

Cheshire East Council

Corporate Parenting Committee

Date of Meeting: 6th September 2016

Report of: Jacky Forster, Director of Education and 14-19 Skills
Nicola Axford, Headteacher, Virtual School for Cared for Children

Subject/Title: Role and Purpose of the Virtual School

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Liz Durham

1. Report Summary

- 1.1. This report provides information to the committee on the local authority duties in promoting the education of cared for children. It provides information on the Virtual School arrangements in Cheshire East and an overview on the cared for children cohort and their latest education outcomes.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. Corporate Parenting Committee is asked to:
 - 2.1.1 Note the contents of this report;
 - 2.1.2 Scrutinise whether the outcomes set out in the report are good enough for our children and young people; and
 - 2.1.3 Identify where they may be able to support the key developments as Corporate Parents.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1. As an advisory Committee to Cabinet, it is important that Corporate Parenting Committee has a comprehensive overview of the role and purpose of the Virtual School and its impact on attainment and outcomes for cared for children and young people.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. Not applicable.

5. Background

Key Duties

- 5.1. Local authorities have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child looked after by them. This includes a particular duty to promote the child's education achievement, wherever they live or are educated. The authority must therefore give particular attention to the educational implications of any decision about the welfare of those children.
- 5.2. The local authority is required to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH) for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children, wherever they live or are educated.
- 5.3. Social workers, VSHs and Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO), school admission officers and special educational needs departments should work together to ensure that – except in an emergency – appropriate education provision for a child is arranged at the same time as a care placement.
- 5.4. All looked after children should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP), which is part of the child's care plan.

Delivery of Key Duties

- 5.5. In delivering its key duties, the local authority must ensure that:
 - Closing the attainment and progress gap between looked after children and their peers and creating a culture of high aspirations for them is a top priority.
 - Looked after children have access to a suitable range of high quality education placement options and that commissioning services for them takes account of the duty to promote their educational achievement.
 - VSHs are in place and that they have the resources, time, training and support they need to discharge the duty effectively.
 - VSHs have robust procedures in place to monitor the attendance and education progress of the children their authority looks after.
 - The authority's Children in Care Council (CiCC) regularly addresses the educational experiences raised by looked after children and is able to respond effectively to such issues.
- 5.6. In delivering the above, the Virtual School Head should make sure there are effective arrangements to:

Give the child a voice

- 5.7. To promote a culture that takes account of the child's views in meeting their educational needs and to help others, especially IROs, social workers, carers and schools, understand the importance of listening to and taking into account of the child's wishes and feeling about education.

Work with others

- 5.8. Encouraging and supporting social workers and carers to have high expectations in helping looked after children to achieve their full potential in education from pre-school to post-16 education, employment and training.
- 5.9. Help IROs and social workers understand the importance they need to place on education as part of care planning.
- 5.10. Ensure that whenever a child is likely to move schools that there is an informed discussion about the choice of school that will best meet their needs.

Supporting Schools

- 5.11. Ensuring that schools understand the powerful role they can play in significantly improving the quality of life and the educational experiences of looked after children.
- 5.12. The VSH should make schools aware of their responsibility to ensure that designated teachers have had the appropriate training to undertake their role as set out in the statutory guidance for governing bodies on the role of the designated teacher for looked after children.
- 5.13. The VSH should offer training and advice to schools. This should enable schools to understand that looked after children, including those who remain looked after but have been placed for adoption, are not a homogenous group and that their individual needs will be different.

Pupil Premium

- 5.14. Local authorities receive a pupil premium grant allocation for children looked after. This is additional funding provided to help improve the attainment of looked after children and close the attainment gap between this group and their peers.
- 5.15. VSHs, working with education settings, should implement pupil premium arrangement for looked after children and hold schools account for the impact of the additional support provided.

Information Sharing

- 5.16. Appropriate and specific arrangement for sharing reliable data should be in place to ensure that the educational needs of looked after children can be understood and met. This is particularly important in relation to the tracking and monitoring of attainment data and notifications of where children, including those placed out-of-authority, are being educated.

