

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

2 February 2022

Report title	Virtual School Head Annual Report 2021	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Beverley Momenabadi Children and Young People	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Accountable Director	Emma Bennett, Executive Director of Families	
Originating service	Inclusion and Attendance	
Accountable employee	Darren Martindale Head of Service	
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Report to be/has been considered by	Children and Young People in Care Management Team	22 December 2021
	Education and Children's Leadership Team	7 January 2022
	Inclusion and Attendance Management Team	5 January 2022

Recommendation:

The Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

1. Comment on the draft Virtual School Head Annual Report 2021 prior to receiving Cabinet approval.

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Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Beverley Momenabadi Children and Young People	
Wards affected	All wards	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Executive Director of Families	
Originating service	Inclusion and Attendance	
Accountable employee	Darren Martindale Service Manager Tel 01902 556951 Email darren.martindale@wolverhampton.gov.uk	
Report has been considered by	Children and Young People in Care Management Team	22 December 2021
	Education and Children's Leadership Team	7 January 2022
	Inclusion and Attendance Management Team	5 January 2022
	Cabinet Member Education and Skills	18 January 2022
	Cabinet Member Children and Young People	18 January 2022

Recommendation for action:

The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to:

1. Receive the Virtual School Head Annual Report 2021.

1.0 Purpose

1.1 The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to receive the Virtual School Head Annual Report 2021.

2.0 Background

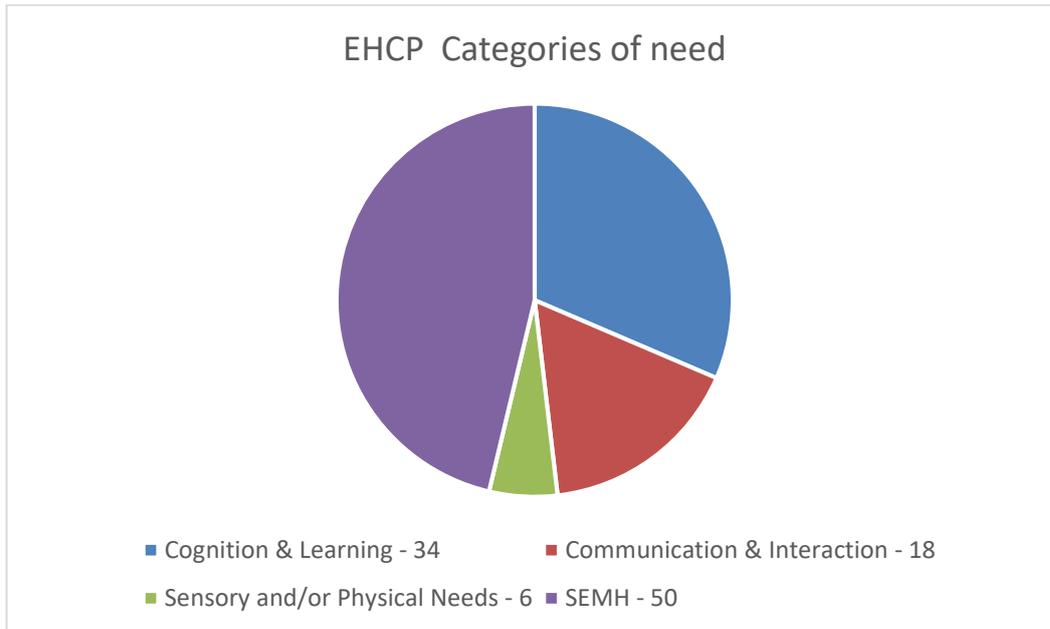
2.1 To inform Corporate Parenting Board of the educational progress and achievements of our Children and Young People in Care, and previously in care, the steps that the local authority has taken to support those achievements, and priorities for future work.

3.0 Cohort Information

3.1 At autumn term 2021:

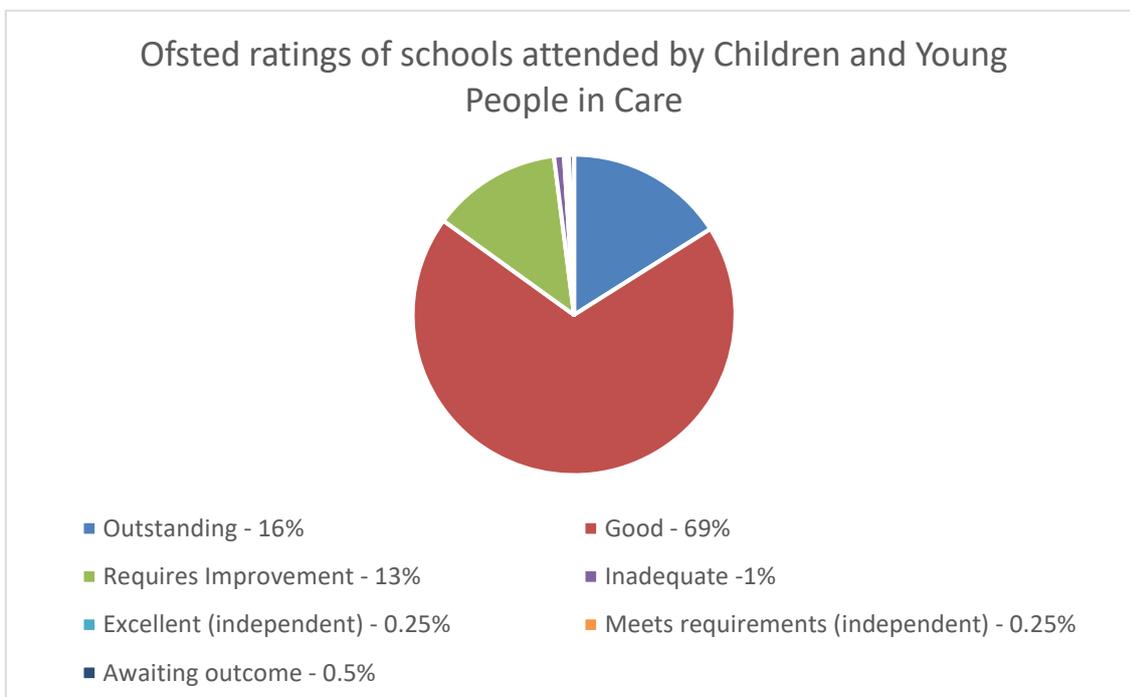
• Total pupils (Reception – Year 11)	394
• Placed in Wolverhampton	199
• Placed out of City	195
• Primary phase	147
• Secondary phase	247
• Attending Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)	10
• Attending Special Schools	66
• Attending other alternative provision	3
• Secure Accommodation	1
• Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)	108
• SEND support	104
• Boys	224
• Girls	170
• Total ethnic groups	14
• Non-White British	38%

