

From Both Sides

Evaluating education support
for previously looked after children
in England

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AdoptionUK
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Introduction

There are more than 56,000 previously looked after children in England's schools who have left care because of an Adoption Order, a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangements Order.¹ This cohort of children face particular challenges in education, being at higher risk of exclusion, more likely to have SEND, and less likely to leave school with higher grades at GCSE.

In recognition of the impact that early trauma and adverse experiences, time spent in care and transitions to permanence can have on children's social, emotional and educational development, the Department for Education in England has extended a package of initiatives that were originally designed to support the education of looked after children to include previously looked after children.

However, seven years after the introduction of Pupil Premium Plus (PP+), and three years after the extension of the designated teacher and virtual school roles to include previously looked after children, evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives remain thin on the ground, and there is little to guide education professionals towards increasing their effectiveness.

During this time, Adoption UK has gathered the views of thousands of adoptive parents, adopted children, young people and adults, and education professionals. Our research has consistently demonstrated that while many education professionals are passionate about the education and welfare of the children they work with, the design and implementation of the systems designed to support them is falling short.

The result is that some of the most vulnerable children in our schools are being seriously let down. Three quarters of adopted young people and adults say that they needed more support than their peers while they were in school, yet more than half felt they didn't receive the support they needed. Only 19% felt that their final examination results were a fair reflection of their abilities.² Almost 80% of adopted children say they routinely feel confused and worried at school, and two thirds of those at secondary school report being teased or bullied because of being adopted.³ On leaving school, adopted young people are twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared to their peers.⁴

If previously looked after children are to be given a truly equal chance to achieve and to thrive in our schools, then we need a system of support that meets the needs of teachers, school leaders, parents/guardians and the children and young people themselves. From Both Sides brings all these voices together for the first time.

Adoption UK is the leading charity providing support, community and advocacy for all those parenting or supporting children who cannot live with their birth parents. We connect adoptive families, provide information and signposting on a range of adoption-related issues and campaign for improvements to adoption policy and legislation.

Methodology

Adoption UK reports drawing on evidence from adoptive parents in England (successive *Adoption Barometer* reports, *Schools and Exclusions* (2018), *Bridging the Gap* (2018)) have consistently found limited awareness of some of the education support available for previously looked after children (particularly the designated teacher and virtual school role) and frustrations surrounding their implementation and effectiveness. Fewer than half of respondents to the survey for the Adoption Barometer 2021 knew who their child's designated teacher was, and only 37% were satisfied with the way PP+ was being used to support their child.

Top of the Class (2019) highlighted that education professionals who work closely with previously looked after children, including designated teachers, frequently lacked the time, resources and training to effectively fulfil their roles, and Adoption UK research among adopted young people and adults has highlighted the potentially devastating impact of missed opportunities in education (*Bridging the Gap* (2018), *Better Futures* (2020)).

To explore the nature and source of these challenges and to further understand the experiences of education professionals, Adoption UK brought together 17 adoptive parents who are also education professionals for a focus group exercise. The participants included primary and secondary school classroom teachers, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) members of senior leadership teams, virtual school staff and school governors.

The participants took part in focus groups moderated by Adoption UK, discussing open ended questions relating to pupil premium plus, virtual schools and designated teachers – three key policies introduced within the last eight years. In each case, participants were asked to identify any challenges and barriers to effective implementation of these policies and to share examples of effective practice from their experience as either a parent or an education professional. The discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed to identify emerging themes, using concept mapping. Five individuals who were unable to attend the focus groups submitted written information in response to the same questions which were also included in the analysis stage.

The results of this focus group analysis, together with existing Adoption UK research, have been brought together in *From Both Sides* with the aim of moving towards improvements in policy and practice that work for educators, parents and, most importantly, the children and young people themselves.

Summary of challenges

- Lack of clarity around the purpose and appropriate use of Pupil Premium Plus for previously looked after children is limiting its effectiveness.
- Inadequate information sharing is limiting the ability of teachers to support children eligible for Pupil Premium Plus and undermining the confidence of parents/guardians.
- The way that Pupil Premium Plus is administered creates difficulties for some schools and the funding is insufficient for children who would benefit from intensive individual interventions.
- The role of the virtual school for previously looked after children is limited and vague, leading to a postcode lottery of provision across different local authorities. Both parents and educators can be unsure as to the purpose of the role and have expectations of the virtual school that may not be achievable with the resources available.
- The designated teacher too often lacks the time, resources and support to effectively carry out their role, especially in smaller settings where they may be fulfilling other significant duties.
- The designated teacher role works best in the context of a whole-school approach to understanding and supporting care-experienced children but providing effective training to all staff is costly and time-consuming.
- The impact of the designated teacher role is blunted when parents/guardians are not aware of the role or are unclear as to its purpose.

