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Looked after children

More likely to be excluded, more likely to have SEND and more likely to have gaps in their schooling, looked after children face a range of barriers to their education and wellbeing. **Darren Martindale** offers schools some practical advice on ensuring high-quality provision for these troubled young people

How schools can support looked after children

Imagine getting home tonight and being told, by someone in a position of authority, that you are going to have to move immediately.

Your bags are already packed and you will be driven to your new family, 150 miles away.

You will be starting a new job for a different employer on Monday. Say goodbye to your friends, family and support network. You have no choice in the matter, and you are just going to have to get on with it.

How would you take that bombshell? Would you be turning up to meet your new work mates on Monday bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and keen to get cracking?

While every step is taken to avoid unnecessary moves, the equivalent of this does happen, sometimes, to children in care. Indeed, some looked after children (LAC), have faced such an upheaval many times over.

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is looked after by a local authority if s/he is in their care or is provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by the authority (DfE, 2018).

When we talk about LAC, however, we are generally referring to children who are placed on a care order (or interim care order), which is when the local authority has been given parental responsibility or children are accommodated by the local authority through a voluntary agreement with their parents.

While some children are placed in care for a short period, and some may move in and out of care at different times in their lives, many live in care long-term.

Most LAC are placed in foster care, while approximately nine per cent are in children's homes, special homes for disabled children and secure facilities. The vast majority of LAC enter care due to abuse and/or neglect (DfE, 2020a).

Unfortunately, the care system is under continual strain. There are not enough foster carers or social workers and resources are stretched. Changes to a child's care placement, leading to school changes, are not just educationally damaging – research shows that young people in care who changed school in years 10 or 11 scored more than five grades less than those who

did not (Sebba et al, 2015) – they also mean that children cannot point to any single person who has consistently supported them. It can mean that they end up getting a little attention from a lot of people. It might also lead to loss of contact with siblings as well as established friendships.

Children in care are also statistically far more likely to be excluded than other children (DfE, 2019), which is likely to compound existing feelings of isolation or instability, and they are more likely to be persistently absent from school.

All of this can compound the difficulties that children in care already face. Some may have unmet therapeutic needs, resulting from the abuse or neglect that they have experienced in their past. Exclusions or gaps in education, prior to entering care, can be a barrier.

Statistically, LAC are almost four times more likely to have SEND than all children and are almost nine times more likely to have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than all children (DfE, 2020b).

Now that I have started by painting such a depressing picture, I must point out the need to retain a sense of balance and avoid sensationalising this subject. We must remember that most children in care live stable, healthy and productive lives.

Despite their many challenges, the majority have very good school attendance. Indeed, the resilience that many of these young people demonstrate is often an inspiration to the adults who work with them.

At the same time, however, there is a sizeable attainment gap. In 2019, 37 per cent of LAC achieved the age-related expected standard in all core subjects at key stage 2, compared to 65 per cent of none-LAC. The average Attainment 8 score at the end of key stage 4 was 19.1 for LAC, and 44.6 for children who are not in care.

LAC are doing slightly better than Children in Need (CIN), and there is other evidence that time spent in care has a beneficial effect on these children (DfE, 2020b). Nobody would argue, however, about the above gaps being unacceptable. And we know, of course, that further

down the line, care-leavers are over-represented in prisons, mental health institutions and so on.

Those with more complex needs can, as one headteacher put it, “place demands on the school system which, if not properly addressed, far outweigh the demands of learning to manage and work with them properly” (Rose et al, 2016).

The Children & Social Work Act 2017 extended the role of the designated teacher in schools – and the virtual school head to an extent – beyond its old remit of LAC to include those who left care via adoption, a Special Guardianship Order or child arrangements order (or “previously LAC”).

Last year, I offered advice to *SecEd*'s readers on previously LAC (Martindale, 2019a) and also vulnerable pupils in general (Martindale, 2019b), so here I will focus on support specifically for LAC. Many of the strategies and underpinning principles of that support are likely to benefit other disadvantaged pupils, too.

Improving life chances

So, how do we promote the achievement, and improve the life chances, of this vulnerable group? It should help to break it down into the essential elements of support. So, let us start with one of the central tenets of effective support – attachment-aware and trauma-informed practice in school.

Attachment, trauma and emotional wellbeing

As a virtual school head for LAC and an inclusion lead, I have been working with schools for many years to develop “attachment awareness”, helping teachers to understand the behaviours of pupils who really struggle with behaviour and emotional wellbeing, where those struggles are rooted in attachment difficulties or the effects of early trauma. Indeed I have also written previously for *SecEd* on this issue (Martindale, 2018a).

