

Darlington Virtual School

Policy Framework

Supporting the Education of Looked After
and Previously Looked After Children

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Introduction

Darlington Virtual School promotes the educational achievement and wellbeing of all children in the care of the local authority, as well as previously looked after children. We work closely with schools, social workers, foster carers, and other professionals to ensure every child has access to high-quality, stable, and inclusive education.

This policy outlines expectations for schools and key partners regarding school admissions, exclusions, part-time timetables, Pupil Premium Plus, use of alternative provision, Personal Education Plans (PEPs), academic progress, mental health, and special educational needs. It reflects the statutory responsibilities of the Virtual School and aligns with national guidance and research-informed practice.

The Virtual School headteacher has additional strategic responsibilities to promote the attendance and achievement of children who have CP and CIN plans, this does not include individual casework for these cohorts.



Academic Progress and Aspirations

Policy Position

Children in the care of the local authority are capable of **achieving highly and making accelerated academic progress** when supported by consistent, high-quality teaching and a care team that shares **ambitious expectations**.

Expectations:

- All looked after children must be supported to **close learning gaps** and, wherever possible, **make accelerated progress**.
- Schools must provide **precise, focused, quality-first teaching** using:
 - Effective differentiation,
 - Responsive assessment,
 - Adaptive teaching.
- PEPs (for Looked After Children only) must:
 - Include academic targets based on current and expected progress,
 - Be updated termly with evidence of attainment,
 - Demonstrate how teaching and interventions are accelerating learning.
- PP+ must fund **targeted academic interventions** that are evidence-based and reviewed for impact.

Strategies to Support Progress:

- Quality-first teaching with explicit instruction, scaffolding, and feedback.
- One-to-one/small group tuition and structured literacy or numeracy support.
- Academic mentoring, guided study, and homework routines.
- **University taster sessions and outreach** via the [North East Raising Aspiration Partnership \(NERAP\)](#).
- Multi-agency planning through the PEP.
- Regular celebration of effort, progress, and ambition.

In Summary:

It is the expectation that every looked after and previously looked-after child will be given the tools, support, and encouragement to thrive academically. The Virtual School and all professionals must work relentlessly to ensure children not only catch up but excel in their learning.



Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

Policy Position:

Every looked after child must have a Personal Education Plan that is current, comprehensive, and tailored to their needs. The PEP is a statutory requirement and a key part of the wider care and education planning process.

Expectations:

- A PEP must be initiated **within 10 working days** of a child entering care.
- PEPs must be **updated every school term** and include:
 - Academic attainment and progress data,
 - Social, emotional, and mental health needs,
 - Special educational needs and EHCP links,
 - Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) use,
 - SMART targets and transition planning.
- All PEPs must be completed using the **Welfare Call ePEP system**.
- Where a child has an **EHCP**, the PEP should reflect the outcomes in the EHCP. The EHCP annual review process should be co-ordinated with a PEP meeting as far as practicable.
- The **Virtual School Head (VSH)** is responsible for ensuring the **quality assurance** of PEPs.
- All professionals – including **social workers, Designated Teachers, carers**, and, where appropriate, the child or young person – must actively contribute.
- There is regular training provided by the Virtual School
- There is a detailed PEP protocol document about how to run an effective PEP process

Guidance:

- [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children \(DfE\)](#)



Pupil Premium Plus (PP+)

Policy Position:

Pupil Premium Plus must be used to close attainment gaps, support wellbeing, and address barriers to learning, based on evidence and individual need.

Expectations:

- *For Looked After Children*, funding must be planned and approved through the Personal Education Plan (PEP) process and should not be absorbed into the school's general budget.
- *For Previously Looked After Children*, schools receive the PP+ payment directly, and PEPs are not mandatory. Schools should consider the use of similar plans to address the individual needs of pupils in partnership with parents and carers. PP+ for previously looked after children is only awarded to children currently Adopted, subject to a Child Arrangement Order (CAO) or Special Guardianship Order (SGO). If they return to Parents, currently they are not eligible for PP+
- Use of PP+ must be:
 - **Child-specific,**
 - **Evidence-based,**
 - **Linked to measurable outcomes** in the PEP.
- Schools are encouraged to use the **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)** to inform the selection of interventions.



