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**University of Southampton**

Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences

School of Psychology

**How Professionals Support the Education of Care Experienced Children in England,  
Including Those on the Autism Spectrum**

by

**Lynn De La Fosse**

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Thesis for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology

June 2022



# University of Southampton

## **Abstract**

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How Professionals Support the Education of Care Experienced Children in England,  
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This thesis contributes to the growing literature around how educational professionals support care experienced children and young people in England, including those on the autism spectrum. There is a long history of care experienced children underachieving compared to their peers. Government policies and initiatives have been put in place in England to improve outcomes, and my thesis focused on two statutory initiatives: the designated teacher for looked after and previously looked after children, and the Virtual School model. A systematic literature review was conducted to explore how the Virtual School promotes multi-agency working to improve outcomes for looked after children. In total, 13 articles were included for review. The findings highlighted that multi-agency working is central to the operation of the Virtual School, who support both academic and non-academic outcomes through training, information-sharing, attendance at multi-agency meetings, contributing towards statutory processes, holding schools accountable for children's educational progress, working to reduce exclusions, and funding additional interventions. The literature review also highlighted barriers to effective multi-agency working, such as poor communication between professionals, lack of role fulfilment, and working relationships with looked after children. The findings were discussed in relation to the three principles outlined by Atkinson and colleagues in 2007. The empirical research paper focused on the role of designated teachers. Autistic care experienced children are likely to have particularly poor outcomes within this already vulnerable population, so my research had an additional focus on designated teachers' experiences of supporting this group of learners. Various facilitators and barriers to role fulfilment were identified by the designated teachers, including multi-agency working and the impact of competing roles and responsibilities. None of the participants reported experiences of supporting a looked after or previously looked after child with a formal diagnosis of autism. Participants were generally confident in their abilities to support this unique population of learners, but identified potential challenges, such as difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs. Taken together, the systematic literature review and the empirical research paper identified implications for a range of educational professionals, and also highlighted a number of prime areas for future research.

Kew words: Virtual School; designated teacher; looked after; care experienced; autism; attachment



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## Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: LYNN DE LA FOSSE

Title of thesis: How Professionals Support the Education of Care Experienced Children in England,  
Including those on the Autism Spectrum

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me  
as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature: ..... Date: 20.06.2022 .....



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# Abbreviations and Definitions

## List of Abbreviations

ACEs .....	Adverse childhood experiences
APA.....	American Psychiatric Association
ASD .....	Autism spectrum disorder
BPS .....	British Psychology Society
CEC .....	Care experienced child / children
CIC .....	Child / children in care
CLA .....	Child / children looked after
Covid-19 .....	SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV) coronavirus
DfE.....	Department for Education
DfEE.....	Department for Education and Employment
DfES.....	Department for Education and Skills
DoH .....	Department of Health
DSED.....	Disinhibited social engagement disorder
DSM-V .....	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5 <sup>th</sup> Edition)
DT .....	Designated teacher
EHCP.....	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP .....	Educational Psychologist
ERIC .....	Education Resources Information Centre
FOI .....	Freedom of Information
GCSE .....	General Certificate of Secondary Education
ICD-11.....	International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (11 <sup>th</sup> Edition)
ILP.....	Individual Learning Plan
JORSEN .....	Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs
LA .....	Local Authority

## Abbreviations and Definitions

LAC .....	Looked after child / children
MMAT .....	Mixed Methods Assessment Tool
NAVSH.....	National Association of Virtual School Heads
NICE .....	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
Ofsted .....	Office for Standards in Education
PEP .....	Personal Education Plan
PLAC.....	Previously looked after child / children
PP+ .....	Pupil Premium Plus
PRISMA .....	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
RAD .....	Reactive attachment disorder
SDQ.....	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SEMH .....	Social-emotional and mental health
SENCO .....	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND .....	Special educational needs and / or disabilities
SSI .....	Social Services Inspectorate
UASC .....	Unaccompanied asylum-seeking child / children
VSAT.....	Virtual School advisory teacher
VSH.....	Virtual School Head
WHO .....	World Health Organisation

## Definitions of Key Terms

Adverse childhood experiences .....	Highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and / or adolescence. These experiences encompass various forms of physical and emotional abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction.
Axiology.....	The philosophical study of value, including the values held by a researcher and their influence on the research process.
Care experienced child.....	A term used throughout this thesis to refer collectively to looked after and previously looked after children and, where relevant, care leavers.
Care leaver .....	A young person aged 16-25 who is / was looked after by a Local Authority for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, including on or after their 16 <sup>th</sup> birthday.
Epistemology.....	The philosophical study of knowledge and how it is created or constructed.
Looked after child .....	A child or young person who is: in the care of a Local Authority pursuant to a care order or a placement order, or who is provided with accommodation by a local authority under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 for a continuous period of more than 24 hours.
Ontology.....	The philosophical study of the nature of being, which concerns what things exist or can be said to exist.
Positivism .....	A philosophy which relies on empirical evidence and accepts only knowledge which can be gained and proved through observation (the senses), including measurement.
Previously looked after child.....	A child or young person who is no longer looked after by a local authority because they are subject to an adoption, special guardianship or child arrangements order.

## Abbreviations and Definitions

Reflexivity .....	Consideration of the researcher's own values, judgements, beliefs and actions, and how these may have impacted on the research process.
Social constructionism.....	A philosophy that sits at the subjectivist end of the positivist-subjectivist continuum and which posits that knowledge is created through social interactions.
Subjectivism.....	A philosophy which posits that knowledge is subjective and that there is no objective reality or truth.
Unaccompanied asylum seeking child.....	A child or young person who has been separated from both parents and has applied for asylum in the United Kingdom in their own right, and is / was under the age of 18 when the asylum application is / was submitted.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims and Rationale

The overarching aim of my thesis was to contribute to the growing literature around how educational professionals support the outcomes of care experienced children and young people in England, including those on the autism spectrum. In the Children Act 1989, a child is legally defined as 'looked after' if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, or subject to a care order or a placement order by their Local Authority (LA). This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Various terms are used in the literature to refer to this population, including 'looked after children' (LAC), 'children in care' (CIC) and 'children looked after' (CLA). A previously looked after child (PLAC) is one who is no longer looked after by a local authority because they are the subject of an adoption, special guardianship or child arrangements order (Department for Education [DfE], 2018a). A care leaver is a young person who was looked after by a LA for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who was in care on or after their 16th birthday (NAVSH, 2019).

Regarding the terminology used throughout the thesis, the term 'care experienced children' (CEC) was chosen to refer collectively to looked after children, previously looked after children and, where appropriate, care leavers. This is because, taken together, the systematic literature review and the empirical research paper cover issues relating to these three distinct but closely related populations. Where the focus is only on one population (either in previous research, official figures, or in my own research) then a more specific term is used, such as 'looked after child'. It must be acknowledged that other terms may be preferred by CEC and the adults who work with them, and ongoing discussion is needed about the way language is used in the social care system, with continued input from service-users (The Adolescent and Children's Trust, 2019). It must also be emphasised that although grouped collectively by the terminology I have chosen, CEC are not a homogenous group, and as such will have differing backgrounds and differing needs.

There is a long history of CEC underachieving compared to their peers. Historically, social care needs and outcomes were prioritised over educational ones, contributing to lower aspirations (Berridge, 2012). Jackson (1988) identified key obstacles to educational attainment and, following this, there was a period of growing interest in the educational needs of this population of learners. Nevertheless, the attainment gap has remained, with looked after children achieving poorer academic and non-academic outcomes compared to their non-looked after peers (Cameron & Maginn, 2009; Dent & Cameron, 2003; DfE, 2021b; Sebba et al., 2015; Simon &

Owen, 2006). Government policies and initiatives have been put in place in England to improve outcomes for CEC and this thesis focused on two statutory initiatives: the Virtual School model and establishment of a Virtual School Head (VSH) in every LA, and the requirement for every maintained school to allocate a designated teacher (DT) for looked after and previously looked after children.

### 1.2 Systematic Literature Review

Within the systematic literature review, I explored the following research question: 'How does the Virtual School promote multi-agency working to improve outcomes for looked after children and young people in England?' The VSH model was first reported on in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007) and since 2014 it has been a statutory requirement for every LA in England to appoint a VSH. I first became aware of the Virtual School as a Trainee Educational Psychologist in my second year of the Doctoral training programme. The LA within which I carried out my second year placement had an Educational Psychologist seconded to the Virtual School for part of their working week, and through this connection I learned about the operations of the Virtual School and the wide range of other professionals with whom Virtual School staff worked in that LA.

Although there is a growing literature base in this area, published research focusing on the Virtual School remains limited. Much of the research to date has focused on either evaluating its impact (Berridge et al., 2009; Ofsted, 2012) or on the role of the VSH (Berridge, 2012; Rivers, 2018). My initial scoping searches found that VSHs have successfully raised the profile of looked after children in their LAs, and have contributed to improving outcomes through multi-agency working and the integration of education and social care. This is an important finding, given that lack of communication and collaboration between agencies has remained a consistent contributing factor to looked after children's underachievement (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE & Department of Health [DoH], 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). The systematic literature review therefore focused on exploring the mechanisms by which Virtual School staff work in partnership with other professionals, agencies and corporate parents to improve outcomes for looked after children. It should be noted that VSHs do also promote the educational achievement of previously looked after children, but do not hold a corporate parent role and do not monitor or hold accountability for their educational attainment; therefore, the primary focus of the systematic literature review was on children who are currently looked after.

### 1.3 Empirical Research Paper

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (amended by the Children and Social Work Act 2017) placed a statutory duty on every state-maintained school in England to allocate a DT responsible for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children in their school. Following amendments made by the 2017 Act, the DT role was extended to also include promoting the achievement of previously looked after children. There is still limited published research exploring DTs' roles and responsibilities, with much of the current research in the form of unpublished theses (Boesley, 2021; Goodall, 2014; Higgs, 2006; Simpson, 2012; Waterman, 2020; Woodland, 2010). In the empirical research paper, I explored DTs' views on their main roles and responsibilities, and factors that help or hinder role fulfilment. My research had an additional focus on DTs' experiences of supporting CEC on the autism spectrum, and whether this might differ from support provided to non-autistic<sup>1</sup> CEC, as previous research has highlighted that this population of learners have particularly poor outcomes (O'Higgins et al., 2021; Sebba et al., 2015). Official Department for Education (DfE) figures put the number of looked after children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as their primary need at 2% (DfE, 2022a), although review of a Freedom of Information (FoI) request sent to LAs in England suggests the actual figure is likely to be higher, at 3% (Parsons et al., 2018). Despite this, very little research to date has explored how autistic CEC are supported. Parsons et al. (2018) identified there is limited and inconsistent information-sharing about children's autism diagnoses at a strategic level within social care services (Parsons et al., 2018). Pickles et al. (2022) found that, although VSHs played a key role in co-ordinating effective provision for autistic CEC, there was a perceived lack of knowledge and expertise around autism. Pickles and colleagues concluded that it would be helpful for future research to explore a wider range of voices around this topic; by exploring the views of DTs, my empirical research paper contributes to this emerging evidence base.

When considering autistic CEC as a population, it is important to also consider the common clinical dilemma of 'autism or attachment disorder?' (Davidson et al., 2022). Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition with a high degree of heritability (Waye & Cheng, 2018). Attachment disorders such as reactive attachment disorder (RAD) and disinhibited social engagement disorder (DSED) are borne out of an individual's experiences, such as suffering abuse or neglect, as described in both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V,

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<sup>1</sup> I have avoided 'person-first' language and have chosen to use the terms 'autistic person' or 'on the autism spectrum' to represent identity-first language, which is in keeping with preferences expressed by the autistic community (Kenny et al., 2016; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020). The term 'autism' is preferred to 'autism spectrum disorder' and the latter is only used to refer to official guidance and figures, or diagnostic criteria where that terminology applies.

American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) and the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11, World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019). A high number of CEC have experienced abuse or neglect, so are at greater risk of developing attachment disorders (DfE, 2021a). There are a number of similarities and differences between autism and attachment disorders such as RAD and DSED; both lead to difficulties with social relationships (Sadiq et al., 2012), although the specific nature of the social difficulties are distinct (Davidson et al., 2015). RAD is associated with lack of social and emotional responsiveness to others, and DSED can lead to deficits in social functioning and indiscriminate social approaches to unfamiliar adults and peers – features which may also be seen in autistic children and young people (CYP; WHO, 2019). In terms of the reported differences, autistic children show less interest in social interaction, tend to fixate on special interests within conversations, and show a greater degree of incongruent speech that is not present in the social interactions of children with RAD / DSED (Davidson, 2015). Children with DSED tend to engage better with humour, and to spontaneously share play (Davidson, 2022). Other features reported to be more unique to autism include: delayed speech, focussed interests, repetitive stereotyped play, stereotypies, and sensory hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity, including limited food preferences / hypersensitivity to food texture (Mayes et al., 2017).

Both diagnostic manuals and prior research define the boundaries between autism and RAD / DSED (APA, 2013; Mayes et al., 2017; WHO, 2019). Nevertheless, diagnostic dilemmas regarding autism and attachment disorders are common, and professionals can find it challenging to differentiate between them (Davidson et al., 2022; Pickles et al., 2022). This may lead to misdiagnosis or diagnostic overshadowing, which could further lead to children not receiving the most appropriate support for their needs. In addition, despite diagnostic manuals restricting diagnosis to either ASD or RAD / DSED, some professionals argue that attachment disorders and autism *can* co-occur (Mayes et al., 2017). This could also make it challenging for professionals working with autistic CEC to provide the most appropriate support based on the root cause(s) of a CYP's behaviour. It is therefore important to consider these issues both when researching CEC more broadly, and when thinking specifically about autistic CEC as a population.

### 1.4 Research Paradigm and Reflexivity

Different research paradigms seek to explain how knowledge is created based on a particular view of reality, known respectively as epistemology and ontology, and this thesis was approached from a social constructionist view. Social constructionism is a philosophy that sits at the subjectivist end of the positivist-subjectivist continuum. Sismondo (1993) makes a distinction between strict, radical or extreme constructionism and mild or contextual constructionism. The former asserts



that there is no objective view of reality as all knowledge, including representations of physical and biological reality, is socially constructed through social interaction and language (Houston, 2001; Taylor, 2018). As stated by Robson and McCartan, “whatever the underlying nature of reality...there is no direct access to it. In principle, there are as many realities as there are participants” (2016, pp. 24). The latter maintains a distinction between what participants believe about the social world and what is already known; most knowledge is believed to be socially constructed, but it is acknowledged that some things are not (Taylor, 2018). In a review of studies adopting a social constructionist paradigm, Sismondo (1993) argued that most studies adopted the mild or contextual form, as was the case for this thesis. Consistent with the tenets of this form, this empirical research paper was based on the assumption that individuals occupying the same role might understand their role in different ways. Vincent and O’Mahoney (2018) state that “methodological practices form a bridge between our epistemological knowledge and ontological reality” (pp. 36), therefore there is a relationship between a researcher’s theoretical / philosophical stance and the methodology they employ (Crotty, 1998). In line with social constructionism, an exploratory qualitative methodology was selected.

Heron and Reason (1997) argue that research paradigms must also consider axiology. Axiology is the study of value and, within research, is concerned with the researcher’s own value in the research process. Participants bring their own knowledge which is socially constructed and is embedded in value and culture. In addition, the researcher also brings to the research their experiences and social constructs, and must be aware of how these impact on the research process, interactions with participants during data collection, and on the interpretation and reporting of findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Saunders et al., 2009). I acknowledge that as the researcher, I facilitated the construction of knowledge and understanding through the interview process, building on participants’ experiences through my responses and vice versa. Axiology was also highly relevant during the data analysis. My chosen analysis method was reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) based on their original paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an interpretative activity, and as the researcher I was actively involved in the generation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). My position as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, my previous experience of having worked in a specialist school for autistic CYP, and my views around inclusion, will all have influenced my interpretation of the findings. In addition, given the word constraints inherent in writing for publication, not all findings could be reported and I made a subjective decision in choosing which findings to report, which involves a degree of bias. However, biases within qualitative research are unavoidable and researchers should not be aiming to reduce or eliminate this bias (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), and Braun and Clarke (2019) explicitly acknowledged the researcher’s reflexive engagement and

subjectivity within the process as an analytic resource. Therefore, while my bias is acknowledged, it is not viewed as a limitation of the research.

### **1.5 The Impact of Covid-19**

It is important to note that this research took place in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which had an impact on the empirical part of the research. It is vitally important that professionals listen to the views of autistic CYP regarding their educational experiences (Parsons et al., 2020), and that CYP generally are given the opportunity to participate in research (Bishop, 2014; INVOLVE, 2016). I had originally intended to recruit both DTs and autistic CEC as participants, however the school closures and national lockdowns which occurred in response to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that recruitment of CYP during this time was not feasible, so the focus of the research shifted to exploring the views of DTs only. Future research should seek to address this limitation and explore the voices of autistic CEC. Recruitment of DTs was also impacted on by the context, as the Covid-19 pandemic placed new and unprecedented expectations and pressures on education staff. During the initial recruitment stage, emails were first sent to all maintained primary and secondary schools and Further Education Colleges in four LAs in the South and South-East of England and Greater London with whom I had a current or prior professional connection (a total of 445 schools), however the response rate to my initial call for participants was very low. Several amendments to the planned recruitment strategy were then made in order to secure an adequate number of participants for the chosen data analysis method. A further 150 emails were sent to the VSHs of every Local Authority in England requesting for the research to be advertised via their DT forums or mailing lists. To enable interviews to take place during a time when external visitors were generally not permitted to enter school sites, data collection took place via virtual interviews carried out on Microsoft Teams as opposed to face-to-face interviews.

### **1.6 Contributions and Implications of the Research**

Findings from both the systematic literature review and the empirical research paper have contributed to the growing literature around how CEC, including those on the autism spectrum, are supported by educational professionals in England. This thesis has also highlighted further gaps in the literature which need to be addressed, and discussed implications for practice for key stakeholders, including VSHs and Virtual School staff, DTs, social workers, Educational Psychologists, LAs, and other corporate parents. A number of the contributions made have been unique, and have complemented or built upon the existing research in this field. Initial scoping

searches into the operation of the Virtual School identified a number of published studies and unpublished theses which explored the impact of the Virtual School model more broadly, and the role of VSHs. Multi-agency working featured heavily within the literature, however there had been no in-depth, systematic exploration of the Virtual School's role in relation to multi-agency working. My systematic literature review addressed this gap in the literature. The empirical research paper explored DTs' perceptions of their job role with an additional, unique focus on their experiences of supporting autistic CEC.

Both the systematic literature review and the empirical research paper had findings concerning multi-agency working, and how this either helped or hindered the provision of effective support to CEC. Some of the identified disadvantages reflect those in previous literature spanning several decades, and more must be done to understand why these issues remain so stubbornly persistent. Key stakeholders must focus on addressing issues to strengthen multi-agency working, which will in turn benefit the CEC being supported by professionals. The systematic literature review included research that was completed before the Covid-19 pandemic, whereas the empirical research paper was carried out during – as a result, there were some novel findings relating to the role of technology and how this could overcome some of the identified challenges, such as increasing engagement and participation in multi-agency meetings. Further research in this area would be beneficial.

Autistic CEC are at particular risk for poor educational outcomes, and there is a need for professionals to recognise this as a distinct population with their own individual needs, and for their support and educational planning to be informed by an autism-specific lens. There is a growing body of literature exploring how best to combine trauma-informed and autism-specific approaches, and such approaches should be adopted by school staff who are working with CEC who have a diagnosis of autism. DTs identified that support from external agencies such as the Virtual School, EPs, and outreach services supported them in their roles, and these agencies may be well-placed to offer advice relating to autism, attachment, and how best to support autistic CEC also.

The conflation of autism and attachment needs can make supporting CEC challenging, and greater awareness amongst DTs and other corporate parents of the similarities and differences between autism and attachment disorders is needed. Future research should focus on evaluating existing tools for differentiating between the two, such as the Coventry Grid, and exploring its usefulness in non-clinical settings. This would support DTs and other school staff to more accurately identify the root cause(s) of a child's observed behaviours. The empirical research utilised a qualitative methodology with a small sample of DTs, and none of the five DTs interviewed had experience of

supporting a CEC with a formal diagnosis of autism. Future research should seek to capture the voices of DTs more comprehensively using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, to generate a national picture of experiences of supporting autistic CEC. Finally, a more accurate national picture of the number of autistic CEC is also needed as official Government-issued figures may be an under-representation. In addition, the official figures are concerned only with currently looked after children, so an area of future research may be to identify the prevalence of autism in previously looked after children or care leavers, as these groups may have similar needs.

Additional areas for future research were identified in this thesis. A key priority is for more participatory research to take place with CEC, including those on the autism spectrum, so their voices are included in a meaningful way. Academic and non-academic support is put in place for CEC, however, there is a very limited evidence base for interventions specifically with the CEC population, and future research must focus on building up this evidence base to ensure that the interventions and provisions put in place are the most appropriate to support these CYP's needs.

### **1.7 Dissemination**

The two research papers were written with the intention to publish in peer-reviewed journals, and I have adhered to the style required for submission to the journals I am considering. Where a paper has exceeded the word count specified by the journal, this was to ensure that sufficient detail was included to meet the requirements of the doctoral thesis; post-viva, further amendments to the paper will be made to reduce the word count in line with journal requirements. The journal that I am intending to submit my systematic literature review to is 'Adoption and Fostering', a quarterly peer reviewed journal which focuses on research related to adoption and fostering, as well as wider developments in childcare practice and research. The journal provides a suitable forum for professionals from a range of disciplines, including social work, psychology, and education, thus making it an appropriate choice based on the focus of my systematic literature review. The journal that I am considering for my empirical paper is 'Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs (JORSEN)', which publishes original research, literature reviews and theoretical papers focusing on meeting a broad range of special educational needs. As the focus of the empirical paper centred more on school-based support, it was felt that this journal was appropriate for the scope and focus of this research.