Training for those involved in Care and Education of Cared for Children

- 5.17. The VSH should ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place to meet the training needs of those responsible for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children.
- 5.18. Such training, among other things, should include information about school admission arrangements; special educational needs; attendance and exclusions; homework; choosing GCSE options; managing any challenging behaviour in relation to education settings; promoting positive educational and recreational activities and supporting children to be aspirational for their future education, training and employment.

Securing Appropriate Education

- 5.19. When a child becomes looked after his or her local authority will arrange a suitable placement. In doing so, the child's allocated social worker should do everything possible to minimise disruption to the child's education, whatever the child's age but particularly at key stage 4, and this should involve the VSH.
- 5.20. If it is not possible to maintain the child's existing education placement, the child's new education placement should be arranged in consultation with the VSH at the same time as the care placement. The VSH has primary responsibility for ensuring that there is suitable education in place for all children looked after by the local authority. The following principles should apply:
- Educational provision should mean a full-time place.
 - Schools judged by Ofsted to be 'good' or 'outstanding' should be prioritised for looked after children in need of a new school.
 - The choice of education setting should be based on what any good parent would want for their child. It should be based on evidence that the setting can meet the educational needs of the child and help them make the maximum progress.
 - The child's wishes and feelings should be taken into account and the suitability of the education setting tested by arranging an informal visit with the child.

Admissions

- 5.21. Looked after children have been given the highest priority within school admission arrangements. It is the responsibility of the VSH to ensure that admission authorities understand that Fair Access Protocols do not apply to looked after children and that they are 'excepted pupils' in relation to infant class size regulations. The local authority, as a corporate parent, does not tolerate drift and delay where children the authority looks after are without an education placement that is appropriate to their assessed needs. This includes using their powers of direction in a timely way rather than delay issuing a direction as a result of protracted negotiation.

Exclusions

- 5.22. Headteachers should, as far as possible, avoid excluding any looked-after child.
- 5.23. Where a school has concerns about a looked after child's behaviour the VSH should be informed and, where necessary, involved at the earliest opportunity. This is to enable to VSH, working with others, to:
- Consider what additional assessment and support (such as additional help for the classroom teacher, one-to-one therapeutic work or a suitable alternative placement) needs to be put place to address the causes of the child's behaviour and prevent the need for exclusion.
 - Make any additional arrangements to support the child's on-going education in the event of an exclusion.

Personal Education Plan (PEP)

- 5.24. All looked after children must have a care plan, of which the PEP is an integral part. All of those involved in the process of developing the PEP should use it to support the personalised learning of the child.
- 5.25. The PEP (pre-school to age 18) is an evolving record of what needs to happen for the looked after children to enable them to make expected progress and fulfil their potential. The PEP should reflect the importance of a personalised approach to learning that meets the identified educational needs of the child, raises aspirations and builds life chances.
- 5.26. The quality of the PEP is the joint responsibility of the local authority that looked after the child and the school. Social workers, carers, VSHs, Designated Teachers and, as appropriate, other relevant professionals will need to work closely together.

Resources

- 5.27. In order to promote the education of our cared for children, the virtual school has the following resources in terms of both dedicated staffing and budget.

Structure

- 5.28. Virtual School Headteacher (1 FT) - responsible for ensuring that the statutory duties of the LA are carried out with regard to the education of cared for children and the strategic lead for developing processes and policies which support this. They will also establish and maintain links with other service areas.
- 5.29. Virtual School Advisors (2.6 FTE) - have overview of a caseload of cared for children, attend PEP meetings for new children and provide targeted support for those cases with greatest need.
- 5.30. PEP Co-ordinator (1 FT) - ensure that all children are allocated a named Advisor and also manage a caseload.

- 5.31. Youth Engagement Service Advisor (0.5 FTE) - have reduced caseload, focussing on cared for children who are known to the Youth Engagement Service.
- 5.32. Early Years Advisor (0.5 FTE) - oversee cases of all pre-school cared for children and support Social Workers to carry out PEPs for children less than 2 years old.
- 5.33. Education Liaison (1 FT) - support carers and young people who are showing signs in disengagement with education or are at risk of exclusion.
- 5.34. Education Psychologist (0.2 FTE) - provide advice to schools on managing behaviours and developing appropriate support plans.
- 5.35. Business support (3 FTE, including 1 x apprentice) - maintain records of children in care, schools attended, attendance and attainment, PEPs, funding allocation and prepare for analysis and monitoring by VSH.