Use of PP+ for Laptops and Devices

- The **Virtual School will not normally approve funding for personal devices** (e.g., laptops or tablets) for individual children in care. These are considered personal items that would typically be provided by parents in any family context.
- **Schools may include requests for PP+ funding for devices** in the PEP where the school will manage and maintain the equipment to support learning.
- **Social Care teams may also submit requests** for funding for devices via the PEP where it supports educational outcomes.
- In either case:
 - The **maximum allocation is £300 per device**,
 - Responsibility for maintenance and upkeep lies with the **carers or school** depending on who holds the device.

Resources:

- [EEF Pupil Premium Guide](#)
- [EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#)
- [Pupil Premium Overview \(DfE\)](#)



Designated Teachers and Governors

Policy Position:

Every school is required by law to appoint a **Designated Teacher (DT)** for looked after and previously looked after children. This role is critical to improving educational outcomes. The primary focus of the Designated Teacher is on **academic progress, achievement, and access to high-quality teaching and learning**.

Expectations:

- The Designated Teacher **must lead on the teaching and learning offer** for looked after children across the school.
- Their role **is not to assume responsibility for safeguarding or general pastoral care**, which lie with other designated leads within the school. Instead, the DT should:
 - Champion high aspirations,
 - Drive academic intervention and tracking,
 - Monitor curriculum access and progress,
 - Support subject teachers to understand how trauma, disrupted learning, or SEND may affect attainment.
- The Designated Teacher must:
 - **Advise class teachers and subject leads** on appropriate academic strategies and reasonable adjustments,
 - Identify gaps in progress and ensure intervention plans are in place and resourced (e.g. through PP+),
 - Lead and coordinate the **delivery of the PEP**, ensuring that it is outcome-focused, curriculum-informed, and accurately reflects progress and targets.
- The DT must attend training provided by the Virtual School and keep abreast of statutory changes and research-informed practice.



Governance Expectations:

- The **school governing body** must appoint a governor responsible for looked after children.
- Governors should:
 - Ensure the Designated Teacher has sufficient time, seniority, and resources to carry out their duties,
 - Monitor how Pupil Premium Plus is used to support academic progress,
 - Receive regular updates on outcomes for looked after and previously looked after children as part of school improvement planning.

Professional Development:

- The **Virtual School offers regular training** and network events for Designated Teachers, supporting:
 - Termly updates on statutory guidance,
 - Sharing of best practice and local data trends,
 - Training on trauma-informed teaching, PEP writing, and use of PP+.

Admissions and School Choice

Policy Position:

Children in care must be prioritised in school admissions. Every effort must be made to secure places in high-quality schools that can meet the individual's needs.

Expectations:

- Schools must comply with the **School Admissions Code**, ensuring top priority is given to looked after and previously looked after children, including for in-year admissions.
- Schools must not refuse places based on capacity or complexity.
- Placements must not be made in schools judged 'Inadequate' by Ofsted unless there is a clear, documented rationale agreed with the Virtual School.
- Any change of school **must** be discussed with the Virtual School Head and be demonstrably in the best interests of the child. If the child has an **EHCP** the statutory process must be followed and **there must be discussion with the SEND team** at the earliest opportunity.

Guidance:

- [School Admissions Code \(DfE\)](#)



School Stability and Transitions

Policy Position:

Maintaining **educational stability** is central to improving outcomes for children in care. Frequent school moves can significantly disrupt learning, wellbeing, and relationships. It is essential that decisions around schooling prioritise continuity of education and peer relationships.

Expectations:

- School stability must be actively protected during care planning. Any change of school should be avoided unless absolutely necessary and agreed as being in the child's best interests.
- Consideration should always be given to:
 - Maintaining **peer groups and friendship networks**,
 - Ensuring **continuity of teaching and curriculum pathways**,
 - Avoiding disruption to key stages and public examinations.
- If a school move becomes unavoidable:
 - A **carefully planned transition process** must be put in place,
 - The plan should involve the **Virtual School Educational Psychologist (EP)** to support emotional preparation and ensure continuity of support strategies,
 - Relevant staff in both schools must be involved, including the Designated Teacher and SENCO where appropriate.
 - Where the child has an **EHCP** the SEND Team must be involved for formal review and statutory consultation purposes. A destination school has a 15-day legal consultation period as part of the statutory process, so the **timescales will be longer** and this needs to be considered when care-planning.