3.2 Among the children and young people in care with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulty is by far the most prevalent category of need, accounting for 50% of this cohort (6% higher than 2020). The prevalence of each category of need is outlined in the chart below.



4.0 School Ofsted Ratings

4.1 Statutory guidance states that Children and Young People in Care should attend schools that are rated as either Good or Outstanding by Ofsted.¹ At November 2019, 85% of children and young people in care attend a school which is rated as good or better by Ofsted, which is a 1% higher than 2019. The ratings are summarised in the chart below:



¹ [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-and-previously-looked-after-children)

5.0 Supporting learning and achievement

5.1 Wolverhampton's Virtual School team are committed to improving educational outcomes for children and young people in care, and previously in care, in accordance with the council's statutory duties in this regard.² We achieve this through a combination of direct, advisory, and strategic work with children, schools, social workers, carers and other partners.

5.2 The team promotes the educational achievement of children and young people in care in a variety of ways. Key areas, in line with statutory guidance, include:

- Regular meetings with Designated Teachers in schools
- Supporting and improving the Personal Educational Planning process
- Tracking attendance, exclusions, attainment, and progress
- Providing direct learning support to pupils
- Providing advice and training, together with robust challenge and support to schools and social care
- Interventions and wider activities to promote learning and raise aspirations

5.3 During the spring term 2021, while schools were partially closed due to the COVID19 pandemic, the virtual school team provided ongoing support both to children and young people in care, as we had during the summer 2020 lockdown period. Attendance was monitored and supported for children who had been identified by their social workers as needing to attend school, and further support provided those who were accessing remote learning at home.

5.4 This support included utilising Pupil Premium+ proactively and flexibly to address any barriers or gaps in learning, maximising attendance at PEP meetings and ensuring that the pupils' voice was included (some children preferred the 'virtual' meeting format conducted via MS Teams), helping to strengthen home-school communication and being a constant source of advice and support for Designated Teachers, as well as advice for carers in how to support education at home.

5.5 Compliments for the support offered by the Virtual School team from schools and other partners in 2020-2021 have included:

- "We all want the best for X and likewise your support and team have been incredible during this time" – Head Teacher of a special school
- "I thought the ARC conference today was excellent" – Head Teacher of a primary school
- I have had a wonderful experience working with X.... I just wanted her to be recognised, for her hard work of going the extra mile to help our young people. In our

² [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

busy and pressured environment at times we fail to acknowledge one another, and I felt honoured to work with X – social worker.

5.6 In addition, the VSH works closely with the Education, Employment and Training (EET) Co-ordinator, further education settings and other colleagues in Skills and Employability teams to promote the EET of children and young people in care at post-16 and care leavers. The support offered to this cohort includes:

- Designated officers in local colleges and a Virtual School 16+ partnership agreement in place
- Dedicated Connexions Advisor to ensure quality IAG
- Strong support from Young People’s Advisors, working alongside Job Centre Plus Work Coaches
- EET Coordinator and EET Apprentice deliver direct support to CAYPIC/care leavers, new additional EET worker currently being recruited
- Weekly EET drop-in service for young people
- Close links with partnership with Black County Impact, Talent Match & Department of Work and Pensions with designated officers in each service
- Monthly EET panels to agree plans and support for young people who are NEET
- Bespoke work experience opportunities and five ring fenced apprenticeship opportunities
- Partnership working with the Care Leaver Covenant
- For young people in Higher Education (HE) - support with UCAS, personal statements, SFE, offered twice-yearly visits by EET Coordinator and dedicated HE PEP. CWC is a member of the NNECL HE forum Ongoing support while at university and offers post graduate employment support. Wolves at work also offer post-graduation support to our care leavers.

6.0 Raising Aspirations – Aspire2Uni

6.1 Aspire2Uni (A2U) is an innovative partnership project between Wolverhampton University and four ‘virtual schools’ for children and young people in care around the Black Country – Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall and Staffordshire. A2U is a long-term, intensive, progressive programme designed to raise the aspirations and support the achievement of children in care. Research shows that children and young people in care and care leavers do not regard Higher Education (HE) as a natural course and will often be looked after by adults who have little experience of HE themselves, or indeed an understanding of the value of HE or further training.

