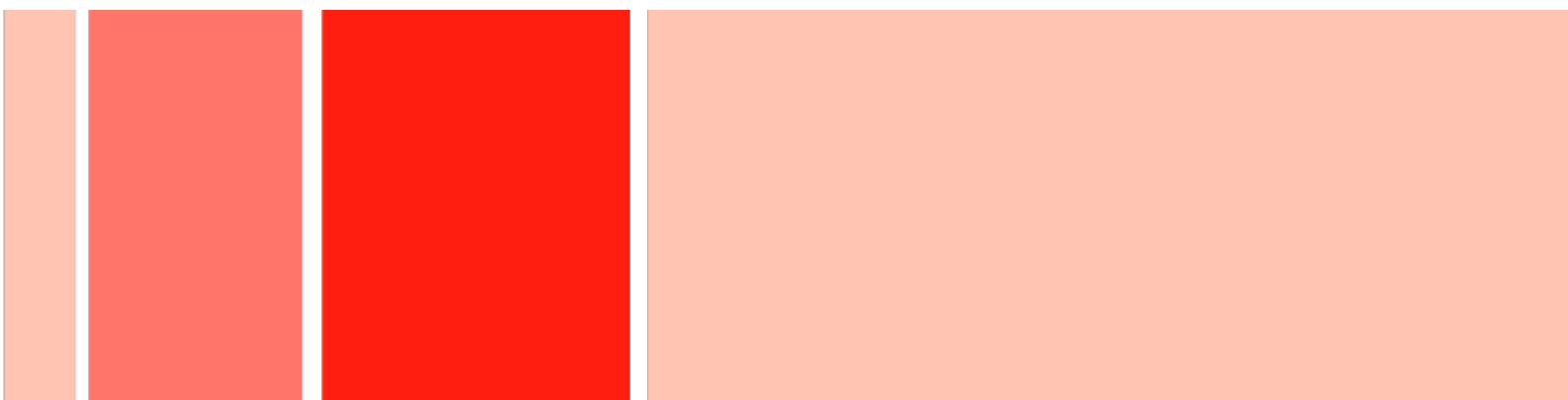


Social research number: 129/2025

Publication date: 17/12/2025

Evaluation of the Virtual School Model pilot funding in Wales



Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

Evaluation of the Virtual School Model pilot funding in Wales

Authors: Kerry KilBride, Jessica Mann, Geof Andrews, Lili Thomas, Cameron Shields (Miller Research), Heledd Bebb, Nia Bryer (OB3 Research)

Full Research Report: KilBride, K; Mann, J; Andrews, G; Thomas, L; Shields, C; Bebb, H; Bryer, N (2025). Evaluation of the Virtual School Model pilot funding in Wales. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 129/2025.

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-virtual-school-model-vsm-pilot-funding>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Schools Research Branch
Social Research and Information Division
Knowledge and Analytical Services
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Email: SchoolsResearch@gov.wales

Table of contents

Glossary.....	3
1. Introduction and background.....	8
1.1. Background context.....	8
1.2. Virtual Schools as a concept	9
1.2.1. Effectiveness of VSM in England and Scotland.....	11
1.2.2. Scope of the funding.....	11
2. Methodology.....	12
2.1. Approach	12
2.1.1. Analysis	15
2.2. Limitations and challenges	15
2.2.1. Disaggregating funding streams.....	17
3. Findings.....	18
3.1. How Virtual School Funding has been used	18
3.1.1. Allocation of the pilot funding.....	18
3.1.2. Grant conditions, principles and components.....	20
3.1.3. Pilot objectives.....	23
3.1.4. Facilitators to pilot activity.....	25
3.1.5. Barriers to pilot activity	26
3.2. Non-pilot area approaches	27
3.2.1. Facilitators in non-pilot local authorities.....	30
3.2.2. Barriers in non-pilot local authorities.....	30
3.3. Supporting children looked after	33
3.3.1. Data	33
3.3.2. Local authority collaboration	35
3.3.3. Strategic planning and Welsh medium education.....	36
Pilots	36
3.3.4. Use of learner voice to shape approaches	37
3.4. Perceived value of the VSM pilot.....	42
3.4.1. Perceptions and experiences of children looked after of support in their local authority.....	42
3.4.2. Other stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of the support that is in place in their local authority	44
3.5. Impact of pilot funding.....	48

3.5.1.	Impact measurement.....	48
3.5.2.	Short-term impacts	49
3.5.3.	Anticipated long-term impacts	55
3.6.	National rollout.....	58
3.6.1.	Opinions of stakeholders on national rollout of a VSM	58
3.6.2.	Need for baseline requirements and standard processes	60
3.6.3.	Replicable features of approaches to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after	62
4.	Conclusions.....	63
4.1.	The applications and uses of VSM pilot funding	63
4.2.	How non-pilot area approaches compared to areas in receipt of pilot funding	65
4.3.	Impacts generated by the VSM Pilot approaches	65
4.4.	The experiences of children looked after in education.....	66
4.5.	Local authority alignment with VSM principles.....	67
5.	Recommendations	68
5.1.	Design a shared framework for monitoring and data collection incorporating the most valued measures of progress for supporting children looked after	68
5.2.	Review PDG-CLA funding considering the impact of the VSM pilot	69
5.3.	Local authorities should use the NDG to support a national dialogue for sharing best practice and establishing common standards.....	69
5.4.	Include support for adopted learners and children previously looked after.....	70
5.5.	Formalise a set of rights and entitlements for children looked after (regardless of whether a national VSM is implemented)	70
5.6.	Introduce a statutory Head role to champion the rights and entitlements of children looked after, in each local authority	71

Glossary

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

As set out in the [ALN Code](#) this refers to:

- (1) A person has additional learning needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability (whether the learning difficulty or disability arises from a medical condition or otherwise) which calls for additional learning provision.
- (2) A child of compulsory school age or person over that age has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:
 - (a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age,
 - (b) has a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities for education or training of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream maintained schools or mainstream institutions in the further education sector.
- (3) A child under compulsory school age has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she is, or would be if no additional learning provision were made, likely to be within subsection (2) when of compulsory school age.
- (4) A person does not have a learning difficulty or disability solely because the language (or form of language) in which he or she is or will be taught is different from a language (or form of language) which is or has been used at home.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs refer to stressful childhood experiences, which occur before the age of 18 and can impact social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Exposure to ACEs is associated with a range of social difficulties, including with relationships and educational attainment, the adoption of health-harming and anti-social behaviours, and with poorer physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Care experienced young people / person (CEYP)

The term 'care-experienced' generally refers to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS)

This is a specialised NHS service that provides mental health support for children and young people up to the age of 18.

Children Looked After (CLA)

The term Children Looked After (CLA) is now commonly used in Wales in place of Looked After Children (LAC). It refers to children under the age of 18 who are provided with care and accommodation by a local authority under the Children Act 1989 or the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. This can include a variety of legal arrangements, such as

care orders, interim care orders, and voluntary agreements under Section 76. Importantly, children looked after includes children placed with foster carers, in residential settings, and with their parents under placement with parent regulations. These children remain formally "looked after" and often represent some of the most vulnerable within the care system.

The broader category of care experienced children includes not only those currently looked after but also those who have been looked after in the past. This encompasses children who have been adopted, those on special guardianship or residence orders following care, and young people defined in law as care leavers.

While the Virtual School Model (VSM) pilots have primarily focused on children currently looked after, references to care experienced children and care leavers are included where relevant.

Department for Education (DfE)

The responsible body for children's services and education in England. They are responsible for the relevant services in Early Years, ALN, post 16 etc.

Edukey

A digital platform used primarily in schools that connects educational institutions with parents and students, facilitating the choice and selection of educational services.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Learners whose first language is neither English nor Welsh.

Expression of Interest (EOI)

A formal statement indicating an individual's or organisation's intent to participate in a project, opportunity, or procurement process.

Higher level teaching assistant (HLTA)

The HLTA role adds further support to those teaching in a classroom environment. The post is more senior than a Teaching Assistant (TA) and comes with added responsibilities. A HLTA may be required to teach classes on their own at times or cover planned absences to allow teaching staff to plan and mark.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a statutory function within each local authority. Each local authority must appoint an IRO in respect of all Children Looked After known to the authority.

Individual Development Plan (IDP)

It is occasionally referred to as the "plan" and it has the meaning given by section 10 of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018^t (the Act), namely a document that contains:

- (a) a description of a person's ALN;
- (b) a description of the additional learning provision which the person's learning difficulty or disability calls for;
- (c) anything else required or authorised by or under Part 2 of the Act.

Kinship carer

A kinship carer is an adult who is looking after the child or children of a relative or close friend on a full-time basis.

Looked after Children in Education (LACE) Coordinator

Each local authority has employed an individual to have strategic responsibility for the education needs of children looked after in the local authority area. In many authorities this role has typically been referred to as a Looked after Children in Education (LACE) Coordinator, but their title and exact responsibilities can vary throughout each individual local authority.

Local authority

This refers to the relevant council that is responsible for providing local government services within a certain area e.g. health, social care, education.

Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

Young people aged 16 to 24 who are not engaged in any of those three activities, meaning they are neither attending school, employed, nor participating in vocational training.

Person-Centred

A focus on the needs of the individual based on personal circumstances, values, needs and preferences.

Personal Education Plan (PEP)

The responsible local authority must ensure that every child looked after by them has an effective and high-quality PEP. The PEP is a record of the child's education and training. It should document the agreed action to help them to fulfil their full potential and reflect (though it does not need to duplicate) any existing education plans for additional learning needs. Virtual PEPs (where information is input online in a secure platform) may be referred to as ePEPs.

Pupil Development Grant for children looked after (PDG-CLA)

The PDG is made available by the Welsh Government to overcome the additional barriers that prevent children and young people from low-income backgrounds achieving their full potential. The PDG-CLA is a specific strand of the PDG that is intended to support the educational attainment of:

- children looked after (CLA)

- children who have been adopted
- children who are subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

A PRU is a type of school established and maintained by a local authority to provide suitable education for children and young people who, by reason of illness, exclusion or otherwise, may not receive such education in a mainstream setting (section 19 of the Education Act 1996).

School Information Management (SiMS)

A software that schools use to manage a wide range of information, including learner records, attendance, and assessments.

Special Guardianship Order (SGO)

A court order that grants parental responsibility to a person, often a relative, who is caring for a child who cannot live with their birth parents. The order provides a legally secure and stable long-term placement for the child until they reach the age of 18.

Theory of Change (ToC)

A detailed explanation of how an intervening factor is expected to lead to its desired outcomes.

Trauma-informed Approach

A trauma-informed approach is one which acknowledges and takes account of the widespread impact of adversity and trauma and recognises everyone has a role in facilitating opportunities and life chances for those affected by trauma and adversity. It also adopts ways of working which prevent and help people heal from, and overcome, adversity and trauma

UNCRC Rights of the Child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child)

Outlines the civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights of children, including non-discrimination, a child's best interests, right to healthcare and education, amongst many other rights.

Virtual School (VS) / Virtual School Model (VSM)

The Virtual School approach has been developed to work with children looked after and, in some cases, young people in post-16 provision, as if they were in a single school and to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve educational stability. In England it is a statutory responsibility for all local authorities to have a Virtual School Head. This is not the case in Wales.

Virtual School Headteacher (VSH)

Their role is focused on improving the educational outcomes of children looked after, ensuring their progress is monitored, and their transition into adulthood is managed. The VSH acts as a leading professional, responsible for developing and implementing strategies to enhance the educational experiences of children looked after, including those placed outside of their original local authority.

Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS)

A single integrated health and social care record system that helps social services (adults and children) and a range of community health services (including mental health, therapies and community nursing) to ensure that care and support for individuals, families and communities are more effectively planned, co-ordinated and delivered.

Please note that a technical report will be published in due course that will include the pilot terms and conditions, the logic model, research questions, and the topic guides.

1. Introduction and background

In March 2024, the Welsh Government commissioned Miller Research, in partnership with OB3 Research and Children in Wales, to conduct an independent evaluation of the Virtual School Model (VSM) pilot funding. The aim of the evaluation was to assess and compare the ways in which the VSM funding was used by local authorities participating in the pilot to support children looked after and to determine the early impacts of the funding. The evaluation also explored the approaches to supporting children looked after taken by local authorities that did not participate in the VSM pilot and contrasted these with the approaches taken in pilot local authorities.

This full evaluation has aimed to provide insight into whether the VSM is a feasible model of integrated support for children looked after in Wales, and considerations for any potential national roll out. The findings from the evaluation may also inform wider Welsh Government policy aimed to improve the educational outcomes of children looked after in Wales.

The main purpose of the evaluation was to:

- Establish what approaches each local authority in receipt of the VSM funding put in place, and how their approach aligned with the VSM principles and components.
- Compare the nature and effectiveness of approaches taken by local authorities not in receipt of the pilot funding with those put in place by pilot local authorities.
- Explore both short-term and anticipated long term impacts of the approaches taken by pilot local authorities on key stakeholders^[footnote 1] – including on children looked after.
- Understand the views of children looked after.

1.1. Background context

The Welsh Government is committed to improving educational outcomes for children looked after. As part of this commitment, Sir Alasdair Macdonald was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake scoping research between January and March 2020 into how an integrated approach could be used to improve educational outcomes for children looked after. The subsequent report from the research, [An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales](#), included 5 recommendations; the first of these recommendations was to develop a VSM for Wales.

In the following year, the Welsh Government commissioned IFF Research to undertake follow-up research into each of the recommendations from Sir Alasdair's report. This included exploring existing structures and practices for supporting the educational outcomes

[1] Care-experienced children (including adopted children), adoptive parents and foster carers, school leaders and teachers, local authority lead officials, wider local authority officials, Regional Consortia, and social workers

of children looked after; stakeholder views on a potential VSM for Wales and how a model could be implemented in Wales; and potential principles to underpin an integrated approach. The report from the research, [An integrated approach to improving outcomes for looked after children](#), was published in September 2021 and included a draft Theory of Change for a restorative leadership pilot, alongside an extensive number of recommendations which aimed to support the educational outcomes of children looked after in Wales.

In response to the findings from both these research exercises, the Welsh Government launched the VSM pilot in March 2021. All 22 local authorities in Wales were eligible to apply for the VSM funding of up to £100,000 per local authority to be distributed over 2 years (£40,000 in year 1 and £60,000 in year 2^[footnote 2]). Thirteen local authorities successfully applied for funding via an expression of interest (EOI) process, of which 12 received the total funding of £100,000 each. One local authority received the first year of funding but did not apply for the second year of funding. Additionally, one local authority applied for the funding but was unsuccessful in their application. The VSM pilot ran from March 2021 until March 2024, during which time the Welsh Government allocated a total of £1.24m across all participating local authorities. Some local authorities had their 2 years of funding from 2021 to 2023, whilst others received it from 2022 to 2024.

In 2023, the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services undertook an initial evidence-gathering exercise into the early insights from the VSM pilot in Wales. This involved a review of the available pilot monitoring data and interviews with the VSM pilot lead in 4 pilot local authorities. The [report on the VSM pilot monitoring data](#) was published in January 2024 and included a number of recommendations, including recommendations for a more in-depth evaluation of the VSM pilot.

1.2. Virtual Schools as a concept

The concept of Virtual Schools (VS) in England emerged in the early 2000s in response to evidence that children looked after (or 'looked after children' as was the term used then) achieved consistently poorer educational outcomes than their peers. Children in care were [recognised as having significant disadvantages](#) in their education, including:

- lower attainment levels (for example at GCSE)
- higher permanent and fixed-term exclusion rates
- poorer attendance than their peers.

The root cause of this disadvantage stems from a range of factors including frequent foster placement moves, often resulting in a change of school; a lack of suitable provision for any additional learning needs (ALN); the effects of emotional trauma; and adverse childhood

[2] In reality, because of delays to funding applications being approved and delays in mobilising VSM pilot activity, some local authorities spent the entire £100,000 grant in Year 2.

experiences (ACEs) that potentially preceded them being taken into care, as well as the trauma associated with being removed from their birth family (and, potentially, friends).

In recognition of the challenges that children looked after face, the government in England introduced targeted interventions to address their educational disadvantage. VS began as local initiatives in a few English local authorities, before being formally embedded in legislation. Following a successful pilot in the late 2000s, the [Children and Families Act 2014](#) created a statutory responsibility for every local authority in England to have a 'Virtual School Head' (VSH).

This policy intervention marked a shift in how government policy aimed to address the educational challenges that children looked after face, by creating a dedicated role to champion their needs across the education system and beyond.

The role of the VSH in England covers:

- overseeing the educational progress of all children looked after under their local authority's care, regardless of where the child is placed or schooled
- ensuring that Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are in place and of high quality
- monitoring academic progress and attendance
- reducing exclusions
- facilitating access to targeted educational support.

VSHs in England also work closely with 'Designated Teachers' in schools^[footnote 3], social workers, foster carers, and other stakeholders to ensure a multidisciplinary approach to educational planning and support.

Over time, the remit of the VS has expanded in England, as have the roles of each VSH. In 2018, [statutory guidance](#) extended advisory responsibilities to "Previously Looked After Children". In this guidance, the VSH was listed as a key source of advice and information to help foster parents and other relevant stakeholders to advocate for children looked after as effectively as possible.