While the training has usually focused on LAC, teachers often point out that it is equally applicable to many pupils who are not in care.

So, what is attachment theory? Attachment was described by the psychologist John Bowlby as the “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1969).

The quality of the earliest relationship – usually between mother and baby – creates connections in the brain which have a profound impact in later life. If we have not had that secure, early experience of love and empathy, we may not be able to feel these emotions ourselves.

If we did not have our emotions regulated, or soothed, as an infant then we might not be able to control our own feelings – and therefore our actions – later in life.

Such children can come to view themselves as worthless or undeserving, adults as cruel or untrustworthy, and the world as a dark and dangerous place.

This is why they dysregulate (or “kick-off”) whenever they are challenged by an adult – it is a reaction to a perceived threat. They are simply trying to survive. Attachment difficulties and early trauma, such as the experience of abuse, can profoundly affect a child's ability to process information and their readiness to learn. They might also struggle to form and retain healthy relationships; you may have seen this manifest itself in aggressive or withdrawn behaviour, or perhaps the flipside – where they become over-familiar.

A disclaimer: It can be a mistake to assume that attachment is always the reason, or the only reason, for very disruptive behaviour. There may be undiagnosed learning difficulties, for example, and one criticism of attachment theory is that it does not consider other possible factors such as socio-economic or cultural issues.



Darren Martindale
...is service manager: vulnerable learners – encompassing the role of the virtual school head – at City of Wolverhampton Council.

Contact him via darrenmartindale@hotmail.co.uk
Read his previous *SecEd* articles at <http://bit.ly/2p0yq8X>

Research into promoting the mental health of looked after and other vulnerable children has concluded that a diversity of approaches is required. The research also recognises, however, the importance of an understanding of attachment and early trauma (Luke et al, 2014).

The usual supportive strategies tend not to work with children with these difficulties. Rewards tend to have limited efficacy and sanctions ultimately fail because there is nothing you can do to that child that can compete with the discomfort that they are probably already feeling. An exclusion will only leave them angrier and more isolated.

What we can do

The good news, however, is that brains are very plastic, they are constantly changing and developing, especially during childhood. So as teachers, we can do a lot to help children become happier, better-adjusted and more resilient. Resilience, essentially, is the ability to cope with stress or challenge and to bounce-back from adversity. However, it is also about having the skills to cope with stress in a socially acceptable way – i.e. not reacting by throwing a chair at the nearest unfortunate individual. If a person lacks emotional resilience, they might not be able to control that impulse.

Consider that if a child in school has a physical difficulty we will rightly make sure that measures are in place to allow them to access their right to an education. Yet if a pupil lacks emotional resilience because of trauma or attachment-related issues, and this affects their ability to learn, how many schools really make additional provision for them?

The brain is shaped by social experience, and those social functions are what helps the brain to learn. It can be crucial to have a key adult in school who the child

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can go to when they are struggling. For a child in care, this is likely to be the designated teacher, though it does not always have to be. The key point is that, if that adult can build a trusting relationship, the child realises they do not need to be completely self-dependant anymore. They develop epistemic trust, and this provides a platform for learning.

However, you also need to be very clear about boundaries. Let them know how you will connect with them before you do it – give them time to process – and, as mentioned previously, you may also need to teach them not to be over-familiar.

Asking for help, relaxing, resolving conflict, accepting approval and having fun – these skills might be very new to some children so they will need time and support to master them. Give them regular opportunities to experience success and show them concrete evidence of it. Be wary, however, of giving too much praise, too soon; they may find it difficult to accept.

You must absolutely avoid shaming the child as a behavioural strategy, because such feelings can be unbearable for someone with unusually low levels of resilience.

Anne Daka, a former senior educational psychologist, explained how shame can be so toxic to these children: “Relentless experiences of criticism and shame, early in life, damages the core of the young person, limiting their inner joy, peace, humour and spontaneity. Even in low-stress situations they may experience fear and panic. We need to be skilful in the way we deal with conflict, we need to try to understand why those young people engage in battles for control.”

Think about how you can make the school environment less threatening to them. These children can really struggle with transitional times, such as moving between lessons, so they need to be given extra preparation.

Go through the timetable with them at the start of each day, explain and reiterate timings, give support when rooms or staff change and keep to routines as much as possible.