Budget

- 5.36. Pupil Education Allowance (£175k) - used to support additional education needs such as 1:1 tuition, alternative provision, additional Educational Psychologist interventions, specialist teaching for pupils changing schools, laptops and funding for development of personal interests and talents such as attending international swimming competitions or music college.
- 5.37. Used to fund additional needs of children in pre-school, e.g. speech and language therapy and that post-16 such as interpreters and English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses for unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- 5.38. Pupil Premium Plus (£590K) - funding for children age 5 to 16 yrs. Majority is allocated to schools to carry out support and extension activities identified in the PEP but school can request additional funding, if needed. Additional funds have been used to purchase alternative provision for children at risk of exclusion or who have moved areas in Year 11, support integration into new schools and to support transition between schools or phases of education.

Cohort Analysis

- 5.39. Attached at Appendix 1 is a cohort analysis as of July 2016.

Cared for Children Attainment and Outcomes

- 5.40. Attached at Appendix 2 is detailed information on cared for children attainment and outcomes.

Key Developments

5.41. The following are key developments:

- Review arrangements to ensure there is no delay in admission of our cared for children into an educational setting.
- Review of the PEP process and allocation/impact of pupil premium allocations.
- Review of arrangements for intervening where there are concerns about attendance and to support school in avoiding excluding a child.
- Work with Social Care to establish a 16+ wrap around support programme that gives all young people access and to education and training opportunities and support to engage with these.
- Establish an annual detailed self-evaluation of outcomes which identifies early intervention/priorities to shared late autumn each year with Corporate Parenting Committee for scrutiny.

6. Contact Information

Contact details for this report are as follows:-

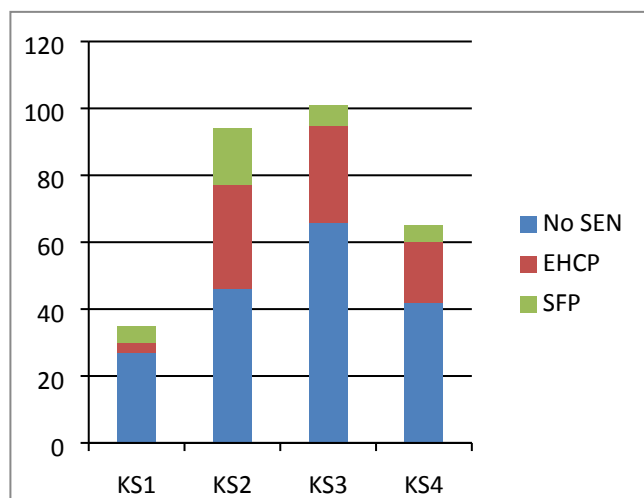
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Cohort Analysis as of July 2016

Cohort size and gender

The Virtual School supports all young people in care as well as all eligible care leavers up to the end of school year when they become 18 years old. After this time advice is available on request but the main support is via Social Care. The total number supported by the Virtual School as of the end of July was 467, a 6% increase from July 2015.

Graph shows number of children in each key stage.



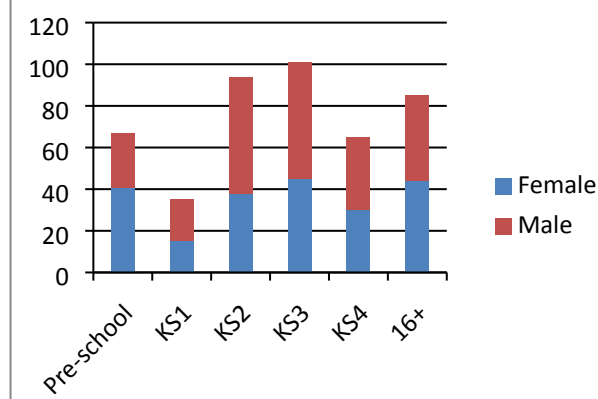
SEN

Pupils with SEN are those who have an Education Health and Care Plan, (EHCP) or those who have a School Focussed Plan (SFP).