In 2021, [further guidance from the Department for Education](#) (DfE) assigned VSHs with a strategic role in supporting all children with a social worker (i.e. not just those who are children looked after), recognising that these children often face similar risks of poor educational outcomes due to safeguarding vulnerabilities. Most local authorities successfully extended the role of their appointed VSHs in line with this guidance, with positive engagement from schools and social care professionals.

In Scotland, the first Virtual School was established in 2015 in Aberdeen. Expansion into other local authorities was enabled through the launch of the Scottish Government's [Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund \(CECYP\)](#) in 2018. The funding guidance

[3] A designated teacher is a designated staff member who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of currently and previously children looked after (i.e. care experienced children) in every school in England. This person must be a qualified teacher, head teacher or acting head teacher.

directs that the whole cohort of care-experienced young people should be supported, including adopted and other previously looked after young people aged 0-26. The role of the VSHT (Virtual School Head Teacher) is not legally mandated as it is in England; however, it is guided by a distinct VSHT framework that can be considered to have evolved in partnership between government and local authorities. This has been enabled through practice sharing and national policy influences (e.g.: corporate parenting duties and The Promise, 2020), which called for trauma-informed, child-centred support across education and care systems.

1.2.1. Effectiveness of VSM in England and Scotland

Existing research evidence [on improving the effectiveness of virtual schools in England](#) and [the duties of VSHs](#) suggests that VS have improved accountability, raised expectations, and led to better coordination of educational support for children looked after (and in some instances other vulnerable children) in England and in [Scotland](#). Key outcomes that have been observed include improved school attendance, greater stability in school placements, and incremental gains in academic attainment among children looked after. VS have also been pivotal in reducing exclusions and in ensuring effective transition planning between key educational stages, such as entry to primary school and transition from primary to secondary school.

Activities like mentoring, trauma-informed training, and improved Personal Education Plans (PEPs) were found to have contributed to enhanced outcomes. Factors that lead to an effective VS were deemed to include strong strategic leadership, a well-resourced VSH, robust use of data and meaningful inter-agency collaboration.

1.2.2. Scope of the funding

The Welsh Government's commitment to supporting children looked after includes care-experienced children, including those who have transitioned out of care through adoption and guardianship, through the PDG-CLA fund (Pupil Development Grant for Care-Experienced learners⁴). This funding stream is explicitly intended to support the full care-experienced cohort of learners in Wales, both those currently in care and those previously in care.

The VSM pilot's aim was to provide evidence of different approaches that can be used to support all care experienced children in education. However, it should be noted that this evaluation found local implementation has placed a predominant focus on currently looked after children. This is explored in more detail in the findings section.

⁴ Further information on PDG-CLA funding is provided in 2.2.1

2. Methodology

2.1. Approach

The aim of the evaluation was to understand how each of the pilot local authorities used the VSM funding to support the educational outcomes of children looked after and to capture some of the early impacts of the funding in these areas. The evaluation also aimed to explore the approaches used by local authorities that did not receive the funding. In [An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales](#), Sir Alasdair Macdonald noted that “there is considerable variation in practice from [local authority] to [local authority] and ... much of this variation is derived from the different structures within which the LACEs⁵ operate.” It was therefore important that the evaluation captured a comprehensive picture of the varied ways in which all local authorities in Wales support children looked after, to understand the comparative merit of additional support provided via the VSM funding. Furthermore, the evidence from non-participating local authorities provided a qualitative measure of the counterfactual; that is, what happened in the absence of the VSM funding.

The findings from the evaluation are intended to inform Welsh Government decisions on whether the VSM is a feasible model of integrated support for children looked after in Wales and whether it should be rolled out at a national level. The findings may also be used to inform wider Welsh Government policy relating to improving the educational outcomes of children looked after.

The overarching purpose of the evaluation was expanded into 16 research questions (see Annex C, Technical Report). To fulfil the requirements of the brief and to answer these research questions, the evaluation used a Theory of Change approach based on [HM Treasury Magenta Book](#) examining:

- inputs (i.e.: policy aims and objectives of the VSM, resources, skills etc.)
- activities (e.g.: development of new/improved young person-centred practices, data-sharing between stakeholders, management and monitoring arrangements etc)
- effects (i.e.: short- and medium-term outcomes such as improved school attendance and increased self-esteem amongst children looked after as well as contribution to longer-term impacts, e.g.: improved post-education destinations).

The Theory of Change was developed from the findings of the scoping phase and informed by the Theory of Change for a restorative leadership pilot included in the report [An integrated approach to improving outcomes for looked after children](#). An initial desk-based review covered relevant research previously commissioned by the Welsh Government, the grant terms and conditions for both 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024, expressions of interest (EOIs) from 4 pilot local authorities, implementation plans for 3 pilot authorities and

⁵ Each local authority has employed an individual to have strategic responsibility for the education needs of children looked after in the local authority area. In some authorities this will be referred to as a Looked after Children in Education Coordinator, but their title and exact responsibilities can vary throughout each individual local authority.

summarised monitoring data for 2022 to 2023 financial year for 12 of the 13 pilot local authorities.

Following this documentation review, scoping interviews were conducted with 11 strategic stakeholders based on their knowledge of the context and background of the VSM pilot, including:

- four with Welsh Government officials
- one with The Fostering Network
- one with Adoption UK
- one with the Office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales
- one with a Regional Consortium
- one with Sir Alasdair Macdonald.

The Theory of Change was illustrated by a logic model. This logic model was discussed with members of the National Delivery Group for Care Experienced Children and young people (hereafter referred to as the NDG) and subsequently modified. The finalised model, which incorporated the feedback from the NDG, is included in Annex B of the Technical Report. An evaluation framework was developed that mapped sections of the logic model to relevant research questions for each stakeholder group (VSM pilot leads in pilot areas, LACE Coordinators/ equivalent in non-pilot areas, other stakeholders in pilot areas, other stakeholders in non-pilot areas and children looked after in both pilot and non-pilot areas). These research questions were then expanded into 6 topic guides for the main fieldwork stages. These topic guides were for:

- VSM pilot leads in pilot areas
- LACE Coordinators/equivalent in non-pilot areas,
- other stakeholders in case study pilot areas
- other stakeholders in case study non-pilot areas
- Adoptive parents and carers in case study pilot areas
- Children looked after.

Topic guides and research questions used for the evaluation are shared in Annex D of the Technical Report.

The evaluation method involved 2 stages of qualitative, primary research. Qualitative methods were used, given the range and complexity of approaches used to support children looked after, which were each being delivered in a variety of different contexts. It would have been unfeasible to have captured this nuanced feedback via quantitative methods, for example a survey.

The first stage of fieldwork comprised interviews with the most appropriate ‘lead’ individual on the education of children looked after in all 22 local authorities, for example the LACE coordinator / equivalent position or the VSH (where these existed)^[footnote 6]. These interviews served two main functions:

- to capture an in-depth understanding of:
 - the way in which the pilot funding had been used and the context in which it had been delivered (in the case of pilot local authorities)
 - the current approach to supporting the education of children looked after (in the case of non-pilot local authorities).
- to explore capacity within the local authority to engage in the second stage of the fieldwork.

The second stage of the research involved interviews with a range of different stakeholders in a sample of both pilot and non-pilot local authorities. The sample (see Annex E of the Technical Report) of local authorities for this case study fieldwork included a mix of urban/rural populations, different levels of deprivation, and local authorities with both high and low numbers of children looked after across Wales. The pilot authorities included in the case study sample (8 out of 11) covered each of the different ways in which the pilot funding was used (see Chapter 3.1 below).

Within each of the 11 local authority areas involved in the case study research, the evaluators carried out one-to-one and small group interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. This was done to build a picture of what is being done in each local authority (either with, or without pilot funding) to support the education of children looked after from a range of different perspectives, including professionals in schools, local authority education departments and children’s social services, as well as foster carers. Because the approaches to supporting the education of children looked after and the roles and functions involved in these approaches varied across the local authorities, relevant stakeholders were identified collaboratively with the children looked after education lead (i.e.: VSH / LACE coordinator / equivalent). Most interviews were conducted remotely via MS Teams, although in a small number of cases, they took place face-to-face. Interviews were recorded (where consent was given) and notes were taken by the interviewer. The transcription (where available) and the notes were then used in the analysis.

The case study pilot areas were:

- Ynys Môn
- Blaenau Gwent
- Cardiff

[6] This included pilot areas that appointed a VSH/equivalent strategic role as part of the VSM pilot (4), pilot areas that already had a VSH prior to the pilot (1) and non-pilot areas that had a VSH (1).

- Newport
- Powys
- Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Vale of Glamorgan
- Wrexham

The case-study non-pilot areas were:

- Flintshire
- Merthyr Tydfil
- Pembrokeshire

Across all 11 pilot areas, a total of 89 stakeholders were interviewed.

All case study areas were invited to coordinate groups of children looked after in their local authorities, who would be comfortable sharing their experiences with Children in Wales to inform this evaluation. Only 3 local authorities were able to coordinate learner groups; Merthyr Tydfil, Pembrokeshire, and Powys. Children looked after who engaged with the research were of secondary school age, with the oldest learners embarking on and pursuing post-16 education.

In total, 24 children looked after contributed to the evaluation.

2.1.1. Analysis

Qualitative data from the fieldwork was analysed using the Thematic Template Analysis technique, carrying out the coding process manually using Miro to develop an initial template to identify key themes (e.g.: 'access to data', 'learner voice' and 'collaboration'). Additional themes and sub-themes were identified during the process of adding interview data to the template. No AI tool was used in the analysis. Two researchers independently coded an initial sample of interview notes and transcriptions, organising the data into a series of visual boards or 'mind maps' using Miro software. These boards were structured around key themes and research questions, with individual maps created for each local authority area, as well as separate thematic maps that compiled evidence across all local authority areas.

2.2. Limitations and challenges

As the fieldwork was entirely qualitative, sample sizes were relatively small, particularly when broken down by stakeholder group (for example teachers). It is therefore not possible to draw quantifiable conclusions based on the evidence gathered. Furthermore, as each pilot local authority has designed their pilot approach based on localised contexts and priorities, there is limited direct comparison possible between local authorities, and the non-pilots do not form a true empirical counterfactual because they are not a robust control

group. An additional challenge for the evaluation related to attribution of outcomes; most of the work undertaken through the pilots (and the resulting benefits this has had) has been enabled by activities funded from other sources – either in terms of systems and roles already in place before the pilot or new processes or functions brought in at a similar time but funded from another source. This issue in relation to the Pupil Development Grant specifically is discussed in further detail immediately below. The implications that this issue had for delivery of the pilots is described in section 3.

Another challenge for the evaluation has been a lack of predefined monitoring indicators for the pilots (including baseline measures), to make firm quantitative assessments of the impacts of the pilot funding. This was an issue identified in the initial evidence-gathering research and informed a specific recommendation on monitoring pilot progress.^[footnote 7] This has resulted in the evaluation focusing on qualitative findings from stakeholder feedback and for some findings, a greater focus being placed on some local authority areas compared to others, based on how much detail stakeholders provided during interviews.

The scale of fieldwork is not uniform across all the local authorities, reflecting the variation of pilot approaches and the exploratory nature of the research. Stakeholder availability varied and often stakeholder roles did not encompass the same responsibilities, as these are shaped by local context. Coverage of stakeholder types is therefore not consistent across all areas. This report does not directly attribute stakeholder feedback to the 11 local authorities **not** involved in the case studies, to preserve the anonymity of the small number of stakeholders engaged (often 1-2 lead stakeholders per local authority) in non-case study areas.

The nature of having been involved in the case study research – applicable to the other 11 local authorities – also means that there is inevitably more feedback in this report from case study areas.

The timeframe for the pilot, which ended in March 2024 just as the evaluation began, meant that in some cases stakeholders involved in the pilot were no longer in post and/or were unavailable for interview.

The number of children looked after and adoptive parents/carers engaged in the research was lower than anticipated. The evaluation found that the additional ‘ask’ of local authorities to contact schools and coordinate learner groups, as well as to invite adoptive parents and carers to engage, was felt to be burdensome alongside completing stakeholder interviews. Though the evaluation aimed to stagger fieldwork so that interviews with professionals would be completed first, followed by the arrangement of wider fieldwork, competing priorities and workloads produced a more adaptive approach for around half of the selected case study areas.

[7] Specifically: “A single set of monitoring documentation should be developed for local authorities to monitor progress of the implementation of the Virtual School Model more clearly and accurately subject to any further evaluation of the pilot.” [Pupil Development Grant \(PDG\) Overview](#)

2.2.1. Disaggregating funding streams

One of the central challenges encountered in the evaluation of the VSM pilot was disentangling the distinct uses – and impact – of the VSM pilot funding from other funding sources, including the Pupil Development Grant for Children Looked After (PDG-CLA funding) and local authority core funding. The PDG-CLA allocation is based on the number of eligible children and young people aged 3-15 in local authority care from the previous year's Children Looked After Census. The PDG-CLA spend is intended to:

- benefit children who are looked after and care experienced (e.g. adopted learners and those in a Special Guardianship Order arrangement),
- support inclusivity and equitable education, with funding for clusters of schools and settings to build capacity and provide bespoke interventions,
- ensure a person-centred approach informed by the views of learners⁸.

The funding is received by local authorities, who are responsible for considering how the grant can be used effectively to plan, set targets for and support learners who are looked after and care experienced. Local authorities can choose to either pass all funding on to schools, settings, and clusters; keep some of the funding for activities that benefit a specific group of (or all of) the authority's children looked after; or keep parts of the funding to employ posts such as children looked after local authority or regional coordinators.

Current guidance sets out the 'expectation' that PDG funding can continue to be used to meet the costs associated with strategic coordination and oversight of the PDG grant.

As both funds have similar objectives, and deliberately employ flexible funding structures, disaggregating the use of the VSM pilot funding from PDG-CLA spend has remained challenging throughout the evaluation. The inconsistency of monitoring and reporting mechanisms also limits traceability between the two funding streams, making it difficult to determine the success of the respective funds independently.

Additionally, the variation in local authority approaches (whether pilot or non-pilot authorities) has posed challenges in the evaluation exercise when seeking to isolate effects of the pilot funding. Fieldwork helps to demonstrate this, as factors such as existing assets or infrastructure, staffing, and local context have influenced decisions to either integrate the model in existing systems, or to develop novel approaches.

3. Findings

3.1. How Virtual School Funding has been used

3.1.1. Allocation of the pilot funding

Reflecting on use of the VSM pilot funding post-completion, the evaluation identified four different models that were adopted across the 13 pilot local authorities, specifically:

- four local authorities that created a VSH or equivalent strategic role (Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Cardiff, Ynys Môn)
- two local authorities that created additional operational posts to deliver a variety of functions on a fixed-term basis, including the delivery of training to school practitioners, the creation and maintenance of a new data system and the provision of support directly to children looked after (Wrexham, Blaenau Gwent, Newport, Carmarthenshire)
- three local authorities that invested in an ePEP system (Neath Port Talbot, Vale of Glamorgan, Swansea)
- two local authorities that intended to appoint a VSH but did not do this in practice (Gwynedd, Conwy) – in one case the funding was used to backfill existing posts that would, collectively, deliver the role of the VSH, with a view to appointing a VSH in future. In the other case, the local authority effectively withdrew from the pilot.

A key challenge for the evaluation was the lack of detailed pilot monitoring data that included a breakdown of how the funding had been used, an issue that was identified in the [initial evidence gathering work](#). A lack of clarity around spend was also acknowledged by pilot stakeholders: "It's baffling how people have used the money. Even unpicking ours, it is so messy."

This issue was compounded by the fact that in many cases the pilot funding was used to augment existing roles and functions funded through other sources, or other funding streams (typically PDG-CLA or investment from core local authority budget, such as education or children's services or a combination of both). These were allocated alongside the VSM funding from Welsh Government to implement the pilot. In some local authorities, a proportion of the VSM funding was used to backfill existing senior roles, to enable their involvement in the pilot, for example in a supervisory capacity or to analyse data.

Cardiff was an example where separate funding was brought into the piloted model; in addition to the VSH (which was partly funded by the VSM pilot), core local authority funding was used to cover salary costs of an additional team manager, a business support worker, a casework officer and a specialist teacher overseeing ALN. As one local stakeholder noted: "you can't say that the pilot has funded the whole team. The pilot has partially funded a head teacher."

In other local authorities, some members of the team overseen by the VSH were already in post prior to the pilot and the formation of the VSM. In Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) for example, the VSH post was funded in part via the pilot, whilst the wider VS team comprised an education coordinator for care experienced children, a care experienced children support worker, a specialist educational psychologist for care experienced children and an administrative assistant.

For a variety of reasons, many of the pilot local authorities chose not to appoint a VSH. This included:

- concern about duplication of existing roles, particularly that of the LACE coordinator / equivalent,
- uncertainty around how a VSH role could be funded permanently given the short-term nature of the funding,
- reservations about the merit of investing in a strategic role rather than using the resource to deliver hands-on activity, (for example training the designated person for children looked after within the school, or one-to-one mentoring to learners).

The above sentiment is captured in the following stakeholder comment: “we used the [VSM pilot] funding to uplift the team that directly offers support to CLA learners. This had a massive impact and was more beneficial in my view than having somebody in a back-office role.”