Summary of recommendations

- The Department for Education to commission thorough research into the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus, the designated teacher and the role of the virtual school in supporting the educational outcomes of previously looked after children.
- The Department for Education to commission and publish evidence-based best practice guides with case studies which clearly outline effective interventions and support for previously looked after children as a specific cohort.
- The introduction of a statutory framework for previously looked after children, similar to the Personal Education Plan for looked after children, to facilitate collaborative approaches to identifying support needs, planning interventions and evaluating outcomes throughout a child's time at school.
- Training on the needs of care-experienced children to be mandatory during initial teacher training and integrated into the Early Career Framework and National Professional Qualifications.
- Statutory requirement for all local authorities to publish a 'local offer' for previously looked after children, including information for families about the role of the virtual school and the designated teacher, priority access to school places and Pupil Premium Plus.

Pupil Premium Plus

The Pupil Premium (PP) was introduced in 2011 to provide additional funding for schools to support the educational attainment of children experiencing economic disadvantage, or who were looked after by a local authority. The funding for pupils experiencing economic disadvantage is often differentiated by referring to it as Ever-6 PP, as eligibility is determined by pupils having been in receipt of free school meals in the past six years.

Amendments in 2014 saw the introduction of Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) which increased the amount of funding allocated to looked after children, and extended eligibility for the funding to include previously looked after children who had left local authority care in England or Wales because of adoption, a Special Guardianship Order, a Child Arrangements Order or a Residence Order. This extension was in recognition of the traumatic experiences that many have experienced in their early lives and an understanding that their needs do not change on the issuing of a legal permanence order.

Virtual school heads are responsible for managing PP+ funding for looked after children in their local authority, and for allocating it to schools. For previously looked after children, the funding is paid directly to schools. It is not ring-fenced to individual children.

What are the challenges?

Lack of clarity around the purpose and appropriate use of PP+ for previously looked after children is potentially limiting its effectiveness.

Solutions

- All advice and guidance for schools on Pupil Premium should clearly differentiate between the purpose and effective use of Ever-6 PP, and PP+.
- The Department for Education should commission research into the effective use of PP+ for previously looked after children and publish evidence-based best practice guidance and case studies.
- School leaders, including governing bodies need training and information on the purpose and effective use of PP+, including how it fits into the school's wider PP strategy.
- A form of Personal Education Plan should be introduced as a statutory requirement for all previously looked after children to support effective and targeted use of PP+.

Answering a series of frequently asked questions in 2014⁵, the DfE stated that PP+ funding was “to improve the educational and personal outcomes of children who have been adopted from care, including (but not limited to) their attainment” and that it was not the policy intention to use the funding to support other groups of pupils or back-fill the general school budget. Examples of appropriate use included training staff in recognising and responding to attachment-related issues, providing tailored support to individual pupils, and providing whole class interventions. Guidance for designated teachers notes that “looked after and previously looked after children’s needs can be very different to others eligible for Pupil Premium.”⁶

However, despite clear differences in intention between Ever-6 PP funding and PP+, there is a persistent lack of clarity for schools about how PP+ can be used. The majority of guidance available to schools focuses on Ever-6 PP and frequently does not mention PP+. A series of PP+ case studies published by BAAF and the Department for Education in 2015⁷ is one notable exception, but this was based on only one year of providing the funding.

From Both Sides focus group participants highlighted a lack of clarity around best practice in the use of the fund.

The person in charge of PP+ in my school didn't even know there was a difference between it and PP. On the website it tells you that it's held by the virtual schools, and it isn't.

As a governor of a maintained school, I have observed that none of the information or training provided by our local authority for governors or school staff differentiates between Pupil Premium and Pupil Premium Plus.

Adoptive parents are also concerned that lack of clarity and appropriate guidance is limiting the effectiveness of PP+ funding. Adoption UK's *Adoption Barometer 2021*⁸ found that only 40% of respondents felt that their child's school was using PP+ appropriately for the needs of adopted and previously looked after children.

The involvement of the virtual school in administering PP+ for looked after children is perhaps a factor in the lack of specific guidance to schools, but PP+ for previously looked after children is directly administered by schools. Therefore, schools need explicit guidance to support them in making the best use of the fund which clearly differentiates between the different types of Pupil Premium.

There should be clear research around what is best practice for adopted children and the use of the money because a lot of the case studies and best practice models talk about disadvantage and they're really lumping all disadvantaged pupils in together but adopted and SGO children are a specific group with specific needs.

Innovative and potentially effective solutions are being devised where schools and local authorities are looking for inspiration to the support systems in place for looked after children. For example, all looked after children must have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which provides a framework for multi-agency involvement and targeting PP+ towards defined goals. Some local authorities have developed a similar system of education plans for previously looked after children in recognition of the fact that a child's support needs do not change on the issuing of a legal permanence order.

