



# Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report 2021-22



“ We want the very best for our care-experienced children and young people. We want our children to tell us we are doing a good job and that they are doing their very best at school.

We want them all to have clear academic or vocational pathways when they leave school so that their lives continue to improve and they feel a sense of belonging in their communities.

We want schools and support services to see themselves as corporate parents and do a good job for their children in care. ”

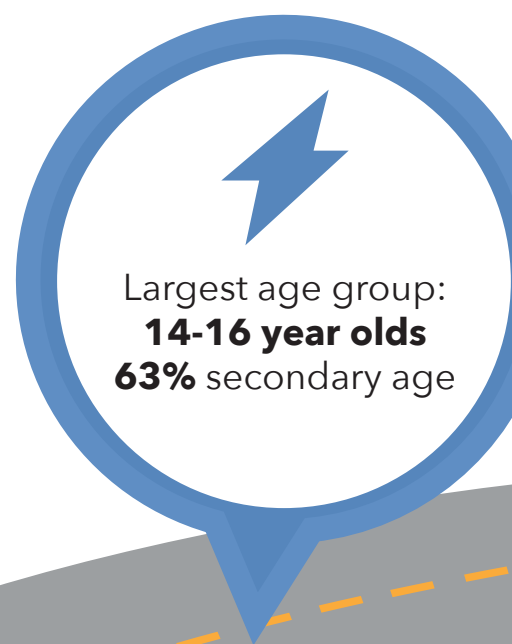
**Jane Walker, Virtual School Headteacher.**

“ Education can have a transformative effect on the life chances of young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential, have successful careers, and grasp opportunities. As well as having a positive impact on the individual, good quality education and child wellbeing also promotes economic productivity and a cohesive society. ”

**Understanding progress in the 2020-21 academic year, DfE.**

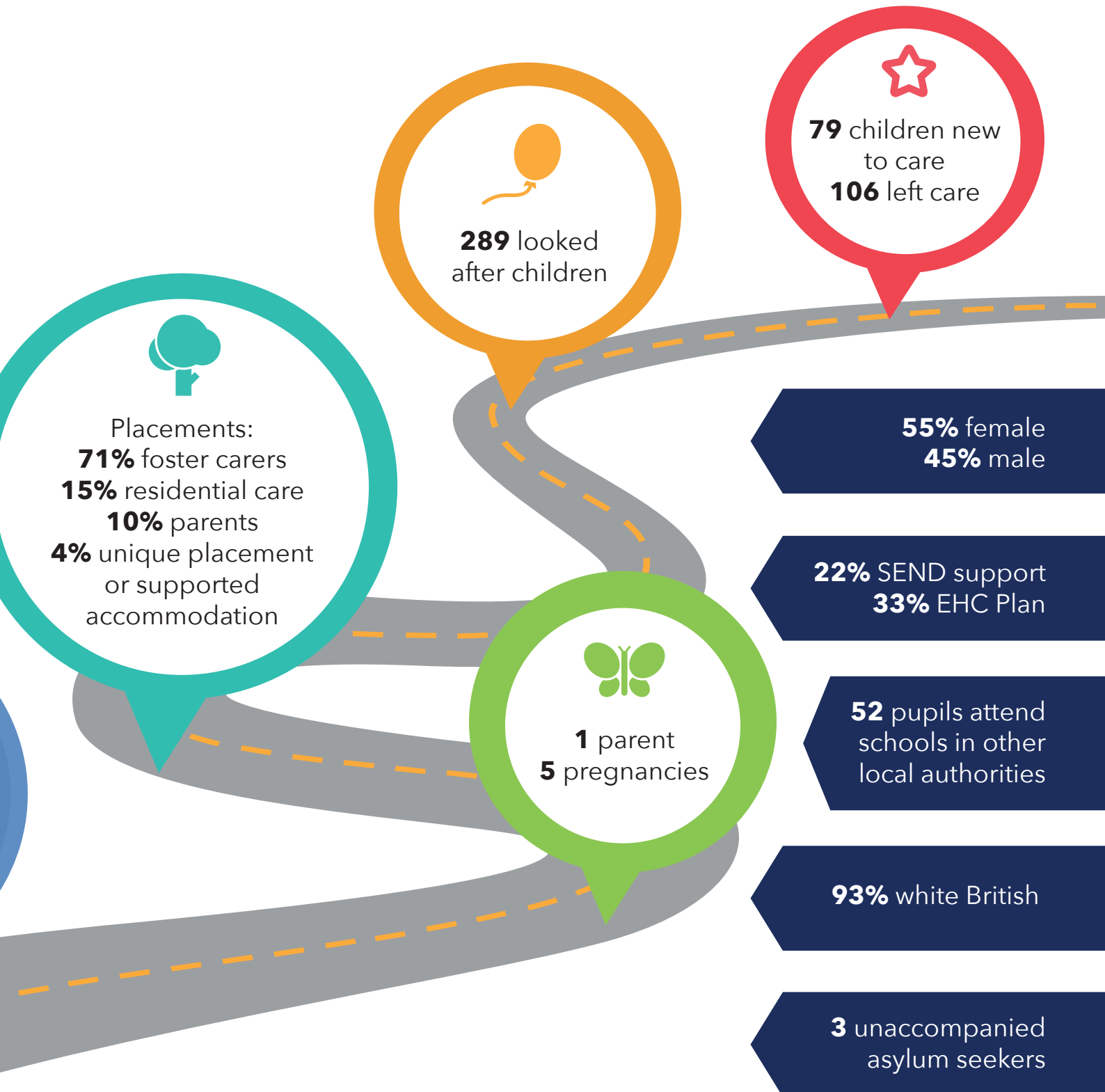


**Department  
for Education**



# Welcome to the Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report for 2021-22

Here's a profile of pupils, aged 5-16 years,  
in Northumberland's Virtual School (at 31.08.22)





## Good practice example: Good corporate parenting

Working with a private sector employer, the council's Northumberland Line project will re-instate an operational railway line, with infrastructure, between Ashington and Newcastle. When the contract for the project went out to tender, the council's social values in procurement policy was applied and it was specified that the successful bidder should offer employability opportunities for looked after children and care leavers.

Morgan Sindall won the contract and has been working with the Virtual School to pilot how a large private sector employer can support our young people. A lot has been learned and there have been a number of positive outcomes already, including some young people engaging with an employer for the first time, learning to use Teams to engage with an employer, and experiencing an interview for the first time. Several of our care leavers are reporting feeling empowered and more confident following the interviews.

A Morgan Sindall team member has visited one of our children's residential homes to learn more about the needs of, and challenges facing, our young people. We are moving towards the second phase of the work now and hope this will involve employer visits, work experience and apprenticeships for some of our learners. We are also beginning to work with a large local employer, Tharsus, and will use the learning from Morgan Sindall to inform the development of this relationship.

## 2021-22 at a glance

GOOD	IMPROVING	NOT YET GOOD ENOUGH
<p>No permanent exclusions, <b>14th consecutive year</b></p> <p>PEP completion, <b>97%</b></p> <p>Looked after children progressing into further education at 16, <b>77%</b></p> <p>Children missing education, <b>0</b></p> <p>Destinations at 16 - in education, training and employment <b>87%</b></p> <p>Level 3 achievement, <b>4 young people, 100%</b></p> <p>Level 6 achievement <b>honours degrees, 3 young people, 100%</b></p>	<p>Achievement at Key Stage 4 <b>the Basics 35.1%</b></p> <p>Progress 8 is <b>-1.27</b> and Attainment 8 is <b>24.5</b> (at Key Stage 4)</p> <p>KS1 age related expectations in reading, writing &amp; maths, <b>20%</b></p> <p>Pupils attending good and outstanding schools, <b>76%</b></p> <p>Looked After reviews aligned with EHCP reviews, <b>57%</b></p> <p>Mid-year school moves. <b>34 moves for 34 pupils</b></p> <p>Multiplication tables check, <b>19.2</b> (average score)</p>	<p>Total absence, <b>9.6%</b></p> <p>Persistent absence, <b>23.2%</b></p> <p>PEPs quality assured as green or amber, <b>76%</b></p> <p>Year 11 progressing to level 3 qualifications, <b>17%</b></p> <p><b>95 suspensions for 38 pupils in 31 different schools</b></p> <p>Early Years good level of development, <b>20%</b></p> <p>KS2 age related expectations in reading, writing and maths, <b>18.2%</b></p> <p>Phonics test, meeting threshold, <b>50%</b></p>

# A note from the Virtual School Headteacher

The start of the new academic year was characterised by hope for a return to routine and the joy of learning, continued determination to act swiftly to provide support when needed, and unswerving belief in our looked after children and their capacity to succeed despite the challenges that circumstances might put in their way.