The overall level of SEN of cared for children Cheshire East is 39%. This is an increase from 32% in 2015, but is below the national level of SEN for all cared for children which was 61% in 2015.

The Virtual School works with the SEN Team to ensure that needs are identified and met effectively and that the teams work together when new EHCPs are being considered or a school move is required.

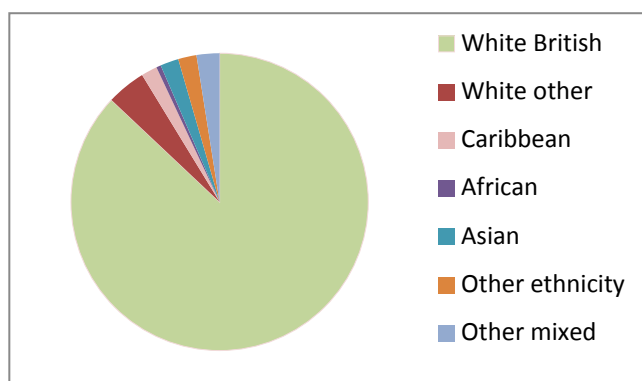
Graph shows level of SEN children in each key stage.



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Ethnicity

The majority of children in care in Cheshire East are white British who make up 87% of population. The next group, white other make up a further 4%. The 'other ethnicity' group who make up just 2% of the population are mainly 16+ young people who are of Middle Eastern origin and include unaccompanied asylum seekers, who require additional language support in order to access training or education.



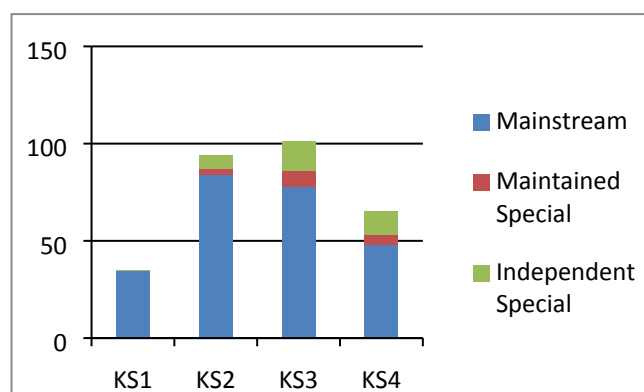
Graph shows ethnicity of children and young people in care.

Placement Type

Wherever possible children are placed in mainstream school where they can be fully included and have their needs met.

Where children have identified needs which require specialist provision, they are placed by the authority's SEN Panel where they live in a school which can meet their needs. The Virtual School are active in this process to find the right school as soon as possible.

Graph shows provision type for children in each key stage.

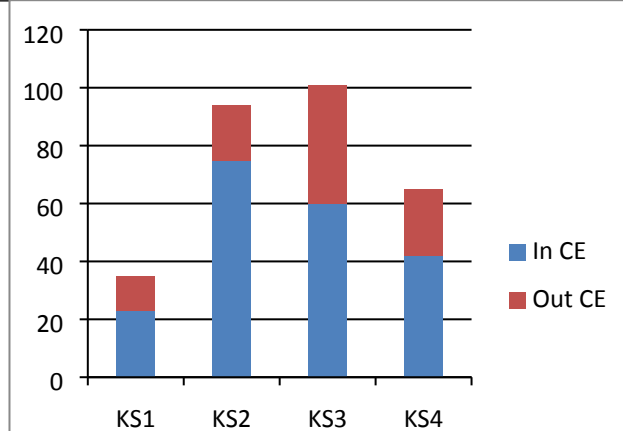


Location of School

Most children are placed in Cheshire East schools when they come into care and will remain at this school, if it is appropriate. In some cases a move away from the home area is requested by the Court when the child enters care or the care placement may be too far from the previous school.