[The education plan] really helps direct thinking because it goes through what needs supporting and what are the barriers to engagement and learning and then what we need to target for this year as well as how we can use PP+ to support the child.

Inadequate information sharing is limiting the ability of teachers to support children eligible for PP+ and undermining the confidence of parents/guardians.

Solutions

- All parents and guardians should be given opportunity to declare their child's previously looked after status as part of the application process and this should then be followed up proactively by the school's designated teacher once a place has been offered and accepted.
- Schools should be required to differentiate between PP and PP+ in published strategies, as long as confidentiality for individual students is not compromised.
- A form of Personal Education Plan for previously looked after children should be introduced as a statutory requirement to support the effective sharing of relevant information within and between schools.

Although 98% of adoptive parents of school-aged children are aware of the existence of PP+, only 31% feel that their child's school is transparent in the way the funding is used⁹, despite the statutory guidance for designated teachers explicitly encouraging the involvement of parents and guardians in discussions around how PP+ can be used to support adopted and previously looked after children.

As adoptive parents, focus group participants had experienced challenges in ascertaining how PP+ was being used in relation to their own children.

I asked about where the money was being spent. They told us they bought a wobble board and that was kind of it.

My adopted children are in secondary school, and I have asked on many occasions how they benefit from Pupil Premium money. I am yet to get a proper response and they are in years 9 and 11.

At our first school they said they were going to spend it on attachment training for the whole staff, but they never did.

In their experience as teachers, focus group participants, especially those working in secondary schools, noted a lack of connection between their daily classroom practice and wider school approaches to supporting children using PP+.

We have a... I can't remember the title... she's in charge of Pupil Premium so, you know, that's sort of her job.

It was only through my adoption training ... that I picked up that there were certain things I could do differently for the children ... It never got cascaded down to the staff, so we didn't really know if we should be doing anything specific for them.

Focus group participants also noted the challenges involved in ensuring that relevant information was passed on when a child transitioned to a new year group or to a new school, with parents often expecting a greater flow of information than happened in reality.

They were saying, "But you must know. Primary school knew so why didn't you know?" But it isn't coming up from primary schools.

I think as a parent you expect that all the necessary information is going to be passed over from year to year and they're going to have read the file ... my son had occupational therapists and we finally got the report at the end of last year but that wasn't even passed on to his new teacher.

The way that PP+ is administered creates difficulties for some schools, and the funding is insufficient for children who would benefit from intensive individual interventions. However, a whole school therapeutic approach and collaboration with other agencies could reduce the need for school-based interventions for individual children.

Solutions

- The process through which PP+ is allocated should be amended so that funding can be released as soon as a child starts school. Pooling the funding for the cohort is not an effective strategy if there is only one child in the cohort. Alternatively, consideration should be given as to whether involving virtual schools in the administration of PP+ for previously looked after children would ensure that funding is available when schools need it.
- A form of Personal Education Plan for previously looked after children should be introduced to support collaborative working between schools, adoption support services, parents/guardians and other relevant professionals and agencies.
- The Department for Education should commission research into the most effective uses of PP+ for previously looked after children and publish specific guidance to support schools to create longer-term strategic approaches for the use of PP+ for this cohort.

PP+ for previously looked after children is administered differently to PP+ for looked after children. Eligible children are declared on the October schools census, with the funding being released to schools from the following April.

If an eligible child joins the school in September, and is declared on the October census, the school will receive funding from the following April. However, if the child joins the school (or becomes eligible) after October, their eligibility cannot be recorded until the following October, with release of funding in the April after that, meaning a potential wait for PP+ funding of up to 18 months.

For children in their final year at the school (Year 6 or Year 11), funding is released only a few months before they are due to leave the school and does not follow them to their new setting. In theory, this means that surplus funding from eligible children who have left the school can be pooled to support new arrivals whose PP+ has not yet been received. The potential for schools to manage the funding in this way is one argument against ring-fencing funding to individual children.

However, while this pooling strategy may work well for Ever-6 PP, where there are likely to be eligible children in every year group, it does not work as well for the much smaller cohort of previously looked after children. If a school does not have any previously looked after children leaving Year 6 or 11 at the end of the year, there is no surplus funding to pool for new arrivals the following September, leaving a potential gap in provision for the new starters.

You've got to wait for the census, wait for the funding to come into the budget, so you can be talking about a year before you actually get any money ... kids in my school are really high mobility so they've often moved on by then.

I think if you could have it on a termly basis rather than annual that would make a big difference in terms of the movement of the pupils and accessing it so you can actually use it for the pupils it's intended for.

