

# Virtual schools for care-experienced learners in Scotland: Reflections on an emerging concept in a new context

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## Abstract

The 'virtual school' is an approach to supporting care-experienced children and young people in education. The Virtual School Head (VSH) has been a statutory role within the education landscape in England since 2014. In Scotland, where the education, social care and legal systems are distinct from those in England, there has been a recent increase in the number of local authorities utilising this concept. This research aimed to explore the role and remit of Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHTs) in Scotland, and to identify similarities and differences with those of VSHs in England, to uncover learning about the emergence of this concept and role in a new context. We conducted semi-structured interviews with relevant post-holders in Scotland, using key concepts from the published literature on virtual schools in England, and analysed these qualitatively to identify themes. We discuss some of the similarities and differences we identified, noting that while the purpose of the role, and the means by which it functions, were largely common to both countries, there were also nuanced differences. Key similarities included the importance of positioning within the local authority, and the development of relationships with social work. Differences were largely underpinned by the educational and legal contexts in which the post-holders operated, and included control of budgets and specificity of remit. This research contributes to our understanding of the

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role of the VSHT in Scotland, and identifies some emerging features as the virtual school concept is translated to a new context.

#### **KEYWORDS**

care experience, home international, looked after, virtual school

### **Key insights**

#### **What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The 'virtual school' with a remit for the education of looked after and care-experienced learners is statutory in England, and an emerging concept in Scotland. This paper offers comparison and reflection on the role and function virtual schools within these two distinct educational contexts.

#### **What are the main insights that the paper provides?**

Virtual schools in Scotland and England are broadly similar in terms of remit, activity and the barriers they face. Differences relate mainly to legislation and policy, and the 'levers' available to support the work. This is a key area for attention in the translation of the role into new contexts.

## **INTRODUCTION**

All children have the right to equality of opportunity in their education (UN General Assembly, 1989). The international research on the education of care-experienced young people describes a cohort of learners who, because of a set of complex interrelated factors, face multiple barriers to learning (O'Higgins et al., 2015), and for whom additional pro-active education supports may be beneficial (e.g. Connelly et al., 2008; Flynn et al., 2012; Mendis et al., 2018; Pecora, 2012). A small number of recent reviews have sought to identify the efficacy of education interventions for care-experienced children and young people, and have concluded that overall, the evidence from individual studies is not robust enough to make strong claims to effectiveness (Evans et al., 2017; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo et al., 2013; Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018). Nevertheless, most of the interventions, including the 'virtual school' approach, were considered to have some promise or indication of positive change (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo et al., 2013; Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018).

### **The virtual school**

Broadly, a 'virtual school' is an approach to supporting children who are or have previously been 'looked after' (sometimes known as 'out of home care' or 'alternative care'), by appointing an individual or team with overarching responsibility for their education, and providing support as if they belonged to a single school. Although

the children and young people continue to attend their usual place of education, the virtual school provides an additional 'layer' of support for these children and young people, with the overall aim of improving attainment and educational outcomes for this cohort of learners.

A pilot of a virtual school model in England concluded that the role was beneficial in raising the profile and priority of looked after children's education, and may have contributed to improvements in attainment (Berridge et al., 2009). Subsequently, a report from OFSTED, England's inspection and regulation body for education, on the impact of virtual schools in nine local authorities, found that there was 'evidence of improving educational outcomes for looked after children in all local authorities visited' (OFSTED, 2012a, p. 6). The report noted reduced exclusions, and improvements related to attendance and attainment. Liabo et al. (2013) included the virtual school approach among other strategic interventions in their review, and noted that despite the 'methodological weaknesses' in the evaluations they considered, there was some indication of improved collaborative working between departments, implying that such improvements would be of benefit to learners. More recent research has explored the Virtual School Head (VSH) role in supporting specific groups, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (Ott & O'Higgins, 2019). Pickles et al. (2023) report their research on VSHs supporting autistic children, and note that there remains 'very limited research' on virtual schools.

While the concept and language of a Virtual School Head is relatively new (Rivers, 2018), the idea of a virtual school is not, and many local authorities in England have had posts and teams working in similar ways for over two decades (Dean, 2009). The construct has been described in multiple ways, including for example as an idea, an innovation, a concept, a model of support, an individual or postholder, and a team supporting a cohort of learners (e.g. Dean, 2009; DfES, 2007; Jackson, 2015; OFSTED, 2012a, Rivers, 2018). In England, the post of Virtual School Head became a statutory feature of the education landscape as a result of the Children and Families Act 2014 (UK Government, 2014). The role initially focused on offering direct support to looked after children specifically, later expanding to offer 'support and advice' to those previously looked after (such as children who have returned to the care of their family of origin, and children who have been adopted from care). More recently, the remit has been broadened through non-statutory guidance to include 'strategic oversight' of a wider group of all 'children with a social worker' (DfE, 2021). Virtual School Heads are expected to become members of the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), a charity set up by members to promote the work, and as a forum to share learning and practice (NAVSH, n.d.).