## **Chapter 2    How the Virtual School Promotes Multi-Agency Working to Improve Outcomes for Looked After Children and Young People in England**

### **2.1    Abstract**

Children who are looked after have persistently poorer academic and non-academic outcomes than their non-looked after peers. One initiative introduced in England to improve their educational outcomes is the Virtual School model and the appointment of a Virtual School Head in every Local Authority. Although an under-researched area, previous research found that Virtual School Heads raised the profile of looked after children and were able to successfully integrate education and social care. A systematic literature review was conducted to further explore how the Virtual School promotes multi-agency working in order to improve outcomes for this vulnerable population. 13 articles were included for review. The findings highlighted that multi-agency working is central to the operation of the Virtual School. Academic and non-academic outcomes were supported through training other professionals, information-sharing, attendance at multi-agency meetings, contributing towards statutory processes, ensuring accountability, working to reduce exclusions, and funding additional interventions. Outstanding barriers to effective multi-agency working remain, some of which reflect those persistently identified in previous literature. Implications for educational professionals are identified.

### **2.2    Introduction**

#### **2.2.1    Looked After Children and Young People in England**

A child or young person is legally defined as 'looked after' by a Local Authority (LA) if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, or are subject to a care order or a placement order (Children Act, 1989). There are several reasons why a child or young person may be 'looked after' which include, but are not limited to: abuse or neglect within the home or significant risk of harm; family dysfunction or intense family stress; the parents or people with parental responsibility are unable to care for the child or young person; or the child is an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) with no responsible adult to care for them. On

## Chapter 2

March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, there were 80,850 looked after children in England, an increase of 1% on the previous years' figures (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a). Notably, 66% of these young people were taken into care due to abuse or neglect.

Compared to their non-looked after peers, looked after children have poorer academic outcomes at all Key Stages. DfE figures in 2020 showed lower attainment in reading, writing and maths at Key Stages One and Two, lower attainment in GCSE English and Maths, and fewer GCSE qualifications gained. Looked after children are almost four times more likely to have a special educational need and / or disability (SEND), and almost nine times more likely to have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) than non-looked after children (DfE, 2020). The majority of looked after children with SEND have social-emotional and mental health (SEMH) as their primary need (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). Looked after children also have poorer non-academic outcomes; in a sample of 42,500 looked after children aged five to 16 years, 38% had scores that were 'a cause for concern' and 13% had 'borderline' scores as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a short behavioural screening tool that assesses emotional and behavioural outcomes (DfE, 2020). Furthermore, this population remains significantly over-represented in the criminal justice system (Swaine Williams, 2017), and poor outcomes can persist into adulthood, with reduced employment prospects and greater risk of substance misuse, criminal conviction, and poor mental health (Dent & Cameron, 2003; Teyhan et al., 2018).

Poor communication between different agencies is often cited as a key contributing factor in the underachievement of looked after children. In 1995, a joint report from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) and Department of Health (DoH) concluded that communication between different parties acting as corporate parents was either inconsistent or non-existent, and that greater partnership between different agencies was needed. Guidance on the Education of Young People in Public Care (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE] / DoH, 2000) recognised that multi-agency collaboration improves the lives of looked after children, but there must be a key professional providing a link between different services. Jackson and Sachdev in 2001 re-emphasised the need for 'truly collaborative working between education and social services' (pp. 15). The Social Exclusion Unit's large scale research survey in 2003 once again highlighted a lack of joined-up working, with social workers and educational professionals often having little understanding of each others' roles and responsibilities. Therefore, lack of communication and collaboration between agencies has remained a consistent contributing factor to children's underachievement.

### 2.2.2 The Virtual School

One initiative to improve educational outcomes is the establishment of a Virtual School and the appointment of a Virtual School Head (VSH) in every LA in England. A successful pilot was reported in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007), and the model was expanded to other local authorities in England following this. The Children and Families Act 2014 made it a statutory requirement for LAs to appoint a VSH to promote the educational achievement of their looked after children. The VSH must be an officer employed by the LA or, where LAs agree to collaborate or share the role, another LA in England (National Association of Virtual School Heads [NAVSH], 2019). Looked after children attend a range of local schools, but the VSH oversees their educational progress as if they attended one school. Thus, the Virtual School is best thought of as a model for supporting the education of looked after children, and is not a physical school or institution.

In the pilot study, VSHs raised the profile of looked after children in their authorities and forged successful relationships with other corporate parents and key members of staff, including head teachers, social workers, foster carers, and designated teachers (Berridge et al., 2009). Thus, VSHs contributed to improving outcomes through multi-agency working and the integration of education and social care. Virtual Schools vary considerably between LAs in terms of the number of staff employed, the roles undertaken, and the scope of their work (Ofsted, 2012). Nevertheless, all Virtual Schools work closely with other agencies as part of an integrated approach (Ofsted, 2012; NAVSH, 2019). VSHs also promote the educational achievement of previously looked after children through the provision of information and advice to parents, educators, and other key adults, although they do not hold a corporate parent role and are not accountable for their educational attainment.

### 2.2.3 Multi-agency Working

Multi-agency working has a long history in England, and collaboration between agencies has been a statutory requirement since the introduction of The Children Act 1989 (Cheminais, 2009). The 2004 Children Act re-emphasised the need for closer, multi-agency working to promote the *Every Child Matters* outcomes (DfES, 2004), to improve information-sharing between agencies, and to improve the commissioning, delivery and integration of children's services. Cheminais (2009) identified that multi-agency working benefits children and young people (CYP) and the adults that support them through: improved outcomes for CYP; better understanding amongst professionals of the support available from other agencies; more appropriate signposting and referrals; a more

cohesive and efficient approach to tackling local needs; sharing of expertise, knowledge and resources; and improved morale, trust and commitment from staff.

A range of terms are used by researchers and practitioners to describe activity that could be defined as 'multi-agency', and a number of these are documented by Atkinson and colleagues (2007; see page 99 of their literature review). For the purpose of this systematic literature review, the definition of multi-agency working provided by Cheminais in 2009 (p. 138) was used: 'where those from more than one agency or service work together jointly, sharing aims, information, tasks and responsibilities'. Atkinson and colleagues (2007) recognised that the differing terminology makes comparison between studies challenging; nevertheless, from their literature review they synthesised three key principles that, in their view, influenced the success of multi-agency working: organisation, joint investment, and integration. These principles will be revisited in the discussion of findings from this review.

### **2.2.4 Research Aims and Question**

Although the importance of multi-agency working for improving outcomes is well-established, little is known about whether or how the Virtual School model has succeeded in promoting this since its establishment. Although there is a growing body of literature investigating the impact of the Virtual School model and the role of VSHs, there has, to date, been no in-depth, systematic exploration of their role in relation to multi-agency working. This systematic literature review aimed to address this gap in the literature through answering the following research question: 'How does the Virtual School promote multi-agency working to improve outcomes for looked after children and young people in England?'

## **2.3 Methodology**

### **2.3.1 Systematic Search**

A systematic search was carried out between October and November 2020 on three electronic databases: PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Scopus. Individual search terms originated from initial scoping searches and were refined through further iterations of the search. The final syntax is shown in Appendix A. An additional search for grey literature (restricted to unpublished theses due to limited time and resources) was carried out based on the initial scoping search. Details of the grey literature search, and the relevant syntax, are found in Appendix B. Further relevant grey literature was identified by examining the reference lists of included articles.



### 2.3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No date restrictions were applied to the database searches themselves during the identification phase of the systematic search (see Figure 1 for PRISMA flow diagram); however, as the VSH model was first reported on in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (DfES, 2007) papers pre-dating 2007 were excluded at the point of screening according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. To ensure studies retained a focus on the Virtual School, participants were limited to those employed by the Virtual School, designated teachers (who can be considered a 'key role partner' to the Virtual School; Simpson, 2012, pp. 50), and looked after children or care leavers who explicitly referenced working with the Virtual School or designated teachers. The Virtual School is unique to England so only research published in English and carried out in England was included. See Table 1 for full inclusion and exclusion criteria.

**Table 1**

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Type of research	Empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals; unpublished theses (grey literature)	Book chapters, review articles, conference proceedings, reports, blogs, advice produced by individual schools or LAs regarding the Virtual School / looked after children / Safeguarding
Study design	Empirical research utilising qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs; anecdotal account based on personal experience	Narrative reviews, systematic reviews, or meta-analyses; any other secondary data
Population	Any individuals employed within the Virtual School, including VSHs; designated teachers where they explicitly reference working with members of staff connected to the Virtual School, or any process for which Virtual School staff are responsible; Looked after children or	Participants with no connection to the Virtual School such as foster carers, parents, teachers (other than the designated teacher), social workers etc.; designated teachers who do not explicitly reference working with members of staff connected to the Virtual School, or

	care leavers where they explicitly reference working with members of staff connected to the Virtual School or any process for which Virtual School staff are responsible.	any process for which Virtual School staff are responsible; Looked after children or care leavers who do not explicitly reference working with members of staff connected to the Virtual School, or any process for which Virtual School staff are responsible
Focus	The operation of the Virtual School, the contribution of any member of staff associated with the Virtual School, or any process relating to looked after children for which Virtual School staff are responsible (e.g. Personal Education Plans, Pupil Premium Plus) as outlined in official Government Guidance (DfE, 2018).	The focus was not specifically about the Virtual School, or any process relating to looked after children for which Virtual School staff are responsible (e.g. Personal Education Plans, Pupil Premium Plus) as outlined in official Government Guidance (DfE, 2018).
Date	Research published / completed after 2007	Research published / completed before 2007
Country	Research carried out in England.	Research carried out in a country other than England; Comparisons between processes in England and other countries.

### 2.3.3 Selection of Studies

The systematic searches produced a total of 632 papers. An additional 11 relevant unpublished theses were identified through the grey literature search. Rayyan QCRI was used to remove duplicates after which 630 papers remained. The titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria and a further 601 papers removed, including papers where full-text access was not available. Where it was unclear from the abstract whether the paper met the criteria for inclusion, the full-text article was accessed for a more in-depth review. In total, 13 studies were retained. Figure 1 shows the PRISMA flow diagram, detailing each stage of the search.

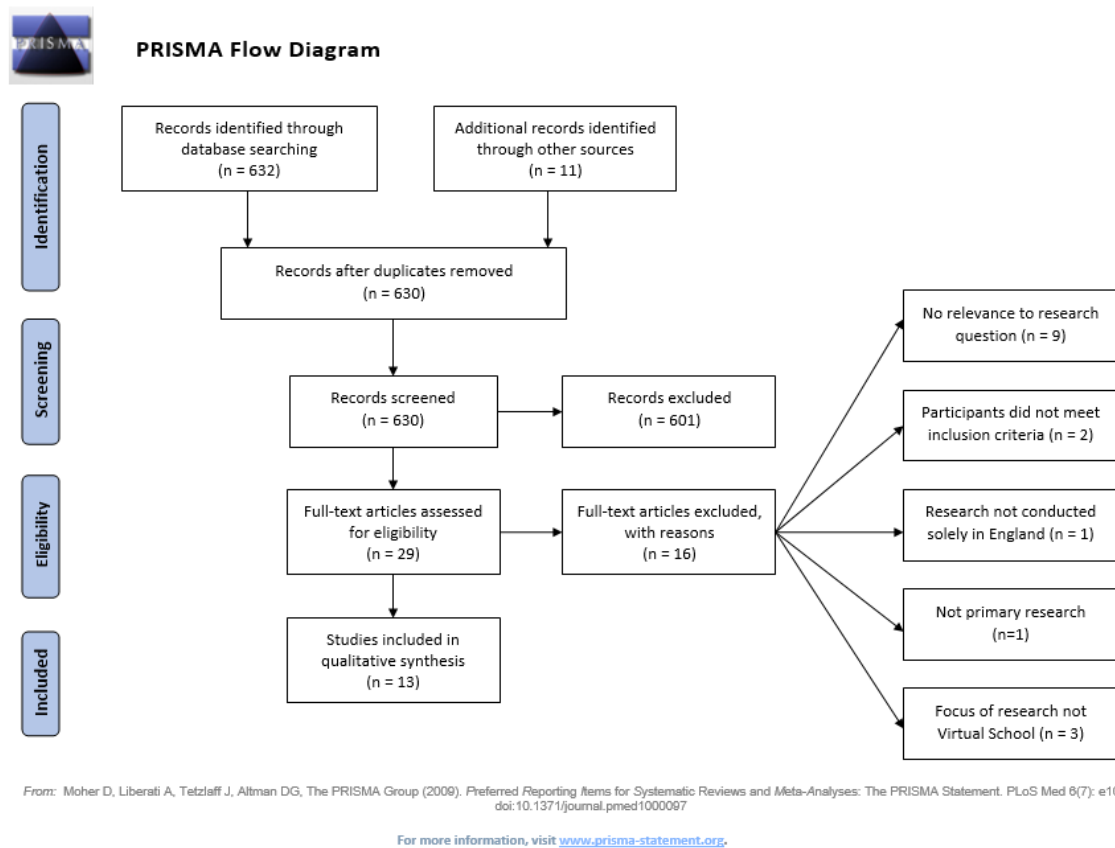


Figure 1

*PRISMA Flow Diagram*

### 2.3.4 Quality Assessment and Data Extraction

The Mixed Methods Assessment Tool (MMAT) by Hong et al. (2018) was chosen to critically appraise the included papers, which comprised both qualitative and quantitative research, as the single tool can be used for a range of different study designs. Appendix D contains the quality assessment data for all included studies. Data extraction took place simultaneously. For each included paper, the author(s), year, sample, method, and a summary of main findings was recorded (see Table 2). Some methodological weaknesses were noted regarding the research aims and questions, clarity around methods of data analysis, and coherence between qualitative data sources, analysis and interpretation of findings; these are discussed in more detail in the Findings section.

**Table 2***Data Extraction Table*

Reference	Design	Sample	Method		Summary of Findings
			Data Collection / Sources	Data Analysis	
Berridge, D. (2012).	Mixed-methods	Virtual School Heads; Children's services directors; foster /residential carers; designated teachers; social workers; looked after children (age range 7-16).  Participant numbers not provided. Other demographic info not provided.	Official, secondary statistics; Individual interviews; Self-report questionnaires for VSHs; Analysis of VSHs' 2008 annual reports; Group interviews with social workers; Web-based survey	Article does not state how data were analysed.	The 11 pilot authorities performed strongly against the national picture for LAC's attainment. VSHs undertook a range of activities within their role. VSHs had successfully raised the profile of LAC in their area. Issues with interdisciplinary working highlighted.
Drew, H., & Banerjee, S. (2019)	Mixed methods	Virtual School Heads (n=19); other management (n=5); Virtual School Staff (other) (n=5).  Demographic info not provided.	Online survey. Questions were a mixture of tick-box responses, Likert-scale and free-text descriptions.	Thematic Analysis using NVivo for Coding of free text responses. Quantitative data were collected, but not reported in this article.	The research highlighted great variability in the structure of different VSs. Four main, inter-related themes emerged: enhanced learning opportunities, specific transition support, well-being and relationships, and raising awareness. Designated teachers appear to play a crucial role as the key link between the VS and school settings.

Driscoll, J. (2011).	Qualitative	Care leavers (n=7, 4 male and 3 female) (age range 16-20). All white British.	In-depth, semi-structured interviews	Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach	Most participants were negative about DTs. YP had a desire not to be different, to access the same support as their peers, and for care status not to be widely known. YP were cynical about PEPs, and did not engage in them in a meaningful way.
Driscoll, J. (2013).	Qualitative	Designated teachers (n=12); Virtual School Heads (n=4). Other demographic info not provided.	Interviews	Article does not state how data were analysed	Many challenges in ensuring a successful transition for LAC post Year-11 including individual pupil factors, multiple transitions, poor communication with FE settings, lack of communication with VSHs. VSHs desired more policy aimed at post-16 provision for LAC. VSs created better links between education and social care.
Jackson, S. (2015).	Case study design using qualitative methodology	VSH (n=1). Female. Other demographic info not provided.	Telephone interview	Article does not state how data were analysed	Role of VS identified as supporting schools to raise attainment of LAC and holding schools to account. In this LA, VS support continued in HE. VS had close links with community. Training provided to other professionals. VS supported social workers to better understand education system.
Mann, F. (2012).	Paper One: Mixed-methods exploratory design  Paper Two: Action research	Paper One: Educational Psychologists (n=111); Virtual School Heads (n=6); LAC (n=30, 14 male and 16 female) (age range 4-19); designated teachers (n=27); Head teachers /	Paper One: Generalising survey using Likert scale alongside open questions; followed up with semi-structured interview.  Paper Two: case notes; pre and post outcomes measures (SDQ and ELC); post-	Paper One: Systematic interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on both interviews, and open responses on survey.  Paper Two: Systematic interpretive thematic	Paper One: three main themes were Process, Multi-agency co-ordination and Child-focussed. Interviewees spoke of wanting to see improvements in the PEP process.  Paper Two: The involvement of an EP was useful. Pre-PEP consultations positively influenced participants' understanding of PEPs, but did not contribute to a change in the PEP process. In all

		teachers (n=9); social worker (n=1); foster carer (n=1)	intervention semi-structured interviews; post-intervention online survey; evaluation of target and PEP paperwork pre and post intervention.	analysis (Braun &Clarke, 2006) on consultation notes and interviews; descriptive statistics for online survey responses.	four cases, targets set in the PEP improved post-intervention. The impact of the intervention on pupil outcomes was inconsistent.
		Paper Two: LAC (n=4, all male) (age range 4-12); foster carers (n=3); designated teachers (n=4)			
Ott, E., & O'Higgins, A. (2019).	Mixed-methods, exploratory design	VSHs, social workers, charity education providers (n=12). Participant numbers or demographic info not provided.	Semi-structured interviews; 18 documents on UASC educational policies and practices from publicly available sources; administrative data obtained from DfE.	Analysis of interview data and documents using NVivo (inductive coding); DfE descriptive statistics reported.	Majority of UASC attend mainstream provision, some attend EL or bespoke provision. UASC face multiple barriers to accessing and remaining in education, including individual factors, systemic factors, and administrative barriers. PP+ critical in supporting access to education.
Parker, E. (2017).	Multiple case study design utilising multiple sources of data	LAC (n=3) (Year 11; age 10; not stated); teachers (n=2); designated teacher (n=1); social workers (n=3); foster carers (n=3). Other demographic info not provided.	3 vignettes constructed from author's notes and audio recordings of PEP meetings; transcripts of PEP meetings; other relevant documents, policies etc. included within the meeting.	Unclear on how data were analysed.	A number of organisations are key actors within the PEP process. Some evidence of power struggles and conflicting views between actors. Pupil voice was tokenistic, and sometimes dismissed or overlooked. PP+ seen as important in providing for LAC and raising attainment. PEP document criticised for being mainstream-centric.

Rivers, S. (2018).	Qualitative, anecdotal account	Virtual School Head (n=1). Demographic info not provided.	Anecdotal evidence.	No data analysis	Multi-agency working is key, VS works with multiple other professionals and community services. Education co-ordinators support individual LAC and UASC. Advantage of this LA using web-based PEP documents. Training seen as a key aspect of VS role.
Sebba, J., & Berridge, D. (2019).	Qualitative	Virtual School Heads (n=16, 8 female and 8 male). Other demographic info not provided.	In-depth, semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis using NVivo; constant comparison during analysis.	Great variation in terms of VS structure and operation, limited info sharing between VSHs about practices. VSHs work closely with various professionals including DTs, Heads, social workers, foster carers, and individual LAC. Key focus is on reducing exclusions and securing appropriate placements. VSHs also quality control PEPs.
Simpson, R. J. (2012).	Mixed-methods	Designated teachers (n=51); Virtual School staff (n=5); Specialist Educational Psychologist (n=1); Virtual School Head (n=1). Demographic info not provided.	Questionnaire completed electronically or hard copy - mix of multiple choice, Likert scale and open-ended questions; individual semi-structured interviews; appreciative enquiry session	Descriptive statistics presented from the questionnaire; Semi-structured interviews and appreciative enquiry analysed using thematic analysis	All DTs aware to a degree of support provided by the VS. DTs appreciated VS's help with both practical advice and emotional support. VS staff identified factors which facilitate their role, including Strategic, Practical factors, Child-focussed issues, and Interpersonal issues. DTs also identified factors that hinder their role, including Young person focussed issues, Expectations, Practical and financial issues, and Staff focussed issues.
Waterman, V. (2020).	Qualitative	Virtual School Advisory Teachers (n=4); designated teachers (n=4). Demographic info not provided.	Interviews with a free-narrative method; use of an Activity Theory diagram within the interview process	Reflexive inductive thematic analysis approach with an additional psychoanalytic lens	VSATs identified conflict between systemic processes and focussing on individual children. VSATs spoke frequently about multi-agency collaboration, and the positives and negatives of this. DTs valued input from the VS but working

Woodland, M. (2010).	<p>Paper One: qualitative</p> <p>Paper Two: qualitative</p>	<p>Paper One: Social care professionals (n=14); Educational Psychologists (n=22); PEP co-ordinators (n=3); designated teachers (n=3); foster carers (n=2). Demographic info not provided.</p> <p>Paper Two: teachers (n=14); designated teachers (n=3). Demographic info not provided.</p>	Papers One and Two: Focus Groups and semi-structured individual interviews	Papers One and Two: thematic analysis.	<p>with multiple VSs was challenging. DTs disliked the PEP process. Participants identified what helps / hinders.</p> <p>Paper One: Professional tensions evident. PEP Co-ordinator role viewed as beneficial by social workers. Poor communication and lack of information sharing, and frequent changes in staffing, can be barriers to supporting LAC. PEPs viewed as not child-centred enough.</p> <p>Paper Two: DTs had varying views on the usefulness of the PEP at this level, and emphasised the need for them to be meaningful for the child. PEP meetings may be stigmatising. Teachers did not often read PEPs, often citing lack of time as a barrier. Teachers emphasised the importance of relationships with the YP.</p>
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## 2.4 Results

### 2.4.1 The Sample

In total, 361 professionals and 40 looked after children / care leavers made up the sample of participants across 11 of the 13 studies; two did not include participant numbers (Berridge, 2012; Ott & Higgins, 2019). The professionals consisted of Virtual School Heads (n=48), other Virtual School staff (n=17), designated teachers (n=105), other school staff (n=25), social workers (n=18), foster or residential carers (n=9), other staff working in Education Services (n=5), Educational Psychologists (n =134) and charity workers (number unknown). Very limited demographic information was supplied. Based on the information available, the age range for looked after children and care leavers was 4-19 years. Ages were not given for adult participants in any studies. 20 of the looked after children / care leavers were male, and 20 were female. Information on the sex of professionals was provided in only one study (Sebba & Berridge, 2019) where eight VSHs were male and eight were female. Only Driscoll (2011) commented on the ethnicity of her participants, stating that the care leavers who took part were White British.