Focus group participants also discussed the problem of funding sufficiency. While PP+ funding has increased considerably since it was first introduced, now standing at £2,345 per child per year, participants noted that this doesn't stretch very far if schools are using it to provide high level interventions and support for children with complex needs.

It can't be wholly effective because it isn't enough funding. Lots of children need full-time 1-1 support but even with notional special needs funding it isn't enough. So, we're potentially setting children up to fail.

We fund play therapy with the money quite often if that's what they need, but it doesn't fund a whole year's worth.

However, participants also questioned how the role of the school fits with the other services that previously looked after children may be accessing. In England, the Adoption Support Fund can provide funding for therapeutic interventions for previously looked after children, but it may not be used to fund educational interventions. However, where children have complex, overlapping needs, the line between what is an educational intervention and what is not is rarely clear.

I think we should be quite careful in terms of thinking how much we're asking schools to be organising counselling or Theraplay... and actually those shouldn't be coming out of education budgets ... I feel when we do put therapy in place, we're kind of plugging the gaps because other services haven't managed it.

Additional education support is governed by SEND policy and legislation, whereas support needs arising from the early adverse experiences and care experience of previously looked after children are covered by adoption support services and the Adoption Support Fund in England. Yet for many children, the lines between needs that are considered educational in nature and needs that are considered to be related to their previously looked after status are blurred and support provision cannot so easily be categorised.

For example, if an adopted child is experiencing considerable mental health difficulties which are impacting their attendance at school, interventions designed to support their mental health may be accessed through education-based programmes, through NHS services such as CAMHS, or through specialist services funded by the Adoption Support Fund. In every case, if a result of the intervention is increased attendance at school, the intervention is arguably supporting their education.

Children with complex needs require a multi-disciplinary approach to meeting those needs, where health, education and adoption support services work together to design the most effective package of support, free from restrictions concerning how individual pots of funding can be utilised.

In addition, several participants noted that strategic whole-school approaches to using PP+ and supporting children with care experience and trauma histories could reduce the need for intensive and costly individual interventions.



[My child] moved to a school with a very therapeutic approach and it ended up that the money is now spent on singing lessons and things like that because she's actually doing fine in school.

I think we should be encouraging schools to have a therapeutic approach, focusing on their whole school ethos and their relationships with children ... Where it seems to work best for our post looked after children in school is where there's therapy happening outside school and we can get a good partnership and have those meetings with the therapists, the class teacher and the parents and work together.

The Department for Education's guidance on using pupil premium¹⁰ emphasises the importance of such strategic approaches, beginning with identifying the specific challenges faced by disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils, including non-academic challenges such as attendance, exclusions, wellbeing and mental health, safeguarding concerns and high mobility. In order for a school to make the most effective use of PP+ for previously looked after children, it is first essential to establish an understanding of the challenges facing that cohort of children.

Once the challenges are identified, a longer-term strategy should be created that focuses on the most controllable challenges that are having the most significant adverse impact. While for some children, short-term, intensive interventions may be appropriate, a strategic, whole-school approach will consider wider strategies that can potentially benefit the whole cohort of children.

This may include reviewing how children's behaviour is managed and supported, the impact of effective multi-agency collaboration, the importance of responsive home-school relationships, systems for identifying and supporting children with SEND and the impact of school policies on care-experienced children. Schools may also invest in training for staff, and strategies to address specific issues, such as transitions, unstructured time, peer relationships and mental health support.

Where children's fundamental needs are understood and supported within a responsive, nurturing school system, and where they experience felt safety and a sense of belonging to the school community, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in learning¹¹ and less likely to need intensive, individualised interventions and support for social, emotional and mental health needs.

Virtual Schools

Virtual schools became a mandatory part of local authority provision in 2014, after a pilot programme which was evaluated by Ofsted in a 2012 report.¹² The original role of the virtual school was to oversee the education of looked after children, monitoring attendance and attainment, and to ensure that education had a central focus in children's care planning.

The Children and Social Work Act (2017) extended the role of the virtual school to include limited duties towards previously looked after children. These changes came into force in 2018, with updated guidance that the virtual school should offer "information and advice" to parents and educators and make "general information and advice available to early years settings and schools to improve awareness of the vulnerability and needs of previously looked after children."¹³

What are the challenges?

The role of the virtual school for previously looked after children is limited and vague, leading to a postcode lottery of provision across different LAs. Both parents and educators are unclear as to the purpose of the role and have expectations of the virtual school that may not be achievable with the resources available.

Solutions

- Increase the provision of funding and resources for virtual schools to be able to fulfil and expand their role with previously looked after children.
- Local authorities to set out a clear 'local offer' of services and support for previously looked after children, including support available in education.
- Regional adoption agencies should involve representatives from the virtual school in prospective adopter training to ensure that adoptive parents have clear information on the support available for their children in education.