Examples of investment in more operational roles were evident in:

- Blaenau Gwent: pilot money was used, amongst other things, to appoint 2 education support workers who engaged with children looked after and their foster carers to help children looked after reach the educational targets set out in their PEP.
- Newport: funding was partially used to pay for an individual to create a monitoring database on the Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) of all information collected for PEPs.
- Carmarthenshire: pilot money funded the delivery of training to schools on ACEs and trauma-informed strategies.

Amongst the 3 local authorities that invested in the development of an electronic PEP (ePEP), two of them already had a permanent VSH (or equivalent) in post. The third “incorporated” the VSH role “into the role of Team Manager of Pupil Support who is a member of the senior leadership team in the council’s education directorate, fulfilling the criteria originally set out in Sir Alasdair MacDonald’s recommendations.” (VSM pilot monitoring data).

Both Swansea and Neath Port Talbot commissioned CACI, the IT services company that created the [education information system](#) used by some local authorities in Wales to develop IDPs, to develop their ePEP software. A range of different stakeholders both within education (e.g. the designated person for children looked after within schools)

and children's services (e.g. social workers) are able to enter data into the ePEP via a secure portal. Individual children looked after are able to access their own ePEP and the system includes a one-page "My PEP" profile, which captures experiences and preferences of the learner. The Vale of Glamorgan undertook a peer review process – in the form of an appreciative enquiry involving children looked after leads from other local authorities – to quality assure their new ePEP system, which was described as a "very evaluative and reflective" process.

3.1.2. Grant conditions, principles and components.

The grant terms and conditions incorporated findings from the IFF and OB3 research report, [An Integrated Approach to Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children in Wales](#). This included an overarching set of principles and their components. Applicants were asked to use the following principles when designing their approaches:

- **strategic planning:** LAs should proactively initiate and identify best practice and use that to develop services that support the education of children looked after
- **whole-community approach to corporate parenting:** leveraging critical resources and opening up the widest possible opportunities for children looked after
- **consistent offer of support:** for the education and well-being of children looked after that is not subject to changes in local authority resourcing or dependent on the area in which they are based.
- **setting ambitious standards**

The 'component parts' of these principles, based on reviews of best practice in integrated approaches to supporting children looked after, involve working in alignment with broad outcomes (beyond educational); restorative leadership; equitable access to resources; the delivery of accessible support; and evidence-based support. In addition to the systemic principles, the report also shared individual level principles (for practitioners) which included person-centred working, collaborative working, and accountability.

Specifically, the pilot terms stipulated that funds should be used to plan and prepare to implement a VS model, giving consideration to:

- developing your current approach and structures to incorporate the role of the VSH in line with the principles set out for the VSM Wales
- ensuring your structures, processes and practices are children and young people-centred and capture the voice of the child
- ensuring all those working in the VSM have access to the data they need to be able to support children looked after effectively

- monitoring the impact and effectiveness of the role and approach in the local authority in order to support future independent evaluation
- ensuring buy-in of the new role and approach with relevant stakeholders
- sustainability of the role of the VSH beyond the lifetime of start-up grant funding

It is clear from section 3.1.1 that there was significant variation in the way the 13 local authorities that participated in the VSM pilot used their allocated funding. Amongst national stakeholders engaged in the scoping stage of the evaluation, there was a widespread perception that the funding had been used inconsistently, with a representative from one national organisation claiming: “I don’t really know how it’s worked in each area.”

National stakeholders questioned whether the investment represented a pilot at all, commenting that:

“[the] guidelines were perhaps not tight enough ... allowed a lot of flexibility ... there have been some attempts to have some consistency but not really a proper pilot as they are all piloting different forms.”

Three stakeholders with an understanding of VS models across the UK drew comparisons between the Welsh pilot and how it has worked elsewhere: “In England the only thing that was made statutory was having a VSH – local authorities had freedom to decide how this worked.” (Scoping interview).

By comparison, the terms and conditions (see Annex A, Technical Report) for the VSM pilot in Wales in relation to establishing a VSH were inexplicit, requiring participating local authorities to “incorporate the role of the Virtual School Head in line with the principles set out for the Virtual School Model Wales”. However, the terms and conditions also required pilot local authorities to “monitor the impact and effectiveness of the Virtual School Head role” and to “review the sustainability of the role of the Virtual School Head” and the EOI for the pilot included an outline job description for a VSM.

The remaining conditions of the pilot funding related to developing child-centred approaches, having access to data and ensuring buy-in to the pilot from relevant stakeholders. Later sections of this report cover pilot local authorities’ approaches to capturing the voice of the child and ensuring access to data and therefore this is not discussed in detail here. For the purpose of this section however, most pilots prioritised both activities, albeit with varying degrees of success.

In terms of the first condition, stakeholders did not appear to be familiar with the principles underpinning an integrated approach for children looked after ^[footnote 9].

[9] As defined in [An Integrated Approach to Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children in Wales](#)

However, most of the system-level ^[footnote 10] and the individual-level principles ^[footnote 11] were referenced in some form within the stakeholder feedback. This suggests that whilst those responsible for the pilots may not be able to quote these principles verbatim, the principles were, in general, embedded in the practices and culture of pilot models.

For example, most pilot leads identified an element of strategic planning within their adopted model: “[we are] moving from firefighting to directly having a person-centred approach ...making sure every CLA has an outcome...measuring impact and progress of learners.” (Stakeholder in pilot area)

Stakeholders described the importance of maintaining education as the reliably consistent source of support for children looked after, who typically experience a greater-than-average level of disruption and discontinuity: “... helping to ensure the education of a CLA is solid ... that one constant as they move into the care system.” (Stakeholder in pilot area)

The importance of encouraging ambition in education for children looked after was widely identified, in order to offset perceptions that aspirations for children looked after can be comparatively lower, simply because of their looked-after status. Whilst not evident in all pilot models, the focus on trauma-informed training in some areas reflects an attachment-aware approach to supporting children looked after.

The only system-level principle that seemed to be missing from the pilot models was the principle of a whole-community approach to corporate parenting; instead, the focus was primarily on social services and education and the stakeholders working in these disciplines.

The three individual principles for children looked after were evident to some extent across all pilot local authorities that engaged with the evaluation ^[footnote 12]. The need for the piloted model to be “person-centred” and for support to be driven by the voice and the needs of the child, rather than by the structures and systems that surround them, was widely emphasised and is discussed in more detail in section 3.4. Fundamentally, a person-centred approach requires flexibility in the system: “A one-size-fits-all doesn’t work for children looked after – especially if they have ALN – they need a more tailored approach.”

There was less of an overt emphasis on collaborative working as a principle for the piloted models. The [2021 Welsh Government report](#) on an integrated approach for children looked after defined collaborative working as relating to collaboration both “within and across local authorities” in the interests of “efficient use of scarce resources” and a “more coherent cross-boundary approach”(p.61). Collaboration between education and children’s services (in local authorities where they are separate departments) has been historically perceived (by stakeholders) to occur when “troubleshooting”, driven by

[10] Principles for the system include: strategic planning, whole-community approach, consistent system, reliable support, attachment-aware and ambitious standards.

[11] Principles for individual children looked after include: person-centred, collaborative working and accountable.

[12] That is 12 out of a potential 13.

the urgent need to share data, rather than as a deliberate operational move towards greater coordination of services. Nonetheless, the timeframe for the pilot (in most cases less than 2 years) taking into consideration the time for planning and onboarding – meant that structural change to an organisation as large as a local authority was widely deemed to be an unrealistic expectation.

The third and final individual-level principle underpinning an integrated approach to supporting the education of children looked after relates to accountability of relevant stakeholders to learners. It was suggested that the pilot activity – and any subsequent VSM rollout – should “be monitored at a chief officer level so that interventions are effective, and resources can be committed.” Again, stakeholders drew comparisons with England, where a management committee is appointed to oversee the VSH and “like a school governing body, they are responsible for supporting but also holding a VSH to account”.

Only 2 pilot local authorities (both ones that invested in a VSH post) established clear governance structures in the form of a management board or committee. In both cases, preparation for the VSM pilot had involved research into VS models in England and/or Scotland. In one case, the management committee was described as being similar in structure and format to the governance arrangements for a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) albeit at a relatively early stage of development.

In addition to the principles set at a national level, the models adopted in each pilot local authorities were informed – to varying degrees – by local-level principles, some of which were evident within more than one pilot local authority.

Given the impermanence that many children looked after experience, both in terms of where they live and where they go to school, it was deemed particularly important that there is a “familiar face”, regardless of whether it is a VSH, an educator or a mentor. Stakeholders in 3 areas talked about the value of providing continuity of individuals supporting learners and prioritising relational approaches: “I don't refer to [it] as the Virtual Schools model ... because it's not a distant organisation crunching numbers ... it's the personalised involvement ... about empathy and understanding.” This included stakeholders that invested in a strategic role, stakeholders that created operational posts and one that already had a VSH and had funded ePEP software.

For similar reasons, communicating a consistent message from the entire team around the children looked after was an important principle for some of the pilots. A foster carer in one pilot local authority anticipated a reduction in hearsay and “conflicting messages” from different professionals, as a result of the investment in a more “streamlined” ePEP system.

3.1.3. Pilot objectives

Whilst section 3.1.1 demonstrates that the overall model and focus of the investment adopted by the different pilot local authorities varied quite substantially, there was broad

consistency in the fundamental objectives to support the educational outcomes of children looked after. Local authorities, regardless of their involvement in the VSM pilot, need to operate in line with the [Code of Practice for Looked After and Accommodated Children](#) as part of the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#). This includes in relation to PEP content and process, and prioritising the voice of the child. Many of these objectives reflect the principles set out in the [2021 report on outcomes for looked after children in Wales](#) and discussed in section 3.1.3 above.

A key objective for all pilot local authorities related to improving collaboration between different professionals and local authority departments involved: “bridging the gap between education and social workers” (Stakeholder in pilot area).

Raising the profile of children looked after in schools was also emphasised as a priority and reflected in the measurable objectives for some pilot local authorities. For instance, establishing a designated children looked after teacher¹³, a children looked after “link governor” and children looked after policy in all schools and aiming to deliver trauma-informed training to teachers in all schools. The rationale for this was around increasing understanding of the disadvantages that children looked after face and ensuring there is proactive support for them in school on a permanent basis.

Linked to this was a key objective in relation to supporting school attendance and preventing exclusion from school. While Welsh Government guidance sets expectations for schools to be ‘especially sensitive to exclusion issues where children have a social worker’¹⁴, and encourages schools to work with the local authority to maintain their place in school, exclusions of children looked after are still perceived as a risk by stakeholders. Many stakeholders – both at a local authority and national level – advocated for permanent exclusion to be prohibited for children looked after given the implications for their living arrangements¹⁵ and the fact they already experience such adversity. As such, pilot local authorities tracked exclusion and attendance rates of children looked after as an outcome measure of their pilot and sought to explore earlier interventions to improve attendance (see section 3.5 for more details).

Prioritising the voice of children looked after (for example in the production of PEPs and setting of PEP targets) was universally identified as an objective of VSM pilots and activities undertaken in line with this objective are described in section 3.4.

Finally, whilst there was a recognised need to allow flexible models of support for the needs and circumstances of individual children looked after, pilot areas cited the importance of introducing greater consistency in support both within and across local authorities. However, stakeholders offered different interpretations surrounding the degree to which a consistent approach should be prescribed. Views on flexibility and consistency of the VSM are further elaborated on in section 3.6.

¹³ There is already a statutory responsibility for every school to have a designated person for children looked after

¹⁴ [Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units](#)

¹⁵ For example, resulting in the excluded child looked after being at home during school hours or needing to travel to a new school that is further away from their home.

3.1.4. Facilitators to pilot activity

VSM pilot 'lead' coordinators were asked about factors considered to enable successful delivery of their approaches to supporting learners. Responses varied however, as some participants struggled to isolate qualities that could be considered unique and influential in their contexts.

Of responses shared, the importance of systemic thinking to balance strategic and operational functions and priorities was seen to set natural foundations for the introduction of the VSM, as an integrated model. Pre-established cultural alignment with the concept, including working in trauma informed and multi-agency ways, was felt to have been helpful when introducing the pilot model.

High levels of support for the VSM (and its principles) at a strategic level within the local authority was seen to be an enabling factor in seven pilot areas, particularly where this was reflected in financial investment to augment activity resourced through the pilot funding. One VSM pilot lead cited "prior agreement to increase capacity" within the team as an important facilitator for what they were doing through the pilot. General support for the VSM was felt to contribute to a constructive ethos, which embraced the approach early on and established a common understanding of purpose and desired outcomes among colleagues. In one pilot area, additional funding was allocated from both education and children's services, and stakeholders felt this was important evidence of commitment to the concept from both departments that work directly with children looked after.

VSM pilot leads also reflected on the importance of selecting the right candidates for the roles established with the pilot funding. Whilst this observation might be applicable for any job, it was deemed to be particularly important in the context of supporting learners, where interpersonal skills – both in terms of cooperating with other professionals and communicating directly with children looked after (and foster carers) was paramount to the success of any support. This was considered important at every level including both VSH (or equivalent strategic role) and operational roles.

Where a VSH was employed, it was considered advantageous that the appointee had senior education experience, preferably as a head teacher and ideally having been a head in a school with a large proportion of children looked after. This experience equipped them to support and challenge schools where necessary and, on a peer-to-peer headteacher basis: "the status of a head teacher challenging a head teacher ... has made a lot of difference [to previous situation of having a LACE coordinator only]."

At a structural level, stakeholders in one pilot area considered it beneficial if VSM staff sat outside both education and social services, enabling them to broker agreement between stakeholders in different departments.

The distinction between the VSH and headteachers in individual schools was also found to be an advantage. A social worker in one local authority acknowledged that they were more open to discussing and agreeing to different education arrangements because it

came from the VS staff with specialist understanding of the needs of children looked after, rather than the mainstream school.

A good level of communication, enabled by the pilot, was reported by 6 stakeholders as an advantage in what VSM pilots were trying to achieve. Part of this was about having a role solely dedicated to learners who were known to children's services and individual schools and could ensure meetings were held and information shared as planned. This contrasted with the situation in a local authority that was not part of the pilot, where the LACE coordinator role (or equivalent) was covered by someone with a much wider remit, reducing their capacity to support children looked after specifically.

The setup and hosting of the National Delivery Group (NDG) by the Welsh Government was also cited as an enabling factor that complemented pilot delivery. This was reported to have been 'very helpful for strategic oversight' and supporting dialogue and collaboration between pilot local authorities.

Proactive and regular monitoring were perceived to have aided the implementation of pilot activities. Setting specific goals for the child, foster carer, and social worker allowed for accurate adjustment of support where needed. Improved data systems that gave access to all (such as the ePEP) who needed it further supported this.

3.1.5. Barriers to pilot activity

Barriers cited by VSM pilot leads centred around communication expectations, funding allocations, and contextual challenges. Misconceptions of the rationale for the VSM were particularly evident in one example, which highlights the contention surrounding the 'Virtual School Head' title:

" [The] first few meetings were frosty, to say the least! LACEs were under the impression they would lose their jobs... [some] worried there would be a sense of superseding them through the introduction of the 'head' role."

The term 'Virtual School' was also thought to generate misunderstandings over its function, particularly amongst those unfamiliar with the model in England. Early assumptions included that it was a remote learning initiative, an opinion influenced by 'virtual' having been used to describe COVID lockdown teaching arrangements. Additionally, the ongoing statutory LACE coordinator / equivalent role existing in parallel with the pilot was noted to cause confusion around responsibilities within the landscape for supporting children looked after.

Resources and finance were raised as ongoing challenges, as VSM pilot leads drew comparisons with the equivalent of PDG-CLA funding available in England (Pupil Premium Plus) and Scotland (Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund). This contributed to perceptions of the limitations of the wider funding landscape for children looked after and the extent to which it is prioritised at a policy level. The main weakness generated by this lack of capacity related to the local authority's abilities to support complex cases. The (relatively small) scale of the funding allocated to the pilot was also raised by five national stakeholders during the scoping stages: "Finance and investment

in England feels significant, but in Wales it feels as though the pilot is like ‘having a go’ at it.”

Finally, the pilot’s temporary nature was reported to have posed difficulties in recruiting suitable staff members in a minority of cases. Those interviewed shared that constraints over the timescales and short-term nature of the roles made this aspect of building a team around the VSM challenging. Similarly, different systems remain separate between children’s services and education, posing challenges to developing integrated ways of working.

3.2. Non-pilot area approaches

The fieldwork in non-pilot local authorities revealed very similar aims and ambitions in relation to children looked after to those of the VSM pilots. These aims were:

- to provide targeted support to children looked after based on need
- to ensure PEPs are completed
- to track attendance and attainment of children looked after
- to collaborate with schools to support transition, avoid exclusions and capture learner voice.

Within one local authority area there was an emphasis on transition to post-16 pathways and work placements. This priority was seen as paramount to enabling a young person’s future success.