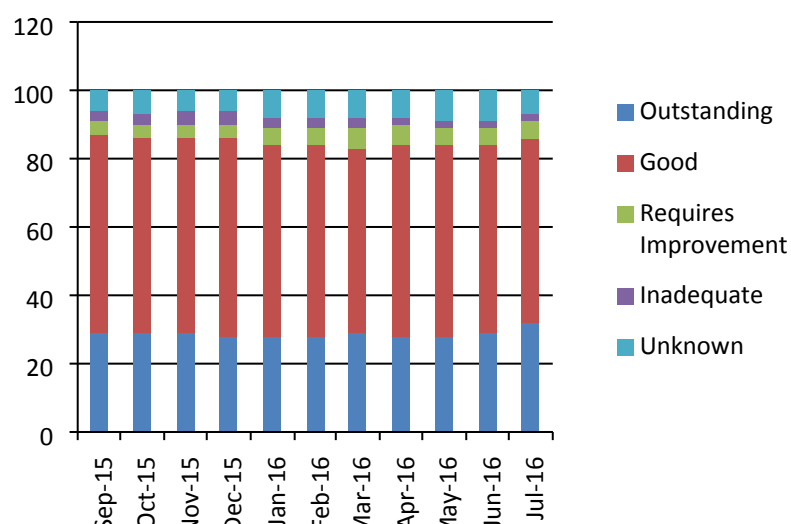
A new school may be needed when a placement breaks down. New placements which will allow the child to remain at the same school are sought initially, but if this is not possible then transfer to an out of borough school may be necessary.

Graph shows location of children in each key stage.



School Ofsted ratings

Over 80% of children cared for by Cheshire East attend schools rated as good or outstanding. Children who attend schools which are found inadequate are monitored and a risk assessment is carried out to determine whether they should change schools. Schools with no rating are those outside England or new schools who have not yet been inspected.

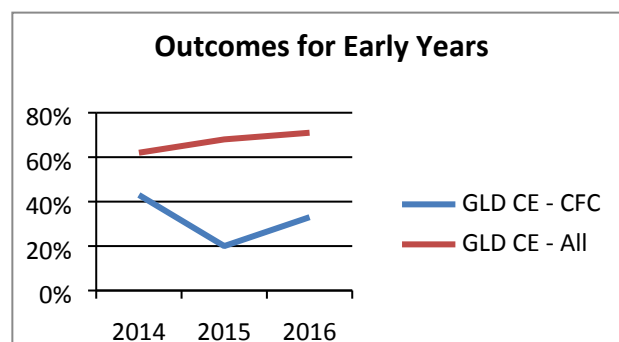


Graph shows Ofsted ratings of schools 2015-2016.

Cared for Children Attainment and Outcomes

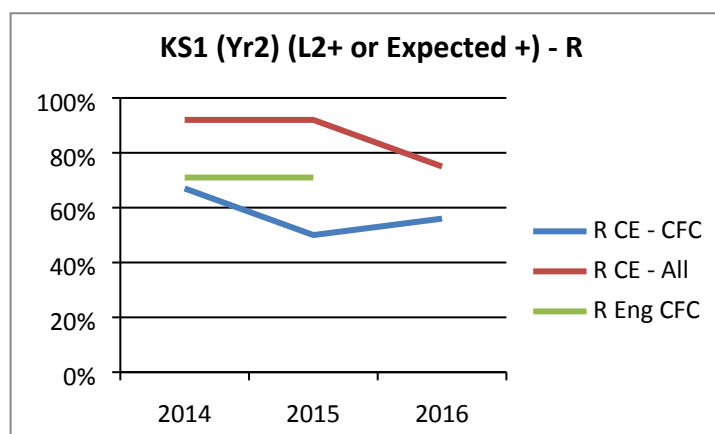
End of Reception

All children are assessed in 12 areas at the end of their Reception year. Those who are assessed as reaching the expected level in all areas are deemed to have reached a 'Good Level of Development' (GLD). These areas include speech and language, social and emotional development as well as basic literacy and numeracy. Cared for children often require additional support to develop their speech and language and emotional intelligence and so do not reach the expected level. All children age 2 years and above are encouraged to attend nursery provision so that they can access support and areas for development can be identified and addressed.