The statutory guidance relevant to virtual schools describes the role of the virtual school head (VSH) as promoting "their educational achievement through the provision of information and advice to their parents, educators and others...". The VSH must, as a minimum, respond to requests for advice and information from parents, guardians and education settings, as well as providing general advice and information to settings.¹⁴

However, in practice, the extent of the role of virtual schools varies widely from one local authority area to another, as was noted by several focus group participants.

The guidance is so vague, every single person you talk to will say, oh well, this virtual school does this, or I've spoken to my virtual school and they do this.

The general nature of the guidance, and the variation in its application leads to confusion even among education professionals. Focus group participants were clear about how the virtual school supports looked after children but were less clear about their function with previously looked after children.

I don't really get what the role of the virtual school is for adopted children. I understand with fostered children and then when you're pre-adoption order, but then what?

It's not like a formal offer sent out to adopters to say this is what we could offer you ... When I was a head teacher there were more things that happened for looked after children in terms of formal meetings.

Our VSH [Virtual School Head] is relatively uninvolved with [previously looked after children]. They will come to PEPs for looked after children. Our school does PEPs for previously looked after children but there's no VSH involvement in that.

The majority of adoptive parents are now aware that the virtual school has a role with previously looked after children, and 40% of adoptive parents have contacted their virtual school for advice or support¹⁵ However, there is a clear disconnect between what adoptive parents are hoping for from their virtual school and what the virtual school is actually able to offer. When adoptive parents were asked to put a list of supportive interventions in rank order of importance, virtual school representatives attending meetings at school in an advocacy role was ranked as the most important, yet only 12% of adoptive parents have received this level of support from their virtual school¹⁶, the statutory guidance does not require it, and the capacity of virtual schools is unlikely to be able to support it as a general offer.

It is also clear that adoptive parents' expectations of virtual schools are both high and wide ranging. The list of potential virtual school interventions considered by adoptive parents included liaising with schools about use of PP+, providing training for parents and guardians, providing advice on transitions and choosing settings, and providing advocacy if a child was a risk of exclusion. The difference between the highest and lowest ranked interventions was extremely small (see Fig. 1), suggesting that adoptive parents would like all of these supports almost equally, yet virtual schools are currently neither resourced nor required to provide many of them.

Figure 1. Rank order of types of Virtual School support desired by adoptive parents (Adoption Barometer 2021).

Types of Support	Score (out of 6)
Attending reviews and other meetings at school in an advocacy role	4.01
Liaising with the school about the use of PP+	3.74
Providing training for parents/carers and education professionals	3.62
Advice and guidance on supporting transition from one educational setting to another	3.61
Acting in an advocacy role when a child is at risk of exclusion	3.22
Advice and guidance on choosing a new nursery, school or college	3.05

The role of the virtual school is limited for previously looked after children because parental responsibility lies with the parent or guardian and not the local authority, but focus group participants were clear that, as parents as well as educators, more support would be welcomed.

What a lot of parents want is someone to come to meetings with them, but the virtual school isn't resourced for that.

Even as a teacher, if I'm in a meeting I need someone who knows legislation ... I need a third party. It just gives you that extra person who knows.

When my kids were going to primary, I asked [the virtual school] where is a school with good adoption and attachment awareness and they couldn't advise me.

Hampshire and the Isle of White Virtual School: A Case Study

The virtual school in Hampshire and the Isle of White introduced education plans for adopted children in Autumn 2018. These are now well established in the area's schools, with versions specifically created for children with special guardianship orders and child arrangement orders as well as adopted children.

The original plans were created in recognition of the positive impact that PEPs (Personal Education Plans) had for looked after children in the area. Jacqueline Marsh (Education Officer for Post Looked After Children) reflects, "As an adopter, I really recognised the added dimension for adults in schools to take on board the notion that our children's needs don't just disappear when the Adoption Order is granted ... Having a plan in place that identifies those needs, captures the history, and looks to support in all areas is absolutely crucial for long term learning and school success."

While the original education plans for post looked after children were similar to existing PEPs so that schools felt familiar and comfortable with the concept, they reflected the differing legal status of these children, with designated teachers and parents as the key players. Over time, in consultation with schools, families and the local Regional Adoption Agency, the system has been refined to take account of the differing terminology associated with different legal orders, the differing needs of children at different ages and those with EHCPs (Education, health and care plans).

The education plans are voluntary for schools and the virtual school has no powers to enforce them, but once schools understood that the system provided a tool to plan and address children's difficulties, consider solutions and provide evidence for how to use PP+ (pupil premium plus) effectively, they were met positively. The plans were introduced as part of designated teacher network meetings, with the clear message that they were a tool to support designated teachers in their statutory role.