6.2 Higher education and training be a critical step to enhanced life opportunity, wellbeing, and economic independence. In this context, Aspire2Uni has two underpinning goals:

- To raise aspirations (and increase knowledge)
- To break down barriers, and improve progression, to Higher Education

6.3 The programme supports children at secondary stage and beyond, who reach the expected attainment in core subjects at the end of Key Stage 2 or have the potential to reach that level but perhaps underachieve. It completed its sixth year in 2021. At the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, there were 33 children from Wolverhampton on the programme. 21 of these were at Key Stage 3, 10 were at Key Stage 4 and 2 were in year 12. The VSH provides strategic oversight of the project from Wolverhampton's perspective, while one of the Virtual School Support Officers acts as an operational lead

6.4 There are three elements to the programme:

- a. **Outreach** - a series of university visits and other events, designed to raise aspirations, break down barriers and inform progression to higher education. The COVID19 pandemic has presented challenges in this regard, but a programme of largely 'virtual' or online events have been offered in response to the pandemic.
- b. **Mentoring** - a dedicated mentor is allocated to the young person and works with either once per week or once per fortnight. Group mentoring sessions are also utilised, for example, for some older students who have been accessing A2U mentoring for a long time and are ready to move on to a different form of support. Though mentoring was historically delivered in the home, during the COVID19 pandemic it has been taking place largely via a secure online mentoring platform called Brightside. While online mentoring is helpful for some young people and certain situations, many of the participants benefit from face-to-face mentoring and participation in mentoring and other events has reduced during the pandemic. The A2U team are working hard on returning pupil engagement to the previous high levels, however.

Several mentors have been with the programme since the outset, have graduated the University and are now working as mentors in various schools and organisations. One is employed as an Education Support Officer by Wolverhampton Virtual School.

- c. **Work Experience and Enrichment** - Working with local businesses, arranges high quality, bespoke work placements and group visits to local employers such as Jaguar Land Rover. In addition, the project offers enrichment experiences such as visits to the theatre or outward-bound experiences, to broaden students' horizons and build their confidence.

6.5 The table below illustrates the percentage of A2U participants from Wolverhampton who are at age-related expectation core subjects in each year group. The percentages are high, even given the fact that pupils with SEND usually do not participate in the project.

Cohort	English	Maths	English & Maths
Year 8 at age-related expectation	100%	86%	86%
Year 9 at age-related expectation	57%	71%	43%
Year 10 predicted to achieve a grade 4 or above at GCSE	100%	67%	67%
Year 11 Achieved Grade 4 or above at GCSE	83%	83%	83%
Year 11 achieved Grade 5 or above at GCSE	50%	67%	33%

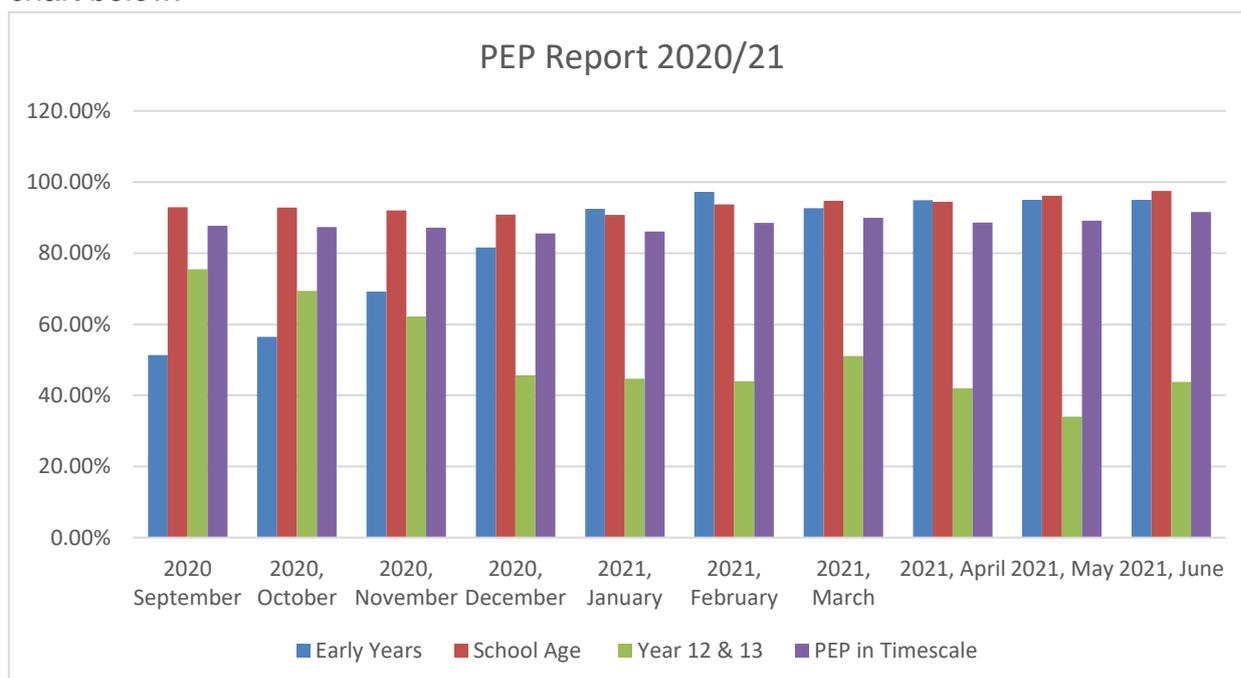
6.6 A2U was nominated for the Children in Care award at the 2021 Children & Young People Now awards, for a submission that was made on behalf of Wolverhampton Virtual School and participants from Wolverhampton.