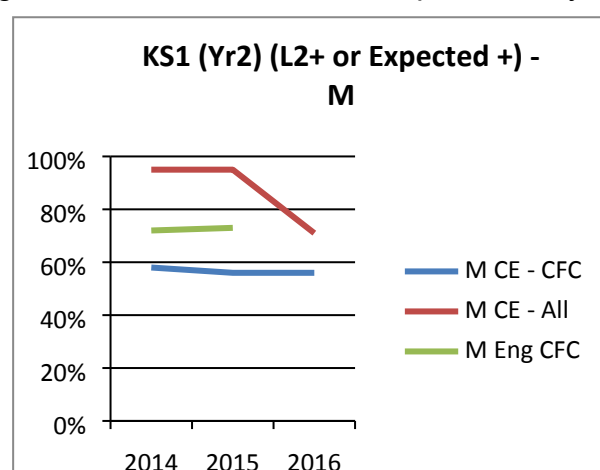
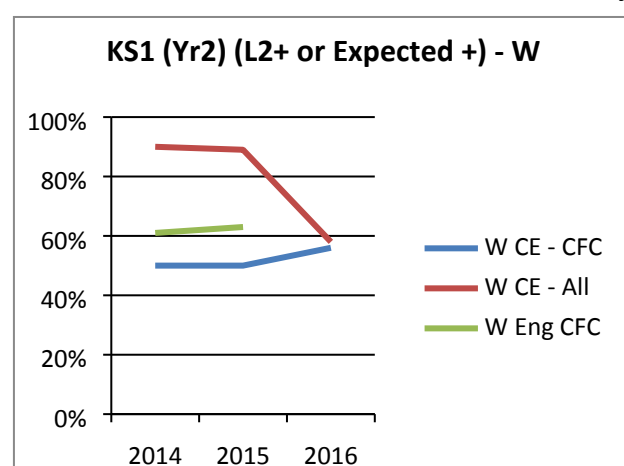


Key Stage 1 – age 7

Attainment in the Y2 tests is below that for all cared for children but has shown an improvement this year, with the percentage gaining the expected level in reading, writing and maths increasing from 50% to 56% although the small cohort size means that caution is needed when drawing conclusions; only five children who had been in care for one year or more completed the tests this year.

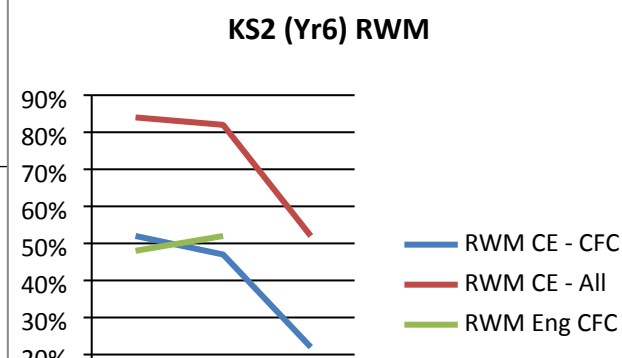


The attendance of this cohort is consistently high and has been 97% for the past three years.



Key Stage 2 – age 11

Cared for children consistently achieve better in reading than in writing or maths despite many

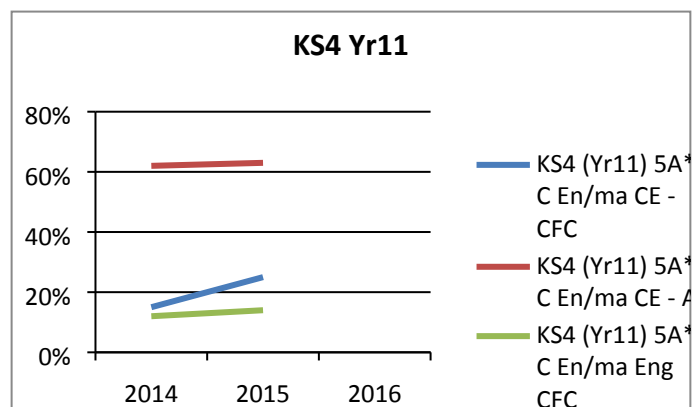


having additional support in these subjects. There have been significant levels of SEN in this cohort for the past two years. Of the 23 children who completed Year 6 in 2016, seven did not complete the tests as they were working below the threshold for assessment. The results for 2016 are for the new curriculum and assessment scheme and are not comparable with the previous years.