Nonetheless, whilst the outcomes that non-pilot areas are trying to achieve are comparable to those identified in pilot areas, the mechanisms for support vary widely, commonly having evolved over time and in response to local context. A children looked after education lead in one local authority commented that “at LACE meetings you see people from very different backgrounds”, an indication that even within effectively the same role, their skills and experience vary widely. This is also reflected in the range of titles used to describe the person responsible for the education of children looked after in non-pilot areas, which includes “Looked After Children and Well-being Education Inclusion Officer”, “Education Coordinator for children looked after” and “Advisory Teacher for Young Persons Looked After”.

In terms of organisational structure, in some local authorities there is a team overseen by the children looked after education lead. For others, the children looked after lead is the sole position responsible for the educational outcomes of learners in the local authority, something that several of those interviewed as part of the evaluation highlighted. In one local authority, the children looked after education lead reported that they “feel very much a one-man band” and felt that by contrast the “VSM could be an amazing model.”

However, it should also be noted that capacity and structure of local authority support for children looked after is guided by local context, meaning that non-pilot areas with fewer

children looked after placements offer proportionally lower resourcing levels due to lower caseloads.

In another local authority, the role that encompasses children looked after education – that was until recently the only role designated to support the educational outcomes of children looked after – is part of a wider role to support all vulnerable learners, covering ALN, English as another language (EAL), and anti-bullying, amongst other responsibilities. By comparison, in another local authority there are 2 people responsible for the education of children looked after – one covering the north of the county and one covering the south of the county and Welsh language speakers.

Although none of the non-pilot areas officially had a VSH, three of them had invested in a very similar model. It was suggested in one local authority that the children looked after education lead is “a VSH in all but name” and “[does] what a VSH would do.”

Similarly, the approach in another non-pilot local authority was described as being “fairly close to the VSH model”. The lead has the title of “Advisory Teacher”, although they have previously been a headteacher, which it was suggested “really helps [and] gives credibility” within the local authority and individual schools. Designated teachers who monitor educational outcomes of children looked after, in line with statutory requirements under Section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008¹⁶, are in regular communication with all children looked after in their school and will then refer any issues to the Advisory Teacher who is based in the council. This designated teacher is typically the headteacher, deputy head or Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) in primary schools, and someone on the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), with support from a higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) in secondary. Maximising the value of this existing designated teacher role had enabled the Advisory Teacher to focus on children looked after who are struggling. Prior to this, the Advisory Teacher: “used to sit in [social care] meetings [where] the majority of [children looked after] were making excellent progress... we were sitting in meetings with lots of other highly qualified people without really being needed.” Latterly, the Advisory Teacher has “come to rely on the designated person within schools and settings for some of these meetings”. The Advisory Teacher will “receive the minutes [from these meetings] and if there are any issues I will raise them.”

In terms of operations, there is also inconsistency between local authorities in how statutory processes, such as completion of PEPs, are managed. Some non-pilot local authorities use fully integrated electronic systems, whilst others rely on separate documents that cannot be easily shared or collated, requiring them to “copy and paste forms into the system.”

Trauma informed practice is prioritised by some non-pilot local authorities through training and investment in education psychologist roles. This is not universal and was not mentioned by stakeholders working in local authorities with more limited capacity or by those who expressed resource constraints.

¹⁶ [Children and Young Persons Act 2008](#)

Although children looked after education leads in all non-pilot local authorities referred to their role in trying to minimise exclusions of children looked after, particularly permanent exclusions, they reported varying degrees of success in this area. Where difficulties do exist, these were often attributed to the attitudes and lack of trauma-informed understanding of school leaders. For example, if it was felt to be more difficult to prevent exclusions when schools were under pressure to remove difficult cases.

In four non-pilot areas it was noted by stakeholders that the scale of need amongst learners was disproportionate to the size of the team in place to support their educational outcomes. In one local authority, the children looked after education lead felt that their work supporting children looked after is effective but that they do not have the capacity to reach all the children with complex needs: “I only really deal with the most complex cases [which is] incredibly frustrating.”

Where stakeholders in non-pilot local authorities were aware of the VSM pilot [footnote 17], they understood the main difference between their approach to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after and a VS model to be the lack of a designated VSH. In some non-pilot areas, there was an awareness that pilot local authorities had invested in other ways, for example, in an ePEP system. Generally, however, there was typically only limited awareness of the approaches taken by other local authorities, either pilot or non-pilot.

Children looked after education leads in non-pilot areas expressed a wide range of reasons for not participating in the VSM pilot, although a minority felt unable to comment as they had not been in post at the time of the application. In one case, the children looked after education lead had a favourable opinion of the VSM as a concept and had advocated to apply; however, managers had disagreed and they did not proceed. The reason for not applying was deemed “very much [a result of] structural and internal barriers.”

In one local authority, the children looked after education lead stated that they did not apply for the VSM funding because of having only a small number of children looked after, and they “couldn’t see how it would benefit them.”

Other children looked after education leads were more overtly negative about the VSM pilot. In one case, this was at least partly due to having had a negative experience of working with VSHs in England. In another case, the children looked after lead did not think a VSH would bring any particular benefits over and above the work they were already doing to support children looked after. In response to being asked what a difference it would make to the support they offer to children looked after, one children looked after education lead commented that “it wouldn’t really change operations.”

In another local authority, the children looked after education lead had been under the impression that establishing a VSH was a requirement of the funding, and the local authority would not have been able to recruit someone with a National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) at such short notice. However, by the time the Welsh

[17] All CLA education leads were aware of the pilot.

Government had “watered down the criteria” and clarified that recruiting a VSH was not a prerequisite, it was too late to apply. In most cases, negativity around the VSM pilot was focused primarily on the (mis)understanding that a VSH was central to pilot models and it was the VSH role that many of these stakeholders opposed.

3.2.1. Facilitators in non-pilot local authorities

In several instances, factors that were thought to have enabled effective delivery in pilot local authorities were also mentioned by children looked after education leads in non-pilot areas, reflecting the shared contexts and challenges that they face in supporting children looked after.

Effective communication between organisations and stakeholders were noted to be key to supporting children looked after and its absence amplifies barriers (see below). Communication happens best when there is single point of contact who is known to all and who can act as a hub for information and can help overcome challenges as they arise. Understanding of competing priorities leads to mutual respect amongst professionals, which boosts relationships and helps manage expectations amongst different stakeholder groups. As in pilot local authorities, key individuals with experience or responsibility in both education and social care can be crucial in fostering wider relationship building between these two sectors that may have different priorities and face different challenges in relation to children looked after.

Timely communication of changes in circumstances for a child looked after, for example changes in living arrangements, allows other parties to adapt appropriately and foresee social and emotional issues that might emerge as a result. In one non-pilot area, the children looked after lead is based in education but works closely with children’s social services and is informed by social services of imminent moves to a new foster carer. This allows them to be prepared for any implications this might have for the education of children looked after.

3.2.2. Barriers in non-pilot local authorities

In non-pilot areas, children looked after education leads shared similar general challenges to supporting children looked after as pilot local authorities.

Major challenges are encountered where there is poor communication between different teams, for example between education, children’s services, and with agencies, such as specialist education providers.

Barriers in communicating effectively between local authorities because of incompatible operating procedures and systems and organisational differences were also identified. One children looked after education lead described collaboration with other local authorities as “very difficult” in terms of accessing the data they need to track children looked after that are placed in schools in other local authorities. This challenge is particularly apparent when children looked after ‘belonging’ to a local authority (i.e.: the corporate parent), return to the area after being placed in another local authority:

“One of the biggest things for me is that even if the child is returning from [neighbouring local authority] I don’t have any access to any school documentation [directly from the council], I’m completely reliant on original school to send information on things like attendance.”

A lack of seniority or authority for some children looked after education leads was also raised as an issue, resulting in instances where decisions were made without them being involved or their judgement being overruled. One children looked after education lead described a challenge with their own lack of influence over decision-making and “not having the senior authority but needing the authority to push things forward.”

Funding was frequently cited as a challenge. This could be raised as a narrow issue, for example within the local authority for the number of posts to support the education of children looked after, and wider, covering funding affecting accessibility of specialist provision.

Differences between Welsh ALN policy and English Special Educational Needs (SEN) policies created challenges for cross-border collaboration. This was not only evident in local authorities that shared a border with England, but across Wales. For example, the statutory IDP under the Welsh ALN policy does not exist in England, which instead requires an education, health, and care plan, following a different format. Conversely, two stakeholders commented that English colleagues expected PDG-CLA funding to follow the same procedures and be at the same level as the Pupil Premium Plus in England.

Inconsistency of social workers engaging with individual children looked after was a recurring theme, as coordinators recognised issues with recruitment in the sector, retention, turnover, and widespread burnout of staff, leading to increased numbers of agency workers. A decreasing level of capacity within schools to support children looked after was also identified as a challenge. Access to foster carers, and education placements were all cited as challenges to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after, particularly those with ALN.

In one local authority, stakeholders noted that schools can be resistant to change and reluctant to accept offers of trauma informed training. This was framed as a wider issue relating to the lack of understanding amongst some of those who are not directly involved in the social care sector of the challenges and disadvantages that children looked after face. For example, lack of awareness in wider society around the implications of a child looked after’s status was linked to prejudice in the context of securing employment and apprenticeship opportunities.

Changes in placement for the child looked after can be a barrier to support, exacerbated further if communication is poor between relevant organisations prior to any changes. Two stakeholders explained that from the individual child looked after’s perspective, inconsistency in placements and schools can cause them to disengage from the support available, mirroring the perceived disinterest in them from professionals. Fundamentally,

poor attendance needs to be overcome before education support is effective and this is something that cannot be achieved by a children looked after education lead alone.

3.3. Supporting children looked after

This section covers both pilot and non-pilot local authority areas.

3.3.1. Data

Effective use of data has been identified as a key component in establishing appropriate support for children looked after, as data can help to signal issues and track improvements in learner attendance and progress. Ideally, data in this context can be used to inform the delivery and implementation of support for children looked after; through the identification of trends that can direct where targeted intervention is needed. The intended advantage of the VSM in relation to data is to streamline information relating to learners, which can provide a more detailed insight into individual characteristics, circumstances, progress and needs, enabling a child-centred approach to provision.

In both pilot and non-pilot areas, children looked after education leads cited lack of access to data for adopted children and young people as a barrier to extending their support to children who were previously looked after, alongside lack of sufficient resource. In Powys, there was some implication that wider policy updates to support children under Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were hoped to improve access to data and avenues for supporting adopted children in the next year. In Neath Port Talbot, it was acknowledged that adapting the PEP for the inclusion of adopted children would be beneficial, but that resource could not be stretched within the pilot remit to do so effectively. In other authorities with comparatively large numbers of children looked after (e.g.: Cardiff and RCT), there simply was not the capacity to extend the remit to adopted children as well.

Pilot local authorities reported consistent confidence in their abilities to access, at minimum, data on children looked after's attendance and exclusions through the education system. Only one pilot local authority cited challenges in this area, owing to dependency on the schools to provide timely updates, which can be compromised by poor IT systems or oversight on the part of school staff. In these cases, the lateness or inaccuracy of data undermines the efforts of a VSH (or equivalent) to take a preventative approach.

Through their integration with children's services, pilot local authorities were also able to access placement addresses. In best practice examples, VSM pilot leads shared that it was possible to access placement data on out-of-county children, though some uncertainty was noted around the accuracy and currency of this data.

Pilot stakeholders that had introduced ePEPs or enhanced their PEP process as part of the VSM pilot, were able to point to additional data available for learners in their local authorities, for instance, including responses to well-being questionnaires. The key difference observed between participating authorities that had invested funding in their data management, and those that had not, was the level of integration achieved. Those that had not specifically invested in their systems stated that, while they believed the necessary information was available, it existed in separate spaces for example, within

children's social services, which slows access to data. However, this information still needed to be manually collated, which prevented the availability of 'live' insights into learner progress. The data-focused pilot models (NPT, Vale of Glamorgan and Swansea) were therefore able to provide enhanced reports at the local authority level, measuring multiple factors for their children looked after 'cohorts', which will improve the targeting of future interventions.

Two pilot local authorities cited Curriculum for Wales (CfW) as influential in making it more difficult to gather data on educational progress than before its introduction. They regretted the loss of "hard data" in terms of levels and outcomes under CfW, explaining it is now more challenging for them to measure the impact on academic progress, something that schools collect but might not be available at a local authority level in all instances.

Collectively, non-pilot children looked after education leads raised more issues and challenges in relation to data collection than pilot participants. In at least three cases, local authorities raised barriers to obtaining data that could prevent appropriate support from being targeted towards learners. This included lack of aggregated data for exclusions (frequency, escalations, behavioural concerns); provision of inaccurate or outdated data; lack of data sharing between primary and secondary schools to support transition between years 6 and 7; and in one case, lack of data on language preference.

Non-pilot stakeholders noted aspirations to improve data collection and monitoring, acknowledging that current approaches do not provide "enough data to tell if a child is doing well or not". In 3 local authorities, children looked after education leads indicated that further tracking could support a better understanding of progress over time and longer-term development. One commented that well-being data could be useful to identify suitable interventions but is not being collected currently. In another area, the children looked after education lead stated that they "should be tracking and monitoring [data on children looked after] more closely" but are "unable to do it with our capacity". They are therefore "not tracking data that could be used to inform preventative measures being put into place". Instead, it is "all reactive measures."

Non-pilot case study areas, however, reported more confidently on their access to necessary data supporting educational outcomes. In Merthyr Tydfil, stakeholders shared that the LACE service team manager is responsible for sharing critical data effectively, including PEPs and ALN data.

In another non-pilot case study area, stakeholders shared that attainment measures include access to predicted grades and academic progression, reasons attributed to low attendance, and primary school assessments, to help provide a more detailed picture of a learner's trajectory. Stakeholders were confident that in-county data could be obtained, however, lack of communication between social care and education still prevented professionals from seeing 'both sides' of a child looked after's status.

3.3.2. Local authority collaboration

In pilot authorities, lead stakeholders provided a greater volume of feedback surrounding collaborative working, primarily at the regional level between neighbouring local authorities. Stakeholders shared that attending NDG meetings, as well as established regional group meetings had improved relationships with colleagues. A sense of shared responsibility and partnership working to achieve the right outcomes were seen to be essential to developing an ethos of collaboration between local authorities. In terms of advantages that could be attributed to the pilot funding, responses focused upon an enhanced strategic approach, and in two cases, stakeholders gave examples of sharing best practice. However, it was noted that more could be done to support complex needs.

Two lead stakeholders raised concerns that the VSM pilot had ‘muddled the water’ in relation to communication between local authorities, due to the variation observed in roles, titles, and positions. The difference in structure between VSM approaches was perceived, in some cases, to have caused confusion between professionals. In one case, the pilot itself was seen to have created a “two tier system”, rather than “bringing children looked after leads together”, indicating unintended consequences of the funding.

In non-pilot authorities, local authority collaboration was perceived to be more reactive than proactive, as stakeholders spoke of coordination to support the movement of children looked after between areas. In a minority of cases, lead stakeholders reported negative experiences ranging from ‘no collaboration’ to experiencing some local authorities where collaboration was reported to be more challenging. One children looked after education lead referred to “huge barriers to working with other LAs due to different operating procedures.”

In some cases, awareness of poor practices such as ‘blocking admission’ for children looked after so that they are moved to another local authority were disclosed as a point of concern and this was reported to occur “across Wales”, even though this is not in adherence with the duties set out in the School Admissions Code.

Overall, challenges to inter-local authority collaboration persisted for both pilots and non-pilots, and this was attributed to the variation between approaches; difficulties accessing information when needed; and the capacity of professionals to form effective and trusted relationships.

Stakeholders also highlighted that whilst the Welsh Government provides guidance on collaboration and will offer provision and support accordingly, factors such as greater dependency on the private sector to deliver specialist education provision for children looked after can affect the extent to which guidance is followed.

Three non-pilot local authorities reported having more challenges in collaborating with local authorities in England than those in Wales. Notably, none of the non-pilot local authorities felt that collaboration with other local authorities had been positively affected by the VSM pilot. In a minority of cases, non-pilot authority stakeholders suggested that the VSM pilot had “complicated” communications.

3.3.3. Strategic planning and Welsh medium education

Evidence and feedback surrounding strategic planning for provision and service delivery through the medium of Welsh was limited. Local authorities with higher Welsh speaking populations were naturally well equipped to ensure provision, whilst authorities with a lower proportion of Welsh speaking learners observed very low demand for provision. There were no notable differences recorded between pilot and non-pilot participants, which could be attributed to the VSM pilot funding.

In English-medium majority authorities, lead stakeholders were confident of their ability to provide an 'active offer' of Welsh language provision for children looked after across their services.

Pilots

Two case study pilot areas were local authorities where Welsh language provision is identified as a higher priority. In Ynys Môn, it could be inferred that demand had influenced the nature of strategic planning; as stakeholders reported that enhanced efforts are made to keep children looked after in county, due to the prevalence of Welsh language at the community level. Beyond capacity for educational support, stakeholders had also noted the challenges of matching foster placements for Welsh language children looked after, which were recognised across English-majority local authorities too. Wrexham described full capacity to provide children looked after support in Welsh, including tuition and resources, however this did not appear to be attributed to the pilot funding, and provision was already in place.