7.0 Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

7.1 It is a statutory requirement of local authorities to ensure that all children and young people in care have a quality, up-to-date Personal Education Plan (PEP). At the end of June 2021, 92% of the cohort had a PEP completed within statutory timescales. A further breakdown of PEP completion rates revealed:

- 95% of children in early years had an up-to-date PEP
- 98% of school-aged children had an up-to-date PEP
- 44% of young people in care in years 12 and 13 had an up-to-date PEP

7.2 A monthly breakdown of PEP completion rates for all three measures is illustrated in the chart below.



- 7.3 The low completion rate for post-16 PEPs has since been addressed (it was partly due to recording issues on the Eclipse system) and, though it is still lower than for the rest of the cohort, it has increased significantly.
- 7.4 The Virtual School Team complete audits of PEPs on a termly basis, focussing specifically on two key areas: (1) whether the individualised learning targets contained in the PEP are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-related) and (2) whether the Pupil Premium Plus is being effectively utilised for the pupil, as recorded in the PEP.
- 7.5 Of the 235 Personal Education Plan that were audited in the summer term 2021:
- 84% had SMART targets (3% higher than summer 2020)
 - 79% demonstrated appropriate and effective use of Pupil Premium Plus (2% higher than 2020)
- 7.6 The Virtual School team report, anecdotally, that PEP quality has improved since the form has been fully electronic and part of the Eclipse data management system. All important information - for example prior attendance, attainment, and progress data - is included as a mandatory field, helping to ensure that the plan contained a complete and holistic picture of the pupil's educational progress and achievement, strengths and needs. In addition, the team regularly provide information, advice and training to schools and social workers on ensuring good PEP quality.

8.0 Pupil Premium Plus

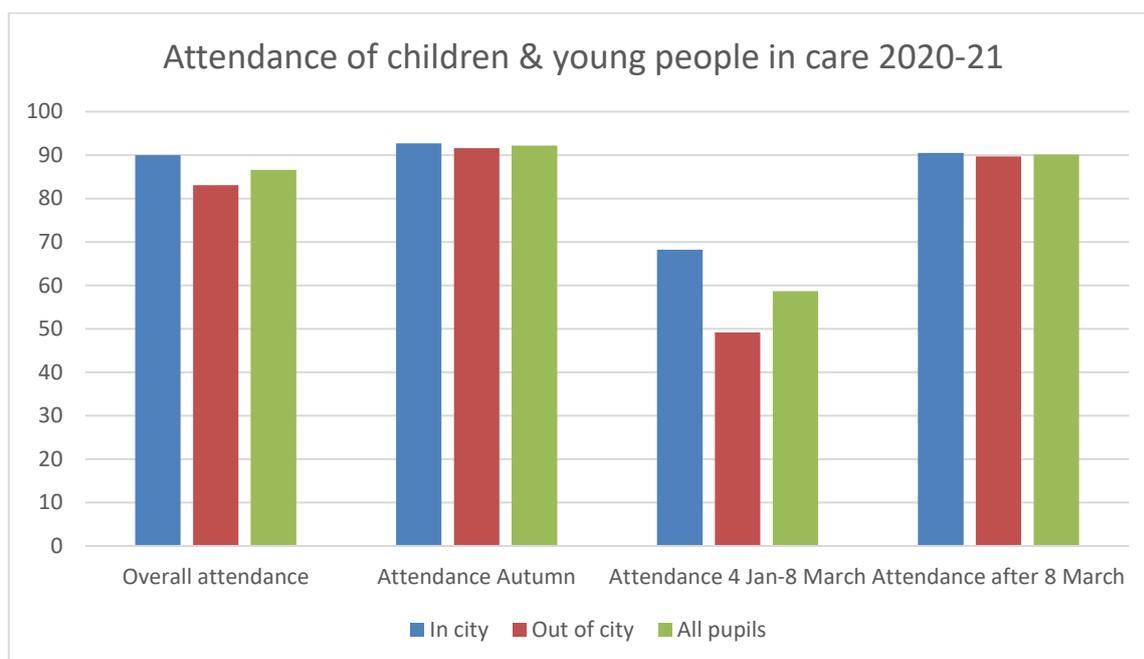
- 8.1 The Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) is the main form of financial support for local authorities to promote the education of children in care, in accordance with their statutory duty in this regard (DfE 2014, updated 2018). The PP+ is allocated to local authorities at a rate of £2345 per pupil, per annum, and is managed by the Virtual Head.
- 8.2 Most of the grant is allocated to schools, to support the individualised learning targets of their pupils in care. This is monitored through the PEP process and by the Virtual School Team, in their scrutiny of PEPs and continual work with schools and social workers. £1700 has been allocated to schools for each child and young person in care, in termly instalments, in 2020-2021.
- 8.3 The remainder is utilised on a range of projects, interventions, and resources to target support where it is most needed, and to support the strategic priorities of the Virtual School. These include Aspire2Uni, Beanstalk Volunteer Reading Help, Welfare Call (see 3.7) and continuous professional development for Designated Teachers. The grant also funds the staffing of the Virtual School Team, other than the Virtual School Head's post.
- 8.4 Following changes introduced under the Children and Social Work Act 2017, an additional, smaller grant was allocated to local authorities to support the extension of the VSH's role to provide information and advice around children who have left care via an

adoption, special guardianship, or child arrangements order. £30,000 has been allocated to Wolverhampton for this purpose in 2020-2021. This funding is utilised to support the work of the virtual school generally, including advice and training around the needs of this wider cohort, rather than utilised to fund (for example) a dedicated post. Some PPG-funded resources, such as Britannica School online learning, have been made available to adopters and the take-up of this has been very good.