Schools were free of Covid restrictions from September 2021 so getting children safely back into school was our priority. Two years of disruption and the wider impact of the pandemic on staffing and resources meant that we had to do some things differently, many things more intensively, and be very flexible to meet the diverse and changing needs of children and schools.

As one of a few teams that continued to work face to face over the last 2 years, ESLAC (education support for looked after children) staff have overcome many challenges, both professionally and personally, to be exemplary corporate parents and make sure that our looked after children are at the centre of their work.

Often against the odds, we made good progress in achieving what we said we would in our Virtual School Improvement Plan for 2021-22:

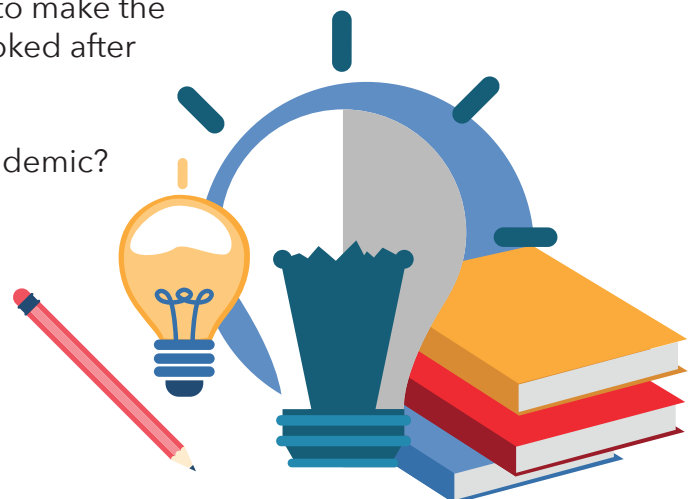

- there is better stability in school placements
- more pupils are back on track and working within their age-related curriculum
- more care leavers are staying in further and higher education
- there is momentum behind our aspiration for all Northumberland schools to be attachment aware and trauma informed
- progress is being made with the whole council approach to corporate parenting

It is still the case that the longer children are in care in Northumberland, the better they do at school.

The highly anticipated new duty for Virtual School Headteachers to promote the education of children who have, or have previously had, a social worker was introduced from September 2021. Using our experience of knowing what works in education for looked after children, and our existing strong relationships with children's social care and schools, we have provided leadership to drive this cultural change that in time will have a positive impact on education outcomes for this very disadvantaged group of learners.

Reviewed DfE guidance relating to school attendance, behaviour in school, and suspensions and exclusions was published during the year, and helpfully raises the profile of the need for Virtual Schools to have a strong strategic influence to make the needs of children with a social worker, including looked after children, everyone's priority.

Are we back on track after the disruption of the pandemic? We're getting there, as this report will demonstrate. But the impact of lost learning, virtual relationships and stretched resources is very real and will take some time for children, education providers and services to fully overcome.



# What we did well this year:

## Supporting teaching and learning

We are very proud corporate parents and recognise the incredible achievement of our looked after children who, despite the nationally recognised challenge of recovering lost learning from the pandemic, have made progress in all phases with some impressive individual success stories.

There has been an improvement in the number of pupils following their age-related curriculum in every year group, attributed to the intensive focus on getting pupils back on track and by using additional grant funding effectively. The Virtual School was able to use a new one-off Recovery Premium and a School Led Tutoring Grant (SLTG) to make sure that pupils who needed it received extra tuition and support in the classroom. The SLTG meant that we could host an innovative summer school that benefited pupils of all ages.

Next year we have planned expenditure of the grant differently to overcome some of the challenges in maximising its impact this year, mainly the shortage of tutors available to work with us. We have spent the funding in line with the conditions of the grant and can demonstrate this upon request.

Our strategies to raise aspirations are working. We were pleased to welcome the return of the Choices Together programme from the North East Raising Aspirations Partnership (NERAP) that had been suspended during the pandemic.

Northumberland has a track record over many years of engaging the highest number of looked after children in the programme, which has a direct impact on those then choosing pathways into Higher Education when they leave school.

The new Choices Together programme provides a set of interventions supporting aspiration, attainment, and study skills for young people from Years 7 to 13. The programme is a blended model of face-to-face sessions, online sessions and campus-based events and care experienced young people are targeted for engagement.




The destinations of our school leavers into further education and the continued success of those engaged in higher education demonstrates that we are providing good support to develop meaningful pathways for school leavers into education, employment and training (EET). We delivered on our improvement plan priority by allocating named careers advisers to work with colleges and training providers to monitor attendance and progress, worked preventatively with further education (FE) partners to improve transition into colleges to prevent early drop out, and funded college places on the Adolescent Thrive course.

A review of the Terms of Reference re-energised the rapid response model of our monthly EET clinics that continued to have a positive impact. Facilitated by the Virtual School, multi-agency partners were able to respond with good quality planning and support when young people were at risk of leaving EET and to then offer alternative EET opportunities when appropriate.

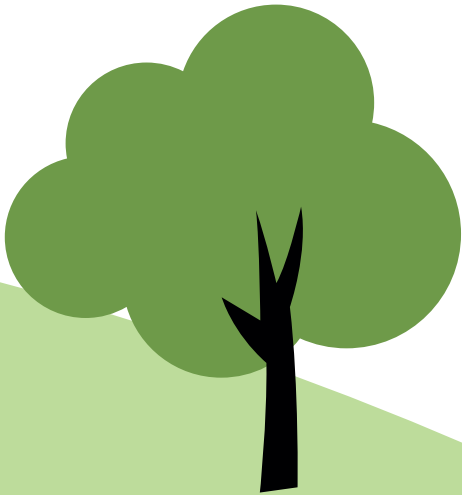
The ePEP mechanism has evolved and improved after undergoing several system enhancements. Specific areas are now mandatory for Designated Teachers to complete with individual children, including pupil views and the pupil strength sections.

The experience of looked after children with SEND continued to improve as the role of the Virtual School funded EHCP Lead Officer for looked after children and care leavers was embedded. Based in the SEND assessment and monitoring team, the lead officer is able to ensure swift action and support for individual pupils when needed. Consequently better quality EHCPlans are now in place. More Looked After Reviews were aligned with EHCP reviews, confirmed by a quality assurance audit led by children's social care and involving the SEND team and Independent Reviewing Officers. The outcome of the audit shows that 62% of workers felt that the school had a better understanding of the child's holistic needs by the meeting being aligned and others highlighted that the school's relationship with SEND and ESLAC improved their knowledge of the child. Significantly, every child entering care who already has an EHCP now has an emergency review with the first 3 month Looked After Review. A review of the Belonging Regulations, a policy now being enforced, is having a particular impact for our SEND learners in Scottish placements as it supports and promotes co-ordinated working.



Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) was successfully used to support schools and the ESLAC team to deliver interventions that worked to get pupils back on track with their learning.

Collaborative working with the Early Years team improved and 54 pre-school looked after children (ages 3 and 4) received pupil premium funding (at a rate of £300 per eligible child), to accelerate their development in preparation for school.