The attendance of Year 6 was 99%; an increase of 2% from that of the previous 2 year groups.

Key Stage 4 – age 16

Since 2014 the measure of attainment at the end of Year 11 has been to gain five or more GCSE (or recognised equivalents) at grade C or above including English and maths. Children in this group are supported with additional tuition, revision guides, mentoring and careers support. Children who enter care or require a school change during this phase are supported to find suitable education programmes which will provide good progression routes. Eleven children who completed Year 11 in 2016 have been supported in this way.

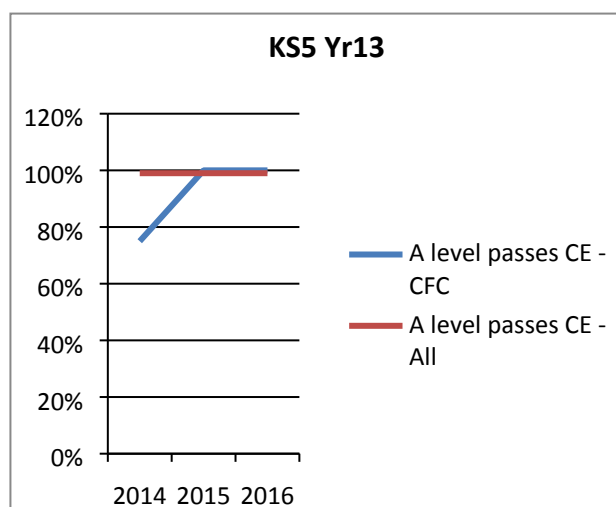


The attendance of Year 11 has increased this year to 90% from 84% in 2015.

Key Stage 5 –age 18

All young people who gain 5A*-C are encouraged to progress to A levels and HE. Although the numbers in each year group are small, the success rate has increased.

Young people who do not complete A levels are supported to move into vocational areas or to continue to progress with lower level studies. 37 young people completed Year 12, of which 26 already have a positive destination from September. Five young people cannot work due to parenting or ill health, while the rest are being supported to find work.



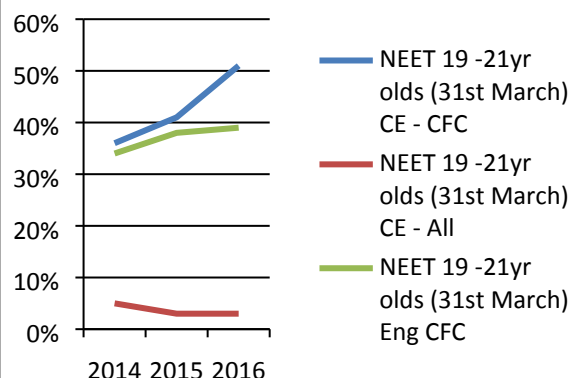
Post-16

The scope of the Virtual School was expanded in 2014 to include all eligible post-16 cared for and care leavers. The focus of our support is on 16 and 17 year olds who are expected to remain in education training after which time Social Care take the lead on support.

Those not in education, employment and training (NEET) amongst this group has remained at 30%, although the level amongst 16-17 year olds is lower. Additional engagement and support activities have been put into place to try and encourage those young people who are reluctant to engage with any services.

A multi-agency approach is now being taken to improve the participation levels at age 18 and above, which involves Youth Support, Workforce Development and Skills and Growth.