9.0 Attendance

- 9.1 The Virtual School team monitors the school attendance of all of Wolverhampton's children and young people in care by scrutinising PEPs and half-termly attendance reports and ensure that any emerging attendance issues are addressed without delay by working closely with designated teachers, education welfare officers, social workers, and carers. Attendance monitoring is also supported by daily telephone calls to all out-of-City schools by 'Welfare Call', a service funded by Pupil Premium Plus, which provides regular reports and helps to ensure that children and young people in care who are educated outside Wolverhampton (and are therefore potentially more vulnerable) benefit from even closer monitoring than those in Wolverhampton schools.
- 9.2 The importance of good school attendance is highlighted in training and supervision for carers, and in the relevant council policies. Carers are expected and supported to talk to children about how they feel about school, particularly if they have recently started at a new school, and raise any concerns with school staff, social care and/or the virtual school immediately. Where there are issues, if appropriate, the PEP will be reviewed urgently. An Educational Psychologist (EP), Education Welfare Officer (EWO) and/or other appropriate professionals will be consulted and involved to ensure a robust, multi-disciplinary response.
- 9.3 The small number of children and young people in care on modified timetables are monitored closely by the Virtual School Team, who help to ensure that pupils receive an appropriate offer of full-time education. If a modified timetable or attendance at an alternative education provision becomes necessary for an individual pupil, the team ensure that provision is regularly reviewed and remains appropriate to the child's strengths and needs, with appropriate progression plans in place.
- 9.4 Attendance is generally high for the cohort. However, COVID19 has inevitably had an impact, though children and young people in care and other vulnerable pupils, were closely monitored and supported throughout both partial lockdown periods, either to help them to engage with online learning, or to cope with the changing demands in school. In the cases of the minority of pupils in care who were not attending school during the January-March 'lockdown' period, the decision as to whether attendance should be expected or not was made by social workers in discussions with carers and with support from the Virtual School Team. Further help, advice and resources were offered to teachers, carers and pupils during and after pupils fully returned to school, supporting them with the challenges of transition.

9.5 The chart below illustrates how attendance was affected by COVID19 by showing the overall attendance for the whole of academic year, alongside attendance during the partial closure of school between January and March 2021, and attendance levels before and after that period. Attendance was slightly higher for pupils in Wolverhampton schools than for the out-of-City cohort, which reflects the generally higher levels of vulnerability of the latter cohort and therefore the greater likelihood of them needing to self-isolate for certain periods. Attendance dropped slightly after 8 March, though it improved throughout the spring and summer and remained high for most pupils.



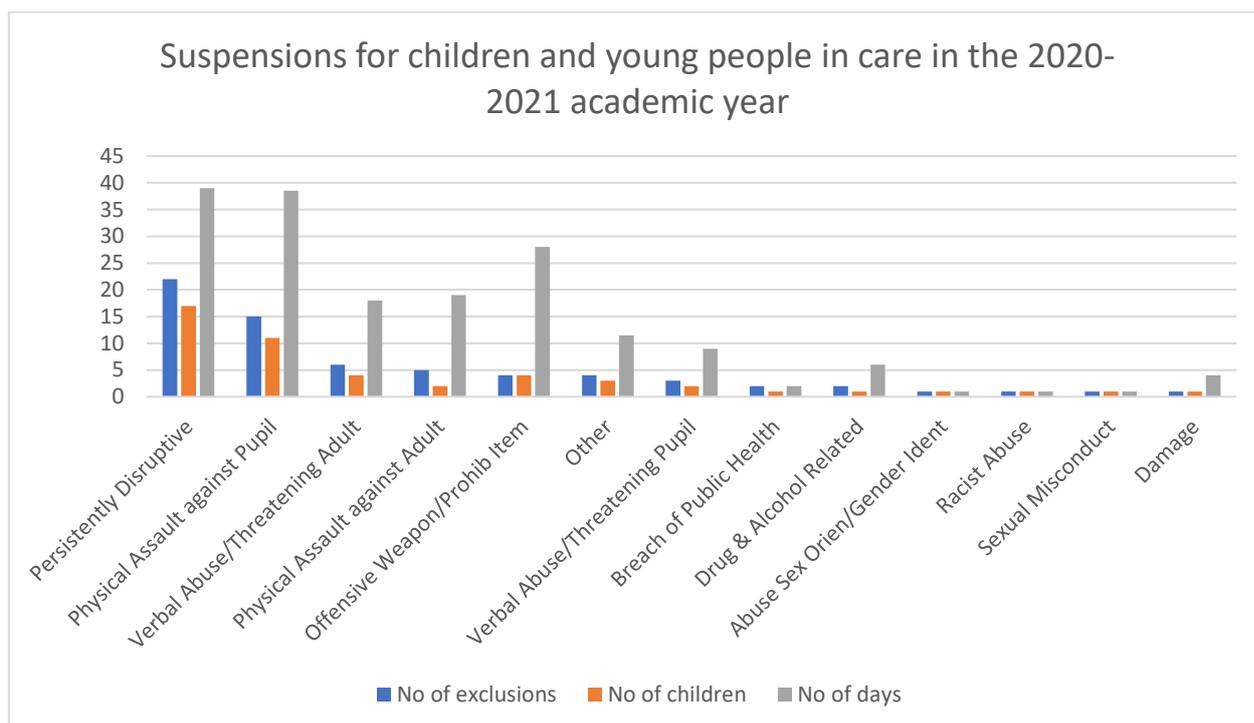
9.6 An analysis of persistent absence (pupils with less than 90% attendance) shows that this became higher after schools reopened on 8 March, however, as highlighted by the table below which compares persistent absence between those two periods.

