

The Role of Virtual Schools

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a Virtual School Headteacher and what is their role?

The role of the Virtual School Headteacher (VSHT), and the Virtual School team, is to promote the education of children and young people in care and previously in care, and to ensure that the local authority's statutory duties in this area are discharged effectively.

The role has been statutory since 2014, and the Department for Education also published statutory guidance in that year, since updated, which outlines the role of the designated teacher for children in care (CiC) and previously in care in schools, and the duties that schools need to be aware of around this critical role ([DfE, 2018](#)).

All England local authorities have this role in place.

The central work of the VSHT is to support improvements in the educational progress and attainment of all CiC, including those that have been placed in schools in other local authority (LA) areas. This means that they work in partnership with regional/national and/or VSHT in other LAs to support the educational progress of children who are in their schools but looked after by other LAs. A VSHT will oversee the academic progress of their children in care across a large number of schools, in and out of their LA. The work of the Virtual School is carried out as if the cohort were in a single school.

The key areas of responsibility for the VSHT in relation to the CiC cohort include:

- Ensure that there is a system to track and monitor the attainment and progress of CiC.
- Ensure that all CiC have high-quality and effective personal education plans (PEPs) and access appropriate interventions.
- Champion the educational needs of all CiC across the LA and those placed in other schools/local authorities.

2. What children and young people do Virtual School Headteachers work with?

The role of the Virtual School Headteacher became a statutory role for local authorities across England at the direction of Edward Timpson, the Children's Minister, in 2013. This role was created to champion the education of all CiC within the local authority and to address the considerably lower educational performance of children in care compared to their peers.

The role was extended to provide advice and information for previously looked-after children (PLAC) to key adults, schools and professionals.

In 2021, the DfE announced funding and published [non-statutory guidance](#) (DfE, 2021) to extend the role of the VSHT to all children with a social worker, and those who have ever had a social worker to enable the more vulnerable children in every local authority can benefit from the support and leadership of a VSHT.

3. Why has the Virtual School Head Teacher role been extended?

The [extended role and guidance](#) covers “all children who were assessed as needing a social worker at any time due to safeguarding and/or welfare reasons, which includes all those subject to a Child in Need plan or a Child Protection plan. This includes children aged from 0 up to 18 in all education settings”.

This decision to extend the role was informed by the government’s Children in Need review (DfE, 2019), which highlighted how poor the educational outcomes of children with social workers could be.

It showed that children who needed a social worker tended to fall behind their peers at every stage of education. By the time they arrive at 16, pupils who had a social worker in the year of their GCSEs were around half as likely to achieve a “strong” pass in English and maths than their peers, and three times less likely to go on to study A levels, and almost five times less likely to enter higher education.

This provides the VSHT with the strategic leadership role to champion the educational attendance, attainment, and progress of children with a social worker. This means that the VSHT will be:

- making visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities, including with children’s social care, to help all agencies hold high aspirations for these children.
- promoting practice that supports children’s engagement in education, recognising that attending an education setting can be an important factor in helping to keep children safe from harm.
- levelling up children’s outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child has the opportunity to reach their potential. This will include helping to ensure that children with a social worker benefit from support to recover educationally from the impact of the pandemic.

4. What resources do Virtual School Head Teachers have available?

The VSHTs are responsible for managing pupil premium plus funding for the children they look after and for allocating it to schools and alternative provision (AP) settings.

An individual VSHT is responsible for the effective allocation of this Pupil Premium Plus Grant (PP+). This is provided for all children of a statutory age in care to that authority and is not a personal budget but is used to improve their outcomes. There will be a PP+ Policy for each Virtual School.

The VSHTs are also responsible for managing the early years pupil premium supporting children in early years providers that educate looked-after children (children in local authority care) who are taking up the free early education entitlement for 3 or 4 year-olds.

More recently, the PP+ grant has been introduced for post-16 CiC.

A school will receive the PP+ grant for each individual, previously looked-after child that has been identified on the last census return for their school.

There is no PP+ for children with social workers.

5. How might a VSHT help a school headteacher?

The Virtual School Head Teacher has a unique position within a LA. They not only will 'bridge' education (including SEND) and social care but will also be linked with health and the criminal justice system. The engagement of the Virtual Head Teachers with all schools, regardless of status, will help to maximise the connectivity of the range of services available for some of our most vulnerable learners.

6. What is not in scope for Virtual School Head Teachers?

The VSHT role for children with a social worker is a strategic leadership responsibility and they are not expected to:

- work directly with individual children and their families - including tracking and monitoring of individual educational progress, providing academic or other interventions.
- respond to requests from parents or carers to offer advice, intervention, and support in relation to individual children with a social worker.
- take responsibility for children with SEND who do not require or need a social worker, as defined above.

7. What quality of education should a CiC attend?

A CiC should normally be enrolled at a school that has an Ofsted grade of 'good' or better. In some cases it may be in the interests of the child or young person to attend a school that has not been rated in this way.

It is essential that the Virtual School Head Teacher is fully involved in the discussions that are held if the school is not 'good' or better.

8. Why might a school work with more than one Virtual School?

The children and young people that are in care to any one local authority might not all reside in that area. There can be as much as 40% of the VS CiC cohort who reside across a number of local authorities and schools. This may mean that a school could have a number of CiC from a number of LAs/VS.

The reasons for this are diverse and could include reasons such as availability of foster carers, education settings to meet need, or safeguarding arrangements.

9. Are all Virtual Schools the same?

There are 150 VS across England, all with differing cohort numbers, internal organisational and financial arrangements and approaches. The number of young people in care and the local authority context are variables that affect the number of staff employed and the roles they hold.

They have a very common purpose in their work and have a national voice via the National Association of Virtual School Headteachers (NAVSH).

NAVSH are organised into regions, where the local VSHT work collaboratively to support their cohorts. The regions are: East, East Midlands, London, North West, North East, South, South East, South West, West Midlands and Yorkshire & Humberside.

10. What DfE guidance supports the VSHT?

The DfE has published, and regularly updates, a number of key guidance documents around the role of the Virtual School, including:

- promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children
- keeping children safe in education 2023
- the designated teacher for looked after and previously looked after children
- promoting the education of children with a social worker: virtual school head role extension

11. What do the acronyms mean?

There are a number of acronyms that are regularly referred to around the work of Virtual Schools. These include:

CiC – children in care (also referred to as CLA, LAC)

CiN – children in need

CLA – children looked after

CP – children on protection plans

CWSW – children with social workers

EY – Early Years

LA – local authority

LAC – looked-after children

PP+ - Pupil Premium Plus Grant/Funding

PEP – personal education plan

VSHT – Virtual School Head Teacher

12. How can contact be made with a VSHT?

All LAs have a Virtual School Headteacher so this would be the first port of call.

In the event this is not possible, please contact:

[National Association of Virtual School Headteachers](#) (NAVSH)

e-mail: info@navsh.org.uk

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