### 2.4.2 Methods and Analysis

The range of methodologies are represented in Table 2. Overall, the chosen data methods across the studies were appropriate for answering the general aims of the research; however, five studies lacked specific research questions, and one did not state its research aims. The majority of studies outlined the analysis method and could justify its use in line with the research aims. Rivers (2018) presented an anecdotal account and there was no clear data analysis, and three studies did not clearly state the data analysis method. In terms of the reporting of findings, not all studies which used interviews included participant quotes, therefore it is unclear to what extent the findings and conclusions were derived from the data. Therefore, the included studies showed some methodological weaknesses which reduced the quality of the research - see Appendix D for the full quality assessment using the MMAT (Hong et al., 2018). There is a need for more high-quality, published research with clearly stated research aims, and greater transparency around data analysis and interpretation of findings. This would strengthen the existing evidence base and add to our knowledge and understanding of the Virtual School's role in promoting multi-agency working.

## **2.5 Findings**

Full, line-by-line coding and thematic analysis of the included studies was not carried out due to time constraints. During the data extraction process, the findings from individual studies were recorded. The researcher then grouped together findings related to similar topics into themes, in order to describe and review the commonalities outlined in the papers, or to indicate where they had differing or conflicting findings. The findings are organised and presented under the following five themes:

- Bridging the Gap between Education and Social Care
- Promoting a Shared Understanding
- Personal Education Plans and Pupil Premium Plus Funding
- Reducing Exclusions and Securing Appropriate Placements
- Barriers to Effective Multi-agency Working

### **2.5.1 Theme 1: Bridging the Gap between Education and Social Care**

Competing priorities between social care and education were identified as a barrier to successful multi-agency working (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). During the initial VSH pilot, social workers did not link closely with the Virtual School, which prevented a joined-up approach (Berridge, 2012). Subsequent studies suggested an improvement in this regard; some VSHs reported having highly collaborative relationships with social workers, noting that social workers respected VSHs' specialist knowledge of the education system (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). In addition, the Virtual School bridged the gap between education and social care, putting across differing points of view, enabling staff to see each others' perspectives, and promoting communication and co-operation between the two services (Driscoll, 2013; Simpson, 2012). In some LAs, the Virtual School team sat alongside, or had members of staff seconded to, social care, which improved working relationships (Driscoll, 2013; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Regular meetings with social care also improved co-working (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Nevertheless, challenges to multi-agency working remained, for example when social workers saw education as less of a priority for looked after children; in multi-agency meetings led by social workers, VSHs perceived there to be a greater focus on social care needs than educational ones (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

### **2.5.2 Theme 2: Promoting a Shared Understanding**

Promoting a shared understanding of the needs of looked after children was central to the work of the Virtual School. One way of achieving this was through training delivered to school staff,

foster carers, residential care home workers, social workers, and other corporate parents (Jackson, 2015). Training aimed to develop professionals' theoretical knowledge, practice, or their knowledge of procedures and processes. Virtual School advisory teachers (VSATs) saw school staff's lack of understanding around challenging behaviour as one reason why looked after children failed to make progress (Waterman, 2020). This was addressed by some Virtual Schools via training on attachment and trauma, increasing professionals' awareness and understanding of the underlying cause(s) of children's behaviour and how to respond more appropriately (Drew & Banerjee, 2019; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Some designated teachers expressed wanting training to be practical and not just theoretical, for example wanting advice on how to react in challenging situations in such a way as to maintain relationships with the CYP (Waterman, 2020).

Foster carers benefitted from training opportunities, although Virtual School staff identified a need for further training with them on how attachment issues can impact on learning (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). A key priority for some VSHs was improving foster carers' aspirations for the children they fostered, as low expectations could negatively impact on attainment (Simpson, 2012) while higher expectations improved outcomes (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Social workers' lack of knowledge and understanding of the education system hindered effective multi-agency working (Waterman, 2020). Informing social workers about the education system increased their confidence in negotiating with schools and acting as advocates for children on their caseload (Jackson, 2015). In this way, the Virtual School had an indirect impact on the progress of looked after children.

Some VSHs were involved in the delivery of multi-agency and whole-school training (Drew & Banerjee, 2019; Sebba & Berridge, 2019), and the promotion of the Attachment Aware Schools initiative and other whole school approaches to support well-being (Drew & Banerjee; Sebba and Berridge, 2019). Rivers (2018) described how her Virtual School organised an annual conference to offer continuous professional development (CPD) and opportunities for networking. This conference contributed to professionals having a 'shared language' (pp. 157) and shared understanding of issues faced by looked after children, thus supporting their progress.

The Virtual School also shared information in other ways; designated teachers were supported in procedural aspects of their role, such as writing PEPs, accessing additional funding, and finding appropriate further education placements (Sebba & Berridge, 2019; Simpson, 2012). Similarly, VSHs aided foster carers with admissions processes and exclusions (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Ott and O'Higgins (2019) reported on one Virtual School that provided a UASC Toolkit to improve understanding and guide practice with this subgroup of looked after children. Despite supporting

other agencies with information-sharing, Sebba and Berridge (2019) identified there was little sharing amongst VSHs about their practices, despite having the same function and common goals.

### **2.5.3 Theme 3: Personal Education Plans**

Personal Education Plans (PEPs), and termly PEP meetings were key to supporting looked after children. The PEP document was used to monitor progress, outlining a number of agreed-upon outcomes for a looked after child and what interventions or strategies were to be put in place to help them meet those outcomes (Parker, 2017). PEP meetings were held at school and attended by key professionals, including foster carers, social workers, the designated teacher and other staff who knew the child well, the Virtual School, and sometimes the CYP themselves. The PEP document helped structure the meeting, inviting contributions from different professionals through organisation-specific sections that were completed (Parker, 2017).

The included studies demonstrated the Virtual School's involvement in this multi-agency process; Parker (2017) considered the Virtual School to be the focal actor in the network, playing a pivotal role in ensuring different professionals came together. One designated teacher liked that VSATs attended meetings (Waterman, 2020) and Virtual School staff's attendance maintained contact between schools and other professionals (Sebba & Berridge, 2019; Waterman, 2020). Virtual School staff also supported with enhanced PEP meetings for looked after children at a transition point in their education (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). VSHs reviewed the quality of PEPS and challenged social workers where PEPs didn't meet minimum standards (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

There were mixed views regarding the effectiveness of PEPs. Designated teachers and VSHs in Mann's (2012) study thought PEPs effectively supported the education of looked after children, but that the process could be streamlined to avoid unnecessary repetition and paperwork, and should focus more on positive achievements. Some foster carers viewed the PEP as 'just ticking boxes' (Mann, 2012, pp. 32) and doubted its ability to produce meaningful change – a view shared by some designated teachers (Woodland, 2010). Sometimes, lack of time prevented the staff working directly with looked after children from reading their PEPs; consequently, they may have been unaware of the pupil's targets and provisions. In two studies, electronic PEP (e-PEP) systems were used (Rivers, 2018; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). In Staffordshire, this electronic system reportedly improved access to the document, helped with transparency and monitoring of progress against outcomes, and supported professionals to intervene if expected progress was not being made (Rivers, 2018). A VSH in Sebba and Berridge's study (2019), felt their e-PEP system had improved practice, but did not elaborate on how.

### 2.5.3.1 Looked after children's participation in PEPs

Nine looked after CYP surveyed by Mann (2012) were aware of the PEP process and only three liked attending PEP meetings, with some expressing they would prefer the meetings to be held outside of school. This echoes the view of one designated teacher, who reflected on how PEP meetings might be stigmatising for looked after children who are already marked out as being different (Woodland, 2010). Care leavers were 'cynical' regarding PEPs (Driscoll, 2011, pp. 26); they complied with filling out forms but expressed a lack of engagement, and did not see the process as likely to lead to any meaningful change. Some designated teachers thought the PEP process was done *to* children rather than *with* them (Waterman, 2020), and that the involvement of CYP was tokenistic and not reflective of a child-friendly or child-centred approach (Woodland, 2010). Several VSHs were keen to develop more interactive ways for young people to participate and express their views to avoid tokenism (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Parker (2017) presented evidence of looked after children's views being actively dismissed, describing how one pupil requested more support with Science in her PEP meeting, but this was deemed to be unfeasible and not included as a provision. Another pupil's desire to learn a musical instrument was dismissed as the adults decided he would not have time to do this.

### 2.5.3.2 Pupil Premium Plus funding

Pupil Premium Grants are available to schools for the purpose of raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, including looked after children. The Looked After Child Premium, or Pupil Premium Plus (PP+), is used to provide for the child or young person's educational needs as described in their PEP; thus, PP+ funding and the PEP process are closely linked. Since April 2014, PP+ funding has been managed by the VSH of the LA by whom the child or young person is looked after (Rivers, 2018). VSATs in Waterman's (2020) study identified that part of their role within PEP meetings was to discuss PP+ spending with school staff and determine how it should be used, and designated teachers similarly identified that one reason they may contact the Virtual School was to discuss the funding (Simpson, 2010).

There is great variability in the extent to which PP+ funding is relevant for an individual looked after child, and how it is used (Parker, 2017). In the included studies, it was evident that PP+ was used to fund provisions not available within the education setting. Some Virtual Schools held back a proportion of PP+ to fund therapeutic services, including play and drama therapy, behaviour support, and counselling (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). In Mann's study (2012), Educational Psychologists (EPs) were commissioned to provide direct work with CYP (such as therapeutic work or anti-bullying groups) or multi-agency consultation and review meetings. PP+ was also spent on one-to-one tuition, particularly for students doing their GCSEs, thus potentially improving

academic outcomes and opportunities for further education (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). For UASC, PP+ funding was perceived to be critical in providing adequate provision in secondary schools, although it is unclear exactly how the money was spent (Ott & O'Higgins, 2019). Sometimes, conflict arose between different professionals over PP+ spending; in one vignette presented by Parker (2017), the social worker and designated teacher disagreed on whether subject-specific tuition was an appropriate use of the money.

### **2.5.4 Theme 4: Reducing Exclusions and Securing Appropriate Placements**

One aspect of the VSH role requires communicating with schools regarding pupils at risk of exclusion, and reducing exclusions was a key priority for some VSHs (Rivers, 2018; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). The Virtual School facilitated managed moves or placement changes to avoid exclusions (Waterman, 2020), and Rivers (2018) helped develop an outreach service to support mainstream schools where pupils were at risk of exclusion. VSHs also took part in negotiations with senior leaders in schools to secure the most appropriate school places (Sebba & Berridge, 2019) and worked closely with social workers to manage any placement move that necessitated a change in school. One VSH noted that in these cases, she would engage in joint planning to ensure any decisions made were in the best interests of the child (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

### **2.5.5 Theme 5: Barriers to Effective Multi-agency Working**

Some barriers to effective multi-agency working were identified. Lack of communication between different agencies prevented a joined-up approach, which could negatively impact on the looked after child, for example when professionals were not informed about upcoming placement moves (Driscoll, 2013; Waterman, 2020). VSATs valued the expertise brought by different agencies, but perceived other professionals to lack knowledge of their role requirements, and therefore not properly fulfil their role (Waterman, 2020). For example, schools did not always complete paperwork for PEP meetings, and social workers did not always initiate three PEP meetings a year. Frustrations with social workers' contributions towards PEPs were echoed in other studies, with social workers criticised for not always engaging fully with the process (Mann, 2012; Parker, 2017). In two PEP meetings observed by Parker (2017), the social worker arrived late, which created tensions between the parties involved. Frequent changes to staffing within social care could also disrupt effective multi-agency working (Waterman, 2020; Woodland, 2010).

Additional barriers were identified in terms of working with the looked after children themselves. Some Virtual Schools promoted positive relationships between CYP and learning mentors who supported academic progress (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). Other Virtual School staff identified that

they built only limited relationships with the CYP, leading to a lack of trust (Simpson, 2012). One study suggested that the working relationship between designated teachers and looked after children could be unhelpful; of the seven care leavers interviewed by Driscoll (2011), only one appreciated the designated teacher in his school, and valued having someone who understood what was going on in his life. The other young people viewed the role less favourably – they expressed wanting to access the same sources of support as their non-looked after peers, but being supported by a designated teacher went against this.

## 2.6 Discussion

Guidance on the Education of Young People in Public Care (DfEE / DOH, 2000) recognised that to facilitate multi-agency working, there must be a key professional providing a link between different services. VSHs take on some of this responsibility, bridging the gap between social care and education. Within the 13 included studies, some explicitly referenced terms such as multi-agency work / engagement, interprofessional working, and inter-disciplinary engagement, but these terms were not always clearly defined by the authors. Other papers did not clearly reference these concepts, often due to this not being the primary focus of the research. Although this meant it was unclear whether descriptions of multi-agency working in the included studies aligned with the definition used by the researcher, the findings still contributed to an overall picture of how the Virtual School and its key role partners worked with a range of stakeholders to support this vulnerable population. Participants across the included studies generally recognised the importance of joined up working between different agencies and professionals, and effective partnership was seen as key to facilitating high-quality service delivery, which echoes the findings of previous Government reports (DfEE / DOH, 2000; SSI / Ofsted, 1995). Multi-agency working was evident in the work of Virtual Schools.

Atkinson and colleagues in 2007 carried out a literature review of multi-agency working across multiple sectors. They found significant variation in the existing models of multi-agency working described, but noted they tended to focus on either the extent of multi-agency activity, or the organisation of multi-agency teams. According to Atkinson et al. (2007), three principles could be said to underlie all models outlined in their review: organisation, joint investment and integration. As these principles were based on a review of literature across multiple sectors, including a large number of studies from health, social care and education, they were deemed to be particularly relevant to the current systematic literature review, and have been used as a framework for the discussion in order to outline in more detail the work of the Virtual School, and the impact it had. In addition, this framework supports the translation of findings into practice, offering practical strategies for overcoming the identified barriers to multi-agency working.

### 2.6.1 Organisation

This principle concerns the degree to which organisational structures facilitate effective collaboration between agencies. One organisational consideration is whether services can work together daily, or whether professionals have very little contact with one other outside of key decision-making points. Tomlinson's (2003) review of factors affecting multi-agency working identified that physical co-location of staff from different agencies had a considerable impact on provision of services. The theme of 'Bridging the gap between education and social care' illustrates this principle in action - as discussed by key stakeholders, Virtual School staff who worked in the same physical department as social workers, or who were seconded to the social care team, reportedly had improved working relationships.

Edwards (2009; 2010; 2011; 2017) provides insights into why co-location may promote effective multi-agency working. Specifically, she suggested that when different agencies have the time to meet and discuss their respective roles, with an emphasis on why they partake in certain practices, this leads to the development of common knowledge. This common knowledge in turn enables the formation of shared goals which benefit children. By contrast, professionals who work in isolation from one another lack the opportunity to relate their own knowledge and expertise to others' (Ingolfssdottir et al., 2021). Close contact on a daily basis can facilitate such discussions, and indeed one VSH identified that regular meetings with social care improved co-working (Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

Sloper (2004) identified that frequent staff turnover could hinder joint working, and this was echoed by the stakeholders in the current review. In 2021, the staff turnover rate for full time equivalent social workers in England was 15.4% (DfE, 2022b), the highest rate reported in the last five years. It is possible that the development of common knowledge is disrupted by high staff turnover within social care, since any common knowledge is lost once one member of staff leaves and another joins. Therefore, collaboration between the Virtual School, educational settings, and social care must be an ongoing process which seeks to promote a continued, shared understanding of looked after children's needs, and what support they require to make progress.

### 2.6.2 Joint Investment

This refers to the extent to which professionals and agencies perceive themselves to be working towards a common goal, and whether their aims and interests align. Competing individual and agency priorities act as a barrier to effective collaboration (Atkinson et al., 2005), and accordingly, competing priorities were raised by stakeholders in the current review. Some social workers saw education as less of a priority, resulting in a greater focus on social care needs in multi-agency



meetings. This echoes findings from a previous review of inter-professional working in three LAs in England, where participants felt that social workers' workloads led to them prioritising placement issues or emotional / physical needs over issues relating to education (Harker et al., 2004). Looked after children in another study also identified this as an issue (Harker et al., 2003), with 19 CYP commenting that social workers' perceived disinterest in their education, and prioritising of physical and emotional needs over educational opportunities, actually hindered educational progress.

To combat conflicts of interests, the viewpoints of different agencies must be aligned. The current review demonstrated ways in which the Virtual School worked together with social workers to achieve this, outlined in the theme 'Promoting a shared understanding'. For example, one VSH organised an 'awayday' so social workers could familiarise themselves with the children's educational needs (Sebba & Berridge, 2019, pp 544). Seven children in Harker et al.'s (2003) study felt that social workers would benefit from training to raise awareness of issues relating to their education. There was evidence of this type of training from the current review, and social workers who received training on aspects related to the education system were better able to advocate for looked after children on their caseload. Training of this nature could be prioritised within Virtual Schools to align the priorities of different agencies while also empowering social care staff.

Previous research found that low expectations negatively impacted on CYP's academic performance (Laing & Mazzoli Smith, 2015), and Harker and colleagues (2003) identified that although many foster carers showed interest in looked after children's education through encouragement and checking-in on their progress, this was not the case for all. 14 looked after CYP identified foster carers and residential carers as individuals who hindered their educational progress through lack of interest in their education, lack of attendance at school events, failure to encourage attendance at school, or lack of support with homework. Participants in the present review also identified that more work was needed in order to raise foster carers' low educational expectations (Simpson, 2012). Therefore, there is scope for the Virtual School to have an indirect influence on outcomes by increasing foster carers' understanding of the importance of high expectations. Recipients of training from the Virtual School in the current review expressed a desire for content which combined theory with practical strategies, and the Virtual School could apply this to training with foster carers as well, presenting underlying evidence and then offering practical strategies for promoting educational achievement which are in line with views expressed by looked after children themselves (Harker et al., 2003).

The theme of 'Promoting a shared understanding' also identified how training with school staff aligned different professionals' viewpoints, while CPD opportunities helped create a 'shared

language' and shared understanding of issues related to looked after children (Rivers, 2018, pp. 157). Although looked after children come from varying backgrounds, the majority are taken into care due to abuse or neglect (DfE, 2021a). Accordingly, many are likely to have experienced disrupted early attachments, and Zaccagnino and colleagues (2015) argued that children in care are much more likely to have insecure and disorganized attachment styles. Teacher training providers should teach trainees about how emotional development, including attachment, impacts on pupils' performance (DfE, 2016). Some teachers interpret the behaviour of children with insecure attachment styles in an overly negative way, including viewing them as aggressive, reactive, withdrawn, uncooperative, unpredictable, overly dependent and demanding of attention, prone to impulsivity, and difficult to manage (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). In the present review, stakeholders identified that training on attachment and trauma helped school staff working with looked after children to better understand their needs and the underlying root(s) of their behaviour, and to respond more appropriately.

Atkinson and colleagues (2007) also described accountability as being central to the concept of joint investment. The Virtual School contributed to accountability through the PEP process, monitoring achievement and holding schools accountable if expected progress was not being made. As evidenced in the included studies, VSHs also quality-assure PEPs to ensure they are comprehensive and include developmental, educational and mental health needs; that there are appropriate short- and long-term targets set; that they set out interventions and resources to support the meeting of these targets, including proposals for how PP+ funding will be spent; and that they are complimentary to any other plans held in relation to that child (DfE, 2018a).

### **2.6.3 Integration**

#### **2.6.3.1 Information-sharing**

Integration of different agencies can be influenced by the information-sharing that takes place between them. In accordance with the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004), the Children Act 2004 required agencies working in partnership to improve their information-sharing. Stakeholders in the current review outlined how the Virtual School contributed to the sharing of information through a variety of means, including sharing key documents like the PEP, signposting, providing general ad-hoc advice on specific issues, the development of information resources, or through training. This was viewed as valuable by other professionals. Regarding PEPs, some LAs had starting using an electronic system for accessing current and previous PEP documents, which improved information sharing and therefore improved practice. This reflects previous findings that adequate IT systems can enhance multi-agency collaboration (Sloper,

2004), and that new methods of access to information, including digital ones, can improve partnership between agencies (Percy-Smith, 2005). There is room for improvement regarding information-sharing within the Virtual School network itself, including more opportunities for VSHs to discuss their own and others' knowledge and practice. This would enable the Virtual Schools to expand their knowledge and identify opportunities for alternative practice that would benefit looked after CYP.