Cohort	Autumn term 2020	8 March 2020 – end of term 2021
In City	13%	19%
OOC	14%	24%
All pupils	13%	22%

9.7 This is an unacceptable level of persistent absence, though it has undoubtedly been affected by challenges related to COVID19. The Virtual School team are ensuring a particularly keen focus on attendance and persistent absence in 2021-2022, and continue to support pupils, schools, social workers, and carers to promote good school attendance while ensuring that vulnerable pupils and carers are kept safe.

10. Inclusion

- 10.1 There were no permanent exclusions for Wolverhampton children and young people in care in 2020-21. Permanent exclusions are extremely rare for Wolverhampton children and young people in care – one in 2019-2020, none in 2018-2019, one in 2017-2018, two in 2016-2017 and one in 2015-2016. This is a notable outcome (statistically, children in care are far more likely to be excluded than their peers) which reflects the concentrated work of the Virtual School in conjunction with schools, social care, and other key partners, in preventing exclusions, promoting inclusive practice, and ensuring that the right support is in place for children and young people in care.
- 10.2 A total of 67 suspensions (previously known as fixed term exclusions) were issued to Wolverhampton children and young people in care in 2019-2020. 36 of these were in Wolverhampton schools and 31 in schools outside of Wolverhampton. 49 pupils received one or more suspensions. Out-of-City pupils lost more days due to suspensions, however, so had longer periods of suspension on average - 102 days were lost due to suspension for out-of-City pupils, compared to 76 days for pupils in Wolverhampton schools.
- 10.3 The overall figure of 67 suspensions is 13 more than in 2019-2020, but 2019-2020 figures were affected by the partial closure of schools during the summer term and the limited low numbers of pupils in care who were attending during that period. It also maintains the significant reduction of suspensions compared to previous years (there were 163 suspensions in 2018-2019, for example).
- 10.4 The table below summarises the reasons for suspensions. Persistent disruptive behaviour is the most common reason, in line with all pupils, though it closely followed by physical assault against a pupil. The latter has increased, as a percentage of suspensions, which could indicate increasing difficulties around children's mental health and wellbeing and challenges related to COVID19. While it has been reported and understood by colleagues within Wolverhampton schools, social care and the Virtual School team, that many of our children and young people in care benefitted from the 'lockdown' periods, giving them more time to cement relationships with carers and spend time as part of a family, this will remain an area of increased focus in our work with young people, designated teachers, carers and social care.



11. School Transition and Stability

11.1 Research shows that children and young people in care who changed school in Years 10 or 11 scored over five grades less than those who did not.³ The Virtual School works closely with social workers, schools, and carers to maintain existing school placements, wherever possible and appropriate. If a change of school is the best option, then the team helps to support a successful transition for those pupils through joined-up working with schools and other key partners.

11.2 Social workers should consult the Virtual School Head prior to any change of school for a pupil in care, so that advice can be given as to the suitability of any potential school placement. This requirement is highlighted in PEP training, as well as in Wolverhampton's Education Policy for Children and Young People in Care and our Model School Policy, which is in the process of being updated to incorporate the recent extension to the VSH role to include all children with a social worker⁴. The team provide support for children and young people in care if they do have to move schools, ensuring a successful transition through 1:1 support, in-class support and close partnership working with all key agencies.

³ http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/EducationalProgressLookedAfterChildrenKeyMessages_Nov2015.pdf

⁴ [Virtual school head role extension to children with a social worker - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

11.3 The transition from primary to secondary school, for example, can be particularly challenging for many children and young people in care. The Virtual School team ensure that all are supported with a successful transition through meetings with year 6 pupils and their teachers, and follow-up meetings in their new secondary school before and after secondary induction sessions. We also help to ensure that children are given their preferred choice of secondary school and offer advice on the most appropriate schools choice. Out-of-City pupils are given additional information and advice by a dedicated Education Support Officer.

12. GCSE Attainment

12.1 The following outcomes relate to young people that the Department for Education class as 'eligible', i.e., they had been in care for 12 months or more at 31 March 2021. 2020 and 2019 outcomes are also included for comparison

12.2 The table below outlines the percentage of pupils in this cohort who achieved grade 4 and above in core subjects at GCSE in 2021.

Cohort (number)	English	Maths	Eng & maths	Eng & maths 2020	Eng & maths 2019
In-City (17)	35%	35%	29%	29%	6%
Out of City (37)	32%	35%	30%	20%	22%
All pupils (54)	35%	35%	30%	25%	16%

12.3 The table below outlines the percentage of pupils in this cohort who achieved grade 5 and above in core subjects at GCSE in 2021.

Cohort (number)	English	Maths	Eng & maths	Eng & maths 2020	Eng & maths 2019
In-City (17)	18%	35%	18%	17%	6%
Out of City (37)	27%	22%	16%	0%	22%
All pupils (54)	24%	26%	17%	9%	16%

12.4 Achievement at GCSE for our children and young people in care has risen significantly in recent years. The 2021 figure of 30% achieving grade four and above is the highest that Wolverhampton has achieved since 2014 for Wolverhampton in 2014. The percentage of pupils achieving grade 5 has also risen in 2021 and is higher than the percentage that achieved grade four in 2019.