Use diaries, visual aids and reminders. Preparation for major transitions, such as a change of school, should ideally be started several months before the event. ➤

Identify a safe place for the pupil to go when things get too tough. This could contain some distracting activities (puzzles, word-searches) and/or an object that the child finds comforting (an “attachment object” such as a photo of a trusted carer).

The child could perhaps put together a “time-out box”, or a “calm-down jar”, together with the help of school support staff – a good way of developing that trusting relationship with a key adult.

Secondary trauma

It is very important that, as an educator working with vulnerable and traumatised children, you learn to recognise, understand and regulate your own feelings. Traumatized children often have a way of making those around them feel the same state of hyper-arousal – remember that tightening knot in the pit of the stomach that you feel when a certain pupil walks into the classroom?

“Secondary trauma” should be taken seriously and it is vital that staff receive quality, on-going training, support and supervision to help them to manage these considerable challenges.

Given that it is often during unstructured times, such as a lunch break, that the more extreme behaviours manifest themselves, it is clear that anyone on the school staff – not just teachers – can be left extremely vulnerable without certain key skills. I have written previously for *SecEd* about spotting and dealing with secondary trauma (Martindale, 2018b).

The designated teacher

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 places a duty on school governing bodies “to designate a member of staff (the designated teacher) as having the responsibility to promote the educational achievement of looked after children, including those aged between 16 and 18 who are registered pupils at the school”.

The designated teacher is probably the single most important role in schools where LAC are concerned.

The statutory guidance

The DfE updated its statutory guidance on the designated teacher’s role in 2018, and it makes a good starting point. Let’s take a headline statement from the guidance (DfE, 2018).

“The designated teacher has a leadership role in promoting the educational achievement of every child in care on the school’s roll. The role should make a positive difference by promoting a whole school culture where the personalised learning needs of every child in care matters and their personal, emotional and academic needs are prioritised.”

Seven key responsibilities

To break it down, here are seven of their key responsibilities. This far from an exhaustive list – just a few key points summarised from the guidance:

- Helping to ensure that other school staff are aware of the individual needs of looked after pupils (while maintaining appropriate confidentiality) and promoting high aspirations.
- Tracking – and promoting – the attendance, attainment and progress of their looked after pupils.
- Putting together the Personal Education Plan (PEP) that all LAC should have, in partnership with the child, their carer and their social worker.
- Ensuring that the Pupil Premium Plus is effectively utilised (more on that later).
- Developing policy and procedure pertaining to LAC.
- Ensuring good home-school links.
- Providing a consistent source of support to the child.

Consistency

Did you spot the key word? Consistent. That consistency alone can be invaluable. If things turn chaotic for the child, and other key adults in their life change on a regular basis – as outlined in my introduction – school can provide the lifeline of a regular, reassuring voice. Sometimes, school ends up being the most consistent element in their life.

“*The designated teacher is probably the single most important role in schools where looked after children are concerned*”

Designated teachers obviously need to establish very strong and clear channels of communication, both internally and with external partners. They will have a role in ensuring, therefore, that their school’s procedures for sharing information with external agencies, as well as home-school communication, are robust and fit-for-purpose. They will need to know what to share, what not to share, and how to communicate it safely and securely.

Sharing good practice

What they definitely should share, however, is knowledge and understanding of good practice in meeting the needs of LAC, and other vulnerable pupils, among other school staff. This involves understanding the links between social and emotional wellbeing and educational achievement, which we have touched on already.

The designated teacher will have a pivotal role in ensuring that professional development spans across the school, as well as practising and modelling it in their own work.

The designated teacher: Advice for school leaders

Seniority
Considering its importance, it is vital that the right member of staff is appointed to this role. They should have sufficient seniority to influence policy and practice where necessary, and to promote a positive and supportive ethos throughout the whole school.

As a professional for the education of children in care, I have found it very frustrating when I have sat in a meeting about a looked after child’s education, and found that the designated teacher in attendance did not feel able to make any key decisions because they lacked the necessary seniority.

Experience and skills

Given the nuances of this complex role, it is also clear that they will need the right blend of experience, skills and personal qualities to make it work. There is a requirement here for both strength and subtlety, for authority and sensitivity to the needs of disadvantaged children.

There is a statutory requirement for “DTs” (as we tend to call them) to keep up-to-date with appropriate training, for a start, and they will need on-going support and



supervision to help them manage the multiple challenges of the job. They will also need, crucially, the time to fulfil the role – time and again, this is cited by designated teachers as one of their greatest difficulties and frustrations.

