, skills and achievements. This resource was delivered through our Care Leavers' Covenant and went live in September 2021.

MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

We have achieved greater breadth and depth in our multi-agency working and this is having a positive impact on outcomes for children.

- We are participating in regional work with Virtual Schools and Adopt North East, and now attend the adoption panel as well as the foster panel.
- Integrated work with the Youth Justice Service (through Northumberland Adolescent Services) has significantly reduced the criminalisation of looked after children, and this is evident for all ages including Post 16.
- Our relationship with foster carers and the Family Placement Service was galvanized during the pandemic and we now enjoy a fully integrated and mutually supportive working relationship. The Virtual School arranged drop-in sessions about covering careers guidance and support with learning; to improve communication we contributed regularly to the Foster Carers' newsletter and Family Placement newsletter; we also facilitated training sessions from Roar, Britannica, Educational Psychologists, Thrive, Lexia and Night Zoo Keeper (writing resource).

Training and practice updates provided to:

Designated Teachers

Children's Social Care Locality Teams

Residential Homes

Schools

Alternative Providers

Corporate Parents

WHAT WE DID DIFFERENTLY

PUPIL VOICE

With the Designated Teacher Working Group the pupil voice section of the ePEP was reviewed, with supporting resources to help schools to have meaningful conversations with children. The new page gives all professionals with access to the ePEP an insight into each pupil and their views of their experiences of school, and also monitors the responses of adults to what they say.

The Virtual School has invested in Widgit for all Designated teachers, an inclusion tool for children to help them to express their views visually. It is designed for those who are non-communicative or who avoid engaging in conversation as part of the PEP process.

The resource has been made available to all schools.

Mainly through Educational Psychology consultations, the Virtual School has supported the implementation of the Signs of Safety practice model, and in doing so has listened to the views of our children.

"I need support for my thinking styles and anxiety. I really enjoy school and want to do well so that I can go to university."

Pupil



We listened and a Virtual School teacher asked the school to arrange a quiet room for the pupil to work in. He told us that made a difference.

"Sometimes I feel unsafe when there are too many people around me and too much carry on."

Pupil



We listened and a Virtual School Educational Psychologist worked with the pupil on effective study methods, learning styles and metacognitive techniques.





This has been an extraordinary year with much to celebrate but also many new challenges to overcome. We made progress with our priorities for improvement (in year 1 of a 2-year plan) with the majority of our 'headlines' already good or improving, and a clear understanding of what we need to prioritise for next year.

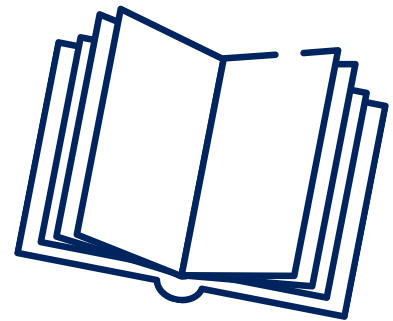
The education achievement of Northumberland's looked after children improves when they enter care, and the highest achievers are those who have been in care the longest. 80% of our pupils who achieved 5+ GCSEs with grades 9 – 5 had been in care for at least 3 years.

KEY STAGES 1 TO 3

Pupils are getting back on track, although some are finding that more difficult than others and realistically it will take some time before pupils close the gaps in their learning caused by the pandemic and start to make real progress towards achieving their potential.

In Years 3, 5 and 7 the proportion of looked after children working in their age-related curriculum was either as good as or better than last year. However, in all other year groups there are fewer children working in their age-related curriculum than last year (in reading, writing, English and Maths), attributed to the continued disruption to learning since September 2020. There is a noticeable weakness in writing. There is an urgent need to get pupils back on track as soon as possible.

Our actions during the year have already started to have an impact. The Virtual School increased pupil usage of Lexia by 60%, which meant that more children have been able to access this excellent programme to improve their reading levels. Those who regularly used the programme saw reading improve by at least one level, some have increased by two levels.