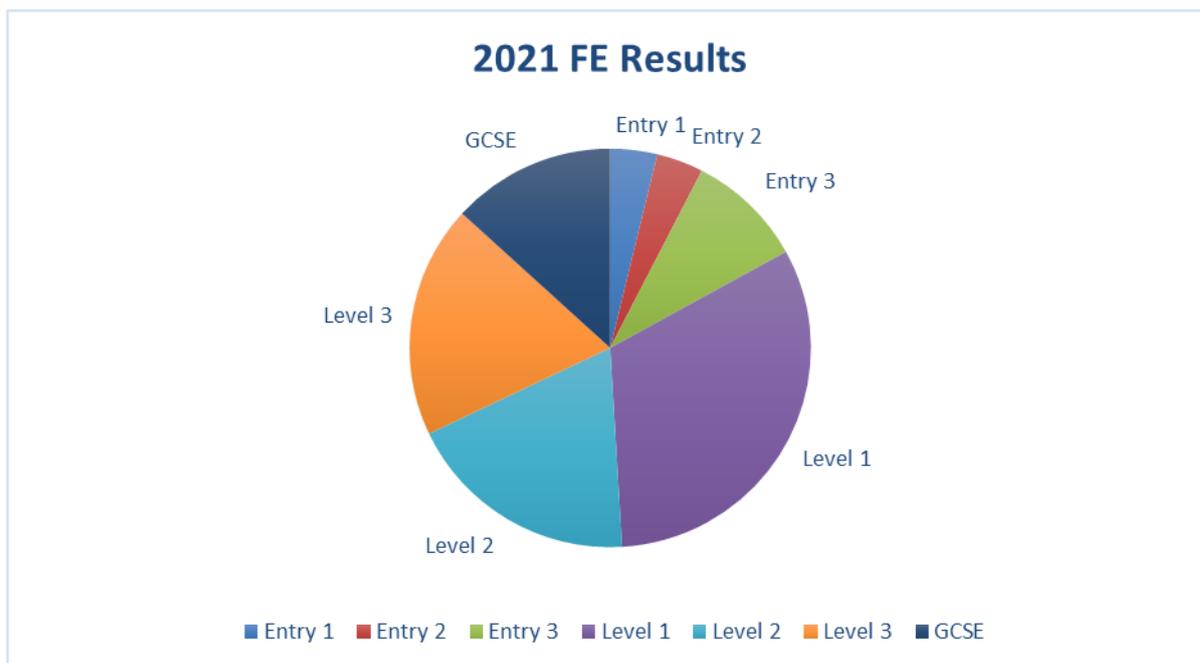
12.5 It is likely that improved outcomes in 2021 and 2020 have been supported by schools adopting more flexible approaches to assessment, as a response to pupils missing schooling due to the COVID19 pandemic. The strong and consistent support that pupils received before, during and after the partial closure of schools in 2020 and 2021, however, is also likely to have contributed to improved results.

12.6 It is also notable that 74% of the cohort had an identified special educational need. 41% had an Education, Health & Care Plan (EHCP) while 33% were at SEN support level -

higher than average for children and young people in care. 20% attended special schools.

13. Post-16 Achievement

- 13.1 98% of children and young people in care in year 11 progressed into education, employment and training (EET) in autumn 2021; our highest ever percentage for year 11 progression.
- 13.2 Of the 85 young people in year 12 and 13 in 2021, 40 achieved one or more qualifications, 20 progressed on to the next year/level of study and two failed their courses. Of the remaining 23 young people, 16 were not in education, employment or training (NEET), one was not available to the labour market (NALM) and six were employed.
- 13.3 Between the 40 young people who were in further education (FE) and achieved one or more qualifications:
- Nine achieved entry level qualifications
 - 16 achieved Level One qualifications
 - Eight achieved Level Two qualifications
 - Seven achieved Level Three qualifications ('A' level or equivalent)
 - Seven achieved GCSEs
 - Seven started a university course
- 13.4 The type and level of qualifications achieved is illustrated in the chart below.



- 13.5 It is noticeable, however, that female students achieved a significantly higher percentage of Level Three qualifications – 33%, compared to 9% of male students – while 63% of male students achieved Level One and Two (GCSE equivalent) compared to 33% of females. A higher percentage of male students also achieve Level One and Two (the lowest level of qualification), though similar proportions achieved entry Three level certification. Girls tend to achieve somewhat higher than boys at statutory school age, as a percentage of children and young people in care. The above data represents a continuation and widening of that imbalance, however. This will be an area of focus for the Virtual School Head and colleagues in social care and further education providers in 2021-2022 and beyond.
- 13.6 Wolverhampton’s care leavers continue to achieve well in **higher education (HE)**. Three young people achieved degree-level qualifications in 2021. Two of these graduated with first class honours and one achieved an alternative level 5 qualification.
- 13.7 Wolverhampton currently have 31 care leavers in higher education. As a percentage of the cohort, this is well above the generally accepted national average of 6%.

14. Participation

- 14.1 Wolverhampton has a very strong and well-established Children in Care Council (CiCC) which benefits from close links with the Youth Council, and with elected members via the Corporate Parenting Board. The CiCC is actively involved in Participation at a regional and national level, enabling our children and young people in care to act as a real force for change and the improvement of services. This report is shared and discussed with the CiCC as well as with Corporate Parenting Board.
- 14.2 Work has been ongoing to strengthen young people’s contribution their PEPs, to ensure the plan is properly informed by their views and is meaningful to them. During the partial

closure of schools, many PEP meetings were held online via Microsoft Teams and it was felt that this enabled a fuller contribution from some young people who enjoyed the online format more than face-to-face meetings in school. Other tools, such as more child-friendly versions of the section of the PEP form which captures the young person's contribution, tailored to different ages and ability levels, have also been trialled with some success. As a result, Designated Teachers are advised on a range of flexible approaches to completing PEPs, in order to maximise pupils' engagement.

