

# UK report highlights vital contribution of 'virtual schools' for children in care

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A new study highlights the vital contribution of 'virtual schools' for children in care and recommends ten ways to improve their educational outcomes.

The research, by the University of Exeter and the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), shows strong disparities in progress and attainment for [children](#) in care depending on where they live. They found these differences are not driven by neighborhood deprivation but by patchy distribution of school places, confused funding policies and variable regulation.

As a result, some virtual schools have difficulty in ensuring stable attendance at school, with some [local schools](#) actively resisting the admission of children in care or being unwilling to accommodate their needs.

The [virtual school](#) is the team within each local authority tasked with supporting learning for children in care. Virtual schools have existed across England since 2014 and play a key role in advocating for [young people](#), liaising with schools and delivering learning opportunities. They are usually led by a former school headteacher, with a role to monitor and improve educational outcomes, advocate for young people and provide additional learning opportunities.

All [local authorities](#) are required to have a virtual school, but there is no detail within the statutory guidance on how they should operate. This means differences around the country in resourcing, their position with organizations, professional networks and leadership. The effectiveness of virtual schools was also impacted by differences in the stability of funding and the virtual school head's relationships with key decision-makers.

[The report](#) was authored by Dr. Neil Harrison (University of Exeter), Professor Judy Sebba (University of Oxford), Dr. Marc Wigley (University of Oxford), Rachael Pryor (NAVSH) and Fay Blyth (NAVSH). The team interviewed key stakeholders, held focus groups with virtual school heads and analyzed government data about local

authorities and their virtual schools.

Dr. Harrison said, "We knew that children in care in some areas attain twice as highly as those in others at Key Stage 4, but we didn't really know why. Through this study, we found that the proportion of children in care regularly missing school varied from 7 percent to 21 percent between different local authorities. This obviously has a huge impact on their scope to progress and gain qualifications.

"When we dug deeper, this was often down to difficulties with finding and securing school places. While this was an issue everywhere, it was much more marked in areas where schools were actively resistant to accepting children in care or where there was a shortage of specialist places for young people with profound needs around trauma or mental health."

Matthew Cooke, Chair of NAVSH, said, "Children in care are meant to be the highest priority for school admissions. While there are many cases of partnerships working effectively, it can sometimes be a real struggle—some schools are extremely reluctant as they believe a young person will be challenging. The result can be lengthy bureaucratic wrangles, and all the while the young person is missing out on their learning. Some schools are also too quick to seek exclusion, despite alternative options being available, which starts the cycle over again."

The report reinforces recent recommendations from the Children's Commissioner who asked for schools and school governors be given extended corporate parenting responsibilities and local authorities to be given powers to streamline and enforce admissions for children in care.

The report also found that contradictory regulations around [special educational needs](#) funding leave many children in care without the learning support they need, sometimes for several months while disputes

between local authorities are resolved. This issue has been heightened lately by the shortage of care placements for young people, which leads to more being housed further afield.

The [report](#) makes ten key recommendations to the Department for Education and other organizations for effective virtual schools around: stable planning horizons, parity of status and pay, timely school admissions, coherent SEND support, informed practitioners, engagement with Ofsted inspections, developing Personal Education Plan practice, adequate care placements, high-quality special and alternative provision, and stronger trauma-informed and attachment-aware practices.

Mr. Cooke said, "The study also reveals the inconsistent involvement of Ofsted in regulating the education of children in care. In some areas, they are proactive and well-informed, but in other areas their involvement with key professionals is marginal. We think that Ofsted should be meeting regularly with virtual school heads and increasing the focus on children in care within school inspections."

Dr. Harrison said, "We need a system where children in care are supported to flourish in school, to give them a strong springboard for their adult life. Our research shows this is not happening reliably enough. Virtual schools play a vital role in advocating for young people, but their hands are tied by insufficient [school](#) places, inconsistent regulation and resistant admissions policies."

Judith McNeill, CEO of the KPMG Foundation, said, "The KPMG Foundation is proud to have supported this research and believes that the findings will be immensely valuable to policymakers, practitioners and regulators. Most of all we hope that it will make a meaningful difference for children, so that their experiences and outcomes in education are the best they can be."

**More information:** Report: [education.exeter.ac.uk/research ...  
ect/index.php?id=739](https://education.exeter.ac.uk/research/index.php?id=739)

Provided by University of Exeter

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