In practice, the process of completing an education plan begins with the child's parent or guardian and the designated teacher completing the relevant sections, with input from other professionals as appropriate. Designated teachers receive training in attachment and trauma from the virtual school to support them in their role creating the plans and chairing the termly meetings. In the context of the child's early life experience, the termly meetings provide a forum to look at a child's current progress, consider everyone's view (including the child or young person's), make a plan to

address any issues, and consider how PP+ funding can best support and provide resources. This plan is then shared with agreed key people, implemented and reviewed.

There is already evidence that the education plans are having a positive impact. The virtual school conducted a survey of adoptive parents in Hampshire and found that reported levels of children's happiness were higher among those who had an education plan in place compared to those who did not. When the virtual school receives queries concerning children who are experiencing significant difficulties at school, it is frequently the case that the child does not have an education plan.

The constructive involvement of parents and guardians is key to the positive impact of education plans. As Jacqueline Marsh notes, "Most enquiries that I am asked to be involved in are regarding a high level of unhappiness or discord between the parent and the school ... We have to see the parent as the expert on their child ... Bringing in a parent to work on a plan is inclusive and transparent practice, and something that we can all be proud of."



Designated Teachers

Since 2009, all maintained schools have been required to appoint a designated teacher to promote the educational achievement of looked after children in their school. The designated teacher (DT) should work closely with the virtual school head and take lead responsibility for ensuring that school staff understand the needs of looked after children, including the development and implementation of looked after children's Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

In 2018, this role was extended to include provision for previously looked after children, with additional requirements to involve parents and guardians in decisions affecting their child's education, including the use of PP+ funding, added to the updated statutory guidance.¹⁷

What are the challenges?

The designated teacher too often lacks the time, resources and support to effectively carry out the role, especially in smaller settings where they may be fulfilling other significant duties.

Solutions

- The DfE to commission and publish good practice guides with case studies demonstrating how the designated teacher role can work effectively in different sizes and types of settings.
- Minimum national standards should be established to quantify the training, resourcing (in terms of funding and time) and support that a designated teacher should receive to effectively fulfil their role.

At the end of 2018, Adoption UK surveyed more than 200 designated teachers about the expansion of the role to include previously looked after children. These teachers wanted the very best for the children in their care and were passionate advocates for the right of every child to an education. However, they also told us that they were struggling.

Only 22% of DTs had been provided with additional resources (in terms of funding, time etc.) to support them in their expanded role, and 45% had not received any additional training for their new role. The majority (59%) were working in schools where there had been no whole-staff training on the needs of care-experienced students in the past three years. When asked what would most support them in fulfilling their role, 84% wanted access to online training materials for use in their school, and 57% wanted training specifically to support them as designated teachers.¹⁸

Focus group participants agreed that lack of time, resourcing and training was a significant factor in the DT role having a reduced impact, especially when the DT was also carrying other significant duties, such as being the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) or a member of the school's senior leadership team.

The DT must be a qualified teacher, but then is often carrying a timetable as well as the DT role and maybe other roles.

I've been dealing with a DT who has to do PEP meetings in her lunchtime because she hasn't got the time to do them.

In smaller schools there will be periods when there are no looked after or previously looked after children on roll. During these times, although there is officially a designated teacher, the role can become dormant as the DT focuses on other responsibilities. When an eligible child joins the school, the DT can find themselves de-skilled and without the time needed to properly fulfil their duties.

You have to have a DT even if you haven't got any eligible children ... but then the reality is that you've got someone named in the role, but they're not really doing the role so if a child does become eligible, they're suddenly trying to skill themselves up.

Focus group participants also reflected on the support and supervision that is available to designated teachers (and other staff members working with looked after and previously looked after children) in their role.

Is there any scope for professional mentoring? You can have your training but you don't know how a child is going to present at schools and [problems] can come up quite quickly.

You've got teachers and [teaching assistants] supporting children who have gone through horrendous trauma experiences ... but they don't get clinical supervision whereas a family support worker who might be going in and working with the family would get clinical supervisions.

Those with experience of the designated teacher role noted that they had training needs that went beyond general training on the impact of trauma, disrupted attachments and care experience. The role involves considerable collaborative working, including with parents and guardians, and consideration needs to be given to developing the skills required for raising sensitive areas for discussion with parents and guardians.

Adoption UK research suggests that, in each year, 12-15% of adopted children will change school in order to find a school that can meet their needs.¹⁹ Where adoptive parents have had previous difficult experiences with education, sometimes in several schools, building a responsive, trust-based home-school relationship takes considerable skill and dedication on the part of the designated teacher.

I got in touch with parents ... but it was scary to do because I didn't really know how to approach it. I'd like to have had training on what to say.