In 'lower demand' areas, stakeholders recognised that though the need for Welsh language provision was minimal, it must not pose an additional barrier for Welsh language children looked after accessing local provision. For example, in Neath Port Talbot, the bi-lingual functionality of the Nexus (ePEP) system was felt to be important to the delivery of a bi-lingual approach, despite the absence of first-language Welsh speaking children looked after in the area. However, some issues with capacity for Welsh-medium provision were acknowledged in Newport. Provision in Newport is supported through GEMS (regional language support service) and the volume of support needed is identified through the accuracy of PEPs, with understanding of support needs acknowledged to be at the core of supporting Welsh medium education.

Broadly, those local authorities that had developed enhanced PEP processes and focused on data management could ensure that platforms used were bi-lingual, and that PEPs recorded language preferences effectively.

In Powys, one of the specialist teachers is a Welsh speaker, which was perceived to be helpful by a social worker interviewed, as Welsh-medium schools in the area were felt to have less experience with supporting children looked after (likely as a result of the low numbers of Welsh-medium learners in the county).

In another pilot local authority, difficulties were encountered when recruiting for a Welsh-speaking trauma-informed practitioner, suggesting some challenges in recruiting for Welsh-speaking professionals in specialist roles.

Non-pilots

The non-pilot areas with the highest demand for Welsh-language provision were Ceredigion and Denbighshire. In one area, the majority of schools are Welsh-medium, and stakeholders reported no issues regarding preferences, placements, or provision for children looked after who speak Welsh. In another area, it was highlighted language preferences for children looked after are not being captured, which potentially points to a level of untracked need for Welsh-medium children looked after provision in the area.

Another non-pilot local authority described their approach to strategic planning and provision in Welsh as ‘developing’. It was noted that a lot of team members are not from Wales, and do not speak Welsh. However, the team has access to 2 Welsh speaking educational psychologists, who can support learners.

A children looked after education lead in one non-pilot local authority cited the importance of ensuring that all provision is available in Welsh-medium. However, despite the offer being ‘greatly promoted’, demand for Welsh language support is low, something that was attributed to their location as a local authority bordering England.

In 3 other non-pilot local authorities, stakeholders reported very low demand for Welsh language provision among children looked after. All 3 authorities are able to provide support, and areas with only a small population of Welsh speakers (such as Merthyr Tydfil), described bi-lingual policies and the role of their Welsh-medium champion. In another area, the children looked after education lead referenced access to the Welsh language immersion centre, which supports families in the area with Welsh uptake.

Wider language considerations

Beyond Welsh-medium provision, stakeholders in pilot and non-pilot areas also shared considerations of wider language needs for children looked after in their localities. For example, in Ynys Môn, stakeholders noted that refugee and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have access to the language immersion centre. This delivers up to 12 weeks of provision. In the Vale of Glamorgan, the importance of a bi-lingual platform to support Ukrainian refugee children was highlighted, as well as to support the varied language needs of other communities there.

One local authority also referenced the roles of their Vulnerable Learners Co-ordinator and a specialist Learning Advisor for EAL children, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller children and children looked after, in supporting refugee and migrant learners in education.

3.3.4. Use of learner voice to shape approaches

The majority of local authorities (both pilot and non-pilot) were able to share examples of methods used to capture children looked after experiences in education and their feedback, informing future service provision. There were no substantial trends observed

between the approaches in terms of modes of engagement, though some areas described more 'direct' practices than others. Generally, it was observed that stakeholders interviewed for case study pilot areas had less to share on capturing learner voice, as discussions centred around what the VSM pilot funding had specifically enabled, rather than pre-existing mechanisms for engagement.

In broad terms, however, evidence of good practice in developing a child-centred approach was recorded across most local authorities, to varying degrees of success. Two of the local authorities (one a pilot area, and the other a non-pilot area) expressed weaknesses in this area of their approach and welcomed further sharing of best practice in order to strengthen their support.

Learner voice in pilot areas

In pilot areas, the strongest examples shared of capturing learner voice included the enhanced role of PEPs (completed to a better standard and on time); the role of improved advocacy on behalf of the learner (owing to the better integration of teams supporting children looked after); and a shifting focus to place the child at the centre of the approach.

In Blaenau Gwent, it was felt that support workers within the VSM acted as a conduit between the learner, the local authority, and the educational setting, which enabled better advocacy on behalf of the learner. An example was shared where a learner was supported to complete their GCSEs alongside their peers, avoiding a move to alternative provision. In this case, support workers were credited for their ability to coordinate and collaborate between services to honour the learner's preference to remain in mainstream education alongside familiar peers. The children looked after education mentor in Blaenau Gwent has also set up learner voice groups to help gather collective feedback, in addition to individual responses.

Stakeholders in Powys were able to share that the VS team, in part funded by the VSM pilot, had commissioned the organisation 'Bright Star', a not-for-profit group which uses boxing and education to empower young people to make positive changes. They ran the 'Futures' programme, an alternative education provision for young people, one day a week. This has combined sport, mentoring, and education, to inspire young people and encourage their engagement with learning through a different avenue.

VSM funding in RCT enabled a more culturally oriented shift towards co-production and amplifying young people's voices through practices and decision making. Sentiment around this was highlighted in one stakeholder's observation:

"Now, the young person has become the focal part [of PEPs and reviews] ... instead of us all deciding what might be good for them [...] it's common place to ask now who has met with the young person to capture their views."

An increased focus on primary to secondary transition was also noted in relation to changes that had occurred as a result of participation in the pilot. Schools are now actively encouraged to hold transition meetings to consider how learners can be best

supported. RCT is now working on a timetable to ensure that learner feedback is collected at regular intervals, having recognised that there had not previously been a strong enough integration of learner voice at the strategic level.

In the Vale of Glamorgan, stakeholders highlighted the integration of ‘all about me’ sections in PEPs, which are designed to capture information from the learner’s perspective. The ePEP introduced with VSM pilot funding was noted to have enabled greater involvement in the process from children looked after. Additionally, the corporate parenting strategy for the local authority has been re-written, and consultation events have been held inviting learners, carers, and professionals to share experiences collectively.

Ynys Môn reported having taken a more individualised approach to learner engagement. The PEP is described as child-centred, with staff supporting learners to go through each section together, “so the child knows the process is for them”. Professionals interviewed shared that one of “the most powerful things has been inviting CLA learners to the corporate parenting panel”. Through this, an example was provided in which a child looked after spoke about a negative experience in their education, explaining the support they wished had been in place, and the barriers they had encountered in education prior to engagement with the VS team. This helped colleagues to understand the differences; made through better, tailored support, and to improve future provision.

Due to the (comparatively) small number of children looked after in the local authority, learners decided they prefer not to be identified as a group (e.g. through a children looked after forum or cohort). It was perceived that the capacity provided through the pilot funding has enabled a greater level of 1:1 support for learners, improving the team’s confidence that they understand the support needs of children looked after well, and are equipped to support appropriately. The VS team is now working towards a more co-productive approach, through which learners have more active ownership over the model.

Overall, the positive effects of the pilot funding on the use of learner voice to shape the approach can be attributed to two main factors: the introduction of the ePEP (or an enhanced PEP process), and the increased capacity to support a more child-centred approach to provision. Often these factors are linked, as enhancements to the PEP process require more time and input from professionals to complete them to a meaningful and consistent standard. Specifically, the ePEP would appear to offer distinct advantages to the inclusion of children looked after, such as greater transparency and ownership of the personal information being held about the individual, and the direct access to contribute to this.

Increased capacity for local authorities, such as the provision of specialist teachers, advisory, and mentoring roles, has improved the time afforded to ‘direct work’ with children looked after, meaning that professionals have a much clearer understanding of the support needs of individual learners.

Learner voice in non-pilot areas

For non-pilot areas, stakeholders shared similar experiences around learner involvement in their PEP processes, and the importance of professionals advocating on behalf of children looked after.

In one area, colleagues highlighted a 'wishes and feelings' exercise that schools complete with their children looked after, and these are brought into the PEP process, which is viewed as a meeting for the child. A social worker also cited the importance of their role in 'discovering' issues that can be missed, such as ALN and interpersonal issues, through direct conversations with learners about their experiences. This particular local authority also operates a learner participation forum at least twice a year within children's services, where officers sit in and listen, which provides a direct feedback loop and ensures learner voice is integrated into planning for provision.

In Merthyr Tydfil, colleagues shared several mechanisms for the inclusion of learner voice, although the extent to which these are targeted interventions for children looked after was unclear. Initiatives included a 'well-being squad', and a 'Learner Senedd', which provides an opportunity for all to share their educational experiences. Specifically, it was reported that learner voice has informed recruitment approaches, and improvements to the Pathway to Work programme for children looked after.

Pembrokeshire reported mechanisms for including foster carers or residential placement voice, to provide a more holistic picture of young people's experiences. It was also noted that learner voice for children looked after had impacted service design, as the commissioning team had interviewed children looked after about their perceptions and experiences of therapies. This feedback was used to inform their therapy framework.

In one area, the children looked after education lead reported that they have close relationships with individual schools and that designated teachers "pass on learner voice" and are "amazing advocates for young people who are looked after". However, as a local authority, they "don't do anything for a collective learner voice."

In another local authority they use the "Mind Of My Own" app to capture learner voice as part of children looked after care reviews, but the children looked after education lead described capturing learner voice as a "weakness of the current system" and that because they "hardly get to see the children" they are "very reliant on [children looked after] designated teachers from schools."

Across all areas, best practice examples included:

- Hosting collaborative consultation events encouraging dialogue between children looked after and professionals supporting them.
- 'Pathways to Work' scheme integrating well-being factors, to ensure the 'right fit' for the individual.
- Young person's voice forums (different formats across local authorities).

- Trained mentors involved in PEPs to advocate for children looked after, electronic PEP process (which is perceived to be more transparent) removing barriers for children looked after who do not want to attend in person.
- Inviting children looked after to join existing panels and committees, sharing their experiences about what has worked for them and what could be improved.
- Development of engagement plans to ensure that learner voice is strategically factored into local authority approaches for supporting children looked after, creating a dedicated feedback loop.
- Celebratory events and rewards, where the planning and design of these events are led and co-produced by children looked after.

3.4. Perceived value of the VSM pilot

3.4.1. Perceptions and experiences of children looked after of support in their local authority

The evaluation sought to include the views of children looked after as part of the fieldwork, to triangulate their experiences with the activities described by local authorities. Whilst the changes implemented because of the VSM pilot funding are largely process-based and operational, evidence of impact should be provided through lived experience, to determine whether children looked after have benefited from the introduction of the model.

As detailed in Section 3.3.4, all local authorities have adopted different approaches to collecting and integrating children looked after feedback through their practices. Participation was largely reliant on the nature of connections established between children looked after education leads, and members of staff with direct oversight of learner voice forums.

Minimal findings were obtained on children looked after's perceptions of the impact of the VSM pilot as they would not necessarily be aware of activity that has been funded through the VSM pilot. However general insights and the overall process of undertaking fieldwork have helped to inform understanding of children looked after experiences in education, as well as provide lessons learnt surrounding any future evaluation of VSM and/or PDG-CLA funding.

Learner experiences of educational support

In Powys (a pilot local authority), the learner group recognised the role of the VSM through the specialist children looked after teacher who had worked with them. Learners made a clear distinction between this role, and the nature of other staff involved in their education. It was indicated that this staff member provided a much more holistic approach, supporting not only educational attainment but also well-being and emotional guidance. One learner specifically attributed this to their development and their ability to progress in school, owing to their encouragement through exam periods and supporting them with the transition into sixth form (by visiting the new school they would need to attend to pursue their A Level choices). Learners in the Powys group also confirmed their inclusion in the PEP process: "we have them quite often really, to discuss how things are going in education and what the plans are".

In Merthyr Tydfil (a non-pilot local authority) it was harder for learners to distinguish between their general schooling experience, and any specialist support received in relation to their children looked after-status. Some references were made to teaching and support staff listening to what learners had to say. One learner in the group confirmed that they attended meetings and were involved in decisions that affected their education.

This group were also older and connected through the Pathway to Work Programme. As such they shared insights into the specific challenges children looked after face when it

comes to deciding on post-16 options. Their responses included passing GCSEs (as having to retake them “puts you back”), leaving friends for college or sixth form, support from carers (e.g. carers being supportive of the jobs they want) and having to “open up” to new people again. Relationships, distance to colleges (due to lack of transport options) and the responsibilities of part time jobs were all factors identified to have influenced their post-16 options.

Individuals in the group referenced their programme mentor positively in relation to their impact on attendance, “they [the mentor] just helped me come to school a bit more.” Another learner specifically attributed the mentor’s role in having influenced and encouraged their aspirations to become a nurse: “I didn’t know if I could be able to be a nurse because I didn’t know if I would be able to do it. I started to discipline myself but you [the mentor] told me I could do it.”

In Pembrokeshire (a non-pilot local authority), learners spoke about the subject-specific feedback forms used by their teachers but did not seem aware of the form’s purpose to integrate feedback from children looked after. Again, feedback here centred around in-school experiences as opposed to specialist support. One learner referenced emotional support from, “someone who used to help me with problems or talk about them so I could get it off my mind, he’s like a well-being teacher or counsellor I think.”

Overall, the experiences shared highlight the challenges of differentiating in-school support from support at the local authority level, from the perspectives of children looked after. Whilst this poses challenges for evaluation, learner recognition of distinctive support for children looked after could also have indicated unintended consequences of recognisable support; for example, increased risk of stigmatisation for children looked after. Though the findings accentuate the difficulties involved in gathering evidence of impact from the learner perspective, they have also provided an important insight into the barriers children looked after encounter in their education, and the recommendations they have for improving experiences for children looked after.

Challenges and barriers to education for children looked after

Children and young people were asked, ‘what are the main challenges that you and other care experienced children face when it comes to attending school?’ and shared the following answers:

- fitting in and making new friends i.e.: apprehension about what new friends might think and whether they knew you were in care
- discrimination and stigmatisation – in part because of being identified as ‘children looked after’: ‘it’s just sometimes they can make people feel different from others with all these labels they give them’
- bad memories of school
- anxiety
- not having a sense of belonging
- bullying
- anger and behavioural issues

- doing activities and speaking in front of others
- lack of understanding from teachers and peers
- different abilities within classes
- performance pressures (in relation to exams, for example).

Their recommendations for improving education for children and young people looked after included:

- adjusting lesson and break times, allowing more space in between lessons
- providing weekly check-ups on people in care (confidentially)
- being mindful of the way that offers of support are communicated “I feel like they rush in to stuff too quickly and they say [they] have so much support for you, and they offer all these courses and stuff but sometimes you don’t even need the support and they just make you feel like because you’re in care, you’re different”
- more awareness for those involved in education, of why people are in care
- efforts to connect with young people in care and understand what is going on in their life
- extra personal help
- better placements (and communication) when matching children looked after with foster carers
- asking how the learner wants to be communicated with about decisions that affect them i.e. do they want to know only when there is a definite outcome (for example regarding a new school), or would they like to be kept regularly updated on how a situation is coming along?

Overall, findings reinforce the importance of children looked after having access to trusted professionals who can support their educational development holistically and provide a level of support beyond educational attainment.

Discussions with learners emphasised the value of emotional support from professionals who were able to offer encouragement, provide solutions to their own unique circumstances (which was deemed invaluable to navigating progression), liaise with carers and their school, and follow up on conversations, “you can tell the communication has gone well because the outcome is good.”

3.4.2. Other stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences of the support that is in place in their local authority

Stakeholder perceptions and experiences of support in their local authorities were mostly positive and often shared common themes and practices. Support for children looked after was useful and described as targeted. Best practice was highlighted as building more direct links between children looked after and services; supporting their school attendance; increasing confidence; and easing the experience of moves between local authorities or education settings.

Case study areas examined stakeholder perceptions of the quality of support available in their local authorities. In pilot areas, stakeholders were specifically asked to consider their perceptions of how the funding had been applied, and any perceived value of participation in the pilot. In non-pilot areas, stakeholders were asked more generally about their perceptions and experiences of the support in place in their local authorities for children looked after.

‘Stakeholders’ encompassed a range of roles, and local authority leads were asked to provide interviewees who could best represent their approach to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after. The roles and positions of those interviewed included (but were not limited to):

- Local authority lead officials (for education and children’s services)
- School leaders/ teachers (including ALNCo)
- Specialist teachers, administrators, and well-being officers
- Social workers and youth workers
- Foster carers.

Pilot stakeholder perceptions

In Blaenau Gwent, stakeholders were confident that the decision to fund support workers and expand capacity for provision was the appropriate choice, rather than appointing a VSH. This was described as a ‘left field’ approach but was perceived to be more beneficial than having positioned ‘somebody in a back-office role’. Direct and observable impact for children looked after was seen to be the right priority for investment.

Conversely in Cardiff, stakeholders emphasised the value of the VSH role, which was felt to be integral to coordinating services. Examples were shared of effective interventions, and improved support for headteachers in the local authority, as well as foster carers. Stakeholders here were supportive of the funding use for appointing a VSH, despite the context of wider budgetary challenges in education:

‘I don’t buy into lots of different initiatives... money [in schools] is really bad... I wouldn’t advocate for [the VSH] role unless I thought it had been really useful, which it has [been].’