Transition Planning Checklist:

- Virtual School consulted before move is confirmed (and SEND Team if CYP has EHCP)
- Current and new schools identified and briefed
- Education Psychologist involvement requested (if appropriate)



- Transition timeline and pupil visit dates agreed
- Information sharing meeting held (including Designated Teachers, SENCOs, key staff)
- Key documents shared (PEP, EHCP, behaviour plan, risk assessments)
- Named staff identified for daily support at new school
- Review meeting date set for 4 weeks after start date

Transition Planning Template Should Include:

- Reason for school move and decision-making rationale
- Pupil voice and concerns
- Current attainment, support strategies, interventions, and achievements
- Risk assessment (educational, emotional, social)
- Actions to support continuity in learning and peer relationships
- Parental/carer input
- Named lead for transition coordination
- Evaluation plan and first review date

Guidance:

- [Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children \(DfE\)](#)
- Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations – Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review



Exclusions and Suspensions

Policy Position:

Exclusion should be an absolute last resort. Children in care are more vulnerable to exclusion, and alternative strategies must be explored first.

Expectations:

- The **Virtual School must be informed immediately** of any risk of exclusion or suspension.
- The Designated Teacher must lead the coordination of an appropriate response with carers, social workers and the Virtual School.
- If a child is suspended, the school must arrange **full-time, suitable education from Day 1** of the suspension.
- A reintegration meeting must be held prior to the child returning to school. A PEP must be held as soon as possible as a suspension indicates the current plan is not working.

Guidance:

- [Suspension and Permanent Exclusion Guidance \(DfE, 2023\)](#)



Part-Time Timetables

Policy Position:

Every child in care is entitled to full-time education. Reduced timetables must only be used in exceptional cases, with clear purpose, oversight, and review.

Expectations:

- Schools must consult the Virtual School **before** implementing any part-time timetable.
- All reduced timetables must:
 - Be limited to a **maximum of 12 weeks**,
 - Include a clear reintegration plan,
 - Be reviewed regularly, with the aim of full-time return.
- Foster carers and social workers must be fully involved in planning and review.

Guidance:

- [School Attendance Guidance \(DfE\)](#)

Alternative Provision

Policy Position:

Alternative provision should only be used where absolutely necessary, and for as short a time as possible. Reintegration to full-time education must always be the goal.

Expectations:

- The Virtual School must be consulted and must approve all placements of looked after children in alternative provision.
- The placement must:
 - Be **time-limited to 12 weeks**, unless a reviewed plan justifies an extension,
 - Be safe, high quality, and meet the child's individual learning and safeguarding needs,
 - Be reviewed termly through the PEP.
- Reintegration or progression plans must be in place from the outset.

Guidance:

- [Alternative Provision: Statutory Guidance \(DfE\)](#)

Special Educational Needs and Mental Health

Policy Position:

Looked after children often have complex special educational needs and emotional needs. These must be addressed with urgency and sensitivity.

Expectations:

- Schools must identify and support any emerging needs promptly and ensure full access to SEN support, EHCP assessments, and mental health services.
- PEPs must consider all SEN, and emotional wellbeing needs and include clear actions for support.
- The Virtual School will liaise with SENCOs, Educational Psychologists, and CAMHS where needed to ensure multi-agency responses.

Guidance:

- [SEND Code of Practice \(DfE\)](#)

EHCP Process and Educational Psychology Support

Policy Position:

Looked after children must have fair and timely access to statutory assessment and EHCP support. Schools and local authorities have a duty to ensure that the EHCP process does not experience unnecessary delay.

Expectations:

- Schools must **not delay statutory assessment requests** for looked after children in order to complete a plan-do-review cycle. These children often arrive in school with known or longstanding **evidenced** needs that justify immediate action. The **evidence** could come from social care, previous school, virtual school etc.
- The **virtual school education officer must complete the professional advice section** for all looked after children undergoing EHCP assessment.
- **Educational Psychology (EP) involvement** should normally be secured by the school the child attends.
- The Virtual School has access to **additional EP capacity** outlined in the next section.



Educational Psychologist Support

Policy Position

Darlington Virtual School has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) in place to access 20 days per academic year of Educational Psychologist (EP) time. This provision is specifically designed to support professionals working with Looked After Children and must be used in accordance with the guidelines outlined below.