The designated teacher role works best in the context of a whole-school approach to understanding and supporting care-experienced children yet providing effective training to all staff is costly and time-consuming.

Solutions

- Training on the specific needs of care-experienced children should be mandatory as part of initial teacher training, the Early Career Framework and the National Professional Qualifications.
- The importance of high-quality teaching and additional training as recommended by the Education Endowment Foundation should be recognised in the provision of sufficient school funding to give all education professionals, and especially staff in key roles, additional non-teaching time to invest in continuing professional development.

The designated teacher works in the context of a whole setting, alongside other specialists, including SENCOs, and with reference to senior management teams and governing bodies and external organisations including the virtual school. Their role integrates strands of every aspect of education provision.

Yet focus group participants were concerned that establishing the designated teacher role created an environment where the eligible children came to be seen as that person's responsibility rather than a cohort of children for which the whole team is responsible.

I think it's about how we ensure that they are empowered and supported... unfortunately in some schools it just becomes, 'It's your problem, you deal with it, you're the designated lead'.

There was a strong sense that without a whole school approach to effectively understanding and supporting the needs of care-experienced children, the effectiveness of the DT role would be blunted. This includes ensuring the senior leadership team are trained and equipped, monitoring policies for possible negative impact on care-experienced children, and providing appropriate training and support for other members of staff.

The other key thing is you've got to get your head teacher on board because if the head teacher doesn't buy into it, you might as well forget it really.

It doesn't matter how much pupil premium we've got and how good the designated teacher and virtual school are, if the [behaviour] policy doesn't match, none of it's going to work.

I think the danger with worrying about training [designated teachers] is that's not the person that's working with those children day in and day out and it's how we support and train those people.

The issue of training for designated teachers and other education professionals was the subject of extensive discussion among focus group participants. While PP+ can be used for specialist training, participants recognised that care-experienced children's needs were just one aspect of a range of support needs experienced by children at school, and that this training was in addition to other professional development that school staff needed.

The Education Endowment Foundation recommends a high proportion of pupil premium funding is allocated to high quality teaching, and that schools consider what additional training is needed for staff as part of the Pupil Premium strategy.²⁰ Training is therefore to be prioritised, but focus group participants noted that it can be difficult to achieve effectively.

There needs to be investment in training and this needs to be reviewed annually, especially in large secondary schools where there might be a lot of new staff at the start of each year.

It's very easy to say we should do some training but actually, when are they going to do it and how much will it cost? If you've got to pay your TA an extra three hours, it doesn't seem much, but if you've got 60 TAs that's quite a lot of money.

You could fill up the whole year with training and not cover half the stuff.

However, the need for training for all staff has been repeatedly highlighted by both adoptive parents and adopted young people and adults in Adoption UK research. Adopted young people (aged 16-25) considered having teachers and school staff who understood their needs as adopted students to

be the single most important supportive and protective factor during childhood²¹ – more important than therapeutic interventions, counselling, or professional mental health support. It is essential that this vital training is embedded into initial teacher training, the Early Career Framework, continuing professional development and the National Professional Qualifications.

The impact of the designated teacher role is blunted when parents/guardians are not aware of the role or are unclear as to its purpose.

Solutions

- A form of Personal Education Plan for previously looked after children should be introduced with the designated teacher taking the lead role, to facilitate collaborative working and ensure a framework for regular meetings where education and other professionals as well as parents/guardians can discuss the child's progress and effective uses of PP+.
- Parents and guardians should be given the option to declare their child's previously looked after status on application for a school place and this should be followed up pro-actively by designated teachers, including providing written information about how the DT can work with them to support their child.

The designated teacher (DT) role is a relatively new one, having only been introduced in 2018, and it is clear that many parents and guardians of previously looked after children are unaware of the existence of DTs, or unclear about their role.

Although the proportion of adoptive parents with school-aged children who know who the DT is at their child's school has risen steadily since 2018, only 54% knew who the DT was in their child's school in 2020 and only 46% had ever had a meeting with their child or children's DT.²²

As adoptive parents, focus group participants noted that, even with their experience as education professionals, they felt unclear about how the role of the DT fitted within other systems of support their children were accessing. Many adopted and care-experienced children have special educational needs, so parents and guardians often had pre-existing relationships with SENCOs, as well as class teachers, form teachers, heads of year, and inclusion and pastoral staff, and were unclear what the DT role would add to that.

DTs only came in for previously looked after children in 2018 so if before that you had been dealing with the SENCO, they are more likely to know about your child and their needs so why start again with a new person?

I don't know who my child's DT is to be honest. I haven't actually found it recorded anywhere. It's quite confusing because my kid already has a class teacher.