Stakeholders – including those responding in a professional capacity as well as foster carers – referenced the invaluable interpersonal skills of the VSH and their determination to do everything possible to support children looked after: “[the VSH] helped me realise that we didn’t have to give up ... you know, there was options for [child] ... So the door that I thought was shut, [the VSH] allowed it to be opened with the right contacts and the right people.”

Stakeholders also raised the limitations of the size of the funding in Cardiff, given their high children looked after population. They stressed that, ideally, there would have been additional resource to enable a larger VS ‘team’, which the VSH could coordinate and manage.

Stakeholders in RCT shared positive perceptions of the use of funding to provide a VSH, and of the principles of the model itself. This was evident in reflections such as '[the VSM] has strengthened an integrated approach between education and children's services [producing] – a more effective multi-agency approach.'

In Wrexham, stakeholder observations included that the pilot had enabled a greater consistency of support, stronger collaborative working, and increased confidence as a result of clearer roles being established through the pilot. Whilst the pilot structure was felt to be effective, particularly in the provision of ALN support, it was suggested that there was room for improvement in refining the new positions that had been introduced, as one stakeholder noted 'it's still not as slick as I'd like it to be'.

For stakeholders in Powys, the funding was seen to have enabled a more suitable team effort to provision. The approach implemented was seen to be tailored specifically to local authority needs, given the size and rurality of the area. The Inclusion Lead was viewed to be a valuable role, having a transformative impact on the nature and quality of support made available, however, only in the context of coordination with 3 specialist workers (funded by PDG-CLA).

Limitations

One stakeholder shared perceptions of limitations associated with the pilot funding more broadly, which included:

- recognition that the success of the support available is often very dependent on individual personalities and the quality of relationships formed
- the nature of funding meant that VSMs had to target priority areas of intervention (which was inferred to be more challenging for the larger local authorities).

Non-pilot perceptions

Stakeholders in one non-pilot area demonstrated a high level of confidence in their approach and felt that many of the principles in place are naturally aligned with a VSM, despite having not participated in the pilot. Examples of this include prior efforts to improve PEP processes; positive links and integration with wider services e.g. provision of a youth support worker with links to wider youth services; and having employed an educational psychologist to improve long-term care and stability. Evidence of multi-agency working included effective links with Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), social workers, foster carers, and trauma informed specialists.

In Merthyr Tydfil, stakeholders were also positive about the nature of support offered, highlighting positive team-working, service links, and a learner-centred approach. Stakeholders felt that the VSM was unlikely to have made a difference to the quality of their provision.

This sentiment was expressed in two non-pilot local authorities. Whilst both wanted to participate in the pilot (one applied but was unsuccessful, the other was unable to

produce a proposal in time), the lack of participation was not felt to have hindered their approaches.

A stakeholder in Merthyr Tydfil expressed the view that, 'implementation of a VSM wouldn't have really changed operations that much, but I can see the benefits of being part of a more nation-wide approach'. In another local authority, a stakeholder explained that they considered applying for the second round of funding but decided against doing so due to the short-term nature of the funding cycle, and concerns around changes being sustained in the future. These views highlight the perceived limitations of the pilot process and help to explain why some local authorities appeared uncertain around the value of the VSM funding.

3.5. Impact of pilot funding

3.5.1. Impact measurement

Impact within the VSM pilot has been measured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, with pilot local authorities drawing on a range of data to assess both the outputs of the VS teams and the outcomes for children looked after.

Output measures have primarily focused on the number of caseloads supported by the VSH or VS teams. Data collection relating to outcome measures have included the following range of metrics:

- changes in attendance and exclusion rates (e.g. Blaenau Gwent)
- well-being assessment scores (such as through the Thrive framework which schools can opt-in to, to support learners' social and emotional development)
- educational attainment outcomes, including GCSE results and post-16 progression (e.g. Cardiff)
- behavioural improvements and intervention outcomes, such as referrals to CAMHS or access to coaching
- qualitative feedback on engagement and reintegration into education settings (e.g. Blaenau Gwent).

The data used to monitor the impact of the pilot varies across local authorities. One local authority (Blaenau Gwent), for example, has tracked outcomes such as successful reintegration into school, sustained engagement in education, and reduced exclusions, noting that the pilot enabled a more consistent level of support to all children. In another pilot local authority (Cardiff), specific criteria were established to assess whether children looked after are meeting age-appropriate expectations in literacy and numeracy. Impact monitoring was described as evolving at a third pilot local authority (Powys). While data collection to date has been relatively limited, the authority plans to introduce more active and longitudinal monitoring imminently. This will include detailed monitoring about individual interventions (such as referrals to CAMHS, tutoring and coaching support offered, and liaison with schools) improving the quality of information that is recorded.

Some authorities also highlighted the challenges of measuring impact in the context of wider reforms. For example, the broadly concurrent implementation of the ALN Code and associated changes, such as the introduction of an online IDP system, make it challenging to isolate the effects of the VSM pilot. Similarly, while one pilot authority did not report specific impact data, there is evidence of enhanced quality assurance processes and a stronger ability to monitor educational attainment among children looked after that now needs to be captured. Non-pilot authorities also offered suggestions on how VSM impact could be measured including collecting data on attendance, exclusions, engagement levels, outcomes at GCSE, and post-16

destinations, including reductions in the number of children looked after who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Overall, current monitoring approaches offer some useful insights into both the implementation and emerging outcomes of the pilot. However, they are not without limitations. A common challenge is attributing observed changes directly to the VSM pilot, particularly where other policy changes, such as the ALN Code, are also influencing practice and outcomes. The mobility of the children looked after population further complicates the ability to track impact over time. Moreover, some outcome measures, such as changes in behaviour, rely on subjective judgements that are difficult to standardise across settings. The variation in monitoring approaches between pilot authorities also limits the consistency and comparability of the data being collected.

There is scope to strengthen impact measurement going forward. Local authorities could benefit from developing a shared framework for data collection and analysis, enabling a more consistent approach across Wales. Investing in systems that support real-time and longitudinal tracking of outcomes for children looked after would also enhance the quality of evidence. Additionally, there is a need to build capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions such as coaching or CAMHS referrals in a more systematic way. Finally, better triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data would support a more rounded understanding of the pilot's contribution to changes in the educational experiences and outcomes of children looked after.

3.5.2. Short-term impacts

This section sets out the short-term impacts of the VSM pilot that are already evident from pilot local authorities. First, we consider the short-term impacts upon the system and processes before turning to consider the short-term impacts upon children looked after.

Impacts on system

The main short-term process related impacts identified by pilot local authorities included:

Improved data collection and monitoring systems

Four local authorities (Vale of Glamorgan, RCT, Newport and Wrexham) reported that they had strengthened their data collection processes, providing more robust evidence to monitor outcomes for children looked after and assess the effectiveness of their interventions. In the Vale of Glamorgan, improved data systems were credited with eliminating the risk of losing manually recorded information, allowing for more consistent monitoring of children's educational attainment. As one stakeholder noted:

"They [the VSH] know when they are not in school ... helps to bring issues to the forefront."

In RCT the introduction of a data dashboard enabled the VSM team to track key indicators such as patterns in school attendance, exclusion rates, and the number of children looked after on reduced timetables. These streamlined data collection and

reporting methods provided the team with a clearer, more accurate overview of the children looked after population across the county. Similarly, stakeholders in Newport highlighted that new data systems enabled them to be more responsive to emerging needs. This adaptability led to a more holistic and tailored approach to supporting children looked after. In Wrexham, the pilot was credited with enhancing data capture and sharing, resulting in more timely access to critical information, which in turn would help prevent issues escalating. Collectively, these developments were thought to enable local authorities to sharpen their focus on areas requiring attention, as one put it:

‘I’ve always been of the opinion that what gets measured gets done.’

Improved awareness and upskilling of staff

Staff awareness of the issues faced by children looked after has improved as a result of the advocacy work carried out through the VSM pilots, alongside the training made available to them. In 4 local authority areas, contributors reported enhanced understanding among staff of the challenges experienced by children looked after, with many professionals now better equipped to support this cohort, including through the adoption of trauma-informed practices.

In RCT, for example, the commissioning and delivery of trauma-informed training to schools and other services deepened practitioners’ understanding of the experiences of children looked after. This led to increased empathy, greater awareness of the challenges faced, and improved insight into their lived experiences. Similarly in Ynys Môn, the delivery of targeted training resulted in improved awareness and knowledge among practitioners, enabling them to respond more effectively to the needs of children looked after.

In Powys, social workers noted that the VSM encouraged them to share relevant background information about children looked after with schools. This has improved collaboration and helped school staff gain a clearer understanding of the trauma experienced by the children, allowing for more sensitive and informed support to be put into place. In a fourth authority (Newport), trauma-informed training provided to the LACE team and designated teachers led to a stronger understanding of the children looked after cohort, reinforcing the importance of tailored and empathetic educational support.

Improved collaboration and partnership working

There was evidence that VSM pilot projects had helped to improve collaboration and partnership working between education and other services, particularly social services in three of the local authorities (Ynys Môn, RCT, Newport). In one such local authority (Newport) the introduction of the VSM was seen as instrumental in bridging the gap between social services and education. Five stakeholders reported that communication channels had become clearer and more structured, with an increase in joint meetings facilitating better coordination and shared understanding across services.

Single point of access for children looked after information

In one local authority (RCT), the VSM pilot led to the development of a single, centralised access point for schools, partner agencies, services, parents/carers, and learners. This streamlined approach helped to establish clearer, more effective communication channels. As a result, schools reported being better informed about whom to contact regarding children looked after-related matters; children's social services noted more regular meetings with VSM staff to update IDPs; social services highlighted improved consistency in school processes and a clearer understanding of expected procedures; and foster carers reported having a more straightforward pathway to access support. In the Vale of Glamorgan, it was suggested that foster carers were receiving fewer conflicting messages as a result of the VSM and were more likely to be included in processes relating to children looked after. There was also some evidence that being able to turn to a single point of information and advice relating to children looked after issues was helping to reduce anxiety amongst school staff around making the right decisions and gaining the right support and information.

Improved quality and timeliness of producing PEPs

Six of the local authorities (Vale of Glamorgan, Powys, RCT, Wrexham, Ynys Môn , Cardiff) suggested that PEPs were being written quicker and to a better standard since the introduction of the VSM pilots, which meant that provision could be put into place sooner than would otherwise have been the case. For instance, staff from one local authority (Ynys Môn) previously struggled getting PEPs completed properly, but upskilling teachers and maintaining relationships with staff had helped to substantially reduce the number of PEPs which were now being rated 'red' as part of a RAG rating exercise. Similarly, another local authority observed that improved completion rates had led to a reduction in the number of PEPs being assessed as problematic across their area.

'[PEPs now] happen every term which didn't use to happen'

It was also frequently observed that PEPs were now more realistic and centred around the needs and circumstances of the child. For instance, one social worker (Powys) explained that '[PEPs are] a lot more focused on the child'. They illustrated this with an example of an autistic child with moderate learning difficulties. The child 'used to be set stupid goals that were unattainable [such as] sit down for three hours.' But the PEP was now based on his interests with more achievable goals such as catching a bus with staff to visit a shop, to practise using money.

Three local authorities (Cardiff, Vale of Glamorgan, Powys) reported that they were in a better position to address weaknesses or gaps within the PEPs prepared by schools as a result of improved quality assurance processes that had been introduced as part of their VSM pilot. Increased staff capacity and improved processes meant that VSM pilots were better placed to ask schools to include more detail within PEPs if they had not been completed to the expected standard. In one local authority, (Newport) where the VSM pilot funding had been used to employ mentors who participated in PEP meetings, it was observed that better information about the progress being made by the child was now being captured, which was being used to help facilitate their learning. The approach

adopted in this case was thought to work well as children looked after had a champion who reviewed their progress and advocated their needs during PEP meetings.

Three local authorities (Vale of Glamorgan, Powys, Ynys Môn) reported that the introduction of electronic PEPs (ePEPs) had streamlined the process and made it easier to review and challenge their content. Three stakeholders noted that having a live, digital document was not only more efficient but also less time-consuming to manage. As a result, PEPs were now being completed for all children looked after cases, with one authority reporting a '100% PEP completion rate.' Another local authority reported that the adoption of ePEPs had enhanced their ability to monitor the progress of all children looked after, allowing the VSM to take a more inclusive approach, ensuring attention was given to all learners not just those who have more difficulties at school.

"Because he's a really engaged learner, he could have gone under the radar [had it not been for ePEPs]." (Vale of Glamorgan)

In one local authority (RCT) a new PEP template had been adopted across the authority area, and the VSM team had worked with schools to help them improve their understanding of how to complete them. In this case, the VS team also proactively contacted schools to check that PEPs were being completed on time.

Impacts on children looked after

The main short-term impacts identified by pilot local authorities upon children looked after are set out below, supported where available by illustrative case study examples.

The presence of a consistent, trusted individual

Two local authorities (Blaenau Gwent and Powys) argued that the VSM pilot funding had been pivotal in providing a 'consistent, trusted person' to work with children looked after. One social worker (Powys) observed that 'for the learner, VS staff [i.e. the specialist teachers] become the consistent trusted person' which meant that 'young people open up to VS staff more – and more often'.

Case study: the presence of consistent and trusted support

Interviewed contributors recalled the experiences of one Year 3 boy, who has experienced instability in both his home life and education since early childhood. Taken into care at a young age, he has faced repeated changes in foster placements, and each autumn term since he began school brought yet another school move. His final transition was into a special school setting, intended to meet his growing and complex educational needs. Although he managed reasonably well in his early primary years, the turbulence at home and lack of consistent care and educational provision began to take a toll. His case was initially managed by the locality team and later by the 14+ team, but by that stage, he had developed a deeply entrenched hostility towards professionals, particularly his social worker.

The turning point came through targeted support funded by the VSM. A mentor who had previously worked with him was able to step up into the role of Educational Support Worker,

becoming the one constant figure across his fractured educational experience. This continuity proved vital. She provided calm, trusted guidance – not just for the child but for school staff who were struggling to manage his behaviours and were unsure how best to respond in moments of crisis. The support put in place for the boy was flexible and responsive, ensuring timely interventions, emotional support, and educational guidance.

In addition to providing the role of Educational Support Worker, the VSM worked collaboratively across the local authority to provide further tailored interventions such as funded tuition, well-being coaching, and alternative provision. The result was transformative. This boy who had experienced six, fixed-term exclusions in the year prior to this support being put in place went on to complete the following academic year with zero exclusions. He began to re-engage with learning, develop trust in adults, and settle into his new school environment. An IDP was put in place, and he made a successful move into a special school setting designed to meet his individual needs.

Sadly, following the end of the VSM pilot project funding, the key staff involved in his progress were no longer in post. The loss of these two consistent adult figures was perceived to have had an immediate effect. Since September, he has already experienced two further exclusions, which was perceived to illustrate the difference that stable and trusted relationships can have upon children looked after.

Enhanced oversight and advocacy for children looked after

The pilot VSMs were thought to have put in place additional, dedicated staff capacity to ‘champion’ children looked after, advocate their case and ‘keep an eye on children’ over time (RCT). This was thought to be particularly important for those children looked after who move frequently between different placements and schools. VSM teams were often praised for the role that they undertook as advocates of vulnerable children looked after, particularly to put in place educational provision that was well suited to their needs. In one local authority (Cardiff) it was noted that the pilot had strengthened the voice of children looked after during professional meetings.

Case study: advocating on behalf of children looked after

In Cardiff, a child looked after who had previously been in a secure setting having experienced a hugely traumatic life, was being supported by the VSM to embrace new challenges and reach their potential in alternative, less-restricted provision:

“So what [VSH] is doing is quite innovative in terms of championing this child ... working with children services, working with education to ensure that this particular child gets exactly what she needs, it's never been offered before. It's something new ... that's some of the best work she's done. I think other local authorities will look at what she and [name of local authority] is doing in order to meet the needs of children where being in a secure [setting] isn't necessarily the right answer for them. They need something else, something new, something different.”

Case study: advocating and liaising with schools and carers

A foster carer (RCT) noted that the VS played a crucial role in supporting a child looked after during their transition from primary to secondary school. The VSH provided valuable guidance, helping the carer understand their rights and what they should expect from schools, enabling them to better advocate for the child. This support proved essential when the school attempted to reduce the child's educational timetable, a decision the VSH successfully challenged, ensuring the child's best interests were prioritised. In addition to advocating for the child, the VSH also provided support to the school, helping them implement necessary provisions despite staff changes. The foster carer described the VSH as both firm and supportive, helping schools put appropriate measures in place while also offering guidance when the carer felt their concerns were not being adequately addressed. They found the Virtual School's advice invaluable in determining whether their expectations of the school were reasonable, appreciating the reassurance and clarity it provided in navigating the education system:

"I've found the Virtual Head really helpful to gauge whether I expect too much from the school; I get frustrated with so many things. I listen to their advice about the remit of schools and what they should be providing".

Addressing complex challenges facing children looked after

The introduction of the pilot projects were thought to have helped ensure that children looked after have access to the appropriate support and intervention that they needed. One local authority interviewee (Cardiff) observed that the VSM was helping to ensure that children looked after were able to access well-being interventions such as the 'Thrive' approach, which might not have happened in the absence of the model. In another authority area (RCT), the VSM was praised for its flexible and creative approach to finding appropriate education solutions for children looked after, such as alternative education placements and work experience for children looked after with more complex needs:

"we've had young people involved in activities outside the usual curriculum ... that is better".