Expectations

EP time is allocated to provide advice and guidance to professionals in circumstances where children may be particularly vulnerable or where additional support is needed to promote educational stability and progress.

Appropriate use includes:

- Provide strategic advice in PEP meetings
- Offer consultation in care team meetings
- Support school staff in designing appropriate academic strategies
- Transitions – support during school moves or other significant changes, where there are particular concerns around a child's vulnerability or response to change
- Entry into Care – when children first become looked after.
- Out-of-Borough Placements – for children educated outside Darlington Borough.

Virtual School EP time **must not** be used for:

- Routine statutory work (e.g. assessments required under EHCP processes).
- Replicating support ordinarily available to all pupils within mainstream school cohorts.

This ensures the resource is targeted specifically at the unique needs of Looked After Children.

Referral, Decision-Making, Prioritisation and Planning

- Termly Review:
Allocation of EP time is reviewed and prioritised at a termly meeting of the Virtual

School Team with Darlington EPS, based on current needs and strategic priorities.

- **Exceptional Circumstances:**
Where urgent or exceptional needs arise outside of the scheduled review, the Virtual School Head will make the final determination regarding Virtual School EP involvement.
- **Referral Process:**
Requests for EP involvement should be made via the Virtual School Education Officer, during the PEP process. Clear rationale and context should be provided in the PEP documentation.
- **Collaboration:**
Teachers and Social Workers are expected to work collaboratively with the EP, sharing relevant information and contributing to planning and review.
- **Feedback and Follow-Up:**
Outcomes and recommendations from EP involvement should be shared with relevant professionals and incorporated into the child's PEP and care plan.



Year 9 PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope)

Policy Position

The Virtual School recognises that Children in Our Care can experience difficulties as they move toward Key Stage 4. These difficulties typically arise for several reasons, including discussions preparing children to become Care Leavers, the pressures of examinations, and the prospect of transitions beyond their secondary education.

Expectations

In conjunction with the Educational Psychology Service, the aim is to pre-empt and mitigate the impact of these changes, striving for a smoother transition with a clear plan moving toward adulthood. A “Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope” (PATH) session will be held, for each of our year 9 pupils in the Autumn term/across the 2025-2026 academic year.

The PATH is a person-centred planning tool that supports individuals, surrounded by their care team and other key adult figures, to consider their next steps and the support they will require to achieve their goals. Sessions will be facilitated by Dr Ashleigh Holt, Senior Practitioner Educational Psychologist, and will require attendance of key adults within the child's care team.



Children who are adopted

Policy Position:

Darlington Virtual school funds an education support worker who is based at Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) to provide advice in relation to children who are adopted. The following services are accessible via Adoption Tees Valley.

1. Dedicated Education Support Worker, their role is to:

- Support adopted children and their families with education-related challenges.
- Provide advice and guidance to parents and schools.
- Assist with transitions, EHCP processes, and school meetings.
- Deliver free, tailored training to schools on trauma, attachment, and regulation strategies

2. Targeted School Interventions and Resources

ATV offers a wide range of resources and interventions, including:

- Trauma-informed training for school staff.
- Guidance on using Pupil Premium Plus effectively for adopted children.
- Sample SEND and welfare plans tailored to previously looked-after children.
- Access to therapeutic tools like The Zones of Regulation, Theraplay, and PACE

3. Multi-Disciplinary Adoption Support Service (MDASS)

Launched in partnership with the NHS ICB and other RAAs, MDASS includes:

- A psychologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, and social work consultants.
- A therapeutic model based on Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP).
- Aims to provide rapid, trauma-informed support to children with complex needs and reduce family breakdown

4. Strategic Advocacy and Cultural Change

ATV is actively involved in national efforts to improve outcomes for adopted children, including:

- Promoting lifelong links with birth families.
- Supporting the voice and influence of adopted young people through groups like Adoptbats

Expectations:

Expectations for adopted young people are very much the same as those articulated for looked after children.

The main differences are:

- A PEP is not mandatory for Adopted young people
- Pupil Premium Plus is paid directly to the school from the DFE
- Parental responsibility and therefore decisions about education lies with the adoptive parents.
- Virtual School can provide advice and guidance to Parents and Schools.

Current Virtual School Staffing Contacts

Name	Role	Email	Phone
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Virtual School General Inbox

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DARLINGTON
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