My child is at secondary school but even as a teacher, I'm not sure who I should be in contact with if there's a small issue. The form teacher? Head of year? Designated teacher?

The DT "should be a central point of initial contact within the school", should work directly with previously looked after children and their parents or guardians, communicating effectively with them, and "should fully involve parents and guardians in decisions affecting their child's education...". The designated teacher should also "encourage parents' and guardians' involvement in deciding how the PP+ is used to support their child...".²³ The description of the role in statutory guidance implies a high

level of pro-active interaction with parents and guardians, so it is disappointing that so many adoptive parents do not know who their child's designated teacher is.

Such is the difficulty of ensuring that the DT role is effective for previously looked after children that some focus group participants questioned whether the DT role should be scrapped altogether, placing their responsibilities with SENCOs, inclusion leads or pastoral staff instead.

Why can't the SENCO just be the point of contact? The SENCO knows my child much better anyway.

If I had to choose between having virtual schools and designated teachers, I'd choose virtual schools.

Without the statutory framework afforded to looked after children by the Personal Education Plan, DTs for previously looked after children are left to negotiate involvement of education staff, senior leadership, virtual schools, social workers, therapeutic service providers, other professionals, and parents/guardians in a vacuum. There is no requirement for a regular cycle of review meetings and therefore no resources to support this. Each person with involvement in a child's educational progress and wellbeing can therefore be working without reference to the others and support can become disjointed and poorly communicated. The role of the DT could be integral to ensuring a coherent approach to the education and welfare of previously looked after children, with the views of parents, guardians and the children themselves at its heart, but the current guidance does not provide a framework within which the DT can have this significant impact.

Our recommendation that previously looked after children also receive a PEP (or similar) would provide the framework for the more effective involvement of the DT for these children.



Conclusions

While the introduction of PP+, designated teachers and virtual school support for previously looked after children is welcome recognition of the enduring impact of trauma, loss, disrupted attachments and care experience, several years on there is still a serious lack of clarity among both parents/guardians and education professionals about the purpose and the scope of these provisions. It is hard to see how they can be effective when so many involved in their administration and delivery lack the knowledge, skills, time and resources to implement them consistently.

It is also significant that none of these systems were designed specifically for previously looked after children. Although there are nearly as many previously looked after children in England's schools as looked after children, recognition of their needs is too often an afterthought.

These systems and processes were designed to be implemented where the local authority is the 'corporate parent' of the child, and work as part of an integrated approach within which support can be provided and accountability can be maintained. The belated addition of previously looked after children to these initiatives has not fully taken into account the differences between looked after and previously looked after children's legal status. While many of their early life experiences and support needs may be similar, the current frameworks within which these needs will be met are very different.

For example, PP+ for looked after children is controlled by the virtual school, which can therefore make best use of the pot of funding as a whole, and its use is linked closely to individual children's statutory personal education plans (PEPs). For previously looked after children, PP+ goes directly to the school, so there is often no pot of funding, and it is not linked to any specific plan as previously looked after children are not entitled to PEPs.



This results in parents and guardians taking on full responsibility for making themselves aware of their children's rights and entitlements and holding schools accountable for adhering to statutory guidance when, too often, schools themselves have not been issued with the guidance they need, nor the time and resources to fulfil their obligations. For parents of children who may have significant and complex additional needs, this is an enormous additional challenge. The PP+ allocation for previously looked after children is in excess of £130million per year, yet the systems for ensuring this considerable funding is achieving its aim are wholly inadequate.

During 2021/22 a small number of local authorities in England will pilot the extension of PP+ to students in post-16 education. However, this pilot project only includes funding for looked after children and care leavers, despite previously looked after children being eligible for PP+ up to the age of 16. Should the pilot prove successful, we may see post-16 PP+ rolled out across the country for looked after children and care leavers, but the position for previously looked after children is less clear. If they are included in any national rollout, it will be without any pilot on that cohort, or any assessment of the systems that will ensure it is used effectively to benefit those students, potentially resulting in a costly, untested initiative that fails to fully achieve its aims.

Children and young people who have been removed from their birth families by the state and placed into permanence by the state deserve to be more than an afterthought in policy and legislation. While this report details a series of recommendations designed to adjust the support systems in place to increase their efficacy, it is hard to escape the conclusion that tinkering at the edges of education policies designed for a different group of children will never be as effective as creating initiatives focused on the cohort of children they are designed to support from the start.

Adoption UK urges the Department for Education to engage with education professionals, care-experienced children and adults, and their parents, carers and guardians to design and deliver bespoke strategies which are focused on the education and wellbeing of all care-experienced children in our education system so that, regardless of a child's legal status, there is parity of provision and accountability. Adopted and previously looked after children did not have an equal start in life. They deserve an equal chance and equal consideration now.

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