It was commonly observed that this greater consistency in the support available for children looked after had often been introduced as a result of improved monitoring data, which allowed the VSM to identify and address issues on a more consistent and timelier basis.

Case study: sourcing alternative provision for children looked after with complex needs

In Powys the VSM pilot provided targeted support for a child experiencing behavioural difficulties. Recognising the complexity of the child's needs, the VS staff advocated for a part-time education timetable, despite resistance from the assigned social worker. This intervention proved highly effective, resulting in a marked improvement: the child, who had previously been excluded on a weekly basis, did not face exclusion for an entire month and as a result of this progress, the learner's timetable was extended.

Behavioural issues have less severe consequences

Several local authorities provided examples whereby children looked after were experiencing a reduction in behavioural issues due to the pilot projects' ability to put in place earlier and more tailored interventions. This meant that behavioural concerns were being addressed before they escalated into major issues. For instance, one such local authority (Ynys Môn) thought that early, more preventative interventions from well-being officers was helping to de-escalate behavioural issues amongst children looked after.

Case study: Early and tailored intervention to address behavioural issues

A Year 4 boy (RCT) who had been in care for several years initially displayed positive behaviour on joining a new school, but over the past two years, his conduct became highly disruptive, impacting his class. His behaviour led to extreme strain, with his class teacher going on sick leave and eight supply teachers refusing to return. He also influenced his peers negatively, and despite the school being both a nurturing school and a trauma-informed school, they felt that they had exhausted all strategies to support him. Seeking assistance, the school contacted the local authority and was directed to the Virtual School team, which they had not previously encountered.

The headteacher reached out to the VS Head, who arranged one-on-one support for the learner over two terms. An additional staff member was appointed to work closely with him, leading to incredible progress. His behaviour improved, he re-engaged with education, and he successfully reintegrated into mainstream lessons. Previously, he could only remain in class for about 20 minutes before becoming disruptive, but with targeted intervention, he regained control and returned to his usual self. The learner was on the verge of exclusion, but the intervention from the VS Head prevented this outcome, reducing behavioural issues and enabling him to thrive academically and socially.

3.5.3. Anticipated long-term impacts

A range of long-term impacts were identified by pilot projects, which are set out in this section.

Improved attendance

Whilst there was some evidence of improved children looked after attendance at school having already taken place since the introduction of the pilot projects across four authority areas, in most cases it was expected that this change would be a long-term one. In one local authority (Wrexham) there were early signs of improved attendance amongst a particular cohort of children looked after girls aged years 9 to 11. Across 2 other local authorities (RCT and Ynys Môn) there were also early indications of improved attendance. In both these cases, it was noted that the VSM team were able to identify non-attendance quicker than had previously been the case due to better monitoring processes. Additionally, it was felt that they had more expertise and capacity to address the complex challenges faced by children looked after, thereby enabling learners to re-engage with their education more swiftly than was previously the case. Another local authority (Powys) reported that they had already seen an improvement in

school attendance amongst learners with the attendance rate now close to the county's average and currently only approximately '0.04 [per cent]' behind the overall attendance for the county'. Several local authorities were confident that the intervention would help ensure that children looked after would be able to stay in school more, and for longer.

Reduction in exclusions

A reduction in children looked after exclusions was an anticipated long-term impact for the pilot local authorities. A number of local authorities however did not have access to any data which would enable them to compare the exclusion rates for children looked after with children not-looked after, or monitor any impact made by their interventions. Others (e.g.: RCT) were mindful that there had been a general increase in the number of exclusions in the learner population reported over the pilot period, and that children looked after exclusions were consistent with this trend.

Some local authorities provided initial evidence to substantiate that pilot projects were starting to impact positively upon reductions in exclusions. For instance, one local authority (Powys) reported that 'many exclusions' had already been avoided and that there had been 'no permanent exclusions' since the introduction of the VSM. Similarly, another local authority (Wrexham) noted that there had been a decrease in exclusions amongst children looked after due to better monitoring and intervention. This included one example of a child issued with a 10-day exclusion from school – in this case support (information and advice) had been provided to her social worker to successfully challenge the fixed-term exclusion, thereby resulting in better outcomes for the child. Another local authority observed that the additional support provided to children looked after was helping to mitigate initial social and emotional issues which could lead to exclusions.

Increased numbers of children looked after staying or reintegrating back into mainstream education

Pilot projects were considered to have the potential to increase the number of children looked after staying in, or being reintegrated back into, mainstream education. It was noted that children looked after were getting better school experiences due to provision being better suited to meet their needs, and that any issues encountered were being addressed sooner. Some examples were provided by local authorities of children looked after who were thought to have been more likely to have stayed in mainstream education as a result of the intervention.

For instance, in Ynys Môn, one child looked after was placed on a reduced timetable in order to secure some GSCE qualifications whilst attending a military prep college for one day a week. In another area (Blaenau Gwent), a child looked after was reported to have gone back into mainstream school provision as a result of the VSM having broken down barriers around access and education. This learner was unable to access mainstream provision at the time when the VSM got involved but managed to complete their GSCEs with their peers and continued into post-16 education.

Improved attainment and acquisition of formal qualifications

This long-term outcome was mostly attributed to the targeted intervention and support put in place by the VSM to assist children looked after with academic work, particularly in cases where they were found to be struggling with their studies. One social worker (Powys) observed that the VSM worked with two children looked after who achieved GCSEs and would not have done so without the VSM. In this case the VSM had set up an examination centre at the care home and arranged for school staff and VS staff to invigilate during exams. Another local authority (Cardiff) reported that:

“Last year a child looked after learner left with 5 A* qualifications – [that] would have been different without the VSM team”

One local authority (Wrexham) highlighted improved educational outcomes for children looked after with complex ALN:

“You know, children looked after are the most complex [learners] and you add ALN [to that], but generally they do make good progress now in line with their ability [...] and we'll analyse that at the end of this academic year.”

Supporting the acquisition of formal qualifications

A foster carer (RCT), acting on a social worker's suggestion, contacted the local authority to seek additional support for a Year 10 learner and was referred to the VSH, who explained that one-to-one tutoring was available for learners during their GCSE studies. The VSM arranged tutoring sessions, allowing two young people in the carer's care to receive eight lessons each in key subjects such as Maths and English. The tutoring proved highly effective for one learner, who engaged well, performed consistently better in their GCSE exams compared to their mock results, and exceeded the grades required to progress to study A-levels. However, the support was less effective for the other, who remained disengaged with academic work and would have likely benefited more from non-academic provision.

Reduced proportion of children looked after becoming NEET post-16

There was already anecdotal evidence that pilot projects were helping to reduce the number of children looked after who might potentially become NEET after leaving compulsory school. One social worker (Powys) observed that they had one learner apply to an army training course on leaving school who has since completed their first phase of training. In this case, it was argued that ‘that is down to the virtual school’. In another local authority, the additional support and alternative provision provided to children looked after to obtain GCSE qualifications was helping them to gain access to further education post-16.

3.6. National rollout

3.6.1. Opinions of stakeholders on national rollout of a VSM

To inform future policy development and provide further conclusions on the effectiveness of the pilot, all local authorities (including those that had not participated in the pilot) were asked about their views on a potential implementation of the VSM, at a national level.

Views of pilot local authorities

Almost unanimous support was observed for roll-out of a VSM in some form amongst stakeholders in pilot local authorities. Lead stakeholders (i.e. LACE coordinators/ equivalent and VSHs) provided various explanations to support their views, and the provision of a dedicated resource for championing children looked after with local authorities was a central factor. In conjunction with this, stakeholders emphasised the importance of clarity for professionals around who to contact in relation to educational issues for children looked after – providing a recognisable and accountable point of contact.

Others who shared support for the VSM were concerned with consistency, suggesting that there would be many benefits to a level of standardisation across Wales. A national rollout would improve the status of support for children looked after and could drive standards in educational provision for children looked after. The consistency of processes in place across local authorities was also perceived to be integral to managing moves between areas more effectively, including border counties; “[the VSM] would work better with a nation-wide roll out – would benefit out-of-country [children looked after] placements.” Regarding differences encountered between Welsh local authorities, stakeholders noted that consistent standards could alleviate problems such as navigating different admission procedures and processes for ALN assessment.

Of those who shared further feedback in support of a national rollout, stakeholders in Powys, Cardiff, and the Vale of Glamorgan were particularly in favour of the VSH as a principle. This was recommended as a ‘bare minimum’ component of a VSM, with the support of a dedicated team, and emphasis was placed on sentiment that “children don’t deserve a ‘watered down’ version of a Virtual School Head.” Newport stakeholders were less supportive of a VSH specifically, but supportive of the consistency offered by the VSH. Here, the counterview is that a VSH risks undermining responsibilities for head teachers in schools (for children looked after) by adding another layer to the system, duplicating roles, and compromising accountability for Senior Leadership Teams in school settings.

Reasons shared ‘against’ the introduction of a national VSM were centrally concerned with the restrictions that could be imposed by a rigid or inflexible model. This was spoken about in comparison to the terms of the pilot, which stakeholders believed encouraged a non-prescriptive approach. Wider explanation included lack of detail or explanation (at this stage) of what a national VSM for Wales might include, contributing to reluctance to support a rollout without knowing the suggested terms. Concerns were

also raised surrounding the sustainability of a national VSM in the long-term, as stakeholders lacked confidence in future ring-fenced funding in this area.

Views of non-pilot local authorities

Views were observed to be more mixed and apprehensive on the question of a national rollout amongst stakeholders in non-pilot local authorities, with no real consensus achieved between them.

Reasons in favour included the recognition that it could help ‘raise the bar’ in support for children looked after, through an increased focus on monitoring their educational outcomes. This would build on experiences with a similar model for Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). It was also felt that a national rollout would provide opportunities for standardising information captured in PEPs, maintaining quality levels across PEPs for all learners and ensuring they are completed effectively. Additionally, there was an acknowledgment that the integrated nature of the model creates positive opportunities for improving social care professionals’ understanding of education for children looked after.

Finally, the advantages of introducing a consistent model were echoed, particularly as learners are often moved across local authority boundaries. Stakeholders highlighted how positive it would be if children looked after had access to the same support systems, wherever they were located in the country. Comparisons were drawn with the introduction of a similar model for PRUs, which a children looked after education lead in one local authority thought “certainly helped local authorities to develop their PRU provision.” This same stakeholder believed that “having a Virtual School Head would raise the bar... having [VSHs] all coordinating across Wales, sharing what is working and not working.”

Reasons expressed ‘against’ a rollout mirrored the concerns shared by pilot participants: uncertainty around what a VSM for Wales might entail; concerns about a model that is too restrictive; and scepticism around the long-term affordability of sustaining the model.

In addition, non-pilot stakeholders were more concerned about the use (and merits) of funding to introduce the VSH role and suggested that this could compromise funding being ‘directly’ targeted toward supporting children looked after. Those who felt funding could be better spent elsewhere shared alternative investment options such as bolstering capacity on existing teams; investment in a new, Wales-wide PEP system; or the provision of direct support for children looked after. This suggests that these stakeholders perceived the VSH role as the only defining feature of a VSM.

Some children looked after education leads questioned whether a VSM for Wales would deliver any benefits to Wales over-and-above those delivered with existing models of provision. Concern was also expressed – notably from a children looked after education lead with comparatively low numbers of children looked after in their local authority – about how “the funding could be fair” if local authorities are all provided with the same amount regardless of the number of children looked after in their care.

In line with a concern raised by a minority of pilot stakeholders, a children looked after education lead in one non-pilot local authority perceived it as “a mistake to [let] the local authority have control over a child ... taking authority away from a school that knows the child”. In their view, the role of the VSH could be seen to diffuse the responsibility of the named head teacher of a learner who is looked after, re-positioning the accountability of the individual responsible for the learner’s education.

Views on the scope of a future rollout

Interviews expanded on the potential scope and remit of a national rollout, to which stakeholders in favour of the VSM emphasised the importance of communicating the model as more of a ‘team’ approach, compared to the ‘old’ LACE coordinator / equivalent role. A dedicated VSM team was felt to be integral to supporting the VSH.

Stakeholders stipulated that the funding should reflect the number of children looked after in the local authority. This stemmed from the perceived unfairness of offering fixed funding amounts, regardless of the number of children looked after each local authority is responsible for supporting. For example, Cardiff has nearly 10 times as many children looked after (1040) compared to Ynys Môn (145)¹⁸ which would mean if the VSM funding was used to employ a VSH in both models, the post holder in Cardiff would have less capacity to track and support the young people in their care.

It was also suggested it should cover learners up to the age of 18 (in line with children’s services) in order to ensure sufficient support and capacity for VSM teams. Long-term security in the funding was felt to be necessary to mitigate the risk of an inconsistent support offering for learners.

Emphasis was additionally placed on ensuring high quality staffing for effective VSM teams, as stakeholders recognised that those with long-term experience in supporting children looked after and/or education are best positioned to develop trusted relationships across services. The importance of addressing inconsistencies in what individuals are paid for being the ‘recognised lead’ for children looked after in education and the expertise they bring to the role was highlighted in the following quote: “Welsh Government need to focus on the role, paygrade and qualification ... [we’ve got people] doing broadly the same role from [a £25,000 salary] to [a £65,000 salary].” According to stakeholder perceptions here, inconsistencies and disparities between the roles (and corresponding salaries) demand further consideration.

3.6.2. Need for baseline requirements and standard processes

There was no clear consensus on standardising processes and developing baseline requirements for a national VSM. Stakeholders were largely hesitant to provide definitive answers when asked about the extent to which local authorities should be ‘free to define their own approach’ to the VSM, expressing caution in recognition of local contexts.

¹⁸ [Number of children looked after at 31 March 2024 by local authority, age, and gender](#)

Overall, local authorities were more vocal about the importance of direction from Welsh Government in relation to the conditions attached to funding, especially in terms of standards. Some favoured an approach including familiar 'core elements' whilst maintaining a level of flexibility for different models, allowing variations in resources and capacity to be fairly taken into account.

Those against standardising processes attached to the VSM felt that the Model needs to maintain freedom to reflect the local context (i.e. area specific needs) as well as to operate in the pre-established care landscape. This sentiment was summarised by the following view:

"If it is going to be very rigid and have a lot of restrictions around what can be done then I would be less likely to encourage or support it". (local authority stakeholder)

Despite the emphasis on maintaining autonomy for local authorities in determining the structure of their support, widespread positive sentiment was observed for some key components of support for children looked after to be standardised across Wales. This included the standardisation of PEPs between local authorities, to ensure a consistent standard of quality, transparency, and inclusion for learners.

If a nationwide VSM were to be introduced, suggested key components of an effective VSM included:

- VSH (or equivalent title) needs to have (recent) experience of being a head and working with vulnerable children: "[The] strength of the model is the parity that I've got with other headteachers, [where there is] background as a head teacher of a school with large number looked after children."
- A clear and universally understood set of principles underpinning the model.
- A governance structure: roles and structure of each model should be distinctly articulated to enable accountability / governance (e.g.: a Management Committee)
- Requiring a "Genuine partnership with Children's Services" (i.e. a genuinely integrated approach to provision)
- Data sharing between education, children's services and other stakeholders (e.g.: foster carers): "via a professional portal to exchange data securely."
- An accessible and real-time data system for 'live' monitoring of attendance, exclusions, and interventions
- Prioritising the voice of learners: "children looked after voice needs to be at the heart of it."
- Emphasis/a minimum requirement on the allocation of resources to enable direct work with children looked after: this should ensure that the VS is adopted as a fully-fledged, collaborative Model, and counters the misconception that a VSH is its distinguishing feature
- Needs to provide an offer of vocational support: facilitating access to suitable alternatives to mainstream provision

- A dedicated VSM team member with responsibility for ALN
- Well-defined monitoring requirements: to measure the impact of funding in a way that's robust and traceable
- Opportunities to promote shared learning across all VSMs

3.6.3. Replicable features of approaches to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after

All participating local authorities were invited to share positive aspects of their approaches which were felt to be easily replicated (i.e. transferrable) to other areas. Pilot areas shared the following features:

- Support worker roles across all local authorities (and more established roles across the board to enhance outcomes)
- The introduction of the ePEP (standardised format)
- The community-focused school model
- Effective use of data and assessment (with training linked to provide an effective feedback loop)
- Preventative strategies and early intervention (which is easier to achieve when information surrounding the learner's status is reliable and easily accessible)
- A fully trauma informed approach (across all services)

Non-pilot areas shared the following practices, which were reported to be effective in their approaches to supporting learners and could potentially be considered in a national model for children looked after education support:

- The Pathway to Work model for children looked after young people, supporting post-16 pathways into employment.
- Consistency in training packages offered across local authorities (including trauma informed and young adult support).
- Information sharing surrounding what school placement will look like to help with admissions and moves, ensuring conversations and updates about progress.