It is not easy, of course, amid the conflicting demands of a busy school community, but the responsibility must be prioritised. It should not be viewed just as an additional chore that is dropped on an unsuspecting deputy or assistant head, who is then simply left to get on with it.

The governing body

The role of the school governing body is also sometimes underappreciated. Some schools have a nominated governor for LAC, who takes a particular interest in the cohort and maintains a regular link with the designated teacher. Otherwise, the chair of governors may take the lead.

Either way, they should be aware, and ensure that other governors are aware, of their responsibilities in this regard, which include appointing the designated teacher, ensuring that training and support are provided for them and other school staff, and assuring quality of support for LAC.

It is recommended that the governing body receives an annual report from the designated teacher. It is also good practice for the

designated teacher and nominated governor (or chair of governors) to have a termly discussion about the progress of looked after pupils and how their needs are prioritised by the school. I wrote a suggested two-page proforma for schools in Wolverhampton, which you may find useful (see further information). Speaking of monitoring progress, let us now look at quality Personal Educational Planning.

Personal Education Plans

So, what is a PEP? All LAC must have a care plan, and the PEP is an integral part of it. It is an evolving record of what needs to happen for LAC to enable them to make good progress and fulfil their potential.

So, in a nutshell, it is a way of facilitating a regular, quality conversation between school, social worker and carer which ensures that they are all invested in the child’s educational progress in a focused, joined up way. Crucially, it should also involve the pupil in developing that personalised learning plan.

The PEP (early years to post-16) is also part of the statutory duty for local authorities and schools. In addition to being part of the overall care plan, it should be seen as part of a LAC’s official school record. If the child moves schools, therefore, it should be forwarded, along with other school records, to their new school and to the main contact

(usually the child’s social worker) in the local authority which looks after the child.

Given the kind of scenario described in my introduction, it is easy to see how a logical, joined-up plan which clearly outlines the child’s key strengths and achievements, as well as any difficulties, support requirements and learning goals – and also captures the pupil’s voice in all this – could become a lifeline for that child and the professionals trying to support them, if they do move schools.

Writing the PEP

My experience has always been that it is best to write the PEP in a dedicated meeting, rather than try to tack it onto something else like a care planning meeting or annual SEND review.

I also believe that this PEP meeting is usually best chaired by the designated teacher, rather than the social worker. It is an education-based meeting so it makes sense for the teaching specialist to lead that discussion. However, it is important that all participants make a full and open contribution.

The social worker, however, should initiate the PEP process. Guidance states that the first PEP should be put together prior to the initial review of the child’s care plan (within a month, then again within three months, of entering care).

Thereafter it should be reviewed termly.

What is in a PEP?

There is not room here for an exhaustive list of what should be in the plan. Please read the DfE’s 2018 guidance for more detail. Broadly speaking, however, the PEP should include:

- A record of the pupil’s academic achievements, including their participation in the wider activities of the school and other out-of-school learning activities (e.g. sporting, personal development, community).
- Information which helps everyone who is supporting the child’s education to understand what works for him or her.
- Clear accountability in terms of who within the school is responsible for making the actions identified in the plan happen (so targets should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related).
- What will happen, or is already happening, regarding any additional support that the child may require – e.g. action required to support SEN or therapeutic needs where they impact on education.
- Any transition support, where needed, such as when a child begins to attend a new school or returns to school, or when a child has a plan for permanence (e.g. is placed for adoption) and may change schools as part of that plan.
- How a child’s aspirations are being nurtured, especially in consideration of longer term goals such as further and higher education, work experience and career plans.

Common PEP problems

Here are some common problems with PEPs, in my experience of having attended hundreds of them:

Incomplete information

It is important that all sections of the PEP form (whichever version you are using) are completed fully, including both basic pupil information and educational data normally provided by the school – current and previous attainment, attendance, any exclusions or SEND etc. This information should ideally be completed prior to the PEP meeting, which saves time (it is also

very difficult to set meaningful and appropriate targets without it).

The wrong people at the meeting

The key attendees at the PEP meeting are the designated teacher for LAC, social worker, carer (or key worker) and the young person. Other key professionals, such as a careers advisor, learning mentor or virtual school team member, may be invited where appropriate. However, try to avoid overcrowding the meeting – keep it focused.

Young people do not always wish to attend their meetings and, if this is the case, I would not try to force them to attend. It is a very positive thing, however, if the young person does attend and is enabled to feel a sense of ownership over the resulting plan.