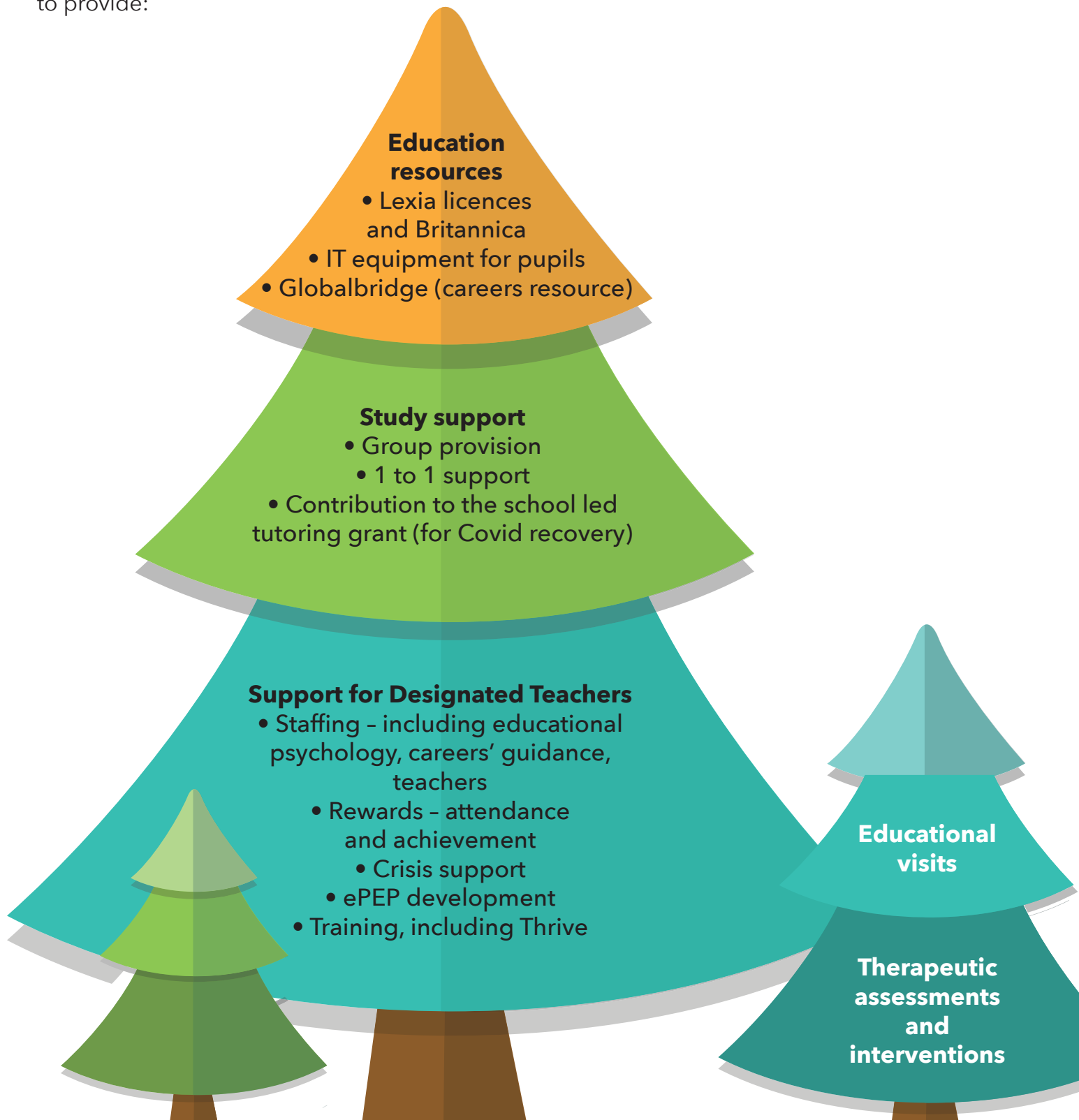


# What we did well this year:

## Pupil Premium Plus Strategy Statement 2022

A PP+ grant of £2410 was allocated for every eligible school age looked after and previously looked after child. The VSH receives the funding for looked after children only and manages the grant allocation to be used for the benefit of the looked after child's educational needs as described in their Personal Education Plan (PEP).

For the academic year 2021-22 our total PP+ budget was £865 190. In line with our PP+ policy we top-sliced £915 from each grant of £2410 and used that centrally held funding of £328 485 to provide:





Schools were allocated a maximum of £1495 of the DfE allocation of £2410 for each eligible pupil which was a total of £536 705. The funding allocated was dependent on providing effective support for each pupil to achieve their individual outcomes and the quality of their Personal Education Plan (PEP).

The Virtual School is also responsible for managing the early years pupil premium (EYPP) which in Northumberland is distributed through the Early Years team to providers that educate looked after children who are taking up the free early education entitlement for 3 or 4 year olds. The local authority received £342 EYPP funding per eligible child taking up 15 hours of early years provision. This was topped up by £444.60 from the Early Years deprivation supplement from the 3 and 4 year olds' budget.

### **Good practice example:** Developing meaningful post-16 pathways

Lily is a Year 12 student who was attending the specialist SEN provision at Kirkley Hall. Due to some behavioural issues Lily was considered to be a safeguarding risk to others and was asked to leave the course. As Lily has an EHCP, a Virtual School careers adviser worked closely with the SEND Lead Officer for looked after children to ensure that she wasn't being excluded completely from education until an alternative option was found. They worked with the college to enable Lily to access education on a 1 to 1 basis. Lily was quite happy with this arrangement as she much prefers classroom work rather than the practical work she would usually do as part of the larger group.

We sent out Lily's EHCP to multiple providers to find an alternative option for her. From those who said they would be able to meet her needs, the careers' adviser put together a presentation for Lily and her mother which was delivered during a joint visit with Lily's social worker. They were able to discuss the 4 to 5 options and whittle it down to 2 options, after which visits were set up for Lily and her mother.

After the visits, Lily decided to sign up for Northumbria Youth Action. She could have started early August but agreed with her mother that she would wait a few weeks and get in a good routine with her ADHD medication again before returning to education – a very sensible plan which was agreed with Northumbria Youth Action. Lily has now started the course and is enjoying it.



# What we did well this year:

## Stability

It is the Virtual School's job to create the right conditions for learning by improving stability in school placements. Looked after children often present with extreme behaviours due to their previous experiences, rejection and inability to self-regulate. When school placements are unstable - due to suspensions, school moves, poor attendance, missed sessions - the trauma is intensified and can deny children a sense of belonging that heightens further feelings of rejection. Looked after children may then have a perception that they are 'not good enough'.

### Contribution to permanence

Involving the Virtual School in strategic arrangements to promote stability have had a positive impact on permanence planning. There is representation from the Virtual School at various meetings with children's social care Heads of Services and senior managers to monitor stability and plan appropriately to ensure education placements are a priority factor in achieving positive long-term outcomes for children in care. The Virtual School is represented at:

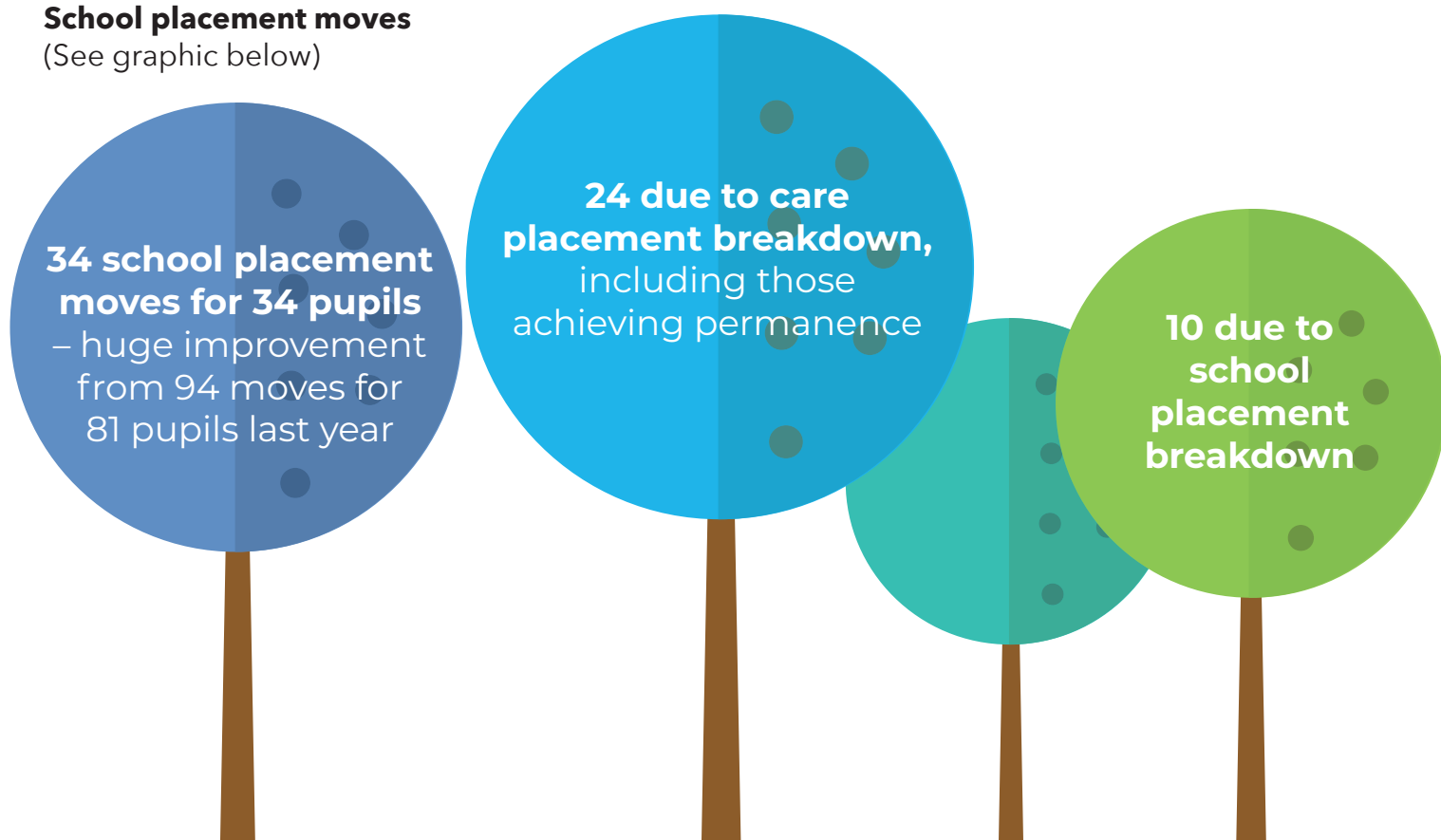
- Legal Gateway Planning
- High Level Resource Panel
- Placement Overview Panel
- Permanence Performance meetings
- Foster Panel
- Adoption Panel

### Mid-year school moves

Partnership working works! Mid-year school moves have dropped as an impact of effective integrated working between the Virtual School, children's social care and the Family Placement Service. We achieved good quality planning for pupils moving schools through involvement in the early placement planning stages and provided regular training and updates for foster carers.

### School placement moves

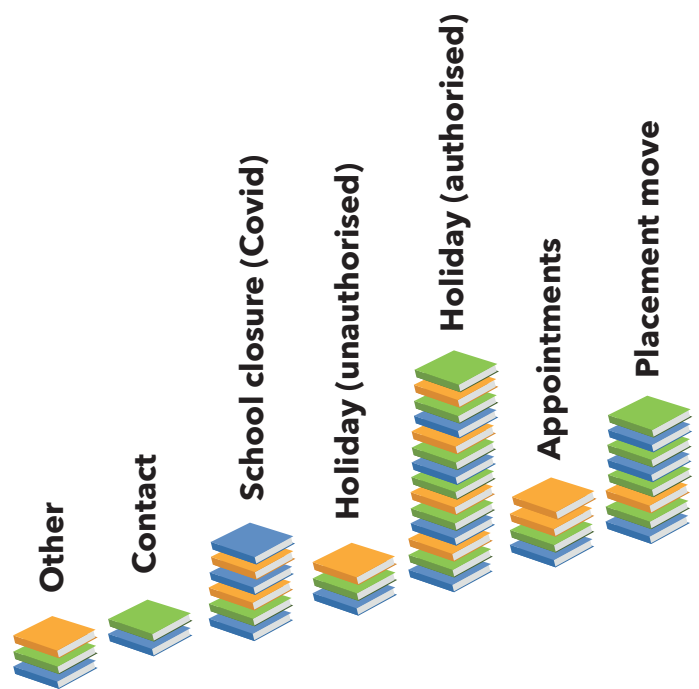
(See graphic below)



### Missed sessions

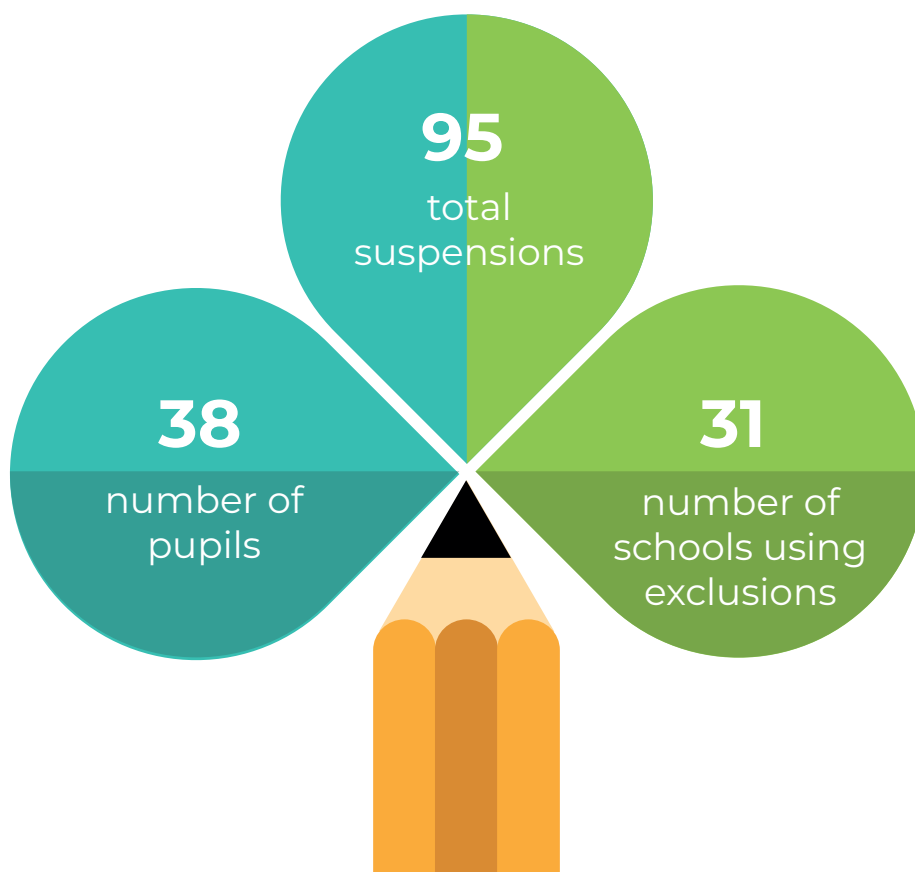
We have a good understanding of the factors that affect learning. Missed learning sessions have a detrimental impact on academic outcomes and increase anxiety, putting looked after children at a further disadvantage. We collaborated with schools and care teams to reduce the number of missed sessions of education that our looked after children experience.