4. Conclusions

Evidence has been found of collective progress against almost all intended short-term and long-term impact areas, including:

- Increased buy-in for the approach at the local level (apart from one participating local authority)
- Improved collaboration between local authorities and relevant stakeholders
- Improved quality of data
- Improved school and local authority confidence in supporting children looked after
- Improved integrated working at the local authority and regional level

Wider impacts have not been observed consistently across the models. This is a natural consequence of the limitations of the grant funding provided, and the targeted applications that local authorities selected to develop their approaches. As such, the pilots were not equipped to deliver against all the intended impacts, but rather to prioritise the areas that required development.

The evaluation did not aim to compare progress between pilot and non-pilot areas (positioning non-pilots as a control group) given the absence of baseline data for the local authorities, and considering the variation observed across local authority practices. Evidence collected through the evaluation is not robust enough to determine whether the pilot funding has ‘added value’ to supporting educational outcomes for learners, when compared to non-pilot approaches. Cost saving impacts were also not reported on by stakeholders. The evaluation has, however, drawn conclusions about the ‘added value’ that the funding has generated for the pilot local authorities, who have been enabled to test and improve interventions offered to support children looked after.

The conclusions provided in this section are framed in response to the four aims of the evaluation exercise and help to provide a final assessment on the extent to which the pilot can be considered successful.

4.1. The applications and uses of VSM pilot funding

Four of the local authorities directed most of their funding towards the introduction of a VSH or equivalent role. All of these participated as case study areas, and stakeholders interviewed (colleagues working in partnership) reinforced the view that a VSH is best supported with a VSM team, which the VSH oversees at a strategic level.

Four of the pilot local authorities created operational posts to increase capacity to support children looked after. This allowed them to strategically consider the structure of their provision, appoint new roles, introduce coordinated meetings to enable an integrated approach to delivery, and introduce or enhance trauma informed practice across services.

Three of the pilot authorities (two of which already had a VSH or equivalent in post prior to the pilot) allocated the majority of their VSM funding to invest in data systems and introduce an ePEP. Stakeholders in these teams supported the rationale that this was a considered investment for a pilot fund, delivering a lasting change that would benefit provision regardless of future funding fluctuations.

Two of the recipients intended to appoint a VSH, but funds were redirected. Limited information was available for one local authority, wherein a change of staffing has resulted in the lead stakeholder responsible for children looked after no longer being in post; and therefore unreachable. In the other instance, the initial funding application changed course, from the installation of a VSH, to the development of a framework to explore what a VSM could look like in the area. In the absence of a VSH, attention was placed on 'upskilling' the team, so that trained team members could form an equipped VSM board, if or when a VSH is introduced.

Overall, the approaches were well aligned with the VSM principles and components, as set out in the Welsh Government's principles, terms, and conditions of the pilot. In the impact analysis, it was concluded that components were achieved at the programme level, however the amount of funding available was often insufficient to make progress across all areas.

There was some critique, from strategic stakeholders and even from lead stakeholders in local authorities that fully supported the model, that the pilot initiative was too flexible, which they perceived to have prevented the implementation of an 'authentic' VS approach. However, local authorities reported that they also needed to allocate the funding in a way that was suitable for their local context, and crucially, considered longer-term consequences, given the temporary nature of the pilot.

While the remit of most local authority approaches, and therefore of the evaluation, applied to children (currently) looked after; a 'grey area' was observed between the wider PDG-CLA funding guidance (which includes care experienced children) and the approaches of local authorities in practice.

The VSM grant terms and conditions stated that, 'This [the VSM] will include looked after children placed within and outside of the local authority boundaries and should ideally also include those formerly looked-after and those on the edge of care, up to the age of 25.' Whilst this was provided to describe the overall purpose of the VSM, it was not explicitly attached to monitoring and reporting requirements, or to the funding purposes.

Implicit feedback suggests that in all local authorities (pilots and non-pilots), a lack of capacity, combined with barriers to data access, prevents a focus on all care experienced children. However, due to the PDG-CLA's reference to all care experienced children, stakeholders demonstrated reluctance to state this explicitly.

These findings have supported insights gained from an initial scoping interview with Adoption UK, who described a lack of available support for adopted children because of a lack of comparable access to information (e.g. the PEP, which is only a statutory requirement for children currently in care) for adopted learners. Overall, lack of access to

comparable data and resource is perceived to have prevented local authorities from expanding their approaches to include provision and oversight for all care experienced children.

4.2. How non-pilot area approaches compared to areas in receipt of pilot funding

Common themes were observed to facilitate positive outcomes across both pilot and non-pilot areas; largely resting upon effective communication and collaboration between services, trusted and experienced personnel, and timely information sharing. The original principles of the VSM (identified by Sir Alasdair MacDonald) and attached as terms of the pilot funding, were recognised and supported in both pilot and non-pilot local authorities. However in pilot areas, approaches can be deemed effective as they targeted specific areas of weakness in provision and sought to strengthen these attributes.

It can be observed that many of the barriers to effective practice raised by non-pilots were areas that the pilot funding was specifically targeted to address, such as improving communications between teams and overcoming a lack of understanding by other services surrounding the education landscape for children looked after. However, persistent systemic barriers remain across pilot and non-pilot authorities, such as challenges with recruitment and retention within social care and inconsistencies with social worker staffing, and lack of foster care placements. Both of which have critical impacts on the stability of education for children looked after.

Additionally, the extent to which the pilot approaches have addressed barriers to educational outcomes such as easing transitions for learners between placement moves (across Welsh local authorities or cross-border) and improving the traceability of these learners remains unclear. Whilst interview data provided evidence of collaborative working between local authorities (particularly for the pilots), the variation between practices across Wales has widened disparities between the provision available for learners, from county to county.

Direct conclusions surrounding the effectiveness of pilot versus non-pilot approaches could not be made, due to the absence of baseline data or an evaluation and monitoring plan for the pilot.

4.3. Impacts generated by the VSM Pilot approaches

The main impacts produced through the allocation of funding to the VSH role included enhanced integration between teams and services supporting learners in local authorities; greater authority associated with the lead role; strengthened strategic collaboration with the pilots who had taken a similar approach; and a more proactive level of preventative provision, mitigating the various challenges encountered by children looked after.

Stakeholders in local authorities that appointed new operational posts reported a more joined-up approach to supporting learners in their areas. In three of these cases, greater

provision of direct work with learners was enabled through roles such as mentors, access officers, and inclusion officers. This also allowed for better monitoring and tracking of attendance, and mitigation measures to prevent exclusions.

For pilots that focused investment on data systems and ePEPs, short-term impact is evident in the shift towards a learner-centred approach to capturing progress and development. The enhanced level of data collected has meant that lead stakeholders (VSH/service managers) can prioritise and plan their provision more effectively, targeting specific areas of identified need.

Collectively, impacts reported by key stakeholders across pilot local authorities included:

- improved data collection and monitoring systems
- improved awareness and upskilling of staff
- improved collaboration and partnership working
- provision of a single point of access for children looked after information
- improved quality and timeliness of producing PEPs

The impacts observed for children looked after because of the pilot were the presence of consistent and trusted support (from VSM teams, but particularly impactful where increased capacity allowed for direct work); enhanced advocacy for children looked after (their needs, rights, and entitlements); and improved ability to mitigate behavioural issues. The latter is attributed to the holistic emotional and well-being support that is enabled through a dedicated VSM, which addresses the wider issues that may be impacting a learner's educational progress.

The timing of the evaluation did not allow for the assessment of long-term impact, but interviewees anticipated long-term impacts including improved attendance, reductions in exclusions, and increased numbers of children looked after staying in or being reintegrated into mainstream education.

Across all local authorities there is a need to improve mechanisms for outcome and impact measurement, for example through the development of a shared framework for data collection and analysis, which would enable a more consistent approach across Wales.

4.4. The experiences of children looked after in education

The pilot approaches have, themselves, enabled a greater understanding of the views of learners through the improvement of learner-centred PEPs, increased capacity to support, and increased direct communication with learners.

Across pilot and non-pilot local authorities, good practice of integrating learner voice in the planning of provision was documented through the evaluation. However, more can be done to co-produce the nature of provision, between service managers, schools, and learners.

Children looked after recommended building more awareness of why people are in care among those involved in education; the provision of extra support (e.g. discreet and confidential check-ups); and ensuring that actions taken to support children in care don't differentiate them from their peers.

Overall, the experiences and reflections of children looked after reinforce the importance of a pupil-centred approach, consistent communication and a heightened awareness among professionals in education of the circumstances of children who are care experienced.

4.5. Local authority alignment with VSM principles

Overall, this research found that when examples of successful practice were provided by local authorities (both pilot and non-pilot), all of these could be related to the VSM principles. For example, person-centred support for care-experienced children and collaborative working within local authorities. Both pilot and non-pilot local authorities identified similar barriers to progress, which included insufficient funding, uncertainty surrounding funding cycles, ineffective communication and data sharing within and across LA areas.

Even though the pilot local authorities varied in their use of the VSM pilot funding, they all provided examples of how their use of the funding improved practice and met the VSM principles. Some pilot local authorities were shown to be making changes that directly met several of the key principles of the VSM. For example, through appointing a senior leader such as a VSH, or developing more advanced data systems that assist in maintaining meaningful PEPs.

Although successful practice in all local authorities could be related to the VSM principles, and this was perhaps even clearer for pilot local authorities, it was not possible to determine whether the VSM should be rolled out or not. This is because the flexibility of the grant funding meant that the application of the VSM varied in each pilot local authority and there were overlaps with VSM funding and other funding sources, as well as an absence of detailed monitoring data from all pilots.

Consequently, the recommendations section focuses on the changes that could be made to improve educational outcomes for all care experienced children, regardless of whether the VSM is rolled out.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that, as far as possible, the suggested actions are applied to the wider population of care experienced children to reduce the educational inequalities experienced by children currently looked after, and those who have had similarly disruptive experiences in their schooling but are no longer in the care system. These recommendations are for the Welsh Government, unless otherwise specified.

5.1. Design a shared framework for monitoring and data collection incorporating the most valued measures of progress for supporting children looked after

The variation in monitoring approaches between local authorities limits the consistency and comparability of data being collected.

There is scope to strengthen impact measurement going forward. Local authorities recognised the value of consistent data collection to improve traceability and provision for learners. A two-tiered approach including a common national framework, whilst encouraging flexibility for authorities to set their own local aims and targets according to population need should be explored. Investing in systems that support real-time and longitudinal tracking of outcomes for children looked after would also enhance the quality of evidence, bringing approaches in Wales closer to those in England, where a 'live' understanding of attendance for children looked after appears to be in operation.

As part of this work, further consideration should be given to the accountability mechanisms available, to ensure that monitoring is an active process. The Inspectorate (Estyn) and governing bodies should ensure that outcomes for any VS models are monitored for alignment with the framework in addition to the assessment of 'physical' school settings.

If a national VSM is not to be implemented, standardised requirements under a common monitoring framework for local authorities should include (at minimum):

- Attendance data
- Exclusions data
- PEP/IDP completion rates
- Well-being/behavioural information
- Evidence of a 'genuine partnership' between children's services and education (data sharing and exchange between the two)
- Evidence of a clear governance structure for local authority teams supporting children looked after in education
- Evidence of the provision of preventative services and interventions, and trauma-informed practice

- A minimum requirement on the allocation of resources to enable direct work with children looked after: to ensure that approaches are collaborative and learner-centred, and are equipped to balance the more bureaucratic features of mobilising support for children looked after

5.2. Review PDG-CLA funding considering the impact of the VSM pilot

Acknowledging that the pilot scheme ran for a finite time, and was reliant on local authority application, the PDG-CLA funding should be reviewed and informed by these evaluation findings.

If a nationwide VSM is implemented, funding arrangements should be reformed to ensure that outcomes can be attributed to each strand (the PDG-CLA and VSM funding respectively), or, merged to ensure funding is attached to a more comprehensive set of terms.

This would be essential to trace outcomes attributed to funding for children looked after with greater accuracy, and failure to do so would be likely to compromise future evaluations.

Through the evaluation, stakeholders raised concerns that the lack of a 'per pupil' funding model for VSM funding specifically generated disparities between outcomes in more populated areas compared to areas with a lower children looked after population. The Welsh Government should consider the merit and advantages of a 'blanket' funding allocation for VSM (as observed in Scotland), against the reported advantages of a pupil premium model as exists in England.

Whichever model is preferential, it must be supported by a more robust monitoring framework (described at 5.1) to provide a stronger evidence base for future policy evaluation and development.

5.3. Local authorities should use the NDG to support a national dialogue for sharing best practice and establishing common standards

Operating as a national forum, this would be well-positioned to facilitate an open dialogue with local authorities about these recommendations. Specifically, discussions on minimum standards and entitlements for children looked after should be held to establish unified goals and common understandings between local authorities. It is recommended that an independent organisation leads this process to overcome perceptions of influence or bias, and to ensure that findings are assessed from a more 'neutral' position.

Secondary research has highlighted how integral the [National Association of Virtual School Heads](#) (NAVSH) is for communicating and driving best practice for supporting children looked after in education in England. A comparable equivalent will be necessary in Wales in order to strengthen communication and buy-in among local authorities, creating space for dialogue surrounding improvement.

5.4. Include support for adopted learners and children previously looked after

Whilst the VSM and PDG CLA are intended to benefit all care experienced children, children looked after education leads and strategic stakeholders noted the 'gap' in available support that is perceived by funding calculations being based on children looked after figures alone.

Stakeholders at Adoption UK specifically highlighted the need for a PEP (or equivalent) for adopted learners. This would help to centralise these learners' histories in their education context, as well as provide evidence to support the relaxation of school disciplinary measures (in the same way that accommodations are made for children looked after to mitigate further disruption to the learner).

It is perceived that the provision of an equivalent learning plan, with corresponding funds to resource it, would help to ensure that adopted learners are supported through various needs including attachment needs, sensory issues, and behavioural needs.

It should be ensured that any future VSM funding, or adjustment to the PDG-CLA, clearly communicates expectations to support adopted children and children previously looked after, including monitoring requirements for evidence of inclusion of these groups.

5.5. Formalise a set of rights and entitlements for children looked after (regardless of whether a national VSM is implemented)

Instead of asking local authorities to standardise their delivery models (which is acknowledged to be challenging given the level of variation observed in existing approaches); focus should be placed on developing a set of common components that a **child looked after should expect to receive**, regardless of where in Wales they are placed.

Under the current system, the inconsistency of approaches delivered by local authorities presents a risk of further inequity in education for children looked after, who may encounter varying levels of support depending on where in the country they are situated.

The central advantage of the rights-based approach would be to ensure that the well-being of children looked after is prioritised, over the preservation of historic local authority systems. This could be formalised as a set of rights and entitlements – in line with the UNCRC, Social Services and Well-being Act and the Corporate parenting charter – that the children looked after education lead / VSM lead can champion.

This supports an **outcomes-first approach**, and honours Welsh Government commitments to:

- Improve educational outcomes for children looked after in Wales
- Maintain a learner-centred approach
- Ensure equity in provision, mitigating disparities between educational experiences for children looked after across Wales.

Local authorities can then be supported to determine how best to achieve those entitlements, in a way that realistically fits their existing structure. The NDG can be utilised to promote shared learning between professionals. The common framework for data

monitoring, as well as the terms attached to funding arrangements, should help to provide improved accountability.

Based on stakeholder feedback, examples of **minimum standards** for care experienced and children looked after in education could include:

- Every learner has an ePEP (standardised, accessible, capturing common outcomes)
- Every learner is involved in their own PEP, and has access to their records
- Every learner (and their carers) is informed about their LACE (or equivalent) coordinator and understands that they can be contacted for support regarding their education
- Every learner is supported by a LACE team that is trauma informed
- Every learner is supported by professionals with an integrated understanding (combining social care and education records) of their circumstances
- Every learner is entitled to appropriate adjustments and adaptations which make their education experience more positive and progression more achievable

5.6. Introduce a statutory Head role to champion the rights and entitlements of children looked after, in each local authority

The rights and entitlements (5.5) should be enforced and championed by a statutory local authority lead for care experienced and children looked after in education. Evidence shared as part of this evaluation, as well as secondary evidence from across the UK [footnote ¹⁹] [footnote ²⁰], has highlighted the value of a senior role in securing better provision for children looked after in education.

Stakeholders emphasised that the VSH (or equivalent leadership title) must have demonstrable (recent) experience as a headteacher or in a senior leadership role, as well as of working with vulnerable children.

The perceived and reported advantages of establishing a 'lead' role include heightened experience and authority, investment in relationship building, and improved accountability in relation to the tracing, stability, and progression of children looked after in education. It is integral that the lead role is supported by an integrated, multi-agency team who can bridge educational outcomes with wider outcomes for children looked after.

Learnings from the rest of the UK suggest that whilst the role can demonstrate value, it should be implemented alongside robust standards for experience (of the individual in the post), which is more achievable where funding for the post has permanence.

Greater job security attached to the role will also expand opportunities to ensure the role is introduced alongside reporting and accountability mechanisms, which can be monitored to drive improvement over time.

[¹⁹] This includes: Improving the Effectiveness of Virtual Schools (2023) Neil Harrison, Judy Sebba, Marc Wigley, Rachael Pryor and Fay Blyth

[²⁰] Virtual Schools for Care Experienced Learners in Scotland: Reflections on an Emerging Concept in a New Context (2024) Leanne McIver, Michael Bettencourt