Even if they do not attend, however, their thoughts, wishes and feelings about their education should be recorded on the relevant section of the PEP.

Lack of SMART targets and action-planning

Let me be blunt: vague, weak or “woolly” targets are the bane of my life as a virtual school head: “Continue to make good progress” or “Attend regularly.”

These are targets which are not SMART. It is not clear how they will make an appreciable difference to a pupil’s achievement in a way that can be measured and evidenced.

The PEP may include targets related to attendance, punctuality, behaviour or emotional wellbeing, for example, as well as academic targets. However, these should still be SMART. The designated teacher is then able to monitor progress against those targets and make sure the PEP is a “live” document.

Losing the focus of the meeting

Stick to the subject and purpose of the PEP meeting. Do not allow it to be “hijacked” by the private agendas of individual attendees – this can occasionally happen. The PEP form has been designed to guide the discussion through every key area related to the child’s education. Remember, this is a meeting to discuss the child’s educational progress and to identify how they can be supported to achieve their very best. As long as you are working with a robust PEP format (each local authority

tends to use their own version, and most are now electronic), it should be designed to ensure that every key aspect of the young person's education is discussed.

Use that format, methodically, to bring the meeting back on track, if required. It will also help you to allocate the Pupil Premium Plus most appropriately, and to monitor its effectiveness.

The Pupil Premium Plus

The PPP is funding allocated to local authorities to help raise the attainment of LAC, as well as pupils who have left care through adoption or a Special Guardianship Order.

The LAC portion of the grant is managed by the virtual school head, who usually allocates the majority to schools, working in conjunction with headteachers and designated teachers to ensure that it is utilised in the best way. The adopted/Special Guardianship Order grant, however, is allocated directly to schools, based on school census data.

The main difference with PPP is that it should be utilised to support each child's individualised learning targets (as contained in the PEP for LAC). What is also clear is that the spend should be carefully planned and driven by priority and need, rather than an attitude of "we've got this money; how do we spend it".

It also definitely should not be used to fund things like school uniform, lunches or transport to school.

While nobody would deny the importance of quality first teaching, and PPP can support that (by funding CPD, for instance), in my view, it really comes into its own

when supporting targeted interventions for individual children. It enables bespoke support, tailored to the pupil's individual needs and strengths, with very regular reviews of progress. It helps schools to fit the provision to the pupil, rather than the other way around.

Think also about the importance of early intervention (rather than just focusing on end-of-key stage), the value of capturing the pupil's voice, the need to engage parents or carers, and how to make the best use of teaching assistants and other support staff – i.e. to focus on an identified priority and being given the skills and tools they need to make a difference. All these priorities can be supported by PPP.

That said, here are a few strategies which can be particularly effective with looked after, and other vulnerable, pupils.

One-to-one or small group tuition

This is one of the more standard uses of the funding and can be very powerful for disadvantaged children. The Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit has identified tuition as one of the more effective (and cost-effective) interventions (EEF, 2018a). The key is that it should be a consistent, medium to long-term intervention, and again communication between school, parents/carers and external tutors is key to success.

Metacognitive strategies
Metacognition involves "thinking about thinking" and "learning to learn". There can be real benefits in

helping disadvantaged students to develop their thinking skills and problem-solving strategies, because they may have missed out on that learning in the past (EEF, 2018b).

This can be informal – for instance, the teacher talks through problems (basically thinking aloud) to model their own thought processes – or more formalised methods. This is a good route toward promoting independent and self-directed learning (for more ideas on metacognition, see *SecEd*, 2018).

Investing in CPD

While Pupil Premium is not allocated to support SEN as such, it could help to build staff capacity around a range of additional needs if that is what is required to support a pupil through PPP.

Speech, language and communication difficulties, which recent research has shown to be very prevalent among young people in the criminal justice system (Clegg et al, 2015), autism spectrum disorder, attachment difficulties, English as an additional language – these are among the areas where pedagogical approaches might need to be more specialised.

Building on an awareness of attachment and the effects of early trauma, many virtual schools have invested in training for teachers in Emotion Coaching, an approach developed by psychologist John Gottman, which enables young people to manage their own behaviour by helping them to understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur, and how to handle them (for more, see *SecEd*, 2016).

“ There can be real benefits in helping disadvantaged students to develop their thinking skills and problem-solving strategies ”

This approach aims to develop intrinsic factors, self-awareness and internal regulation, rather than external motivators such as rewards or sanctions. As such, it is likely to be more effective in the long-term.