In total 357 sessions were missed by 51 pupils. Most of the absences could have been avoided if better forward planning was in place so we ensured that everyone understood that school sessions should only be missed if there are exceptional circumstances. Looked after children are unable to take term-time holidays, and where possible medical appointments and family contact are not made during school hours.



### Suspensions

Some children have found the return to school more difficult than others, and this is showing in the number of suspensions (previously called fixed term exclusions). Suspensions have increased significantly since last year, which interrupt learning and put pressure on foster placements that then threaten home placement stability.



# What we did well this year: Stability (continued)

## Attendance

Swifter action was taken when problems started to emerge with attendance by monitoring live attendance data using a new form in the ePEP. A successful Attendance Initiative improved overall school attendance and reduced the number of persistent absentees (attendance of 90% and below). All school age Northumberland looked after children were eligible to receive a reward for 100% attendance in each half of the Spring Term.

When the Attendance Initiative started overall absence was 10.2%. Over half of our looked after children met the target for a reward voucher in both the Spring and Summer terms and overall absence improved to 8.9%.

## Permanent exclusion

There has been no permanent exclusion of a Northumberland looked after child since 2008.

## Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The achievement of Northumberland's children in 2022 demonstrates that the lower a pupil's SDQ score, the better their education achievement is. Emotional health has an impact on achievement, so the SDQ score helps us to target the right support at the right time for individual pupils.

The new model for using the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ), a mandatory behavioural screening tool, has ensured that for the first time there is consistent and regular multi-agency consideration of the emotional health of individual pupils at all of their PEP reviews.




## Good practice example: Improving school placement stability

Virtual School Education Psychologists, teachers, and Intervention Workers have regular consultation meetings with schools to discuss how best to support challenging behaviours and reduce exclusions.

They explore alternative strategies and deliver training to minimise further missed learning for the looked after child.

This supports their sense of belonging and feeling safe.



All Designated Teachers were asked to complete an SDQ at least annually for all Northumberland looked after children on their school roll.

When an SDQ score is high and giving cause for concern, an outcome relating to improving emotional and mental health and wellbeing is included in the PEP and pupils are referred to monthly CYPS liaison meetings.

For looked after children there was an increase in emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) as during lockdown they coped well in smaller class sizes but found it difficult to readjust to the return of full classes. The SDQ and network of Virtual School-trained Thrive practitioners meant that we could identify and address issues swiftly, although very high demand for support did put pressure on the ESLAC team and other services.

### **School readiness**

We got to know our pre-school children better using the Early Years school readiness passports with looked after children. We are aware from an earlier age if additional support is needed when children transition to Year 1.

### **Designated Teacher training**

We delivered 3 conferences for Designated Teachers with content suggested by the volunteer Designated Teacher Working Group. Themes covered included school transitions (including progression to college), the SWAN (safety, welcoming, all together, nurturing) model for returning safely to school, the graduated approach, good practice on entering care, summer school provision, and Mind of My Own (pupil voice). We continued to fund Thrive attachment training and introduced a new programme for Designated Teachers new to role.

## **Good practice example: Supporting school transitions**

To improve school placement stability, the Virtual School was a lead partner of a multi-agency group of schools and other professionals to implement a new framework called STAN - supporting transitions across Northumberland. The work was developed with partners from education, children's social care and mental health and was influenced by the voices of children, young people and their families.

The framework was applied to 90 looked after children starting new schools from September this year, supported by Designated Teachers trained by the Virtual School at a transitions themed Spring Conference. Trainers included representatives from Northumberland Inclusive Education Service, Educational Psychology, the Virtual School Headteacher and Newcastle College.



# What we did well this year:

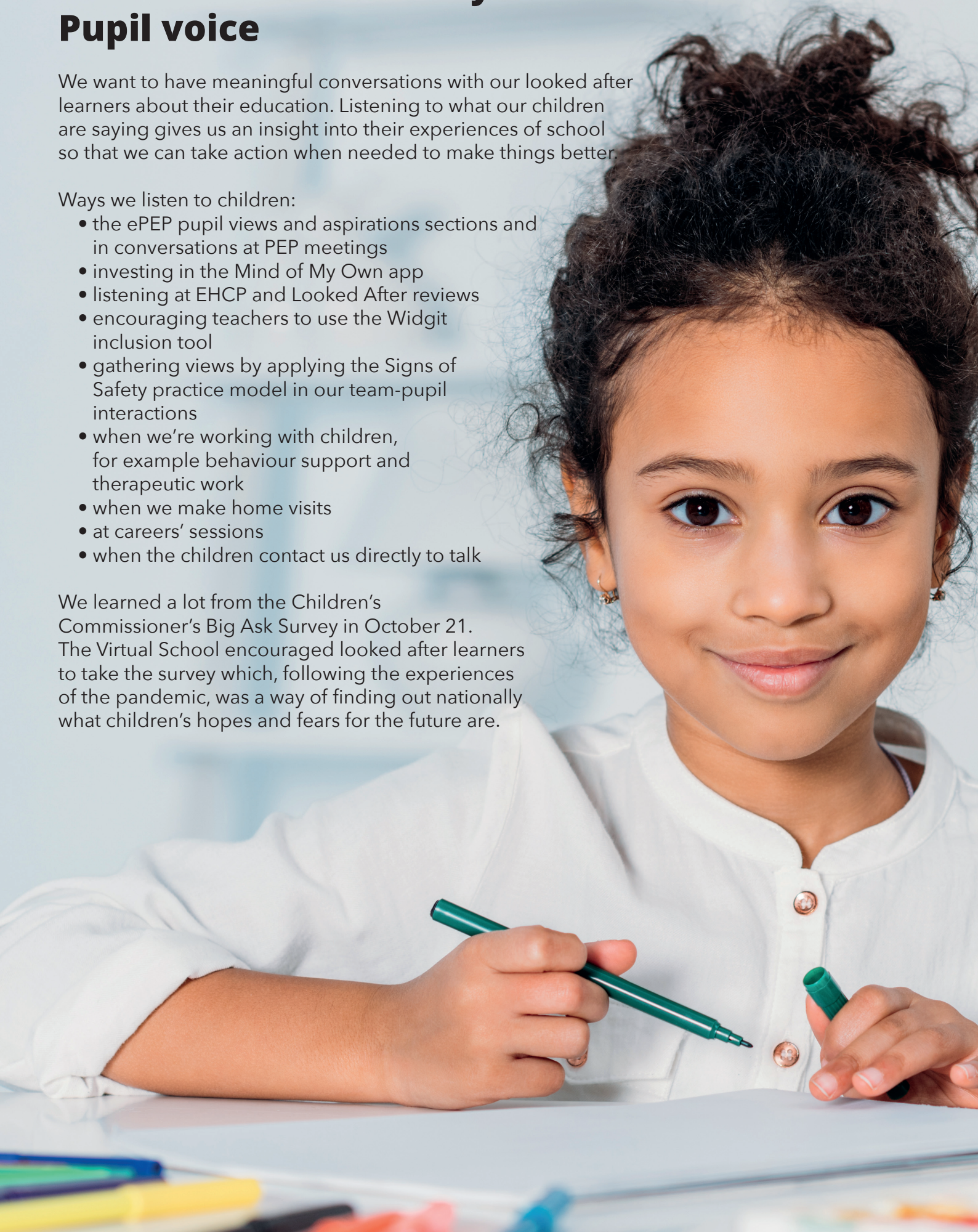
## Pupil voice

We want to have meaningful conversations with our looked after learners about their education. Listening to what our children are saying gives us an insight into their experiences of school so that we can take action when needed to make things better.