### **2.6.3.2 Focus on service-users**

Atkinson and colleagues (2007) argued that where different services are well integrated, there is a holistic approach to service delivery that focuses on service-users. The current review highlighted how the Virtual School and other professionals worked together to improve the lives of looked after CYP; however, stakeholders criticised some processes for not being child-centred, or for including children's views in tokenistic ways. There was also evidence of child-initiated suggestions being dismissed by adults in favour of adult-initiated goals. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE / DoH, 2014) places the onus on schools and LAs to ensure pupils with SEND and their families can participate fully in decision-making around their education. Student participation in school decision-making processes has been found to lead to improvements at the individual, interactional and organisational level (Mager & Nowak, 2012). It helps services improve and adapt to meet changing needs, and improves decision-making by ensuring decisions are more relevant for service-users and more likely to be implemented (Sinclair & Franklin, 2000). Participation was also found to improve student-adult relationships and communication and co-operation between teachers and students (Mager & Nowak, 2012). At the individual level, participation can enhance children's skills and self-esteem (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Sinclair & Franklin, 2000). If looked after CYP's views are overlooked or dismissed, as in the current study, this creates feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment (Gaskell, 2010) and they potentially miss out on the identified benefits. The Virtual School has a role to play in educating other corporate parents on the importance of student participation. Staff could be further empowered through training on methods that have proved effective in gathering the views of vulnerable CYP, such as visual participatory techniques including PhotoVoice / Photo-elicitation and digital stories (Aldridge, 2012; Chonody et al., 2013; Parsons et al., 2021; Zilli et al., 2020).

This review also highlighted a lack of pupil voice within research focusing on the Virtual School and designated teachers. The included studies highlighted the CYP's discontent with some of the systems in place to support them in school. For example, designated teachers were criticised for showing a lack of sensitivity regarding looked after children's care status in front of peers. Prior research identified that looked after children experience stigma within their peer relationships,

including peer rejection and bullying (Luke & Banerjee, 2012; McClung & Gayle, 2010), and feel they are treated differently by their teachers (McClung & Gayle, 2010). Keeping one's care status secret is one way to avoid social stigma and reduce the threat of bullying (Dansey et al., 2019; Madigan, et al., 2013). There may be scope for designated teachers to receive renewed guidance and training on the potential impact of revealing looked after children's care status. In addition, looked after CYP should be consulted on how to offer them support, invite them to key meetings, and discuss their progress in a way that is sensitive and not stigmatising.

It is integral that stakeholder views are considered when planning support and provision, and more research needs to be undertaken with participants from this population. The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) stresses the importance of ensuring research is carried out 'with' or 'by' CYP, rather than 'to,' 'about' or 'for' them (INVOLVE, 2016, pp. 1). For research to be truly participatory, Bishop (2014) argued that CYP must be actively involved in research beyond providing data; guidance on carrying out research with children recommends that involvement starts early on in the process, and suggests how involvement can take place during each stage of the research, as well as outlining the different forms that research can take (INVOLVE, 2016). Staff who work closely with looked after children, such as designated teachers, social workers, and VSHs, may be well-placed to advocate for such research to take place within LAs.

### **2.6.4 Limitations of the Research**

A rigorous systematic literature review process was followed to ensure that all papers which could contribute to answering the research question were accessed. A limitation of the review is that only three databases were searched due to time restrictions, so some key papers could have been missed. The inclusion of grey literature in the form of unpublished theses is a strength of this review; these are too often excluded and therefore rich sources of data are lost. Nevertheless, some relevant unpublished theses were not available through open access and attempts to obtain them from the authors were unsuccessful; they may have added to the findings had they been included.

## **2.7 Conclusion and Implications**

This literature review revealed that Virtual School staff work with a broad range of professionals from different disciplines, and that multi-agency working is at the core of what the Virtual School does. The Virtual School successfully engenders change for looked after children through training other professionals, information-sharing, attendance at multi-agency meetings, contributing towards statutory processes, ensuring accountability, working to reduce exclusions, and funding

additional interventions and academic support where needed. Despite this, some key barriers to effective multi-agency working remain, including organisational factors, differing and sometimes competing priorities, and lack of focus on service users. Some of these barriers are familiar and reflect those identified in previous literature spanning several decades. Therefore, Virtual Schools need to prioritise addressing these to strengthen multi-agency working, which will in turn benefit the looked after children being supported by professionals.

Few studies referenced working with Educational Psychologists (EPs), yet there is scope for EPs to work alongside Virtual Schools to help overcome some of the identified barriers. EPs are required to understand psychological models related to wider, systemic influences on development, so they are well placed to support schools to deliver whole-school approaches. In addition, their knowledge and experience of attachment and trauma informed practice could be utilised in the delivery of training to different professionals. At an individual child level, EPs could help promote a shared understanding of children's needs through consultation with key adults, and support staff to implement appropriate interventions to promote psychological wellbeing and social, emotional and behavioural development. EPs may also be able to share examples of novel ways to gather pupil views from their own practice.

A range of voices were captured by the included studies, including education and social care staff, Virtual School staff, other professionals, and looked after children themselves. However, the latter group comprised only a small proportion of the total participants. Therefore, there needs to be a greater focus on participatory research with looked after children, so their voices are included in a meaningful way. Even during statutory processes such as PEP meetings, there was evidence that some CYP's views were gathered in a 'tokenistic' way, or were not prioritised, and more must be done within education and social care to ensure that CYP are listened to and able to enact agency over their learning.



# Chapter 3    The Role of Designated Teachers in Supporting Care Experienced Children in England, Including Those on the Autism Spectrum

## 3.1    Abstract

Autistic care experienced children are likely to be at particular risk for poor educational outcomes, so it is vital to understand where some of the challenges and opportunities may lie in providing improved support for them. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five designated teachers to explore the under-researched role of designated teachers, their perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to their role fulfilment, and their experiences of supporting care experienced children on the autism spectrum. Following reflexive thematic analysis, five themes were developed. Designated teachers enacted change through both systemic working and the provision of targeted support to address individual-child needs. Various facilitators and barriers to role fulfilment were identified, including multi-agency working and the impact of competing roles and responsibilities. None of the participants reported currently or previously supporting a care experienced child with a formal diagnosis of autism. Participants were generally confident in their abilities to support this unique population of learners, but identified potential challenges, such as difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs. Implications for professionals are discussed and suggestions for future research are made.

## 3.2    Introduction

A child or young person is legally defined as ‘looked after’ by a Local Authority (LA) if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, or are subject to a care order or a placement order (Children Act, 1989). This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Department for Education (DfE) figures indicate there were 80,850 looked after children (LAC) on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2021, an increase of 1% on the previous year (DfE, 2021a). A previously looked after child (PLAC) is one who is no longer looked after by a local authority because they are subject to an adoption, special guardianship or child arrangements order (DfE, 2018a). DfE figures report that, compared to their peers, LAC have poorer academic outcomes at every Key Stage and are more likely to leave school with fewer or no formal qualifications (DfE, 2020). Care experienced children (CEC) also have poorer non-academic outcomes in terms of their physical and mental health and future prospects (Dent & Cameron,

2003; Sebba et al., 2015; Simon & Owen, 2006; Teyhan et al., 2018). That CEC underachieve compared to their peers is not a novel finding, and since the late 1980s there has been a growing interest in factors that contribute to this attainment gap (see Berridge, 2012 for a summary). Government policies and initiatives have been put in place in England to improve outcomes, including two statutory initiatives: (1) the requirement for every maintained school to allocate a designated teacher for looked after and previously looked after children; and (2) the Virtual School model and requirement for every LA to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH).

### **3.2.1 The Designated Teacher for Looked After Children and The Virtual School**

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (amended by the Children and Social Work Act 2017) places a statutory duty on all maintained schools in England to designate a member of staff who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of currently and previously looked after children. This member of staff is known as the designated teacher (DT). The DT must be a qualified teacher, head teacher or acting head teacher, and be working at the school at the time of being appointed (DfE, 2018b). At an organisational level, DTs contribute to school policies to ensure they do not disadvantage CEC, and ensure there are adequate procedures in place to support their learning. They also work with school staff, providing information regarding differentiated teaching strategies appropriate for CEC, and promoting greater understanding of the emotional, psychological and social effects of children's early experiences and separation from their birth family, and how this might affect a child's behaviour and learning. DTs should also work closely with external stakeholders and agencies, including social workers, VSHs, foster carers, birth parents if appropriate, and Governing Bodies, and be the central point of contact within the school for CEC (DfE, 2018b). The UK Government introduced the concept of the Virtual School and the role of the VSH in the White Paper *Care Matters: Time for Change* (Department for Education and Skills [DFES], 2007). The VSH would oversee the education of all LAC in their LA as if they attended one school, although the children remained educated in a range of local schools. Following successful pilots of the Virtual School model, the Children and Families Act 2014 placed a statutory responsibility on all LAs to appoint a VSH.

### **3.2.2 Looked After Children and Autism**

LAC are more likely to have a special educational need and / or disability (SEND) than non-looked after peers, and 52.6% of all children who had been looked after at any point on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 had an identified SEND (DfE, 2022a). Physical disabilities, moderate learning difficulties, severe and profound learning difficulties and autism have been associated with poorer academic outcomes than other SEND (Freeman, 2016; Sebba et al., 2015; O'Higgins et al., 2021). 2-3% of all



LAC are estimated to have an autism diagnosis, though this is likely to be an underrepresentation due to under-diagnosis and underreporting (Parsons et al., 2018). Figures for PLAC are less readily available. Given the evidence that these children are at particular risk for poor educational outcomes amongst the already vulnerable looked-after population, it is vital for LAs to gain a better understanding of why this is the case, what is currently being done to support this group of learners in schools, and what more could be done to improve outcomes.

### **3.2.3 Research Aims and Questions**

The present study sought to explore DTs' views on their role more broadly, and their views and experiences of supporting autistic CEC. The research addressed the following research questions:

1. What do designated teachers perceive to be their main roles and responsibilities?
2. What do designated teachers perceive to be the facilitators and barriers to carrying out their role?
3. What are the experiences of designated teachers in providing support to care experienced children on the autism spectrum?
4. What do designated teachers perceive to be the potential facilitators and barriers to supporting this group of learners?

## **3.3 Method**

### **3.3.1 Sample**

The sample consisted of five DTs (1 = male, 4= female) recruited from LAs across England. Further demographic information can be found in Table 3. The study used a purposeful sampling method (Palys, 2008) and the sample was self-selecting, with participants opting in to the research. The inclusion criteria were: for the participant to be the DT in their school, and for the participant to be working in a LA maintained school or Further Education College.

**Table 3***Participant Information*

Participant Number	Gender	Geographical Location	Type of Setting	Length of Time in DT Role	Additional Roles Held	Pupils Currently Supported
P1	Female	South of England	LA maintained specialist setting (SEMH)	Not explicitly stated	Deputy Headteacher; Assessment Lead; Curriculum Lead	Looked after children
P2	Female	South East England	Primary school	13 years	SENCo; Designated Safeguarding Lead	Previously looked after children
P3	Female	South East England	Infant school	Not explicitly stated	Headteacher; SENCo; Mental Health Lead; Class Teacher	Previously looked after children
P4	Male	South of England	Primary school	7 years	Deputy Headteacher; Head of Inclusion; Designated Safeguarding Lead	Looked after children
P5	Female	Greater London	Primary school	1 year	SENCo; Class Teacher	Looked after and previously looked after children

### 3.3.2 Procedure

During the recruitment stage, emails were sent to all maintained primary and secondary schools and Further Education Colleges in four LAs in the South and South-East of England and Greater London with whom the researcher had a current or prior professional connection (a total of 445 schools). The research was also advertised via national DT mailing lists or via DT forums held by Virtual Schools. Prospective participants were invited to opt in to the research, at which point they were supplied with a detailed information sheet and consent form which was used to obtain written consent (see Appendices E and F). Data collection took place via semi-structured interviews carried out virtually on Microsoft Teams, during the Covid-19 pandemic. They were recorded using the Recording feature in Microsoft Teams.

#### 3.3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

An exploratory, qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was deemed most appropriate to answer the research questions (Flewitt, 2014). The interview schedule (Appendix H) was informed by Government guidance on the role of DTs (DfE, 2018b), discussions with colleagues in the field, and a review of relevant literature (see Chapter Two). Participants were asked to reflect upon the nature of their roles within school, including their experiences of working with the Virtual School, their experiences of supporting autistic and non-autistic CEC, and whether they thought the support might differ between the two populations.

#### 3.3.2.2 Transcription and Data Analysis

Interviews were fully transcribed and data analysis followed the six-step approach to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with modifications to the steps as outlined in Braun & Clarke (2019; see Table 3). Coding and theme development was carried out inductively, as the process was directed by the content of the data and not by pre-existing theories or concepts.

**Table 3**

*Six Stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

Stage	Description
Familiarisation with the data	Reading and re-reading the data, to become familiar with its content.
Coding	Generating succinct labels (codes) that identify important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the

	research questions. It involves coding the entire dataset, and collating the codes and relevant data extracts for later stages of analysis.
Generating initial themes	Examining the codes and collated data to identify significant broader patterns of meaning (potential themes) and collating data relevant to each candidate theme. Themes are defined as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central concept or idea.
Reviewing themes	Checking candidate themes against the dataset to ensure they reflect the data and answer the research questions. Refining themes can involve them being split, combined, or discarded.
Defining and naming themes	Developing a detailed analysis of each theme and working out its scope and focus. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme.
Writing up	Weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

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### **3.3.3 Ethical Considerations**

The study conformed to the British Psychology Society's ethical guidelines (Oates et al., 2021) and ethical approval was gained from the University of Southampton Ethics Committee (ref 54850.A2). Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose and nature of the study, and fully informed, written consent was gained via a consent form (see Appendices E and F). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point until transcription. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, participants were assigned an alphanumeric value which will be used to refer to them throughout this paper. Other identifiable information was removed during transcription. Participants were sent a debrief form identifying sources of support should the interview have caused any distress (Appendix G).

## 3.4 Findings

Five themes were generated from the analysis: (1) Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role; (2) Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school; (3) A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs; (4) Competing roles and responsibilities within school; and (5) Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice. See Figure 1 for the thematic map of themes, subthemes, and connections between them.

### 3.4.1 Theme 1: Multi-Agency Working as a Key Aspect of the Role

The subthemes that comprise this main theme relate to information-sharing, how DTs perceived they were supported by other professionals and agencies, and the perceived disadvantages of multi-agency working.

#### 3.4.1.1 Importance of information-sharing with others

Participants emphasised the importance of information-sharing with other professionals. For example, informing school staff about children's care status helped staff to understand their needs better, and one DT kept the Virtual School updated on children's progress outside of formal statutory processes:

P1: If I'm emailing the social worker I might copy in [Name] from the Virtual School. So I will make sure that they know what is going on regarding a child's education, or concerns or issues that we might have in school.

DTs were a key source of information for foster carers / parents, particularly around school systems and processes. DTs also shared useful links and signposted families to appropriate services:

P2: And there's also a need for us to spend some time with people making sure they just understand boring things like the different systems of school, because if they haven't fostered someone who has come to our school before then we will be different to the school, even the one that is just down the road.

Information sharing with families was a reciprocal process, and P5 acted as an intermediary between families and teachers, sharing successful strategies and supporting a consistent approach:

P5: And she will say to me 'I've tried this and it worked' and I will say 'Great, I will let the teacher know'. And the teacher will say 'I've tried this and it works' and I will let her know. So yeah, I just keep up with that communication.

P1 stressed the need for timely information-sharing and found herself becoming frustrated when this didn't happen.

P1: We have just received a chronology that the social worker had put together and that was only because I'd sent- I'd informed the social worker about some issues that he'd been having in school and she said 'Oh, this might be helpful for you'. Well actually, that should- that would have been helpful for us back in June when we knew he was going to start.

For other DTs, information-sharing had been hampered by documents getting lost, for example when a child transferred from one LA to another, which made it challenging for staff to implement appropriate and effective support.

#### **3.4.1.2 Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role**

All DTs described how the Virtual School supported them in their role, for example by offering training opportunities which helped build DTs' skills and knowledge, and made them feel valued:

P5: There's termly CPD that the Virtual School offer which are really good. They have been really helpful and useful. And then also because we're in the Attachment Aware Schools Award there's also optional ones, optional courses you can do.

Some DTs felt improvements could be made to Virtual School training. P5 wished information was simplified for new DTs, as she was left feeling overwhelmed after her first course and struggled to understand the acronyms used. Two DTs also criticised that some training was unavailable to them as they only had PLAC on roll:

P3: Maybe some wider training that would be open to all staff, not just for looked after children. For schools like us, we have a lot of post-adopted children who still have many of the similar needs to looked after children, particularly when they are very young.

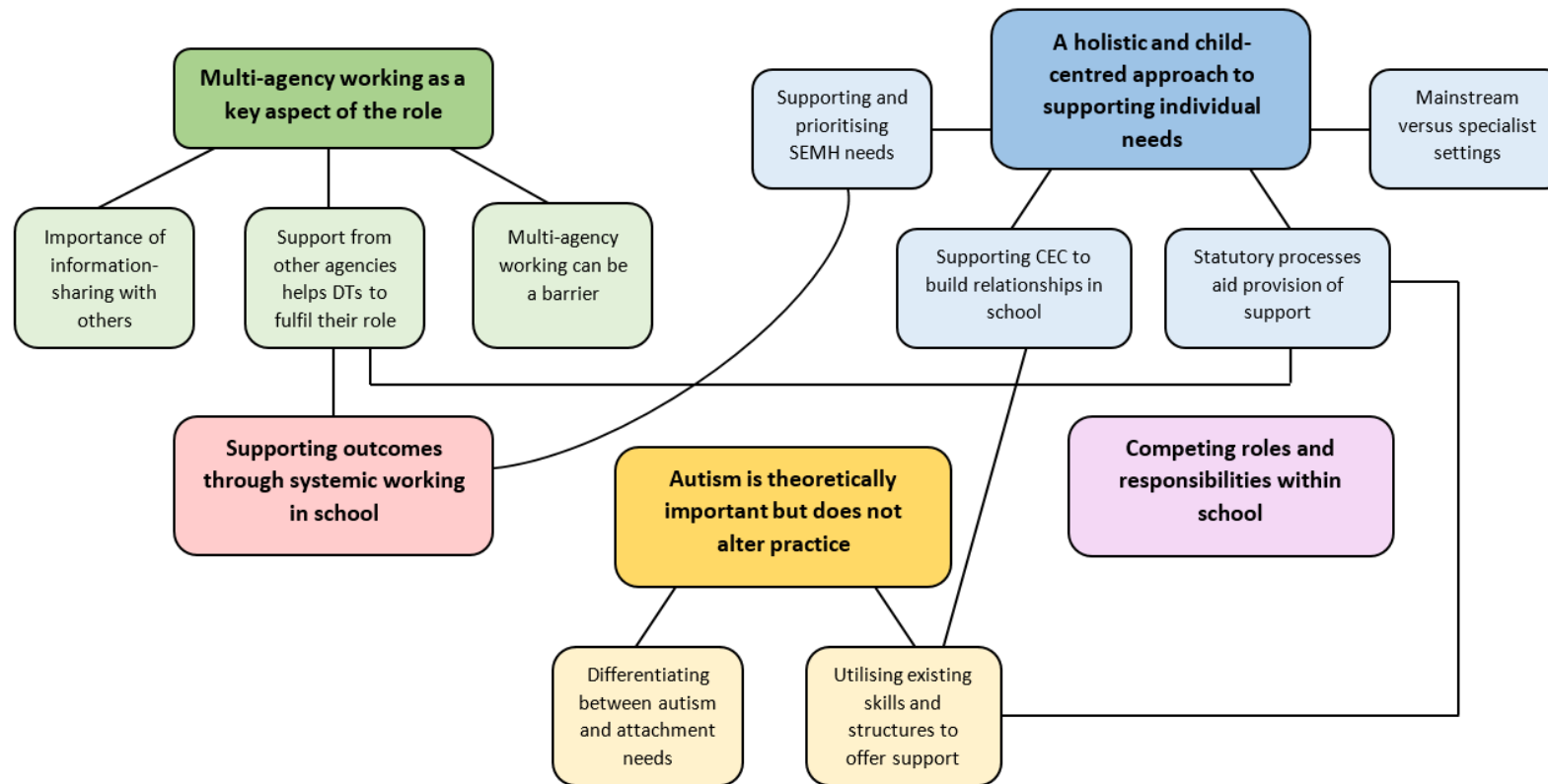


Figure 2

*Thematic Map Showing Themes and Sub-theme*

The Virtual School also supported through advice-giving, information-sharing, and signposting. This was achieved through regular email contact, information shared via the Virtual School website, or being available to answer specific queries from DTs. Clarity and ease of access to information was important to two participants, and this could differ between Virtual Schools:

P5: I feel like the [Local Authority] Virtual School website is a little bit more... user friendly, more detailed. Whereas the [Local Authority 2] one, yeah, I couldn't really find what I was looking for as such [...] which kind of then slows things down as well when you just need to find an answer to something.

P4 found working in isolation difficult, being the only DT in his school. Some Virtual Schools facilitated networking with other DTs, and this enabled sharing of good practice and ideas, although this was perceived to be more efficient when done in smaller groups:

P2: And we used to have hub meetings – they were excellent – and they were just DTs from local schools used to meet up. And we- I think we found them really helpful but actually they stopped [...] I don't really know why, a few years ago, and they have been replaced with DT health briefings which are much bigger.

Some DTs were supported by other schools and agencies in their local area, including Educational Psychologists (EPs), outreach services, and specialist settings.

### **3.4.1.3 Multi-agency working can be a barrier**

P4 emphasised that multi-agency working needed to be collaborative, with people 'working together' rather than working against one another, which didn't always happen. P3 perceived one Virtual School to show no interest in LAC placed in her setting, and multi-agency meetings were a source of frustration for several DTs, particularly when there was perceived lack of engagement from families and other professionals, for example:

P2: I think social workers have their own whole load of stresses and strains but [...] I listen to some people who have got lots of looked after children, and none of them have their SDQs done, none of them have social workers that turn up at meetings and I just think that's really frustrating.

However, P1 recognised that conducting meetings virtually during the Covid-19 pandemic had actually improved attendance:

P1: I don't actually think that having to do them over Zoom has had a particularly negative impact. I think it- what it has done actually is people have made the time



whereas often, particularly with the child and his parents, they would be like ‘Oh no, we can’t come in and we can’t do it’. But actually because they have been at home there has been no excuse for them not to attend.