NEET age 19-21yrs

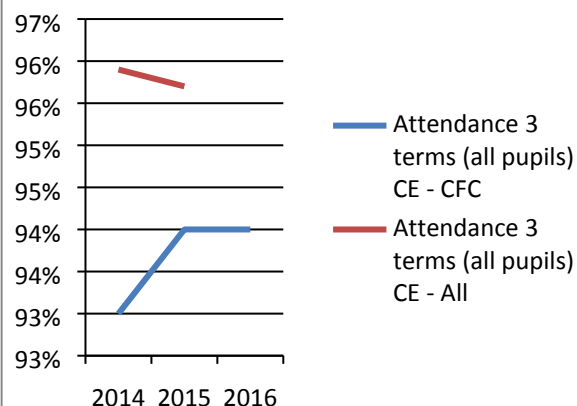


Attendance and Exclusions

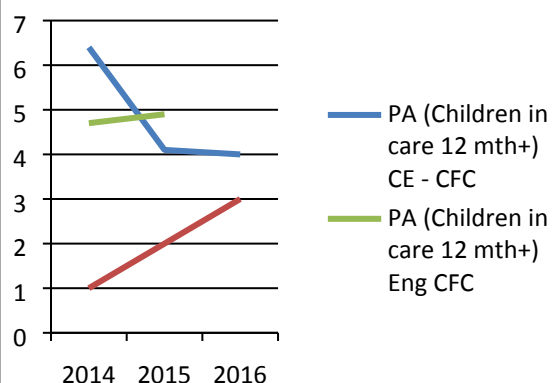
Attendance has been a focus for the Virtual School and, although there has been no change in the overall level, there has been a decrease in the level of persistent absence compared to last year. The threshold has however been raised this year to 90%.

Despite a rise in permanent exclusions in Cheshire East, there have been no permanent exclusions amongst cared for children for the past 4 years. This is due to the close working between schools and the Virtual School to find ways to avoid exclusions and put in interventions which help to stabilise the young person so that they can resume learning. The Virtual School has worked with schools when an exclusion has taken place to try and avoid repeat exclusions and this has contributed to the reduction in the number of incidents and total days lost.

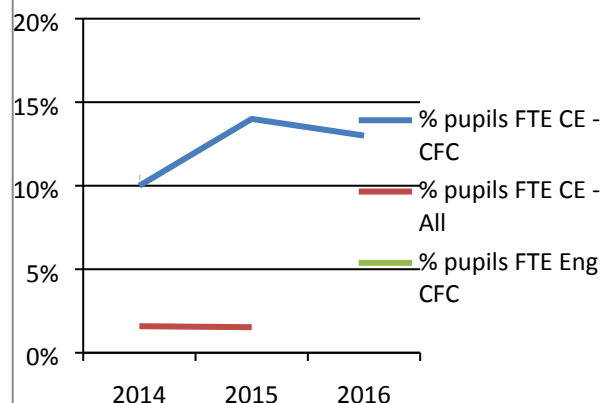
Overall Attendance



Attendance



Rate of Exclusions



PEPs

For children less than two years olds, a simplified PEP has been produced which is completed by Social Workers and/or Health Visitors to avoid multiple meetings and carers having to give the same information to several agencies. Once completed these are subject to quality assurance by the Virtual School.

The Virtual School takes the lead in ensuring that all children from 2-16 years have PEPs every term. These are then reviewed by the Advisor who assesses the support needs and quality assures the PEP, giving feedback to the school. Where cases are assessed as having high support needs, the Advisor is heavily involved in the case. This may include observing classroom behaviour or visiting prospective new schools while for cases with lower support needs the Advisor will monitor the case through the returned PEPs and termly data reports.

Young people age 16-18 are encouraged to have termly PEPs and these are always arranged for those in education. Some young people who are in apprenticeships or other training may not wish to have a formal PEP meeting, although their progress and future plans are recorded in their pathway plans and the Virtual School support remains available on request.

All returned PEPs are reviewed and quality assurance is carried out on those where the Virtual School have not attended. Training with Designated Teachers has focussed on the need to ensure that PEPs are fully and accurately completed and that targets are specific, appropriate and can be monitored for impact. This has shown a significant improvement over time and continuous improvement remains a priority.