Ways we listen to children:

- the ePEP pupil views and aspirations sections and in conversations at PEP meetings
- investing in the Mind of My Own app
- listening at EHCP and Looked After reviews
- encouraging teachers to use the Widgit inclusion tool
- gathering views by applying the Signs of Safety practice model in our team-pupil interactions
- when we're working with children, for example behaviour support and therapeutic work
- when we make home visits
- at careers' sessions
- when the children contact us directly to talk

We learned a lot from the Children's Commissioner's Big Ask Survey in October 21. The Virtual School encouraged looked after learners to take the survey which, following the experiences of the pandemic, was a way of finding out nationally what children's hopes and fears for the future are.



There was an unprecedented response from looked after children and care leavers across England that gave us helpful feedback to plan meaningful support for our children in Northumberland. Children told us that:

- they share the same aspirations as their peers, for example to get a good job and receive a good education
- having a good education and career is a top priority
- they want the security and stability in every day life that other children take for granted
- they don't want to be marked out as different
- they want to be confident about continued support if they need it when they are 18

### **Good practice example:**

Pupil said, we did ...

**Pupil said:** Michael said he didn't want to attend an alternative provision because there were other pupils there who caused him difficulties in the community.

**We did:** We liaised with his care team and changed the alternative provision for him and he is now engaging and attending well.

**Pupil said:** Kyle said he didn't want to move to a new school even though he had moved to a new placement outside of Northumberland. He was in Year 11 and wanted to do as well as he could in his exams. He said he wouldn't mind travelling.

**We did:** We arranged transport for him and kept in close touch to ensure he was coping. He did well in his exams and is now in further education.

**Pupil said:** Stephen said he wanted extra tuition.

**We did:** We arranged a tutor for him quickly. His confidence has grown and he made the move to his new secondary school smoothly.

**Pupil said:** Chloe said she was concerned about how the staff at school were treating her.

**We did:** We raised her concerns with the Designated Teacher, and a plan that included additional support by a member of staff she trusted was put into place on the same day.

**Pupil said:** Sarah said that she wanted to go to university in the future.

The deadline for the Choices Together programme had already passed.

**We did:** We made enquires and were able to get her application agreed.

She is now able to join in with this year's activities.



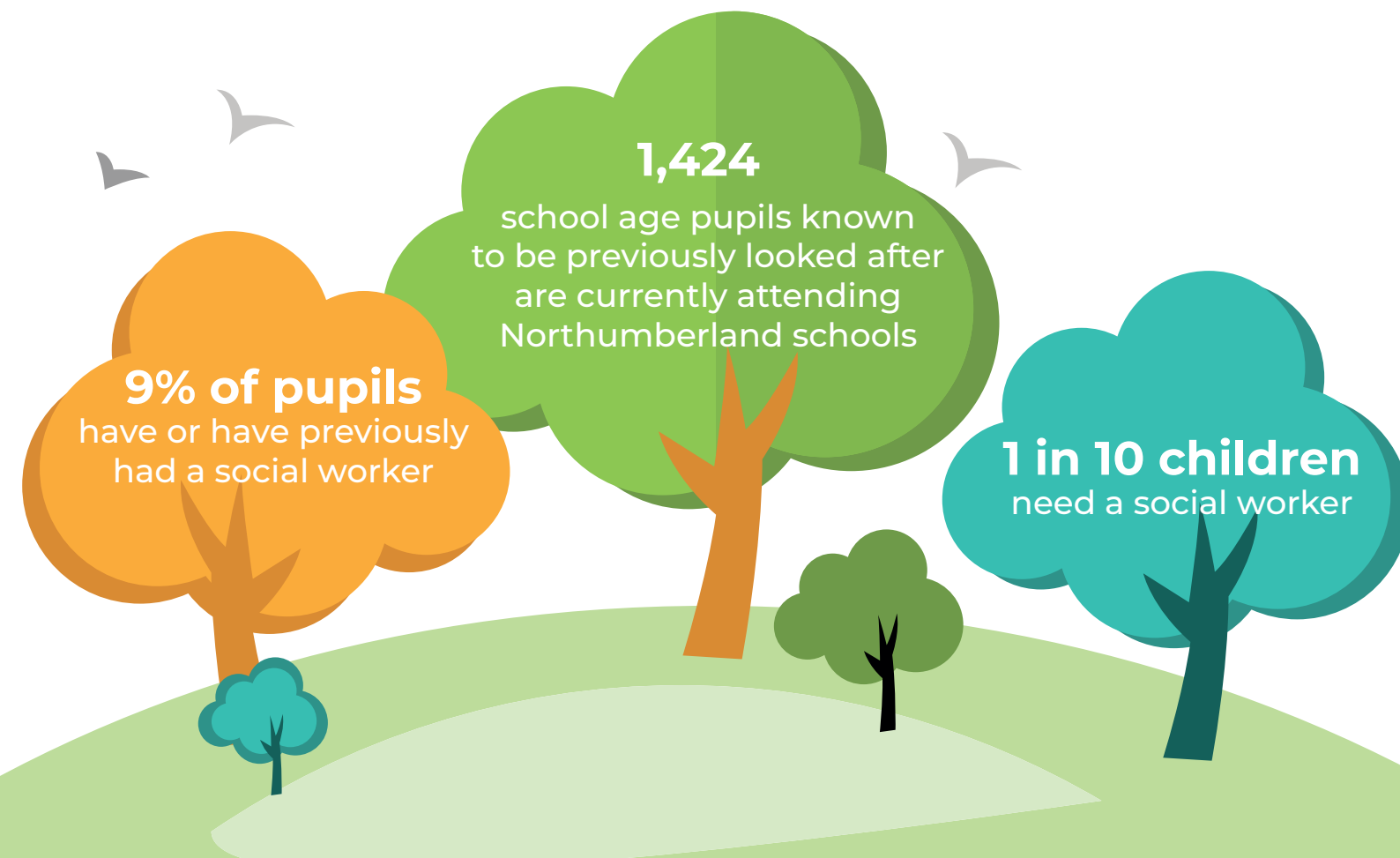
# What we did well this year: Previously looked after children

1,424 school age pupils known to be previously looked after are currently attending Northumberland schools. Children and young people who have experienced early life trauma can continue to experience a range of challenges in school. We understand the long term impact of trauma and loss and this informs the support and guidance we give to parents, carers and professionals who live and work with previously looked after children.

The Virtual School's relationship with Adopt North East (ANE) is strong and collaborative working is good. We have participated in half termly sessions convened by ANE, with other regional VSHs, to upskill staff and share good practice resources.

The quality of ESLAC resources has been recognised and distributed throughout the region. Improved knowledge and communication has led to an increase in adoptive parents contacting the Virtual School for a range of advice to reduce difficulties for their children at school, or to recommend school placements that might match their needs.

Northumberland's Deputy VSH has delivered four training sessions for those parents who have already adopted, those in the process of being assessed or at the matching stage. Sessions have been well attended. Content includes the role of the VSH, potential difficulties previously looked after children can experience at key points such as school transition, why additional support is needed and how to access this, and how children can mask behaviors or act out at home while 'keeping it together' at school. Our contribution to the effectiveness of the ANE is enhanced by the Deputy VSH being a member of the adoption panel.





# What we did well this year: Children with a social worker

We know that children who have, or who have had a social worker, are some of the most disadvantaged children in England and that they under achieve at school in comparison to their peers who have not been known to social care. Approximately 1 in 10 children need a social worker, they do significantly worse than others at all stages of their education and poor educational outcomes persist even after social work involvement ends.

In 2021 the government acted on the findings of the Children in Need review (2019) and has asked Virtual School Headteachers to be the strategic leaders who will make a difference to education outcomes for this group of children. At the moment in Northumberland there are 4,494 school age children who have or have previously had a social worker which is about 9% of the pupil population (1,056 with a social worker, 3,951 previously had a social worker).