Cross-border agreements meant some DTs had to work with multiple Virtual Schools, which presented challenges. Specifically, P1 and P3 disliked the lack of consistency in the paperwork, while P5 struggled to know which Virtual School to seek support from, for example:

P3: And also all the paperwork was slightly different, which was incredibly frustrating if that makes any sense? So [...] it wasn’t helpful. It was almost unhelpful because of the differences. There was no sort of continuity or consistency.

P2 expressed frustration that Virtual Schools differed in the extent to which they supported PLAC and praised a Virtual School which was more proactive in this regard.

### **3.4.2 Theme 2: Supporting Outcomes through Systemic Working in School**

The second theme pertained to DTs enacting change by working systemically in their schools. Often, this systemic work focused on changing staff attitudes and practice. One way of doing this was through implementation of whole-school approaches. These included: an Attachment Aware Schools Award, Emotion Coaching, and being an Empathy Lab pioneer school. For both P2 and P5, the ‘Attachment Awareness’ initiative had created a noticeable shift in attitudes within the staff team, with P5 going on to describe it as ‘the best thing that we’ve done’. DTs also cascaded training they received to other staff members, and devised their own whole-school training e.g. ‘Behaviour as Communication’, which helped change staff views:

P2: I think it has changed the way some of us look at the function of some children’s behaviours. So ‘What is it they are trying to communicate to us?’ And also it’s given us an insight- a little bit more of an insight into... there’s a whole bit about ACES and what children have lived through and maybe what parents have lived through.

DTs also had a systemic, whole-school influence through writing and contributing to school policies. P5 was working on amending the school’s Behaviour Policy to be more attachment and trauma informed:

P5: So I think definitely the policy side of things. So I had to write the policy and we’re still kind of working through that and making sure, you know, it’s finalised and suited to our school.

### **3.4.3 Theme 3: A Holistic and Child-centred Approach to Supporting Individual Needs**

Participants recognised that a holistic approach was needed to support CEC, which considered academic attainment, social skills, sense of belonging, emotional well-being and mental health, teaching behaviour for learning, and physical or sensory needs. Crucial to providing the right type of support was assessment of academic and non-academic progress, which was used to inform interventions. In P1's school there was a school-wide, formalised approach to assessing social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs:

P1: So the assessment for the social, emotional and mental health – we call it our pupil profile – that will be used to inform the teaching that the child will have in those kinds of skills. And then, as with all other schools, we also assess them for reading, writing, maths and science.

#### **3.4.3.1 Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs**

Interventions and strategies were put in place to support SEMH needs. These included: physical spaces for children to use when overwhelmed; pastoral support; targeted support around regulating emotions; whole-school approaches such as Emotion Coaching and restorative justice; and buying in external agencies e.g. a counsellor. Some DTs emphasised how the support offered was not unique to CEC:

P3: No but what I would say is we would do the same for children who weren't looked after if they had similar needs because it isn't just always looked after or post-adopted that have those anxieties and needs. It can be from a very different reason.

Two DTs recognised that SEMH needs might be prioritised over learning and academic progress, which led to academic pressures and expectations being reduced, for example:

P5: At some point I think she will need it. But her emotional side of things is... we have to... not 'fix it' because that's the wrong term, but help her with that first because I think that comes first for her. Then she will attain.

#### **3.4.3.2 Supporting CEC to build relationships in school**

A recurring subtheme was that of relationships, and their importance for CEC:

P3: I think it's our relationships with them. So I think it's being their constants. And it can even be that just- in my role currently, that just checking in with them. As we are walking down the corridor it's making sure I say something involving their name and about a conversation we might have had. So that they are always in the top of our mind.

All DTs regularly took time out of their day to 'check-in' with their CEC. P2 and P5 provided more formal opportunities for regular contact, through a 'mailbox' system where children could send notes, or through weekly mentoring. Relationships with other key adults in school were also important, however staff changes e.g. from one academic year to the next could be challenging, so the DTs acted as a consistent adult during these times.

The DTs also recognised the importance of supporting CEC to foster relationships with other children. In this way, the DTs and other school staff helped to provide a sense of belonging, which may previously have been lacking, for example:

P1: We give our children a sense of belonging and, particularly with the looked after children that we have here, even if their foster placements haven't broken down over the years their school placements possibly have, or they have been educated in a cupboard away from other children because of the volatile nature of their behaviour and things like that. So we create this sense of belonging.

### **3.4.3.3 Statutory processes aid provision of support**

DTs were positive about statutory processes to support LAC, to which they contributed. Key to monitoring LAC's progress and attainment was the Personal Education Plan (PEP). DTs and class teachers reviewed progress against previous targets and set new ones. DTs also gathered LAC's views ahead of PEP meetings. The PEP meeting itself was attended by key staff including DTs, social workers, foster carers and sometimes Virtual School staff. DTs liked that the PEP meeting presented an opportunity to focus on positive achievements, for example:

P5: And, yep, we just use that time to really focus on a lot of what's gone well which has been so lovely for this child because he's made amazing progress.

DTs worked with teachers to identify the provision needed to support progress. Thus, the process was viewed as individualised and child-centred:

P5: We choose which ones need the most work and together we come up with the targets. And then it's a case of 'Right, can I support you with this? Do you need me to take him out one to one? Do you need me to do this? Do you need help with resources?

Three DTs referred to the Virtual School's involvement in statutory processes. The online PEP format provided by the Virtual School was praised by DTs, who found it clear and easy to complete. Two DTs liked that VSHs quality assured their PEP documents, as this motivated them to produce more comprehensive plans, for example:

P4: I like the way in which they grade the PEPs as I said earlier. It makes you- not that I'm competitive at all (laughs) but I like that element to it because we're getting feedback with regards to how we're writing them. So if I ever was to get a 'requires improvement' PEP then I'd want to know why.

Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding was utilised to support both learning and SEMH needs. Reflecting the broader context of the research, some DTs described how the Covid-19 pandemic had limited the provisions they could put in place because children were educated at home during the lockdowns or because usual clubs / groups were unable to run. Therefore, Government-granted funding could not be used as effectively during this time.

### **3.4.3.4 Mainstream versus specialist settings**

One DT worked in a specialist school, and perceived specialist provision to support CEC better than mainstream provision. For example, her school's behaviour policy was reportedly more flexible and less punitive when children showed dysregulated behaviour. This enabled the school to be more inclusive. This DT gave examples where children had previously been taught outside of the mainstream classroom, been on part-time timetables, or who were unable to remain in a mainstream school as their needs were not being adequately catered for:

P1: But it- for some children it was heart-breaking. They would find themselves out of class. It still is, because we get them coming into us and we read their history. Parents having to come up and collect them after half an hour of being in school because they're sensory, and they are having a sensory overload.

This DT also felt the higher staff: student ratio in the specialist setting made it easier to provide an individualised curriculum and cater to children's needs. In addition, both time and expertise could affect teachers' ability to support pupils in a mainstream school:

P1: But actually mainstream teachers don't have the time. They have the commitment and they have the desire but they are under so many other pressures that I just think dealing with a- supporting a child with autism in a mainstream school, supporting a looked after child in a mainstream school is more difficult.

### **3.4.4 Theme 4: Competing Roles and Responsibilities within School**

All DTs held additional roles in school, and those with more roles found they had less time dedicated to their DT responsibilities. This was particularly evident in smaller schools with a small senior leadership team:

P3: But we are a three-class school so I have lots of roles because there aren't lots of people (laughs).

P1 and P4 reflected on how additional time pressures were created due to staff absences during the Covid-19 pandemic. DTs took on additional responsibilities and other work was prioritised over the DT role:

P1: Yeah, yeah it's always- time is always a bit of an issue. But actually it's the staffing, the pressures on staffing, that is causing them. Our SENCO is currently off and so I am picking up her annual reviews as well.

The number of LAC in school influenced capacity, with greater numbers leading to more time pressures, for example:

P4: For me at the moment, it's easier in respect of we only have two children. If you've got a much bigger number - and we have in the past, we've had up to ten in school at any one time - that's much harder to manage.

Two of the DTs interviewed were only supporting PLAC at the time of the interviews and as a result had fewer time pressures as statutory timescales did not apply.

### **3.4.5 Theme 5: Autism is Theoretically Important but Does Not Alter Practice**

None of the DTs interviewed currently supported CEC with an autism diagnosis. P1's school had one LAC on the waiting list for an assessment but it had been delayed due to Covid-19; P3 said a post-adopted child in Reception had been flagged by a health visitor as showing autistic traits; and P5 also had a child in Reception whose foster carer had raised the possibility of him being autistic. Therefore, DTs had little to no experience of working with this population. In addition, P3 reflected on how she had never considered autistic CEC as a distinct group, although her participation in the research had since prompted discussions within her staff team around this. Notwithstanding these important caveats, this theme comprised two subthemes relating to difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs, and how DTs would support autistic CEC in their schools.

#### **3.4.5.1 Differentiating between autism and attachment needs**

DTs noticed similarities between CEC and children on the autism spectrum. For example, children might have reduced emotion regulation, difficulties with emotional literacy, impulsivity, and a preference for sameness and routine. This could make differentiating between autism and attachment needs challenging:

P3: Because what we've started to think about is there are so many similarities between that sort of attachment children and autistic children, if that makes sense... But it isn't a connection we've probably naturally made.

This could also lead to conflicting views between foster carers / parents and school staff; at times, families thought a child was autistic, but school did not share that view, often due to not observing the same behaviours in the school setting. P3 felt that families were more likely to seek out a diagnosis as a way of explaining a child's behaviours:

P3: I'm wondering whether they are looking for something and we are not seeing it at school.

Some DTs believed the similarities between autistic pupils and those with early childhood trauma or attachment needs could lead to misdiagnosis of autism, and gave examples of this from their non-looked after population:

P1: We have some children who have a diagnosis of autism, a diagnosis of ADHD, but knowing their backgrounds we are kind of thinking it's more early developmental trauma.

### **3.4.5.2 Utilising existing skills and structures to offer support**

Participants were asked what current or hypothetical support would benefit autistic CEC. The DTs thought prior training and staff experience of working with autistic children would be utilised to also support this population of learners. In this regard, they perceived support for autistic CEC to be the same as support for autistic pupils who were not care experienced:

P1: We support with autistic friendly strategies anyway so children all have visual timetables, they use social stories, they have now and next boards, and they are given the time away from the class, they can use ear defenders, and all of those sorts of things that would help a child in the classroom we would do anyway.

One DT identified where support may differ between CEC with or without an autism diagnosis:

P4: So- so actually, neither of the children specifically work with a teaching assistant or any additional adult so I suppose thinking about it and working it through, there may be some additional adult support, certainly if they have an Education Health Care Plan.

As well as utilising existing skills in the staff team, the structures in place to support LAC would also benefit those with an autism diagnosis. For example, a PEP would cover any autism-specific needs. P4 also emphasised how some children might have different statutory documents in place and, in these cases, it was important for all targets to align:

P4: So you would dovetail the targets from the EHCP to the PEP to their Individual Learning Plan so that everything marries up. So you know, they haven't got PEP targets over here, spinning that plate, ILP targets here, and then EHCP, and nothing is actually working in tandem.

Some DTs identified areas where they felt they did not have sufficient knowledge and expertise, and would require additional support from other agencies, for example:

P3: I think we would probably want to get some advice from somewhere. Probably our EP to start with. But somewhere about how to marry up... and which bit to start on first. That would be very personal to the child, wouldn't it? 'What is the priority?' 'Which bits do we need to get in place first for this child to be successful?'

### 3.5 Discussion

Autistic CEC are at particular risk for poor educational outcomes amongst this vulnerable population so it is vital to understand where some of the challenges and opportunities may lie in providing improved support for them. This study focused on the under-researched role of DTs, the facilitators or barriers to their role fulfilment, and their experiences of supporting autistic CEC. Interestingly, none of the DTs reported currently or previously supporting CEC with a formal diagnosis of autism, although some DTs mentioned children who were on the waiting list for an assessment, or for whom a key adult had raised concerns the child was autistic. The latest DfE figures indicate that 52.6% of children looked after at any point had an identified SEND, of which 2% had autism spectrum disorder (ASD) listed as the primary need (DfE, 2022a). However, this figure is likely to be an under-estimation of the true number given underreporting and under-diagnosis of autism amongst LAC (Parsons et al., 2018). Therefore, the main findings discussed next relate to CEC generally, including autistic CEC, but not specifically focused on them. However, we return to possible reasons for autistic children's under-recognition within this population later, and the implications of this for practice.

The five DTs interviewed emphasised how working systemically was a key facilitative factor for supporting CEC. Whole-school, multi-modal approaches that emphasise skills work, school ethos and teacher education have been shown to be most effective in supporting the mental health of young people in schools (Weare & Nind, 2011), and DTs described how they delivered staff training and implemented whole-school approaches, thus ensuring support moved beyond focusing on the individual child, the classroom, or the curriculum. A holistic approach was evident in accounts of assessment and intervention. DTs assessed academic outcomes as well as those relating to SEMH and physical needs. LAC are more likely to have a diagnosed mental health

disorder than non-disadvantaged children (Bazalgette et al., 2015) and support for non-academic progress was reported in all of the interviews. Poor mental health (as characterised by internalising and externalising behaviours) is associated with poorer educational attainment, and LAC with associated mental health needs show reduced skills for learning (Bazalgette et al., 2015; McLeod & Fettes, 2007; Needham et al., 2004). In some cases DTs prioritised SEMH over learning goals to support CEC's access to learning at a later time.

This did not mean that academic aspirations and attainment were not important; DTs applied a range of approaches to support academic progress, including booster sessions for English and maths, and small group teaching where appropriate. In many cases, academic interventions were funded by the PP+ grant awarded to the school. Statutory processes such as the PEP and Annual Reviews require schools to review progress, and therefore to informally evaluate the effectiveness of any interventions put in place, which may have highlighted if interventions were failing to have the desired impact. However, the academic interventions described by participants have a limited evidence base for LAC, which reflects a wider lack of research in this area (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2021); this is an area of research that requires urgent attention.

It was notable that these DTs were positive about the PEP process, while previous research has found mixed views (Mann, 2012; Goodall, 2014; Waterman, 2020; Woodland, 2010). For example, in Woodland's (2010) study, the PEP was viewed by some DTs and Virtual School staff as a 'tick-box exercise' (pp. 97) which led to varying degrees of engagement. The method of producing and reporting the PEP may be important here since three DTs used electronic formats ('e-PEPs') supplied by their Virtual Schools. In line with previous findings that e-PEPs improved practice and helped with monitoring of progress (Rivers, 2018; Sebba & Berridge, 2019), this format provided clarity around what information DTs needed to supply, supporting their contributions to the process. Interestingly, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to be a facilitative factor to the process, with two DTs commenting that virtual meetings increased stakeholder engagement and thus improved multi-agency working. Although there is still limited research in this area, this aligns with the views of social workers interviewed by Manthorpe and colleagues (2021), who found the virtual format to increase attendance as travel requirements were removed. One DT was considering continuing with virtual multi-agency meetings, representing a potential step change for her school. It is unclear whether this reflects a wider shift in practice amongst schools in England, and future research exploring this could be beneficial.

DTs valued the relationship they had with the Virtual School, who served as a key source of support, training, and information. This echoes previous findings that DTs required support in areas such as completing PEPs, accessing additional funding, useful resources, and training to



support educational attainment and emotional needs (Boesley, 2021; Drew & Banerjee, 2019; Simpson, 2012). DTs particularly valued staff availability, and clear, user-friendly websites or regular email updates. As some DTs utilise less than one day a week to meet their obligations (Boesley, 2021), easily accessible information aids role fulfilment by minimising the time spent searching for information and resources. All five DTs held sole responsibility for CEC in their schools and the role could feel isolating as a result. Consequently, they valued opportunities provided by the Virtual School to network with other DTs and share good practice. In alignment with the findings of Pickles et al. (2022) and Gilligan (2001), the building of positive relationships with CEC was also recognised as crucial for supporting their resilience, including within the family and in the context of school and the wider community. Levels of individual contact with CEC varied, ranging from regular mentoring sessions or delivering interventions, to more informal contact, but all DTs perceived the CEC in their school to value this contact. DTs also recognised the importance of fostering positive working relationships with other key stakeholders, such as foster carers or parents, which echoes Goodall's (2014) findings.

Nevertheless, despite these positive accounts of systemic working, relationship building, and collaboration, these DTs also reported longstanding and substantial barriers to supporting CEC. DTs worked closely with a range of professionals and agencies, most commonly social workers, VSHs, Virtual School staff, and foster carers and families. Other professionals not fulfilling their responsibilities prevented a joined-up approach, which negatively impacted on DTs' provision of support. Unfortunately, these challenges with multi-agency working are a familiar and persistent story, very much in line with previous research (Harker et al. 2004; Mann, 2012; Parker, 2017; Waterman, 2020). Likewise, DTs commented on frustrations with poor information-sharing within and beyond LA teams (also Goodall, 2014). As noted by Pickles et al., (2022), this situation is exacerbated by the statutory requirements of the '*Belonging Regulations*' (The Education [Areas to which Pupils and Students Belong] Regulations 1996). These regulations apply where some LAC have a care placement outside of the boundary of the LA which took the child into care. The child would typically be educated in a school close to their care placement, but would still 'belong' to the placing authority. DTs reported that they had LAC on roll who were cared for by different LAs and so under the remit of different Virtual Schools. This created inconsistencies regarding the paperwork required in each case, which was very challenging for DTs, a finding also reflected by Waterman (2020).

Challenges with multi-agency working were also magnified given that DTs were often themselves fulfilling more than one role. The *Designated Teacher (Looked-After Pupils etc) (England) Regulations 2009* stipulate the DT must be a qualified teacher or a head teacher / acting head teacher, and these participants had at least one other job role, with many holding several (see

also Boesley, 2021). In line with guidance that the most effective DTs have a leadership role, some participants were part of the senior leadership team (DfE, 2018b). Perhaps unsurprisingly, DTs found it difficult to manage their time effectively in light of multiple and competing job roles. This was particularly the case with smaller schools with fewer staff, and when a school had a greater number of LAC on roll (also found by Fletcher-Campbell et al., 2003). Although DTs recognised that time had always been a barrier, staff absences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated this pressure. This raises concerns about the extent to which the complex and wide-ranging needs of CEC can be effectively managed and met if they cannot be prioritised amongst other competing demands.

Finally, given the very poor outcomes for autistic LAC amongst the already poor outcomes of CEC in general (Freeman, 2016; Sebba et al., 2015; O'Higgins et al., 2021) it was important to explore DTs' experiences of supporting this group. No DTs currently supported any autistic CEC and one stated that, prior to her involvement in the research, she and her colleagues had never considered this as a distinct group of learners. However, as Green et al., (2016) argue, it is vital to appropriately consider whether a child may be autistic and for their support and educational planning to be informed by an autism-specific lens if so. Diagnostic criteria may contribute to an under-diagnosis of autism within the LAC population as the DSM-5 and ICD-11 state that children cannot be diagnosed with both ASD and either reactive attachment disorder (RAD) or disinhibited social engagement disorder (DSED; APA, 2013; WHO, 2019), something which is disputed by other researchers (Davidson et al., 2022; Mayes et al., 2017). By limiting diagnosis to only one condition, some children's needs may be misattributed and therefore not supported in the most appropriate way. It is vital that professionals and researchers recognise autistic CEC as a distinct population, yet there is a paucity of empirical research in this area (Davidson et al., 2022).

Under-diagnosis of autism within the CEC population could also result from differing professional views around assessment and diagnosis. Previous research revealed disagreement in parent-teacher ratings of observed difficulties for autistic CYP (Clark et al., 2020; Stratis & Lecavalier, 2015), and parents have felt frustrated when teachers did not support a diagnostic assessment due to not seeing the same difficulties at school as at home (Jacobs et al., 2020). Some autistic CYP mask their autism in school, but experience greater dysregulation at home, leading to differences in observed behaviours (Sedgewick et al., 2021). Some DTs in the present study disagreed with a foster carer or parent's view that a child was autistic and this resulted in no referral being made. If parents or carers lacked the knowledge and confidence to instigate an assessment themselves, or deferred to the view of school staff, this could halt the process entirely, leading to a risk of autistic CEC not receiving the most appropriate support. However, similarities in presentation and diagnostic overshadowing can also lead to children with

attachment needs being misdiagnosed with autism; DTs identified cases from their non-looked after population where they felt that autism had been diagnosed in children whose primary need was related to attachment and developmental trauma. Therefore, a careful and considered approach to referral, assessment and diagnosis is necessary.

### **3.5.1 Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

Although the DT role has been statutory since 2009, there is limited published research exploring their roles and responsibilities, so this small-scale study provides important insights from an under-researched group. Previous research explored the views of VSHs in relation to autistic children in care (Pickles et al., 2022), and the present study built on this previous research by capturing the voices of DTs, who are a 'key role partner' to the Virtual School (Simpson, 2012, pp. 50) and enact change for CEC more directly within schools. Although carrying out this research in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic presented some limitations, it also generated novel findings which could be utilised to improve future support, such as the use of virtual meetings to overcome practical barriers to multi-agency working. Owing to the exploratory, qualitative nature of the study, the sample size was small and so no assumptions can be made about the extent to which findings generalise to the wider group of DTs. Future research should seek to capture the voices of DTs more comprehensively using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, to generate a national picture of experiences of supporting autistic CEC. A further limitation of the present study is the absence of other key voices. As this research was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, and against the backdrop of national lockdowns and school closures, it was not possible to capture the voices of autistic CEC themselves. Future research should seek to prioritise exploring their experiences. In addition, the voices of social workers are absent from the present study and warrant further exploration.