KEY STAGE 4

For the third consecutive year achievement at GCSE continued to improve and has almost tripled since 2019. 33% of pupils achieved grade 4+ in the Basics (English and Maths) and a record 7 pupils achieved the Basics at grade 5+. More pupils are in good and outstanding schools and benefited from being awarded centre assessment grades rather than taking exams. The 14 pupils in alternative provision also achieved well.



Improved outcomes in the Basics means that more young people are continuing in education and have accessed higher level qualifications, particularly at level 3. To sustain and improve on this, we need to get the numbers of children following their age-related curriculum in Key Stages 1 to 3 back to pre-pandemic levels or better.

We need to work with schools to change this pattern by Year 9 to prevent it from becoming a barrier to pupils accessing English and Maths GCSE and potentially resulting in underachievement by the end of Year 11. It also remains our priority to retain young people in their chosen post 16 pathway to improve the education, training and employment rates at age 17 (currently 76%) and age 18 (currently 54%).



Even though GCSE results improved since last year, there were challenging circumstances for the Year 11 cohort that required consistently high levels of support from the ESLAC team, Designated Teachers and multi-agency partners. Until 1st January 2021 pupils expected to be taking GCSE exams in the summer so the school closure and remote learning for the Spring Term was unexpected and not a substitute for in-school teaching and contact with adults. With 45 pupils (37 entered for at least one GCSE) this was the largest ever Year 11 cohort that the Virtual School has experienced. 11 pupils entered care during Key Stage 4, 2 having been previously permanently excluded from school, so achieving stability that would have a positive impact on achievement was a challenge. Well done to the 4 pupils entering care in Year 11 who did achieve the Basics.

POST 16

The destinations of our school leavers into further education and level 3 courses, and the continued success of those engaged in higher education demonstrates that we are providing the right support to develop meaningful pathways for school leavers into education, training and employment. Achievements at all post-16 stages are at record levels in Northumberland!

91%

91% of the 2021 Year 11 school leavers are in education, training and employment which is an improvement since last year. 4 young people are NEET but are planning pathways with our careers' advisers and will engage with EET when their current circumstances change.

80% of the cohort progressed to further education with an increase to 15 pupils following Level 3 courses, which is a third of this large and complex cohort! A record breaking 9 care leavers are studying A-levels or a combination of A-levels and BTECs.

80%

Two care leavers completed their A-Levels and will progress to university and an NHS supported internship. 3 care leavers have followed and completed Level 3 courses and are progressing into employment. 2 care leavers completed their degrees and are progressing to employment as a nursery nurse (prior to training as a teacher) and a social worker with Manchester Council and 2 care leavers completed their Masters' degrees.

FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNING

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

Even though the numbers of children moving in and out of care was fluid and started to fall, there has been a rise in the number of children of statutory school age coming into care, particularly at age 14 to 16. For many children their behaviour has been more challenging due to instability, circumstances and typically the children not managing change well.

This put pressure on our resources and our Designated Teachers and made us think differently about some aspects of our service delivery.

We have a good understanding of the reasons why school placements are not as stable as we want them to be and are confident that the actions underway will have a positive impact in the new academic year if there is no further disruption to education caused by the pandemic. Better involvement with placement planning and working with schools to reduce fixed term exclusions have mitigated the full impact of disruption and provide us with a firm basis for further improvement.

PRIORITY

It remains a priority to reduce the number of fixed term exclusions, mid-year school moves and rates of persistent absence from school. For Northumberland's pupil population there has been a reduction in fixed-term exclusions, however for looked after children there has been a significant rise compared to last year that puts our looked after children at a further disadvantage and potentially increases their risk and vulnerability when not in school.

REACTIVE

There has been an increase in emotion-based school avoidance. Our looked after children coped well in smaller class sizes during lockdown but found it difficult to readjust to the return of full classes. This often presented as extreme behaviour due to previous experiences and an inability to self-regulate. The ESLAC team had to be reactive in responding to requests for support and overcome the barriers to strong relationship building in the context of social distancing. This is reflected in the increase in fixed term exclusions and is a priority for next year

SUPPORT & MOMENTUM

Our Educational Psychologists are in high demand and were able to develop more attachment aware and trauma informed schools through delivery of a comprehensive training programme and continued investment in Thrive.