Good progress has been made to fulfil the VSH's extended duty to promote the education of children with a social worker. We have taken a project approach in Northumberland, with priorities clearly defined through 4 workstreams - Attendance, Behaviour, Wellbeing and Learning. The workstreams are working with Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and children's social workers to strengthen professional relationships to improve safeguarding, planning and partnership working. There is representation from different sectors in the Project Strategic Group and benchmark data has been agreed so that impact can be monitored and measured in the next 12 months using an outcomes framework.

Workstream lead officers have:

- mapped their work to other strategic priorities
- identified services that are already working effectively in their themed area
- mapped training needs for social workers and DSLs
- started to develop guidance for social workers and DSLs to be accessible through a project Sharepoint webpage
- agreed how to promote the education of children with a social worker through their respective networks eg Senior Mental Health Leads, Attendance leads, locality team managers, Independent Reviewing Officers
- drafted case studies of good practice
- identified relevant school policies for development
- published a newsletter for professionals relating to the theme of each workstream

In response to feedback in an online survey, a task and finish group has been convened of volunteer DSLs and children's social workers to generate solutions to overcome operational barriers to strong relationships and good communication.

Recognising the innovative Virtual School model that Northumberland has in place, with a VSH that has oversight of attendance and safeguarding in schools, we delivered a national webinar at the invitation of the DfE on the attendance of children with a social worker. The attendance of children with a social worker is recognised as a major barrier to achievement and is being prioritised nationally through revised statutory guidance that has given the project considerable momentum. Schools are now required to involve the VSH and social workers in matters relating to behaviour, suspensions and exclusions, also captured in revised statutory guidance that will take effect from September 2022.





### **Good practice example:**

Understanding the impact of trauma to overcome barriers to education for children with a social worker

Extra grant funding was used to launch the extended duty of the Virtual School Headteacher to promote the education of children with a social worker at a conference for Designated Teachers and professionals in the Autumn term.

Lisa Cherry was the keynote speaker, an author, researcher and leading international trainer and consultant specialising in assisting schools and local authorities to create change that supports working with the legacy of trauma.

The focus of the conference was School Belonging and this has informed our aspiration with schools to develop positive relational policies to manage and improve behaviour in schools that affects educational achievement.



# Impact evaluation

The education achievement of Northumberland's looked after children improves when they become looked after, despite more pupils entering care during Year 11 and an increase in the number of school age children moving in and out of care.

Consequently, since the last national tests and exams were taken in 2019, education outcomes for our pupils are much improved in several measures, notably at Key Stage 1 in the combined reading/writing/maths measure, and at GCSE.

## Early Years

The low number of children reaching a good level of development in early years is a concern and is a clear indication of the impact of disruption during the previous two years, and the impact that has had on child development and school readiness.

We need more feedback from schools about the impact the PP+ has had on progress and achievement for every year group. From the PP+ allocated to schools through the ePEP we know that 42% of pupils made progress in at least one subject and 28% of pupils made progress in at least four subjects. More information and improved impact will be a priority for next year.

## Key Stages 1 and 2

The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt and gives us a focus for future priorities. In particular we need to target the progress of pupils in Years 2 to 5 so that a much higher proportion are working in their age-related curriculum.

We are also concerned about achievement at Key Stage 2, with poor progress from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 impacting on the number of pupils achieving age related expectations in Year 6. There is a noticeable weakness in maths which meant the combined measure of reading/writing/maths dipped significantly. This is the first year since 2019 that children in Year 6 have taken the SATs and this year's lower achievement is a direct impact of lost learning for these children during the two years of the pandemic.

## Key Stage 4

**87%**

of Year 11 leavers into FE, full-time training or apprenticeships (for Sep 22)

## Key Stage 4

**38**

KS4 learners in total

**36%**

with EHCPs

## Early Years

**42%**

of pupils made progress in at least one subject

## Early Years

**28%**

of pupils made progress in at least four subjects

## Key Stage 4

The improvement in GCSE achievement has created further opportunity for our Year 11 leavers whose high aspirations have led 87% into further education, full-time training or apprenticeships for September 2022.

Context makes this improvement in performance even more impressive, with a number of factors potentially having a negative impact on learning and therefore GCSE performance. This was a large official cohort of 38 pupils, and over half have SEND (36% with EHCPs). The SDQ scores of the higher achievers were high, which is unusual, and indicates strong personal resilience as well as effective support from care teams and schools.

Stability was not as good as we would have liked it to be, with 10 pupils entering care at the beginning of their GCSE courses, 25 pupils experiencing a placement move during their GCSE courses, 12 pupils having suspensions from school and overall attendance of only 79%. Achievement in the key measures needs to be better aligned with national averages for looked after children.

### Pathways at 16

It is pleasing that 87% of our Year 11 school leavers have a destination in education, employment or training for September 2022, and despite the disruption to some pathways caused by the pandemic the retention rate of Year 12 and 13 learners in Further Education has improved to 70%.

There has been a dip in the number starting Level 3 courses at 16, but this is in part due to the uncharacteristically high number of pregnancies in the Post 16 cohorts and an over representation of learners with SEND (36% have an EHCP). Professionals are in contact to ensure that guidance is available and pathways are ready to be developed when the time is right.

### Higher Education

100% of our learners completing Level 3 courses have achieved well and are now progressing into Higher Education and employment. 100% of our care leavers in Higher Education completed their university degrees and are progressing into employment and postgraduate courses.

### Pathways at 16

**87%**

of Year 11 leavers into education, employment or training (for Sep 22)

### Pathways at 16

**70%**

retention rate of Year 12 and 13 learners in FE

### Higher Education

**100%**

of care leavers completed university degrees and are progressing into employment and post-graduate courses

### Higher Education

**100%**

of Level 3 learners progressing into HE and employment

# Impact evaluation (continued)

## SEND

As expected, outcomes for children with SEND were poorer than that of children with no SEND. Over half of our children need SEND support or have EHCPs, so it is pleasing that at least one met their age-related expectations in Phonics and at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2, and 2 pupils achieved the Basics at GCSE.

From Early Years upwards however, progress and achievement need to improve. Overall, there are some encouraging signs here but there is still a lot of work to do.

We need to make sure that the recovery funding is being used for maximum impact and that the social, emotional and mental health needs of our children are being met so that they can make much faster progress.

## Children with a social worker

Understanding who this cohort of children are evolved with the project during the year. Next year we will be able to benchmark and evaluate their education achievement in comparison to the national cohort and gather evidence about the impact of the project outputs.

Clear long term performance indicators will be established and where appropriate integrated with existing children's social care and education data sets.

Our aspiration is to make this cohort of children visible, and for a culture of 'business as usual' to underpin integrated working with professionals. Education should be part of every pupil's plan.



## Good practice example: Maximising the impact of grant funding to get pupils back on track

The drive to get pupils 'back on track' was non-stop and additional grant funding from the DfE (the school led tutoring grant, part of the Covid recovery programme) was used to collaborate with Maximize Tuition in Morpeth to host a 3 week summer school. Working with a team of highly skilled teachers in a safe environment, pupils had the opportunity to work in small groups to continue their learning, develop social skills and prepare for new schools in September. Over the 3 week period 180 tutorials were delivered either at the Maximize centre or online. Tutorials were 1-to-1 or in small groups, depending on what suited individual pupils best.

Pupils were invited to attend the summer school based on their individual needs and circumstances, including those who have missed learning, those in transition, GCSE focus groups, and sessions for our residential homes.

Pupils getting ready for Year 6 and Year 11 in September were also invited, as were pupils with SEND and those leaving Year 11 to prepare for sixth form. All sessions had an academic focus while encouraging friendships and confidence-building, sprinkled with a huge element of creativity and fun!

## Covid


Better stability was gained and maintained this year, as the impact of Covid was relentlessly challenged by the ESLAC team and Designated Teachers.

This was achieved by working with schools to improve their understanding of adverse childhood experiences and promoting good practise for school transitions. However, the main threats to stability remain and will be a priority for improvement next year.