## **3.6 Conclusions and Implications**

DTs enacted change for CEC through systemic working and provision of individualised, targeted support to address individual-child needs. Evidence of whole-school approaches to support SEMH is positive given that a combination of universal and targeted interventions appears to be the best-informed approach (Weare & Nind, 2011). EPs may have a role to play in supporting schools to implement whole-school approaches, including initial training, monitoring adherence, and delivering refresher training when needed. EPs may also have a role in supporting DTs and other school staff to better identify the root cause(s) of a child's observed behaviours. This could be done through consultation around individual children, or through whole-school training, and training around attachment and the impact of trauma on children's cognitive, social, and

emotional development is particularly crucial for supporting school staff to better understand and respond to individual needs. The Coventry Grid is a clinical tool designed to aid clinicians in distinguishing between attachment disorders and autism (Moran, 2010; 2021). It also has the potential to highlight where attachment disorders and autism co-occur, and therefore where trauma-informed and autism-specific approaches should be combined (Berger et al., 2021; Davidson et al., 2022). However, there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the Coventry Grid and it was formed from clinical impressions rather than being rooted in an evidence-base. Awareness of the tool also appears limited, given that it was mentioned by only three of eight VSHs in Pickles et al.'s (2022) study, and by none of the DTs in the present study. Further research on the usefulness of this tool for educational professionals in non-clinical settings is needed

## Appendix A      Syntax for Database Searches

**Table 4**

*Syntax for Database Searches*

Database	Syntax
PsycINFO 27.10.2020	<p>DE "foster children" OR DE "foster care" OR (TI, AB "looked after child*" OR "LAC" OR "child* looked after" OR "CLA" OR "looked after" OR "foster care") AND</p> <p>DE "individual education programs" OR (TI, AB "virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR "designated teacher*" OR "personal education plan*" OR "PEP" OR "PEPs")</p> <p>Limiters: English</p>
ERIC 27.10.2020	<p>(MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Foster Care") OR subject("Out of home care") OR (ti("looked after child*" OR "LAC" OR "child* looked after" OR "CLA" OR "looked after" OR "foster care") OR ab("looked after child*" OR "LAC" OR "child* looked after" OR "CLA" OR "looked after" OR "foster care")))) AND</p> <p>(ti("virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR "child* looked after" OR "designated teacher*" OR "personal education plan*" OR "PEP") OR (ab("virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR "child* looked after" OR "designated teacher*" OR "personal education plan*" OR "PEP" OR "PEPs"))))</p> <p>Additional Limits – Language: English</p>
Scopus 27.10.2020	<p>(TITLE-ABS("looked after child*") OR ("LAC") OR ("child* looked after") OR ("CLA") OR ("looked after") OR ("foster care")) AND</p> <p>(TITLE-ABS("virtual school*") OR ("virtual school head*") OR ("designated teacher*") OR ("personal education plan*") OR ("PEP") OR ("PEPs")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English"))</p>

## Appendix B      Syntax for Grey Literature Searches

Table 5

*Syntax for Grey Literature Searches*

Search	Syntax
OpenGrey.eu 05.01.2021	("looked after child*" OR "LAC" OR "child* looked after" OR "CLA" OR "looked after" OR "foster care" OR "child* in care")  AND  ("virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR "designated teacher*" OR "personal education plan*" OR "PEP")
Google Scholar 06.01.2021	("looked after child*" OR "LAC" OR "child* looked after" OR "CLA" OR "looked after" OR "foster care" OR "child* in care")  AND  ("virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR "designated teacher*" OR "personal education plan*" OR "PEP")  Additional limit: Since 2020

## Appendix C      Articles Excluded After Full-Text Searches

Table 6

*Excluded Articles Following Full Text Searches*

Reference	Reason for Exclusion
Berridge, D. (2016). Policy transfer, social pedagogy and children's residential care in England. <i>Child &amp; Family Social Work</i> , 21(1), 76-84.	No relevance to the research question.
Berridge, D. (2017). The education of children in care: Agency and resilience. <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 77, 86-93.	Participants did not meet inclusion criteria.
Crowley, C. (2019). Exploring the views and perceptions of adopted young people concerning their education and social development: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. <i>Educational Psychology in Practice</i> , 35(2), 165-183.	No relevance to the research question.  Participants did not meet inclusion criteria.
Denecheau, B. (2011). Children in residential care and school engagement or school 'dropout': what makes the difference in terms of policies and practices in England and France?. <i>Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties</i> , 16(3), 277-287.	Does not meet inclusion criterion for country as it is a comparison of England and another context (France)
Gilligan, R. (2007). Adversity, resilience and the educational progress of young people in public care. <i>Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties</i> , 12(2), 135-145.	Not primary research, was a summary of existing research.
Goodall, D. (2014). <i>An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Exploring Designated Teachers' Experiences of Supporting Looked After Children</i> (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield).	Focus of the research is not Virtual School
Harlow, E. (2019). Defining the problem and sourcing the solution: a reflection on some of the organisational, professional and emotional complexities of accessing post-adoption support. <i>Journal of Social Work Practice</i> , 33(3), 269-280.	No relevance to the research question.

## Appendix C

Harrison, N. (2020). Patterns of participation in higher education for care-experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress?. <i>Studies in Higher Education</i> , 45(9), 1986-2000.	No relevance to the research question.
Hayden, C. (2008). Education, schooling and young offenders of secondary school age. <i>Pastoral Care in Education</i> , 26(1), 23-31.	No relevance to the research question.
Parsons, S., McCullen, A., Emery, T., & Kovshoff, H. (2019). Awareness within local authorities in England of autism spectrum diagnoses of looked-after children. <i>British Educational Research Journal</i> , 45(1), 99-116.	No relevance to the research question.
Sinclair, R., & Grimshaw, R. (1997). Partnership with parents in planning the care of their children. <i>Children &amp; Society</i> , 11(4), 231-241.	No relevance to the research question.
Stanley, N., Austerberry, H., Bilson, A., Farrelly, N., Hargreaves, K., Hussein, S., ... & Strange, V. (2014). Establishing social work practices in England: The early evidence. <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , 44(2), 367-383.	No relevance to the research question.
Sugden, E. J. (2013). Looked-after Children: what supports them to learn?. <i>Educational Psychology in Practice</i> , 29(4), 367-382.	No relevance to the research question.
Turner, J., & Gulliford, A. (2020). Examining the Circles of Adults process for Children Looked After: the role of self-efficacy and empathy in staff behaviour change. <i>Educational Psychology in Practice</i> , 36(1), 32-51.	Focus of the research is not Virtual School
Whitehouse, C. (2014). <i>An Exploration of Designated Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting Looked After Children</i> (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).	Focus of the research is not Virtual School
Williams-Brown, Z. (2020). The Early Years Pupil Premium: practitioners' perspectives on if the funding supports 'closing the gap' for looked after children?. <i>Early Child Development and Care</i> , 1-13.	Participants did not meet inclusion criteria.



## Appendix D      Quality Assessment of Included Studies

Table 7

### *Quality Assessment of Included Studies*

Key: Y = Met      X = Not Met      P= Partially Met      ? = Can't Tell

	Author(s)	Citation	Screening Questions		Quality Assessment				
			Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?
Qualitative Studies	H. Drew & R. Banerjee	Drew and Banerjee (2019)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	J. Driscoll	Driscoll (2011)	P – Article states its aim but does not have clear research questions	P – Partially met due to lack of clear research questions	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the general aims of the research	Y - Method adequate to address the general aims of the research	Y	Y	Y

J. Driscoll	Driscoll (2013)	P – Article states its aim but does not have clear research questions	P – Partially met due to lack of clear research questions	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the general aims of the research	Y - Method adequate to address the general aims of the research	Y	Y	P – Article does not state how data were analysed
S. Jackson	Jackson (2015)	P – Article states its aim but does not have clear research questions	P – Partially met due to lack of clear research questions	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the general aims of the research	Y - Method adequate to address the general aims of the research	Y	Y	P – Article does not state how data were analysed
S. Rivers	Rivers (2018)	X – Article lacks clear research questions or aim	P – Partially met due to lack of clear research questions	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the general aims of the research	Y - Method adequate to address the general aims of the research	? – As data is anecdotal in nature	? – As data is anecdotal in nature	? – As data is anecdotal in nature
J. Sebba & D. Berridge	Sebba & Berridge (2019)	P – Article states its aim but does not have clear research questions	P – Partially met due to lack of clear research questions	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the general aims of the research	Y - Method adequate to address the general aims of the research	Y	Y	Y
V. Waterman	Waterman (2020)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
M. Woodland	Woodland (2010)	P – States its aim but does not have clear	P – Only partially met due to lack of	Y – Approach appropriate to answer the	Y - Method adequate to address the	Y	Y	Y

			research questions	clear research questions	general aims of the research	general aims of the research			
	Author(s)	Citation	Screening Questions		Quality Assessment				
Mixed-methods Studies			Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?
	D. Berridge	(Berridge, 2012)	P – Article states clear research aims of the VSH pilot on which article was based	Y	P – More detailed rationale included in final report (not included in this review)	Y	?	?	? – Very little information given on the separate components of the evaluation
	F. Mann	Mann (2012)	Y	Y	Y	X	X – Do not feel that the quantitative and qualitative data have been effectively integrated	?	P – Descriptive stats reported, but no direct quotes from participants to support findings from interviews. Findings cannot be substantiated

E. Ott & A. O'Higgins	(Ott & O'Higgins, 2019)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
E. Parker	(Parker, 2017)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	?
R. J. Simpson	Simpson (2012)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	?		P – Author acknowledges there is risk of bias due to questionnaire sample being self-selecting.

## Appendix E Information Sheet for Designated Teachers

**Study Title:** How Do Virtual Schools Support Looked After Autistic Children

**Researcher(s):**

Lynn de la Fosse (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

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**ERGO number:** 54850

You have been invited to take part in the above research study. To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is unclear or you would like more information before making a decision. You may like to discuss it with others but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

**What is the research about?**

My name is Lynn de la Fosse and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This project is being undertaken as part of my Doctoral Thesis in Educational Psychology in collaboration with the Autism Community Research Network at Southampton (ACoRNS). ACoRNS is an initiative which seeks to improve the lives of children and young people (CYP) on the autism spectrum through undertaking research in collaboration with Education and Psychology at the University of Southampton, and schools in the wider community.



The aim of the research is to investigate how the Virtual School supports autistic children who are looked after, whether this differs from the support provided to non-autistic looked after children, and the role that Designated Teachers have within schools. In line with the SEND Code of Practice, I am also keen to include the voice of the CYP themselves, and therefore this research aims to conduct interviews with both Designated Teachers and looked after children who have a diagnosis of autism / ASC in a number of different Local Authorities. The duration of the research project is from March 2020 until June 2021.

**Why have I been asked to participate?**

You have been asked to take part as you have been identified as the Designated Teacher for looked after children at your school.

**What will happen if I take part?**

You will be asked to return a consent form via email which states that you are happy to participate. You will be asked to take part in a Skype, phone or face-to-face interview with myself lasting approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked questions about different aspects of your role within the Virtual School, what provisions are in place to support looked after autistic children and whether this differs from the support in place for non-autistic looked after children.

The interview will be recorded on a Dictaphone and then transcribed (typed up word-for-word). Once transcribed, the audio recording will be deleted from the device. This transcript will be analysed alongside transcripts from other participants in order to identify patterns or “themes” in the data.

I will also ask you to identify whether there are any looked after autistic children aged between 10 and 18 currently on roll at the school who may wish to participate in the research and be interviewed to explore their views. Pupils should be aware and accepting of their diagnosis, and their status as a child “in care” should be general knowledge or they are otherwise comfortable with it being shared and discussed.

If a suitable pupil is identified, you will be asked to seek permission from the Head teacher of your school, if they have not given permission already, for me to approach them and ask them to participate in the research. I am able to provide an information sheet for Head teachers on request, and will require an appropriate form of written consent from the Head teacher.

If a pupil chooses to participate, a semi-structured interview will take place with them. They will be given the option of having a trusted member of staff with them, or nearby, during the course of the interview. They will also be directed to speak to a trusted member of staff after the interview if they have any questions or concerns. It is important to be aware that you may be named by the pupil as that trusted member of staff.

### **Are there any benefits in my taking part?**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in the research study. However, it is important that researchers and educators understand how looked after autistic children are currently being supported in schools and what more could be done to improve their outcomes. This research may help to identify instances of good, effective support and practice that Designated Teachers provide within school, and shed light on what aspects of their role are recognised and valued by the CYP themselves. It may also uncover some of the barriers to good practice. The research also concerns to what extent looked after autistic children and young people are aware of the existence of the Virtual School.

### **Are there any risks involved?**

As the research concerns children who are looked after, who may have had significant, adverse experiences in their lives, the researcher will be vigilant if you appear distressed at any point when taking about yours and their experiences. If you appear distressed, the researcher will give the option of pausing the interview, or stopping it completely.

If you do find the experience of the interview upsetting, and would like some additional support, some sources of support that you can contact are listed below:

- <https://www.samaritans.org/>
- Your GP

### **What data will be collected?**

- Demographic information about you (including your age and gender) will be collected. The research team will also hold information about the school you work at, and the Local Authority the school is in, although this will not be reported in any reports or publications.
- There will be an audio recording of the Skype, phone or face-to-face interview. This recording will be uploaded onto a password-protected University of Southampton laptop or computer the same day as the interview has taken place, and will be deleted from the Dictaphone immediately after being uploaded. The audio recording will be accessible only to the researcher, research supervisors, and any research assistant employed to assist with the project. The recording will then be transcribed (typed up word-for-word) by me or a research

assistant at the University of Southampton. Once transcribed, the audio recording will be deleted from the laptop / computer.

- The transcript will be saved as a password-protected file on a password-protected University of Southampton laptop or computer.
- The consent forms, which contain identifiable information, will be stored securely in a locked cupboard to which only the researcher, the research supervisors, and any research assistants employed to assist with the project, have access. They will be stored away from the transcript and the rest of the data.

### **Will my participation be confidential?**

Your participation, and the information we collect about you child during the course of the research, will be kept strictly confidential. The following steps will be taken to ensure this:

- Any audio recordings will be deleted from the Dictaphone they were recorded on as soon as they have been uploaded to a password-protected University of Southampton laptop or computer.
- The audio recordings will then be deleted from the laptop or computer as soon as they have been transcribed.
- All participants will be assigned a pseudonym. This pseudonym will appear in all transcripts, and in the reporting of findings. Any other identifiable information will be removed during transcription (e.g. names of schools, teachers, pupils, Local Authority, etc.). The transcripts will be stored as password-protected files on a password-protected University of Southampton laptop or computer.
- The consent forms, which contain identifiable information, will be stored securely in a locked cupboard to which only myself, the research supervisors, and any research assistants employed to assist with the project have access, away from the transcript and the rest of the data.
- Only members of the research team and responsible members of the University of Southampton may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly) may require access to your data. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you will need to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to this.

### **What happens if I change my mind?**

You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected, up until the audio recording has been transcribed. If you would like to withdraw from the research, please make a written request to the researcher or the research supervisors using the contact details provided at the top of this Information Sheet. You will also be reminded at the start of the interview of your right to withdraw for any reason. If you choose to do so, the interview will be stopped and any data held on them up until that point will be destroyed.

### **What will happen to the results of the research?**

The findings from the research will be used in a number of different ways:

- The findings will be written up and form part of a Doctoral Thesis submission to the University of Southampton.

- As the research project is being carried out in collaboration with the ACoRNS network, an executive summary will be placed on their website (see: <http://acornsnetwork.org.uk/about/>)
- The findings may be written up into an article and a submission made to a relevant peer-reviewed journal, ideally within 12 months of the research being completed.
- The findings may also be shared through poster or oral presentations at relevant conferences.

Throughout, your personal details will remain strictly confidential. Research findings made available in any reports or publications will not include information that can directly identify you, such as the name of the Local Authority, school, or any members of staff associated with the school or Virtual School. You will be assigned a pseudonym which will be used in any reports or publications so you cannot be identified.

If you would like a copy of the research findings sent directly to you, please let me know and I will send a copy by email upon completion of the research.

### **Where can I get more information?**

If you would like more information, you can contact me or the research supervisors associated with the project. The contact details are included at the top of this Information Sheet.

### **What happens if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the researchers who will do their best to answer your questions. The contact details are listed included at the top of this Information Sheet. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Research Integrity and Governance Manager (023 8059 5058, [rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk](mailto:rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk)).

### **Data Protection Privacy Notice**

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of research integrity. As a publicly-funded organisation, the University has to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information about people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use information about you in the ways needed, and for the purposes specified, to conduct and complete the research project. Under data protection law, 'Personal data' means any information that relates to and is capable of identifying a living individual. The University's data protection policy governing the use of personal data by the University can be found on its website (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>).

This Participant Information Sheet tells you what data will be collected for this project and whether this includes any personal data. Please ask the research team if you have any questions or are unclear what data is being collected about you.

Our privacy notice for research participants provides more information on how the University of Southampton collects and uses your personal data when you take part in one of our research projects and can be found at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/sharepoint/intranet/Is/Public/Research%20and%20Integrity%20Privacy%20Notice/Privacy%20Notice%20for%20Research%20Participants.pdf>

Any personal data we collect in this study will be used only for the purposes of carrying out our research and will be handled according to the University's policies in line with data protection law. If any personal data is used from which you can be identified directly, it will not be disclosed to anyone else without your consent unless the University of Southampton is required by law to disclose it.



Data protection law requires us to have a valid legal reason ('lawful basis') to process and use your Personal data. The lawful basis for processing personal information in this research study is for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Personal data collected will not be used for any other purpose.

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 10 years after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal data necessary to achieve our research study objectives. Your data protection rights – such as to access, change, or transfer such information - may be limited, however, in order for the research output to be reliable and accurate. The University will not do anything with your personal data that you would not reasonably expect.

If you have any questions about how your personal data is used, or wish to exercise any of your rights, please consult the University's data protection webpage (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>) where you can make a request using our online form. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer ([data.protection@soton.ac.uk](mailto:data.protection@soton.ac.uk)).

**Thank you for taking the time to read the information sheet and considering taking part in the research.**

## Appendix F      Consent Form for Designated Teachers

**Study Title:** How Do Virtual Schools Support Looked After Autistic Children

**Researcher(s):** Lynn de la Fosse (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

**ERGO number:** 54850

***Please initial the boxes if you agree with the statement(s):***

I have read and understood the information sheet <b>(17/07/2020, Version 3)</b> and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	
I agree to take part in this study and for my data to be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand what the study will involve and I agree to take part in the interview for the purposes set out in the information sheet.	
I understand that the interview will be audio recorded using a Dictaphone for the purposes set out in the information sheet. This audio recording will be transcribed and then destroyed	
I understand that I may be quoted directly in reports of the research but that I will not be directly identified (e.g. that my name will not be used and I will be assigned a pseudonym instead).	
I understand that my personal information collected about me such as my name, the school I work in, the Local Authority I work in, or where I live will not be shared with anyone beyond the research team.	
I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw up until the interview has been transcribed for any reason without my participation rights being affected.	
I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the study, all information held on me will be destroyed.	

Name of participant (print name).....

Signature of participant.....

Date.....

Name of researcher (print name).....

Signature of researcher .....

Date.....

## Appendix G      Debriefing Form for Designated Teachers

**Study Title:** How Do Virtual Schools Support Looked After Autistic Children

**ERGO number:** 54850

The aim of the research was to investigate how the Virtual School supports autistic children who are looked after, whether this differs from the support provided to non-autistic looked after children, and the role that Designated Teachers have within schools.

Once transcribed, the data from this interview with you will be analysed alongside transcripts from other participants in order to identify patterns or “themes” in the data. It is hoped that the findings from the research will help to identify instances of good, effective support and practice that Designated Teachers provide within school, and shed light on what aspects of their role are recognised and valued by the children and young people themselves. It may also uncover some of the barriers to good practice.

This research did not use any deception. However, it is recognised that as the research concerned children who are looked after, who may have had significant, adverse experiences in their lives, talking about this could have caused some distress. If you would like some additional support, some sources of support are listed below:

- <https://www.samaritans.org/>
- Your GP

Once again, the results of this study will not include your name or any other identifying information about you or the children and young people you work with. If you would like to receive a summary of the research findings when the study is complete

If you have any further questions you can contact me or the research supervisors associated with the project. The contact details are included at the top of this Information Sheet.

Thank you for your participation in this research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel that you have been placed at risk, you may contact the University of Southampton Research Integrity and Governance Manager (023 8059 5058, [rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk](mailto:rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk)).