15. Strategic and Advisory Development

- 15.1 The Virtual School Head's role includes strengthening the awareness of key professionals around the needs of children and young people in care, building strong working partnerships and developing policy and procedure in this area. This involves a combination of advisory and strategic work with a range of agencies.
- 15.2 In 2020-2021, the following training sessions were delivered by the Virtual School Team:
- Two sessions on the early years PEP for social workers
 - Three sessions on the post-16 electronic PEP for social workers
 - Two session on supporting education for carers
 - One training event on the role of the Designated Teacher
 - Three termly Designated Teacher forum meetings
 - Two sessions on attachment / trauma for Designated Teachers
 - Funded places for Designated Teachers on the Attachment Research Community (ARC) annual conference, and membership of ARC
- 15.3 The Virtual School team also provide information and advice in relation to supporting the education of children and young people who have left care via an adoption, special guardianship or child arrangements order receive additional support with their education, as set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017. This duty is covered in Designated Teachers training and further training is made available to schools. The Virtual School team regularly respond to requests for advice and information regarding the education of children previously in care, from schools, adoptive parents / special guardians and social care, particularly with regard to the use of the Pupil Premium Plus for this cohort.
- 15.4 A Virtual School Stakeholder Group was initiated in the summer term 2021, chaired by the VSH and involving representatives from schools and key local authority partners. The group helps to provide scrutiny and oversight of the virtual school's activities, including those of its key partners and stakeholders, and to develop and drive forward the virtual school's attainment improvement plan and strategic priorities.
- 15.5 The Virtual School team have continued to promote effective joined-up working between teams and partners services that support the education of vulnerable children. The VSH's wider role as a service manager for vulnerable learners, including attendance, EHE and elective home education (EHE), has continued to help facilitate better collaborative working and the appropriate sharing of information. School exclusions for all pupils have

continued to fall, while the engagement of electively home educating parents has improved to over 90% engagement, despite significant rises in EHE numbers after the first 'lockdown' due to COVID19.

- 15.6 In June 2020 the DfE announced funding and published non-statutory guidance to extend the role of the Virtual School Head to all children with a social worker or who have ever had a social worker, so that more vulnerable children in every local authority can benefit from the support and leadership of a VSH.⁵ This extended role, incorporating children on children in need and child protection plans, includes enhancing partnerships between social care and education settings, highlighting the barriers that young people in this cohort can face, and providing advice on effective, evidence-based approaches to narrowing the achievement gap. Work is underway in response to this new duty, including the recruitment of a new Inclusion and Attendance Manager which will enable the Virtual Head to focus purely on virtual school activities and properly incorporate this wider responsibility, and a dedicated School Improvement Officer.

16. Conclusion

- 16.1 2021 has been another unusual and challenging year for all. The Virtual School Team, alongside schools and other partners, has worked very hard to support our children and young people in care, despite the additional challenges that have been presented by the COVID19 pandemic, helping to find new ways to engage with young people and ensure continuity of support.
- 16.2 Once again, there is much to celebrate regarding the educational achievement of the children in our care. A very small percentage of Children and Young People in Care are attending schools which are rated as requiring improvement or inadequate by Ofsted. Temporary exclusions continue to decrease and there were no permanent exclusions for pupils in care in 2020-2021. Attainment has improved significantly at Key Stage 4 for the third year running, with our best-ever GCSE results, and notable successes at post-16 including a high number of care leavers attending and achieving at university. Personal educational planning is generally strong, with the introduction of the Eclipse electronic PEP continuing to support improving quality. Our schools and other partners have a good understanding of their corporate parenting responsibilities. The positive impact of the Virtual School Team's interventions on educational stability, as well as so-called 'soft outcomes', such as children's confidence, self-esteem and attitude to learning, is also reflected in positive feedback from schools, carers and social care.
- 16.3 At the same time, however, there are always areas for development. There are issues around school attendance for some pupils, though this is a minority and COVID-19 has clearly presented additional challenges in this area despite the strong support provided. PEP quality, though good overall, could still improve further and completion rates of post-16 PEPs still needs to be improved. It has not been possible to report on attainment and progress at early years and primary phase in 2020, or on attainment 8 / progress 8, and

⁵ [Virtual school head role extension to children with a social worker - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/virtual-school-head-role-extension-to-children-with-a-social-worker)

these areas will be prioritised going forward. The Virtual Head is becoming more actively involved with the regional network and National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), but there is still a need to develop this further to ensure that Wolverhampton stays abreast of new developments and research, as we continue to strive to improve the life chances of children and young people in care and previously in care.

17. Financial implications

- 17.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
[TS/04012022/U].

18. Legal implications

- 18.1 The Local Authority's statutory responsibilities are set out in the body of the report.
- 18.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.
[TC/21122021/D]

19. Equalities implications

- 19.1 An equalities analysis will be undertaken if required, in partnership with the Equalities and Diversities Team. As the work that underpins this strategy is to overcome any inequality, the analysis is aspirational and will need to be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the work undertaken.

20. All other Implications

- 20.1 There are no other implications, including health & wellbeing or COVID-19 implications.