

£16 million to support young people with a social worker



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Children with a social worker in England will benefit from further dedicated support in school and at college to help level up their outcomes in education and reach their full potential.

The Government has today (Wednesday 16 June) announced more than £16 million for councils to extend the role of Virtual School Heads from September this year, meaning there will be a local champion for children with a social worker in every local authority in England. This will ensure that more focus is placed on children with a social worker, targeting support earlier on in these young people's lives and helping improve how they engage with education.

A further £3 million in funding has also been confirmed for a new pilot, where Virtual School Heads will support looked-after children and care leavers in post-16 education. Launching in October, the pilot will enable Virtual School Heads to expand their work into further education settings.

Both programmes will build on the existing role of a Virtual School Head, who help champion and improve the educational outcomes for children in or on the edge of care, enhancing relationships between schools, colleges and local authorities so that pupils receive support from professionals that will help them develop and progress throughout their time in education.

Children and Families Minister Vicky Ford said:

Every child or young person should be given opportunities to fulfil their potential regardless of their background. For children in care, or those who are known to social care teams, it is absolutely vital we help them to overcome the barriers they can face in education so that they have the best chance

to succeed in life.

Our Virtual School Heads are already doing a phenomenal job supporting children in care, and working closely with schools and delivering significant improvements to their educational outcomes. That's why we are extending their role, so that their leadership and experience can benefit other children with social workers, boosting their attainment and attendance and ensuring they can access support that meets their needs.

Extending the role of Virtual School Heads delivers on a key recommendation of the Government's Children in Need review in 2019, which looked at what further support children in need of help and protection may require. The enhanced role will also be central to ensuring that the Government's education recovery package reaches and benefits children with a social worker, with Virtual School Heads able to advise on the best use of the Recovery Premium to meet their needs and how access to the National Tutoring Programme can improve their outcomes.

Their newly extended role will include additional responsibilities, such as increasing awareness among schools, colleges and social workers, of how education plays a crucial part in the care of these children, improving the visibility of support services for children with a social worker and ensuring Virtual School Heads champion this group in local authority planning. Further guidance is now available which sets out the role and activities expected of Virtual School Heads.

Patrick Ward, chair of the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), said:

It is particularly pleasing to note that sufficient additional resources have been allocated to deliver on the aims identified. It has been refreshing to work in partnership with the Department for Education and colleagues from the Association of Directors of Children's Services to make this happen. I hope this successful way of working continues in the future.

Paul Whiteman, general secretary of school leaders' union NAHT, said:

Educational outcomes for all children are obviously a priority as we look at recovery post-Covid, and many children, including those with a social worker, may require more support than others. NAHT has pressed for an extension to the role of the Virtual School Head to provide a source for schools to access additional support and advice for these children. This additional funding is a positive step towards increasing the capacity of the support services our children and families urgently need.

The pilot programme for looked-after children and care leavers in post-16 education will run in a selected group of local authorities for six months. Local authorities interested in the pilot will be able to apply through an expression of interest (EOI) process to be launched next month.

Virtual School Heads have made a significant impact since the role became statutory in 2014, bringing expert leadership to the system that has seen a reduction in exclusions and absences, and improved educational progress. In 2019 the permanent exclusion rate for looked-after children was almost the same as for all pupils and much lower than Children in Need, whilst the persistent absence rate for looked-after children was lower than the rate for all pupils.

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