We know that:

- there was fluid movement in the cohort, new to care and leaving care
- looked after children's behaviour has been more challenging due to instability, circumstances and typically the children not managing change well.  
This led to an increase in emotionally based school avoidance
- looked after children already have gaps in their learning due to experiences prior to entering care, further missed sessions increase the gap between them and their peers
- due to staff self-isolating, there has been an increase in supply staff or Teaching Assistants being used who did not know the needs of looked after children well, or had the necessary skills or training to manage their behaviour
- school staff members' resilience may have been lower than normal when dealing with challenging behaviour
- it continued to be difficult for the ESLAC team to facilitate and support the building of relationships between looked after children, key adults and peers due to social distancing and restrictions





## **Good practice example:** Decision making and pathway planning Post-16 – getting the timing right

Charlie completed A-levels after doing well in his GCSEs but due to working from home during lockdowns and school closures, combined with his diagnosis of ASD and mental health issues exacerbated by the pandemic, he struggled with Post-16 education. He didn't achieve the grades he was initially predicted, and decided that Higher Education, which was his original plan, was not right for him at this time.

Charlie wanted to do an apprenticeship but he and his care team felt that he wouldn't cope with the social demands of this at that time and would need to build up to a full-time job.

The Virtual School careers' adviser suggested the NHS Project Choice programme, liaised with the Post-16 SEND team regarding funding, and Charlie and his parents attended an information session. Charlie decided this was the best option for him as it would give him the support he needed to get into the workplace. Unfortunately, due to Covid, the work placements Charlie had hoped for weren't available so he spent the first two terms in a charity shop and while this wasn't what he would have chosen, he did gain a lot of experience, including of customer service which he had thought he wouldn't be able to do.

Charlie is now in the 3rd term of the programme and is on placement within the NHS; he has had training on the patient record system which increases his chances of gaining employment within the NHS after his course. However, the year has made him reflect on what he wants and he has decided that he does want to return to education, so Project Choice staff, with support from his 18+ worker and Virtual School careers adviser, have supported him to apply and arrange student finance. He has a place on a Foundation Degree and is excited to get started.

## **What are we going to do next?**

Actions that underpin the following priorities identified in this Virtual School evaluation are set out in the Virtual School Improvement Plan for 2022-23.

(See improvement priorities and areas to cover in the table overleaf.)



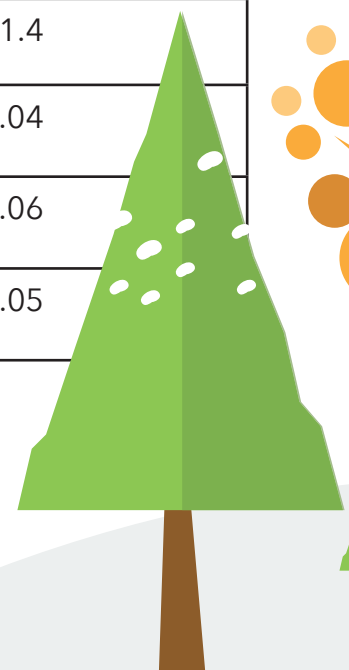


# Virtual School Improvement Plan for 2022-23

Improvement priority	Areas to cover
1. Improve attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce persistent absence</li> <li>• Integrated working with the Education Welfare Service</li> <li>• Training for Designated Teachers, social workers and foster carers</li> <li>• Promote and comply with new attendance guidance</li> </ul>
2. Get progress back on track so that more pupils are following their age-related curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality assurance of PEPs with a focus on SMART academic outcomes</li> <li>• Quality audit of EHCPs</li> <li>• Impact of recovery funding</li> <li>• Reduce the use of suspensions and number of missed sessions</li> <li>• Strategies to accelerate progress</li> </ul>
3. Provide leadership for promoting the education of children with a social worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• VSH as strategic project lead</li> <li>• Develop and recognise attachment aware and trauma informed schools</li> <li>• Accessible guidance and resources for Designated Safeguarding Leads and children's social workers</li> <li>• Utilise the expertise and experience of Designated Teachers in schools</li> </ul>
4. Participate in the Pupil Premium Plus Post 16 Pilot (national)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment of care leavers into further education</li> <li>• Improve retention in EET</li> <li>• Build capacity in colleges to meet the needs of care leavers</li> <li>• Introduce a Post 16 ePEP</li> <li>• Convene a Post 16 working group</li> <li>• Collaboration with regional Virtual Schools</li> </ul>
5. Deliver the Virtual School's contribution to the corporate parenting strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop service Promises as part of whole council approach</li> <li>• Engage private sector employers</li> <li>• Develop training</li> <li>• Create EET opportunities</li> </ul>

# Education outcomes for looked after children in all key measures, 2022

2022	Northumberland CLA* (all) %	Northumberland OC2** %	National CLA %	National All %
Early Years GLD	46.7 (15)	20 (5)	41	65.3
Phonics Year 1	58.8 (17)	50 (8)	59	75.5
KS1 R/W/M	23.5 (17)	20 (5)	28	53.4
KS1 Reading	41.2 (17)	20 (5)	43	66.9
KS1 Writing	29.4 (17)	20 (5)	33	57.6
KS1 Maths	35.3 (17)	40 (5)	42	67.7
MTC average score	19.2	18.9	Data not yet available	
KS2 R/W/M	27.8 (18)	18.2 (11)	32	58.7
KS2 Reading	61.1 (18)	54.5 (11)	52	74.5
KS2 Writing	50 (18)	45.5 (11)	42	69.5
KS2 GPS	55.6 (18)	45.5 (11)	47	72.4
KS2 Maths	33.3 (18)	18.2 (11)	44	71.4
KS2 Progress Reading	-3.04	-3.79	-0.53	0.04
KS2 Progress Writing	-3.52	-2.71	-0.92	0.06
KS2 Progress Maths	-4.75	-5.34	-1.19	0.05



2022	Northumberland CLA* (all) %	Northumberland OC2** %	National CLA %	National All %
KS4 Basics 4+	31.4 (51)	35.1 (37)	27	64
KS4 Basics 5+	13.7 (51)	18.9 (37)	12	49
KS4 English 4+	37.3 (51)	40.5 (37)	34	77
KS4 Maths 4+	35.3 (51)	37.8 (37)	33	68
KS4 Progress 8	-1.42	-1.27	-1.19	-0.03
KS4 Attainment 8	24	24.5	24.8	48.9

Number of pupils in each cohort shown in brackets

\* Where CLA is child looked after

\*\* OC2 is the official cohort



# Northumberland's Virtual School

Northumberland's Virtual School Headteacher is managed through children's social care and has senior management oversight of the work of 5 teams that fulfil statutory duties for the local authority to ensure that children are safer in education. Those services are:

- Promoting the education of looked after and previously looked after children
- Promoting the education of children who have and have had a social worker
- School attendance
- Children missing and at risk of missing education
- Elective home education
- Licensing for children in entertainment and employment
- Safeguarding standards in schools, including the training of Designated Safeguarding Leads
- Providing education for children with health and medical needs

The Virtual School Headteacher chairs the Schools' Engagement sub-group of the Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership.

The ESLAC - education support for looked after children - team is the operational arm of the Virtual School that is dedicated to looked after and previously looked after children. It is a multi-disciplinary team with 13 members of staff (10.63 fte), providing a range of expertise in teaching, educational psychology, education welfare, careers' guidance and therapeutic interventions. The team provides training and support for Designated Teachers for looked after and previously looked after children in all education settings.

The MALAP - multi agency looked after partnership - has terms of reference as the governing body of the Virtual School. ESLAC is funded by NCC and Pupil Premium Plus grant from the DfE.

Northumberland's Virtual School is a member of the National Association of Virtual School Heads.





### **Disclaimer**

The information provided in this publication is, to the best of our knowledge, accurate at the time of production. Data sources are available upon request.

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