Emotionally intelligent approaches such as emotion coaching and restorative practice are not only effective de-escalation techniques but also support pupils' preparedness for learning.

The classroom environment

Think also about the classroom and wider school environment. Pupils with additional needs can be especially sensitive to noise, light, colour (too much, not enough?), and any physical surroundings that they may feel to be threatening.

Children in school spend much of their time required to listen or taking part in listening activities, so if the classroom is noisy, or has bad acoustics, attention will soon wander and some pupils will become easily distracted. Some funding could be used, or pooled, to purchase PA or other equipment that reduces these barriers.

Other considerations

Consider also how disadvantaged pupils are given access to the following:

- Enrichment activities outside school.
- All areas of the curriculum (especially if they are following a reduced or modified timetable).
- Sports, music and the arts.
- Encouragement and support to aspire toward further and higher education.
- Careers advice/guidance and quality work experience.
- Support to participate in all areas of school life, including extra-curricular.

Measuring PPP impact

This can be a challenge, and accountability for Pupil Premium spend is critical. There are

evaluation tools available online, including from the EEF (2019). However, self-evaluation is again a key element.

Pupil progress meetings (including PEP reviews for LAC), data-tracking, RAG-rating, pupil surveys, focused observations, etc, can all be used to capture data at regular intervals.

The road to improved attainment is not always a straightforward one, especially for vulnerable pupils. However, there are many kinds of progress, and difference ways to measure it.

Attitudinal surveys and tools, which measure "wider" progress, including behaviour or social and emotional wellbeing, can be key to supporting vulnerable learners.

PASS (Pupil's Attitudes to Self & School), Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs – a triangulated response between school, carer and social worker), Boxall Profile and Resilience Scales are some of the methods to track engagement and resilience in your pupils (see online).

Look for opportunities for peer-led reviews, and to share good practice with other settings. Ask your educational psychology service, virtual school head or other partners for support with scrutinising the success of your Pupil Premium strategies. The DfE website contains more details (see further information).

The virtual school head

School leaders should also be familiar with their virtual school head (VSH). They ensure that the local authority's statutory responsibility to promote the education of LAC is effectively discharged (and I am more-or-less quoting statutory guidance here).

This statutory role means working to narrow the attainment gap by challenging and supporting schools, and other key partners, and helping to get the right provision in place for all looked after children.

The VSH (and the virtual school

support teams they usually manage) can also act as a bridge between education and social care which, I am afraid, can sometimes be a necessary bridge – those waters are occasionally troubled.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 also extends the responsibilities of the VSH to include children who left care via an adoption or Special Guardianship Order, though the latter responsibility is normally limited more to the provision of information and advice, rather than the direct support that they offer to pupils who are in care.

Virtual heads have also established a key relationship with Ofsted. As a result, lead inspectors for LAC have been established in most regions and HMI are generally much more aware of the circumstances of looked after children. They are increasingly likely to shine a light on LAC during school inspections and may even consult with the VSH as part of an inspection.

If schools are struggling with a looked after pupil, they should work with their virtual head (though preferably before the situation becomes dire). Partnerships are key, as always, in supporting vulnerable children. Virtual heads support the PEP process in a variety of ways, and as said previously, they manage the PPP in conjunction with schools. So, they can help to ensure that packages of support are well-planned, joined-up and properly resourced.

There are other areas of work where school leaders should find that two heads are better than one. Part of the VSH role is to ensure that designated teachers have access to appropriate training in understanding and meeting the needs of LAC, for example. Another sensitive area is the stigma that can be attached to being in care.

Going back to PEPs one last time; many pupils are reluctant to be involved in their PEP meetings. They might feel they are being

"singled out" or treated differently to others, which is likely to be the last thing they want. All virtual heads work with their local Children in Care Council/s (which all local authorities, as "corporate parents", must have to facilitate regular consultation with the young people in their care). If you have problems with meaningful participation, speak to your VSH about how they might help to gather children's views, individually and collectively.

Conclusion

Hopefully, your looked after pupils' lives will not be turned upside down in the dramatic way outlined in my introduction. By planning the right package of support and doing everything possible to hold on to them, not only can schools help to give vulnerable children the resilience to cope with such a trauma, they can significantly reduce the chances of it happening in the first place.

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INFORMATION & REFERENCES

To download the LAC proforma for discussions between governors and the designated teacher (created by Darren Martindale), visit <https://bit.ly/30600DK>

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