This gained momentum in partnership with C.A.R.E. Northumberland and the strategic transformational work of Be You. Through the extended duty of Virtual School Headteachers to promote the education of children with a social worker, we will build on this momentum as a priority next year.



C.A.R.E.
NORTHUMBERLAND
Caring about Adversity, Resilience and Empowerment



Be you

Children with special educational needs and disabilities are getting a better experience, thanks to the investment in expertise and productive integrated working with partners, driven by the themed audit action plan. Despite the challenges, the increase in pupils with EHCPs (and reduction of pupils with SEND/K code) indicates our successful drive to identify and meet needs.

The impact of the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding held centrally by the Virtual School is positive. The investment in educational psychology, teachers and careers' guidance is demonstrated by pupil progress, destinations at 16 and the consistent growth in the numbers of young people in further and higher education. The largest proportion of centrally held PP+ is invested in staffing, and the impact of this is evident through the range of interventions we deliver and our highly valued educational psychology work.

Evaluating the impact of the grant dispersed to schools will be a priority next year to ensure good value for money and the effectiveness of our Pupil Premium Plus policy. Some PEPs do not record well enough the issues faced by pupils, particularly those most affected by the disruption to learning, and this will be evaluated against the use of PP+ to meet those needs effectively.

There is convincing evidence that positive working relationships exist with schools.

Maintaining the 13 year record of no permanent exclusions for looked after children is testament to the strength of our partnership working. Managed moves and alternative provision can sometimes be the solution to avoid permanent exclusion, but this is always needs led and child centred with a focus on engagement with education.



PRIORITIES FOR 2022

- 1 Fulfil the new duty for Virtual School Headteachers to promote the education of children with a social worker.
- 2 Achieve better stability in school placements.
- 3 Improve retention of care leavers in education, training and employment.
- 4 Ensure that progress is back on track so that more pupils are able to access their age-related curriculum.
- 5 Develop attachment aware and trauma informed schools.
- 6 Provide leadership for a whole council approach to corporate parenting.
- 7 Improve outcomes for looked after children and care leavers with SEND.

A NOTE ABOUT DATA

The data used in this report is local to Northumberland and quality assured by the Data Unit and Virtual School. Due to the global pandemic exams and assessments were cancelled again this summer. Pupils in Year 11 and those following post-16 courses received results using centre assessment grades calculated by their teachers.

There is no official summative achievement data for other year groups and the DfE will not be collecting, validating or publishing regional and national data for comparison. Schools, and Virtual Schools, are not required to report on or publish achievement data this year, including for Year 11.

USEFUL REFERENCES

1. Northumberland Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021 refresh
2. National Association of Virtual School Headteachers, www.navsh.org.uk
3. Understanding progress in the 2020/21 academic year Interim findings January 2021 DfE
4. Care leavers' experiences of support during the Covid-19 pandemic Executive Summary March 2021 (Anglia Ruskin University)

	2021		2020		2019	
	Local data, not validated		Local data, not validated			
	No of pupils	%	No of pupils	%	No of pupils	%
KS4, the basics	45	33	28	29	26	12
Year 11 EET	45	91	28	86	30	85
Further Education (Yrs 12 & 13)	31	63	28	75	30	70
A Levels/Level 3	5	100	5	100	3	100
Higher Education	2	100	4	100	5	80
Total Absence	286	8	298	9	168	7
Persistent Absence	71	25	47	17	18	9
Fixed term exclusions	35 pupils 66 exc 22 schools	12	28 pupils 53 exc 21 schools	9	18 pupils 41 exc 12 schools	7
Permanent exclusions	286	0	298	0	168	0
Good & outstanding schools	286	75	298	69	168	63
Mid-year school moves	94	25	48	17	29	11
PEP Completion	286	98	298	72	194	73

DISCLAIMER

The information provided in this publication is, to the best of our knowledge, accurate at the time of production. Data sources are available upon request.

OTHER FORMATS

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If you are Deaf or can't speak on the phone, contact us using Relay UK. Download the Relay UK app or using your existing text phone prefix our dedicated text Relay number: 018001 01670 623 515. British Sign Language users can contact us using an online sign language interpreting service: northumberlandcc-cs.signvideo.net

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