## Appendix H Interview Schedule for Designated Teachers

**Key:** BLACK = Explanations / blurb

PURPLE = Questions

RED = Prompts

0. GENERAL INTRODUCTION	INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS
<p>So I am interested in the role of the Designated Teacher within schools, with an additional focus on how Designated Teachers might support looked after children who have a diagnosis of autism. I am going to ask some questions about your role as a Designated Teacher more generally, and then focus on the support for looked after autistic children, and finally ask some questions about the Virtual School and how your role fits in with that wider organization.</p> <p>I am going to be recording this video call and will keep the recording of the audio in order to transcribe it afterwards. If you would like to pause, or stop the interview at any point, you are able to do this without your participant rights being affected.</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me before we start?</p> <p>Tell me a little bit about your background, and how you came to be in this role of Designated Teacher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What made you want to become the DT?</li> <li>– How long have you been a DT at this school?</li> <li>– Were you a DT in any other schools before this?</li> <li>– What was your background previously?</li> <li>– What other roles do you have within the school?</li> </ul>	<p>Very general start, just gathering some context around their DT role.</p> <p>If participant mentions Virtual School when describing how they came to the role, acknowledge / note this as a topic we are coming back to later or move to end section next and then return to other questions afterwards.</p>
1: THE DESIGNATED TEACHER ROLE	INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS
<p>Thinking now about your role as the DT, what are your main responsibilities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Personal Education Plans. What do these involve?</li> <li>– One to one support / tuition. How often / with how many students? What do you cover in that tuition?</li> <li>– Assessment of needs. What kind of assessment do you do? What is the purpose of the assessment? Do you do them with all LAC?</li> <li>– Liaising with other staff in the school. What staff members do you liaise with? What sorts of things would you discuss with them?</li> </ul>	<p>The aim here is to get a clear picture of what this DT does to support LAC, from their own perspective.</p> <p>Prompts are taken from DfE guidance – we want to see how much of this is evident in practice, and will use prompts elicit more detail about the aspects of the role identified by the participant. In addition, prompts can be used</p>

<p>Is training other staff formally a part of your role? Could you tell me more about that?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– School policies. Do you have any influence over policies related to LAC?</li> <li>– Can you tell me a bit more about that / what you do when you are doing X?</li> <li>– Is there any more you would like to say about that?</li> <li>– And what else do you do?</li> <li>– What helps / hinders you in fulfilling this aspect of your role?</li> <li>– Is there anything else that you feel the DT role should cover that it doesn't already?</li> <li>– Is there anything else that you do within your role as the DT we have not covered?</li> </ul> <p>In your view, what would good, effective support look like for looked after children?</p>	<p>to ask them about areas they do not identify to see if this is because it is not part of their role within their school.</p>
<p><b>2. BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN</b></p>	<p><b>INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS</b></p>
<p>How do you build positive relationships with the looked after children in your school / that you work with?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do you think that the pupils value the relationship with you, and the work you do together?</li> </ul>	<p>We are not asking about one specific child here, but rather how relationships are formed and maintained with this population more generally.</p> <p>This is something which links up to the interview questions for the LAC.</p>
<p><b>3. SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT FOR LOOKED AFTER AUTISTIC CHILDREN</b></p>	<p><b>INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS</b></p>
<p>I am going to move on now to asking some questions specifically about looked after autistic children.</p> <p>Do any looked after children in your school also have a diagnosis of autism / ASC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– If none currently, have there been looked after autistic children on roll in this school while you have been working as a designated teacher? OR</li> <li>– Have you encountered any LAC in your role as a DT, either in this school or anywhere you you've worked in this role?</li> </ul>	<p>Next, the focus is narrowed down specifically to LAC with a diagnosis of autism / ASC.</p> <p>We are interested here in whether the participant differentiates looked after autistic children from LAC generally in</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Have you come across any LAC where there was an autism assessment pending, or where you or other staff thought they may be autistic but be undiagnosed?</li> <li>– Are you recognising any features of autism in the population that you support?</li> <li>– What might the benefits of having a diagnosis be for these LAC?</li> <li>– What, if anything, do you think might differentiate this group of pupils from the other looked after children who do not have a diagnosis of autism / ASC?</li> </ul> <p>In your view, what would good, effective support look like for looked after autistic children?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Would that support look any different to the support for looked after children without a diagnosis of autism / ASC?</li> </ul> <p>If you were to get a LAC with a diagnosis of autism, what provision do you feel would need to be put in place to help support their needs above and beyond the support already in place for non-autistic LAC?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– E.g. for learning needs / SEMH needs.</li> </ul> <p>Would the things that you personally do to support LAC with ASC be the same or different from LAC without ASC?</p> <p>Would you foresee any significant barriers to supporting LAC with ASC in your role?</p>	<p>terms of their needs and provisions.</p>
<p><b>4. THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL</b></p>	<p><b>INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS</b></p>
<p>What are your views of the Virtual School(s) that you work with?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How much linking up with the Virtual School(s) do you do?</li> <li>– Liaising with Virtual School Head. How often are you in contact with the VSH? What do you discuss with them?</li> <li>– Do you work with one or multiple Virtual Schools?</li> <li>– If multiple, what differences or similarities have you noticed?</li> <li>– What works well, or is effective about it/them?</li> <li>– Could anything about the Virtual School(s) be improved?</li> <li>– Is there information-sharing from the Virtual School or other agencies around any diagnoses that LAC have?</li> <li>– What would be helpful for you as a DT in terms of information sharing around this?</li> <li>– Are there implications for your practice – what would you like to know and how?</li> </ul>	<p>We are also interested in how DTs view the VS as a whole.</p> <p>Recognition that they might have pupils on roll from different LAs and so deal with multiple VSs. Be sure to clarify which VS they are talking about.</p>

5. CLOSING QUESTIONS	INTERVIEWER NOTES / INSTRUCTIONS
<p>Is there anything else that you would like to say which we haven't covered?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me about the research?</p> <p>Ok, so those are all the questions I have for you today. If you do think of anything else that you would really like to add, please do contact me using the details provided.</p> <p>The recording will end when we end the call.</p>	



## Appendix I Participant Quotes and Associated Codes, Subthemes and Themes

**Table 8**

*Participant Quotes with Associated Codes, Subthemes and Themes*

Theme	Subtheme	Code(s)	Quotes
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Importance of information-sharing with others	Information sharing with school staff	P3: "I guess because my role is head of learning, each half term I meet with all the teachers and we have what we call a progress review meeting, so within that meeting we would be looking at the purer, academic progress, but within that we will be touching on all of the vulnerable children for whatever reason they are vulnerable, and the SEND children."
		Raising awareness of individual P/LAC's needs	P5: "My job is to make sure that teachers are just aware of the background and the 'whys'. Why they are behind, why they might be acting this way, what's missing basically."
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Importance of information-sharing with others	Information sharing with parents / families / foster carers	<p>P2: "I find I have to meet with those parents several times usually to get a full picture of the child's background and their early years, and some people are really, really good at sharing and other people we sort of hear about little nuggets of what the child lived through very gradually."</p> <p>P2: "And there's also a need for us to spend some time with people making sure they just understand boring things like the different systems of school, because if they haven't fostered someone who has come to our school before then we will</p>

			<p>be different to the school, even the one that is just down the road. So it's just making sure people know who to speak to and who they can ask questions of."</p> <p>P3: "I also spend quite a lot of time meeting with parents. So for example each term I will meet with our post-adopted families, more for a catch up on how things are going for them and how their children are doing."</p> <p>P3: "As a federation we buy into a charity called [Charity Name] and they run a post-adoption group for our families as well, so I liaise with them. Now, it's completely separate post-adoption; they don't report to me and there's nothing like that but I'm kind of the bridge so I make sure our families are aware of it and go if they would find it helpful."</p> <p>P5: "And she will say to me 'I've tried this and it worked' and I will say 'Great, I will let the teacher know'. And the teacher will say 'I've tried this and it works' and I will let her know. So yeah, I just keep up with that communication and letting them know that we are here as well and it's not easy."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Importance of information-sharing with others	Information-sharing with Virtual School	<p>P1: "If I'm emailing the social worker I might copy in [Name] from the Virtual School. So I will make sure that they know what is going on regarding a child's education, or concerns or issues that we might have in school."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Importance of information-sharing with others	Need for timely information-sharing	<p>P1: "Well, the more information we have about a child the better we can support them [...] We have just received a chronology that the social worker had put together and that was only because I'd sent- I'd informed the social worker about some issues that he'd been having in school and she said 'Oh, this might be</p>

Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Virtual school support through giving advice, resources, and signposting	<p>helpful for you'. Well actually, that should- that would have been helpful for us back in June when we knew he was going to start with us."</p> <p>P2: "I mean any knowledge we can be given at the point of entry into school is really useful. So if social workers or foster parents know that the child has the diagnosis it would be <i>great</i> to have that explained to us as soon as possible, because it does always surprise me when people don't tell us those types of things and it comes out in the meeting after we've had the child in school for two weeks, which is a bit annoying."</p> <p>P1: "We get weekly emails from [Name], the Head, and actually within that are often links that are useful for all our families. So I will often send links out that she sent, which is quite good."</p> <p>P2: "Also I've got one child who is post- who is adopted but through [Local Authority] so that's been interesting. So I have some really good email advice and support from [Name], the Head of the Virtual School in [Local Authority], just because of this little boy."</p> <p>P4: "So it's taking on board their advice a lot of the time because [Name], who is the Virtual Head, sends out a lot of communication to us in schools so yeah, we've got a good understanding of what the targets should look like and some examples of targets during lockdown, and that has been really useful."</p> <p>P4: "So seeking advice I think is really good, and that's where the Virtual School come into their own. They are always really good to talk to them, and actually if you get a really good social worker then they are a good source of advice too."</p>
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Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Clarity / ease of access to information is important	<p>P4: "Well they- as I say, they send through quite regular updates. I've got some good links with regards to accessing various support for the children."</p> <p>P5: "So because my little one in Reception is currently looked-after I have an allocated member of the team I guess who is on hand for any sort of questions"</p> <p>P2: "The [Local Authority] team, they seem to- they send me - because I'm part of their mailing list - they just send me all sorts of stuff [...] They seem to work on the understanding that we are all busy and that we're not going to necessarily research it ourselves, whereas I think [Local Authority 2], they provide it but I have to remember to go on the website and look at it which I don't maybe do as regularly as I could do."</p> <p>P5: "I feel like the [Local Authority] Virtual School website is a little bit more... user friendly, more detailed. Whereas the [Local Authority 2] one, yeah, I couldn't really find what I was looking for as such so, yeah, which kind of then slows things down as well when you just need to find an answer to something."</p> <p>P5: "It's quite good because they have sections for schools, parents, they have all the sections. And yes, and the school sections have got information regarding the Pupil Premium Plus grants. They've got... information on, again, who everybody is."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Virtual School offers training / CPD and chances to network with other DTs	<p>P1: "The conference last year was great. We actually went to a hotel and they treat- you know, gone are the days where you could go on a course and you had your free lunch and all the rest of it. Those days are gone. But actually the Virtual</p>

	<p>School showed that they valued their designated teachers. They had some good speakers in.”</p> <p>P2: “And we used to have hub meetings – they were excellent – and they were just DTs from local schools used to meet up. And we- I think we found them really helpful but actually they stopped. They sort of ground to a halt, I don’t really know why, a few years ago and they have been replaced with DT health briefings which are much bigger.”</p> <p>P2: “So there was a big launch, probably about twelve years ago I would say, and we were all invited to go on free training to talk about the role of a DT. There was attachment training and there was an opportunity to do training alongside social workers which was really, really useful. That doesn’t seem to happen anymore but at the time that was really good.”</p> <p>P2: “[...] the school have just paid a subscription which means I can access lots of other training that is coming on. I have got three or four now booked throughout the year which is sort of effective reporting and...I’ve left my diary in the other room but there’s all sorts of really good things.”</p> <p>P3: “And then a few years ago one of our parents, who actually works for the [Local Authority 2] Virtual School, was doing some attachment training so we became an attachment and trauma trained school.”</p> <p>P5: “At the beginning of each CPD that they do, they do sort of reintroduce everything. So they will say this is the part of the DFE, here is <i>our</i> policy, here is</p>
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			<p>everybody's roles and they go through the expectations I guess of the DT role which is all really helpful."</p> <p>P5: "There's a lot of- there's termly CPD that the Virtual School offer which are really good. They have been really helpful and useful. And then also because we're in the Attachment Aware Schools Award there's also optional ones, optional courses you can do, which have been good."</p> <p>P5: "I felt after my first course I came out and I went 'Oh my goodness, I have no idea what I'm doing'. [...] So maybe, I don't know, at the beginning when they know new people are coming on board, maybe stripping it back and slowing it down might work. There's a lot of acronyms that you're just like 'What? What does that mean?' And you are Googling it on the side (laughs)."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Working in isolation – lack of linking with other DTs	<p>P4: "Yes, and actually I have spoken to our Head about this and with [Name] sat behind me with his SENCO hat on, it's definitely good to have more than one designated teacher I would say [...] I think to always be able to speak to a colleague who has got similar training, you are sharing good practice and good ideas."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Positive about the Virtual School as a model	<p>P1: "No, I think they are there if you need them. They don't take too long to get back to you. I think they do a really good job."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Support from other agencies helps DTs to fulfil their role	Outreach from other schools and agencies	<p>P2: "I work, or we work, quite closely with – as well as our EP - with the [School], which is our local behaviour unit. They have just recently put on some mental</p>

Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Need for multi-agency working to be collaborative	<p>health training. And we also use our local outreach so I guess we do tap into our local specialists. We have quite a good relationship with all of those.”</p> <p>P4: “If there are other agencies involved then it’s about everybody working together and not fighting against each other”</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Other professionals not fulfilling their roles	<p>P1: “I- so obviously they [PEP meetings] are three times a year, each term. I know the social workers are supposed to initiate them for the first one that the child is at the school but they don’t, I tend to make sure that’s done because I like to get them done within the first ten days of the child being in.”</p> <p>P2: “And I never did get a social worker to attend a PEP.”</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Virtual meetings can improve multi-agency working	<p>P1: “I don’t actually think that having to do them over Zoom has had a particularly negative impact. I think it- what it has done actually is people have made the time whereas often, particularly with the child and his parents, they would be like ‘Oh no, we can’t come in and we can’t do it’. But actually because they have been at home there has been no excuse for them not to attend.”</p> <p>P1: “But I mean Zoom calls and things like that now, the virtual meetings, that makes all that a lot easier I suppose.”</p> <p>P2: “I mean from a DSL point of view though, since everything has been virtual those meetings have worked really well, I think. I think it’s a shame they are not in a room but at least because those meetings <i>have</i> to happen they still do.”</p>

Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Staff turnover impacts on working relationships	P1: "We have had difficulties around particular social workers having long periods of time off sick and that then makes it difficult for that continuity."
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Working with multiple Virtual Schools	<p>P1: "I remember back to when every local authority had their own PEP system and their own PEP and their own rules about who initiated what meeting and who set targets for this and stuff. That was difficult."</p> <p>P3: "But what made that even harder was it was a [Local Authority] child so we were working with the [Local Authority] Virtual School although we are a [Local Authority 2] school. We had previously worked with support from the [Local Authority 2] Virtual School. So that was difficult. And also all the paperwork was slightly different, which was incredibly frustrating if that makes any sense? So my overriding- it isn't... as a teacher, it wasn't helpful. It was almost <i>unhelpful</i> because of the differences. There was no sort of continuity or consistency."</p> <p>P5: "It's a funny one because she's come from a different borough. So her care borough was [Local Authority] but she's come to [Local Authority 2] and it's that whole 'I need funding so who is going to give me it?' You know, we're kind of at that stage."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Lack of knowledge in schools of what the Virtual School is	P3: "I'm not sure in schools how much understanding there is of what they are, if that makes any sense, because I literally almost had to fumble around and find it out for myself and I'm not sure my colleagues would know really what their role is or what they do if I'm truly honest."



Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Other professionals do not value school's contributions	P1: "And perhaps they [Social Workers] think 'It's just school'. Do you know what I mean? 'Well, that's just school'. Well actually we are a massive part of that child's life and we can equally contribute to how that child- to the whole- well to the child's emotional wellbeing."
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Difference in opportunities if school has no LAC	<p>P2: "And one thing that I find hard is that if you've not got looked after children there's certain amounts of training that isn't available to you."</p> <p>P2: "We wanted to do the attachment and trauma aware training for years and years and we haven't been able to because we didn't have current looked after children, but on the back of some quite tricky post-adopted children, we have, as a school, been accessing that."</p> <p>P3: "Maybe... maybe some wider training that would be open to all staff, not just for looked after children. For schools like us, we have a lot of post-adopted children who still have many of the similar needs to looked after children, particularly when they are very young, so I think schools would feel more able to tap into that wealth of training that they've got out there if it was phrased slightly differently."</p>
Multi-agency working as a key aspect of the role	Multi-agency working can be a barrier	Differences in the extent to which Virtual Schools support PLAC	<p>P2: "I do think post-adopted, it's a little bit of a- in [Local Authority 2], it's a little bit of a sort of 'Get on with it, you're fine' whereas in [Local Authority] they seem to possibly be a bit more proactive in making sure those families get support still."</p> <p>P2: "I don't think those- I don't think adopted parents seem to get very much support once the adoption process has happened. And even during the three</p>

Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school	N/A	Raising awareness of P/LAC's needs	<p>years that they are still open to... the Virtual School it does seem a bit hit and miss."</p> <p>P1: "It's also about raising that awareness within the classroom, so making sure that people are thinking all the time 'That is a looked after child and so therefore they might need something a bit different or something a bit <i>more</i> than other children'."</p> <p>P3: "My role is more to make sure the teachers understand that for those children who are- they need to be emotionally secure and maybe different approaches are needed to gain that academic progress than the mainstream class."</p> <p>P3: "I think sometimes the parents are quite surprised because they have often been on training themselves, as part of the adoption process, about trauma and when we [DT and SENCO] can talk about it as well they are a bit like 'Oh'. Because it's not easy to understand, it's not part of teacher training."</p>
Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school	N/A	Behaviour as communication	<p>P1: "But it's drawing people back to the 'Right, okay. Well they are trying to communicate something. They are not behaving personally towards <i>you</i>. They are not <i>targeting</i> you in particular. They are trying to communicate something so let's sit down and unpick what that is'."</p>
Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school	N/A	Implementation of whole school approaches	<p>P2: "I think it [Attachment Awareness training] has changed the way some of us look at the function of some children's behaviours. So 'What is it they are trying to communicate to us?' And also it's given us an insight- a little bit more of an</p>

	<p>insight into... there's a whole bit about ACES and what children have lived through and maybe what parents have lived through"</p> <p>P3: "And then a few years ago one of our parents, who actually works for the [Local Authority 2] Virtual School, was doing some attachment training so we became an attachment and trauma trained school."</p> <p>P3: "We are also an Empathy Lab pioneer school so we were involved in the Empathy Lab project when that was first set up, so we use a lot of story books for talking about feelings and emotions as a way of giving children the vehicle to talk about things but without it being very personal, because for some of these children that's just not possible [...] But that's been very powerful for lots of our children, being able to talk about difficult things because it's in a storybook and it's not them."</p> <p>P3: "We are currently... well, it's been paused slightly because of Covid, but we are looking at redoing our behaviour policy but developing more of the Emotion Coaching, because we think it would work for all of the children, not just our post-adopted or looked after."</p> <p>P5: "Yep, so the first thing we had to do was train the whole school on Emotion Coaching, which has been- as you can imagine is lovely. So we did attachment stuff and the trauma, and Early Years development, and we've just had the Emotion Coaching side of things"</p> <p>P5: "I just think it's [Attachment Aware Schools programme] the best thing that we've done actually. We're just kind of getting more emotionally literate as a</p>
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Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school	N/A	Delivers specific training to staff	<p>school, you know, and it's got us talking about other things like dipping into other policies, like our Behaviour Policy and things like that. Like our communication with parents as well and our record keeping as well"</p> <p>P3: "I'm the one that gets lucky enough to get all the training as well so I have to cascade that back to staff. And that's done in a variety of ways. It can be done one to one, depending on the child who is in that class, so if that teacher needs to know it. And it can also be done in staff meetings and we have federation meetings."</p>
Supporting outcomes through systemic working in school	N/A	Influencing whole-school policies	<p>P5: "So I think definitely the policy side of things. So I had to write the policy and we're still kind of working through that and making sure, you know, it's finalised and suited to our school."</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Assessment informs intervention	<p>P1: "We assess our children for their social, emotional and mental health skills and we have a formal way that we do that, that scores them on a positive or negative scale. [...] So the assessment for the social, emotional and mental health – we call it our pupil profile – that will be used to inform the teaching that the child will have in those kinds of skills. And then, as with all other schools, we also assess them for reading, writing, maths and science."</p> <p>P4: "I suppose that goes back to answer an earlier question with regards to how we support the children. It's looking at those interventions, and looking at the assessments, looking at the gaps, what are the gaps, how can we close the gaps and what interventions can we use to close those gaps quickly."</p>

A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Focus on SEMH more than academic needs	<p>P1: “We can very much tailor the learning to the children’s needs and we have a thing called the Marlin Curriculum which- in September/October/November time we won’t actually mention reading and writing as words and subjects. We will teach the children social and emotional skills and any academic learning is brought in through the back door, and games and bits and pieces like that so they won’t even know that they’re learning. And that then teaches the children to be in a classroom. It teaches them behaviour for learning skills.”</p> <p>P4: “It’s got to be a <i>holistic</i> approach to the child. It’s not all about academic attainment. It’s about social attainment, it’s about their emotional wellbeing, are they emotionally intelligent? Is their mental health intact?”</p> <p>P5: “At some point I think she will need it. But her emotional side of things is... we have to... not ‘fix it’ because that’s the wrong term, but help her with that first because I think that comes first for her. Then she will attain.”</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Support and interventions for SEMH needs	<p>P1: “And actually as well, if- if they are particularly wobbly and if we’ve had to use physical intervention with one of them, which we might have to do on occasions, I’ll often be the one to then go and sit with them and talk them through what happened. We use restorative practice in school so I will go and have those conversations with them afterwards.”</p> <p>P1: “We’ve got a pastoral team where children- they can go to our snug, which is a non-threatening place where they undertake similar activities to what you might find in a play therapy setting or an art therapy setting.”</p>

	<p>Some strategies and approaches are not specific to the P/LAC</p>	<p>P2: "But generally from a day to day point of view, the children just need... quite a high level of support around how to regulate their emotions and how to make the most of school. But then they are not- they are not the only ones in that, so we do the same for a lot of our vulnerable children"</p> <p>P2: "We also have a man who comes in and does counselling with certain children once a week, and he has in the past picked up some of my children. [...] I find because counselling is so confidential I don't really get a lot of feedback, so it does seem to support the children but I don't really feel I know what's being covered. So that's a bit strange."</p> <p>P2: "So my involvement usually is when- is bringing them out of class to do things. So sometimes that's to do an assessment. Often it's to unpick something emotional that's going on with them, and [Name] and me do that all the time. Not for just our post-LAC children but any child that's wobbly."</p> <p>P3: "No but what I would say is we would do the same for children who <i>weren't</i> looked after if they had similar needs because it isn't just always looked after or post-adopted that have those anxieties and needs. It can be from a very different reason."</p> <p>P4: "Because some of the children who go into foster care, it's not all sweetness and light, it's a very difficult situation for them. They might have been taken into care and they don't want to go into care. They've got a great love for their family, their dads, their mums, and they've been taken away by the police or whatever the family circumstance is"</p>
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A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Impact of Covid-19 on support / provision	<p>P5: "I think the whole Emotion Coaching thing I think is so important for the previously looked-after child and just, like I said, just saying to her 'You know it's okay to feel like this.'"</p> <p>P4: "One of the children, if we could have, we would have had in a little earlier but we just didn't have the space in school."</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Reducing academic pressures and expectations	<p>P1: "We do have what we call a pathways assessment. This means if we have got a child who is currently undergoing, say, CP issues and there is stuff going on at home- the child who is looked after by his parents and we knew that that was likely to go to court proceedings so that's going to affect how he is, or his brother is off the wall, then we would say 'Right, okay. We only expect- we expect that child to make two steps out of five or six progress' because they are dealing with all this other stuff."</p> <p>P1: "And it just takes that pressure off the children really, but also the staff. So they are not trying to force a child to do something that they are not in a place to be able to do."</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Impact of lockdown and home learning on P/LAC 's SEMH needs	<p>P3: "He has been incredibly challenging to the family when we first locked down, because of course that was a major rejection for him."</p>

A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting and prioritising SEMH needs	Support with upcoming transitions is key	P3: "Our next problem- the biggest problem now for us is the transition to junior school and how we ensure that they know him and then are able to build that relationship with him and the family so he will respond to them."
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting CEC to build relationships in school	DTs and other members of staff build relationships with the P/LAC	<p>P1: "Well all of our staff- we have an ethos here that every child is everyone's responsibility and because of the volatile nature of a lot of the children it's important that staff know each of the children quite well. And children will also develop relationships that are better with some staff than they are with others, so I would also speak with TAs about how the child is doing."</p> <p>P1: "Because I do lunch duties every day, I will make a point of speaking to each of those children every day, and we meet and greet them - particularly now with Covid - we meet and greet them every day so I can check them out at the start of the day."</p> <p>P2: "But I think most of it needs to just focus on the child building relationships with the key adults that they've got in school, which can be very hard if they are only just meeting a foster parent as well."</p> <p>P3: "I think it's our relationships with them. So I think it's being their constants. And it can even be that just- in my role currently, that just checking in with them. As we are walking down the corridor it's making sure I say something involving their name and about a conversation we might have had. So that they are always in the top of our mind."</p>



A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting CEC to build relationships in school	Providing opportunities for regular contact	<p>P4: "I actually see quite a lot of them because their classroom is not too far away. So you just develop a working relationship with them, you know, if I see them because I stand outside in the morning and at the end of the day, so just check in."</p> <p>P5: "I think it goes right back to the simples of, you know, recognising them. It's the 'Hello's in the morning, it's making them feel safe and warm, and it's that building relationships. I think that's number one because their relationships have broken down before."</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Supporting CEC to build relationships in school	Staff help provide sense of belonging	<p>P2: "We've got a system where they can write down anything they are worried about and post it and then we are the ones that follow that up and things. Our young lady who is post- who is adopted at the top of the school, she uses that all the time. I think she just really likes to have somebody to write to and then somebody will come and talk with her."</p> <p>P5: "She's in Key Stage 2 just now so staff availability isn't there so I take her out weekly, one to one and offer her a safe talking space, and just give her that little bit of love and affection."</p> <p>P1: "We give our children a sense of belonging and, particularly with the looked after children that we have here, even if their foster placements haven't broken down over the years their school placements possibly have, or they have been educated in a cupboard away from other children because of the volatile nature of their behaviour and things like that. So we create this sense of belonging."</p>

A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Statutory processes aid provision of support	PEP / multi-agency meetings and monitoring of progress	<p>P4: "I think it's just giving them that sense of worth, sense of feeling, sense of belonging. Relationship is key and letting them know that we care about them and that this is a safe place to be, and 'every day that you see us we are going to be doing our very best for you.' I think that is it in a nutshell really, relationships."</p> <p>P1: "I will liaise with the class teacher to set the targets. But because I make an effort to know the children well, I would speak to the class teacher before the PEP to get feedback for how it's going in class, but we maintain fairly detailed behaviour records and academic achievement information so a lot of that I would be able to find myself."</p> <p>P1: "But I mean we also have annual reviews for all of our looked after children so those really <i>are</i> very much focused on the Education Health and Care Plans and the outcomes. The PEP is more general in terms of the fact it will look at the whole child I suppose, rather than just focusing on some particular outcomes."</p> <p>P4: "But obviously with regards to the PEP and the targets and the wider areas within the PEP, it's making sure that all areas are in the best interests of the child and that they are making progress both soc- well, socially, academically and emotionally and in partnership with the parents."</p> <p>P4: "So then you sign off targets and you can tweak targets, change targets, add in new targets, so obviously as they have completed them you sign them off to say they've completed and then set new targets. We try to set targets around reading, writing and maths, and then the wider curriculum. And other areas, actually, because one of the children has got targets around coordination and gross motor skills."</p>
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A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Statutory processes aid provision of support	Setting and reviewing of targets outside of PEPs	<p>P4: “So we liaise quite a lot with regards to the targets because, like I said, some of the targets that we set, you don’t have to wait six weeks to keep the targets ticking over, as and when they become achieved, for want of a better word, then let’s add in the new targets and then we just discuss them all and say ‘this is a huge list of achievements and success in this term’.”</p> <p>P5: “When we prepare the PEPs and they have the separate targets in them, we really work together as like a whole, you know, the teacher and the TA and everybody gets involved and really have that child-centred approach.”</p> <p>P5: “We choose which ones need the most work and together we come up with the targets. And then it’s a case of ‘Right, can I support you with this? Do you need me to take him out one to one? Do you need me to do this? Do you need help with resources?’”</p> <p>P5: “And, yep, we just use that time to really focus on a lot of what’s gone well which has been so lovely for this child because he’s made amazing progress.”</p> <p>P1: “I pride myself on making sure that my PEPs are outstanding every time and if it comes back good I will phone up [Name] and ask ‘Why? What did I do wrong? What should I do differently?’”</p> <p>P1: “And they did used to attend PEPs. They would try and send somebody along for PEP meetings but that stopped probably a year ago, eighteen months ago maybe. I just think they are so short-staffed like everybody else really.”</p>
		Virtual School involvement in statutory processes e.g. PEPs	

A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Statutory processes aid provision of support	DTs like the ePEP / ePAC format provided by Virtual School	<p>P1: "I don't have any concerns about...about my...about the targets that I set and things like that, but I know some people find that quite hard and I think having someone from the Virtual School there, particularly perhaps for an inexperienced designated teacher, if you've got the Virtual School there they can guide and steer and help them in the right direction."</p> <p>P4: "The Virtual School then assess it, so they look into it in detail and they actually grade the PEPs – so you get a 'Good', a 'Requires Improvement' and what have you."</p> <p>P4: "I like the way in which they grade the PEPs as I said earlier. It makes you- not that I'm competitive at all (laughs) but I like that element to it because we're getting feedback with regards to how we're writing them. So if I ever was to get a 'requires improvement' PEP then I'd want to know why."</p> <p>P5: "She [Virtual School staff] will always be at the PEPs as well, and she sort of liaises with both me and the social worker as well."</p>
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Statutory processes aid provision of support	Inclusion of pupil voice in statutory processes	<p>P4: "And having that e-PEP system, it's just very clear on what you have to achieve. As I say, so long as you work through every single section and fill it all in and in as much detail as possible, that's what they want."</p> <p>P1: "I will sit with them when it comes round to their PEPs, they have got their contribution bit to do so I will sit with them and we will do that."</p>

<p>A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs</p>	<p>Statutory processes aid provision of support</p>	<p>Use of PP+ to support need</p>	<p>P5: “The children are really young so they’re not at that stage yet where they can say ‘I want to be this; this is what I want to achieve’ but, you know, they do a lovely little pupil voice.”</p> <p>P1: “Working alongside the class teachers for- to make sure the children are getting what they need and that their pupil premium grant money is being spent effectively. And I work quite a lot at times with our business manager as well to just make sure that the money is allocated in the right way.”</p> <p>P1: “We have a booster teaching assistant, although she is actually a qualified teacher, and I liaise with her on a weekly basis. So when I set the PEPs I make sure that certainly their Maths and English target is structured so that she will do booster work. [...] I wouldn’t necessarily- I wouldn’t take that kind of interest, if you like, in any of the other children but I make sure that that is happening, because that’s part of the Pupil Premium funding.”</p> <p>P5: “So that [PP+ Grant] comes in, which obviously isn’t a lot (laughs), it’s not a lot of money per child, but for my looked-after child it gets put into his provision pot and he is getting his one to one and he’s getting his small group. He’s getting a lot of support in there.”</p> <p>P5: “And obviously if we need, for a looked-after child who comes in, it’s reaching out to the sources that are available from the Virtual School as well, to say ‘Okay, we need that funding to go towards... therapy’ or anything sort of external that we can’t provide in school”</p>
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A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Statutory processes aid provision of support	Use of PP+ during Covid-19 pandemic	P4: "I think one of the things for us at the moment that's the hardest thing is spending the grant when there is no access to clubs and various things."
A holistic and child-centred approach to supporting individual needs	Mainstream versus specialist settings	Sudden transitions can be challenging - need to always be prepared to receive a new LAC	P2: "But one other thing that is my job is to remind the head teacher or other people that we could have a looked after child turn up tomorrow. So you don't get that much knowledge that they are coming, sometimes, and we need to be ready to do everything we are supposed to do sort of straight away."
		Mainstream versus specialist settings	P1: "Yes, and I think in mainstream we had- there was less looked after children. There's one I remember in particular but I can remember- I would have years where I didn't have any. But here we've had looked after children every year since I've been here."
			P1: "But we will tailor for the needs of the individual child. Because we have a high staff to child ratio we have that ability."
			P1: "Now those we tend to- because we are a special school we are in a very lucky position of being able to say that our children- there are reasons why they don't make progress, or they haven't made progress before they come to us, if you like, because of their previous education experiences."
			P1: "No, because it's a school for children with behaviour needs, actually quite often our looked after children, particularly those who are cared for by decent foster carers, their behaviour can often be better than other children."

Competing roles and responsibilities within school	N/A	DT holds multiple roles in school	<p>P1: "I mean yes, it's a long time ago that I was in a mainstream school but it is much more difficult to manage children who struggle with their behaviour or their emotional needs."</p> <p>P1: "But actually mainstream teachers don't have the time. They have the commitment and they have the desire but they are under so many other pressures that I just think dealing with a- supporting a child with autism in a mainstream school, supporting a looked after child in a mainstream school is more difficult."</p> <p>P1: "You don't have the expertise of staff to be able to meet the sensory needs or their learning needs. To be able to structure a particular way for a child to learn because that's how they learn best. Even down to wearing ear defenders, here it doesn't look out of place but in a mainstream school you worry that a child might be picked on if they are wearing ear defenders or whatever. It's much more difficult to be different I think in a mainstream environment."</p> <p>P1: "We don't agree with part-time timetables here. I know in mainstream schools a lot of children that experience difficulties are on part-time timetables. We don't believe in that here."</p> <p>P1: "It's a very small school; we've only got forty-two children and so the leadership team there is three of us. We are jack of all trades and master of none, almost. Yeah, so, assessment lead, often curriculum coordinator depending on what we are focusing on with our school improvement plan, tea maker for visitors... it's a bit of everything because it is <i>such</i> a small school."</p>
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<p>Competing roles and responsibilities within school</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Covid-19 leading to increased pressure on time and staffing; take on extra responsibility due to staffing issues</p>	<p>P1: "Well the difficulty is because we are such a small team which... I can't think of the word...is it quantities of scale? So if you had a bigger school you would have other senior leaders that would be able to help with things and we don't."</p> <p>P3: "But we are a three-class school so I have lots of roles because there aren't lots of people (laughs)."</p> <p>P5: "I don't know, I'd just love to be out and about with the children a lot more. But you know what the day is like and the other roles but, you know, if I could have them a little bit more, like you said, doing that academic stuff as well as the emotional stuff, yes, that would be all good."</p> <p>P1: "We do try to work it so that if any one of us is in a meeting that time is sacred, if you like, but actually staffing with Covid has meant that it can't always be like that. So it's really difficult to be able to distance yourself from things that are going on in school knowing that people might need support with something."</p> <p>P1: "Yeah, yeah it's always- time is always a bit of an issue. But actually it's the staffing, the pressures on staffing, that is causing them. Our SENCO is currently off and so I am picking up her annual reviews as well."</p> <p>P4: "So our SENCO at the moment is in class, so [NAME] is overseeing the roles and responsibility of a day to day SENCO and I have got the overarching side of it. So we are all working together to ensure that nothing is lost [...] Because of staff shortages which are all Covid linked"</p>
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Competing roles and responsibilities within school	N/A	Variability in numbers of LAC and PLAC lead to differences in roles and responsibilities	<p>P2: "I mean in theory- it's slightly easier, definitely, because I'm not having to coordinate with outside agencies very often. Or if I am it would be an agency like the behaviour support team, rather than trying to coordinate meetings with social workers, which is where it does get quite complicated."</p> <p>P2: "I listen to some people who have got lots of looked after children, and none of them have their SDQs done, none of them have social workers that turn up at meetings and I just think that's really frustrating. So I am lucky at the moment because I don't have to worry about any of that."</p> <p>P2: "I talk to colleagues in other schools, particularly secondary schools, and some of them have got fifteen or twenty looked after children on their books and that's almost a full-time job in itself, I don't know quite what I would do if we were inundated because I can't suddenly conjure up more time."</p> <p>P4: "But I think outside of Covid, for me at the moment, it's easier in respect of we only have two children. If you've got a much bigger number, and we have in the past - we've had up to ten in school at any one time - that's much harder to manage."</p> <p>P5: "Because we don't have a lot of looked-after children anyway, I feel like it wasn't... yeah, like it wasn't prioritised in the school and therefore, yeah, the Deputy was kind of overlooking things but probably not ticking all the boxes because we didn't really have to I guess."</p>
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Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	N/A	Little or no experience of autistic LAC	<p>P1: "One is on the waiting list I think but Covid has scuppered that. But we have one who has been on the waiting list for an ASD assessment."</p> <p>P3: "We do have a child that's just started with us in Year R, so he's only been in a term or so, who is post-adopted and the family have just adopted a baby, another child, and the... let me get this right... the health visitor for the new baby is convinced the older one, who we've got, is autistic."</p>
Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs	<p>Similarities and differences in needs</p> <p>Can be hard to differentiate</p>	<p>P2: "I think the self- the lack of self-regulation and impulsivity of the children is very similar. Yeah, sudden changes in mood is definitely one. And for the younger children, a real difficulty to express their feelings. Well, they can't- some of them can't express their needs let alone what they feel."</p> <p>P3: "There's that whole... not being able to read social situations, but particularly with the attachment children it's not that they can't, it's that they are emotionally unavailable to read them, whereas the autistic children can't and they kind of have to learn."</p> <p>P3: "He does prefer adults and I guess you could look at his behaviour and some of it is on the spectrum. But equally it could be just that he's just started school, and he's a post-adopted child finding his way."</p> <p>P3: "Because what we've started to think about is there are so many similarities between that sort of attachment children and autistic children, if that makes sense... But it isn't a connection we've probably naturally made."</p>

<p>Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice</p>	<p>Difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs</p>	<p>Potential misdiagnosis of autism</p>	<p>P3: "As I say, we were talking today and we hadn't really made that connection, and I don't know why we hadn't. Possibly because we haven't worked with a looked after child with a diagnosis of autism, but actually now you've said it those similarities are there. There's quite a lot of crossover behaviours for those children."</p> <p>P5: "And children with autism are just going to have that even harder because maybe their emotional side of things is tougher to deal with, and anxiety and things. So yeah, just ensuring we know what provisions they need and they are in place for them starting, I think is really important."</p> <p>P1: "We have some children who have a diagnosis of autism, a diagnosis of ADHD but knowing their backgrounds we are kind of thinking it's more early developmental trauma."</p> <p>P1: "Because we do have a high level of previous social worker/social services involvement with a lot of our children. So it does feel that <i>some</i> children have been diagnosed with autism who perhaps actually it may be that there is more of a developmental trauma."</p> <p>P2: "In my previous setting there was one boy and everyone talked about him when he arrived as if he <i>was</i> autistic, but... at the time we used the Boxall Profile, at that school, and actually we very- we quite passionately felt that his needs were more around attachment and speech &amp; language than actually... I think just saying he was autistic was a little bit too simple somehow. He was a lot more complicated than that."</p>
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Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs	<p>Differing views between school staff and foster carers / parents around diagnosis</p> <p>Families are keener on diagnosis</p>	<p>P1: "The trouble is, I think often the carers want that diagnosis because it gives them explanation and, you know, it wouldn't make any difference to how we would support a child."</p> <p>P3: "we are aware that there is a little bit of... I don't mean... not family tension, that's not the right word, but I'm wondering whether they are looking for something and we are not seeing it at school."</p> <p>P3: "Yeah, yeah and I think it could be that he is masking it very well or it could be because of events that have happened to him."</p> <p>P5: "With my Reception one, his carer was like 'He's definitely ASD. He lines his toys up and he does this and he does that'. But... whether it is or not, whether that's just a comfort thing for him?"</p> <p>P5: "He was just like 'He's definitely autistic' and we were like 'Oh, but let's not jump yet' [...] So yeah, we don't have... we'll not really be doing any referrals anytime soon for this little one."</p> <p>P5: "Yeah, I mean you have to be delicate obviously to say 'You know, this is a possibility, yes'. And if his behaviour traits are becoming a concern, if they are affecting him socially, if they are affecting him academically, then yeah we can definitely sort of take this forward and look deeper into it and see if there's a reason for these behaviours, but we're not seeing a lot of it at school."</p>
Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Difficulty differentiating	Diagnosis is not a priority for the school	<p>P1: "However we do have another one. He's not... he's not...he has traits. Again, there are definitely traits of autism there. He finds changes to routine <i>really</i> difficult to manage and changes to relationships in the classroom <i>really</i> difficult</p>

	between autism and attachment needs		to manage. A very sort of clear sense of black and white, right and wrong. So there's- but the decision has been made not to pursue that at the moment because they are still unpicking life story work and things like that."
Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Difficulty differentiating between autism and attachment needs	Perceived benefits to child having a diagnosis	<p>P1: "I think CAMHS felt that there was no need to pursue that. Having said that, I think once he transitions to secondary school, which he is due to do in September, I think they may decide a bit later down the line to have a look at that with him."</p> <p>P3: "Our EP spends a lot of time talking to parents because lots of parents <i>want</i> a diagnosis. But she's saying it's not going to make any difference to how we treat them."</p> <p>P4: "If that was their medical need and it was something that had been diagnosed by the medical practitioners then absolutely, just with any child and regardless of whether they are in care or not in care, and they are worth of an assessment then absolutely."</p>
Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Utilising existing skills and structures in order to offer support	<p>Support wouldn't look any different for autistic LAC vs regular autistic students</p> <p>School / staff experience of supporting autistic children</p>	<p>P1: "None of our looked after children have a diagnosis of autism but we do have a number of other children who are so the policies are catered for all of those needs."</p> <p>P1: "We support with autistic friendly strategies anyway so children all have visual timetables, they use social stories, they have now and next boards, and they are given the time away from the class, they can use ear defenders and all of those sorts of things that would help a child in the classroom we would do anyway."</p>

<p>Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice</p>	<p>Utilising existing skills and structures in order to offer support</p>	<p>Areas where support may differ</p>	<p>P1: “Not for us in school because we have to- like I say, two thirds of the children in the classroom have a diagnosis or are on a waiting list for a diagnosis. So we would provide them with those opportunities anyway.”</p> <p>P2: “I think our autistic children generally get all the different things that we know support them the best, and that would be... it doesn’t matter when their diagnosis happens or... I think that we are quite clued up here, so I think staff would feel quite skilled to support the child anyway.”</p> <p>P3: “I think we would be okay but I think that’s because of the previous training we’ve had and the staff that we have. I think getting the right staff would be the key for that.”</p> <p>P5: “Obviously, depending on their needs, what would be needed sort of in the classroom? We’d obviously have to look at that and do they need- what visuals do they need? Do they need the Now and Next? Does it have to be- how much does it have to be broken down? We’d have to look at the playground and how much support do they need socially”</p> <p>P4: “So- so actually, neither of the children specifically work with a teaching assistant or any additional adult so I suppose thinking about it and working it through, there may be some additional adult support, certainly if they have an Educational Health Care Plan.”</p> <p>P5: “And children with autism are just going to have that even harder because maybe their emotional side of things is tougher to deal with, and anxiety and</p>
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Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Utilising existing skills and structures in order to offer support	Areas where expertise / knowledge may be lacking	<p>things. So yeah, just ensuring we know what provisions they need and they are in place for them starting, I think is really important.”</p> <p>P3: “I think we would probably want to get some advice from somewhere. Probably our EP to start with. But somewhere about how to marry up... and which bit to start on first. That would be very personal to the child, wouldn’t it? ‘What is the priority?’ ‘Which bits do we need to get in place first for this child to be successful?’ But it’s the same as we would do with our EP with any of our SEND children as well. [...] I don’t have a problem with dealing with either of those but together it’s making sure that we do it in the right order for that child.”</p>
Autism is theoretically important but does not alter practice	Utilising existing skills and structures in order to offer support	PEP targets would also cover needs arising from being autistic	<p>P4: “So with regards to autism [...] I think within that targets section [of the PEP] you would make the targets specific to their needs around those areas of the curriculum.”</p> <p>P4: “So you would dovetail the targets from the EHCP to the PEP to their Individual Learning Plan so that everything marries up. So you know, they haven’t got PEP targets over here, spinning that plate, ILP targets here, and then EHCP, and nothing is actually working in tandem.”</p>





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