Jackson (2015) considered the virtual school approach in England, questioned whether the concept would work elsewhere and concluded that virtual schools 'would seem quite applicable in any country with semi-autonomous school districts of a reasonable size' (Jackson, 2015, p. 332). Subsequently, Sebba and Berridge (2019) have noted that the approach has been used in parts of Australia, but that no research is yet available from that context. More recently, Foster et al. (2021, p. 57) have used learning from the 'Virtual School Model' in England and Scotland, along with engagement with care-experienced individuals and education professionals, to conclude that 'it would be premature to endorse a national roll out of a virtual school (VS) model in Wales', but that the Welsh Government should consider creating supportive conditions to enable piloting of such an approach.

In Scotland, where Jackson (2015, p. 332) noted that 'concern about the attainment of looked after children has, if anything, been even stronger than in England', some local authorities have in recent years established posts and teams whose work is aligned with the virtual school approach.

## Virtual schools in Scotland

The first virtual school in Scotland was established in Aberdeen City in 2015, but since the launch of the Scottish Government's Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund (CECYP Fund) in 2018, several other local authorities have chosen to utilise funding in the creation of a post or team with a remit for the education of all care-experienced children and young people. This fund is part of the ongoing Scottish Attainment Challenge, the purpose of which is to contribute to the closing of the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, [n.d.-b](#)). The CECYP Fund is allocated to local authorities based on the number of looked after children and young people aged 5–15 recorded in the most recent Children's Social Work Statistics, although the related guidance describes that the funding should be spent to benefit the whole cohort of care-experienced young people (e.g. including adopted and other previously looked after young people), aged 0–26 (Scottish Government, [2021](#)). As at July 2023, although such a role is not statutory in Scotland, over half of the 32 local authorities have a Virtual School Head teacher (VSHT) or equivalent in post, covering over 70% of the country's approximately 12,600 looked after children (Scottish Government, [2023](#)).

Education in Scotland is devolved, meaning it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government based in Edinburgh, rather than the UK Government based in London. Furthermore, the education system in Scotland, including its underpinning legislation and curriculum, has historically been distinct from that in the rest of the UK (Humes & Bryce, [2018](#)). The different legal, health and education systems have created the conditions for what Raffe ([1998](#)) has called 'home internationals', and what Bywaters et al. ([2020](#)) have more recently described as a 'natural experiment', in enabling comparative research in the four nations of the UK. Machin et al. ([2013](#), p. 1) suggest that '[e]ducation is an area that is highly devolved in the UK, and the fact that all four constituent countries have pursued very different policies in the recent past provides a good testing ground to undertake a comparative review of the merits or otherwise of the education reforms that have taken place'. The emergence of the virtual school approach in Scotland allows us to explore its development in this new context.

In this study, we explore the virtual school concept, which is already well established in one UK nation, and which is emerging elsewhere. We interviewed VSHTs and their equivalents in Scotland, as part of research to explore the role and its development within the Scottish education landscape. Here we report our findings from these interviews in response to the broad question 'What is the role and remit of the virtual school (or equivalent) in Scottish local authorities?' We then go on to discuss the ways in which this is similar to and different from the statutory role in England, as described in the existing literature. We seek to reflect on the emergence of the virtual school concept in Scotland, and to contribute to a wider understanding of its introduction in this new context.

## Language

The findings of the recent Independent Care Review in Scotland, published in *The Promise*, highlight the importance of careful and non-stigmatising use of language (ICR, [2020](#)). In addition, we are conscious of nuanced differences in some of the language used in different UK contexts, and that language use is emerging and fluid. We have therefore sought to be explicit about the language we use and the reasons for this.

We use the term 'care experienced', which is the preferred term identified in *The Promise*, to mean anyone who has at any time been 'looked after'. Where we use terms such as 'looked after', this relates to the use of this term in legislation and policy to include the specific group of children and young people who are currently 'in care', rather than the broader

care-experienced population of children, which includes individuals who are 'previously looked after', including individuals remaining with their family of origin who have previously been subject to 'compulsory measures', and adopted people. In direct quotes, we use the language of the speaker.

Throughout this paper, we use VSH to refer to the Virtual School Head and equivalent roles in England. We use VSHT to refer to the Virtual School Head Teacher or equivalent in Scotland; owing to the small population of individuals in such roles in Scotland, using correct job titles or more specific terminology would risk identification of interview participants.

## METHODS

We conducted semi-structured online interviews with VSHTs in Scottish local authorities. Interview participants were recruited through membership of the Virtual Schools and Care Experience Teams (VSHT and CET) Network, which offers guidance and support to local authority representatives in relevant roles. The research was subject to ethical review at the University of Strathclyde.

The research was introduced to Network members during a routine online meeting, and interested VSHTs were invited to contact the researchers initially by email with any questions, or to express an interest in participating. Interviews were then scheduled by email or during other online engagement. At that time, 16 of Scotland's 32 local authorities were represented by membership of the Network, and 13 individuals took part in an interview. Interview participants had a range of experience in their role, including some who had joined the Network at its inception in March 2019 with their posts already established, and some who had come into newly created posts in early to mid-2021. Interviews took place in June and early July 2021, and were conducted and recorded using MS Teams with the written consent of participants.

Interview topic guides were informed by a search and review of the literature on virtual schools in relation to care-experienced learners. Key features of the virtual school concept were identified, and although these were not necessarily described in the literature itself as vital to ensuring the impact of virtual schools (since none of the papers had intentionally sought to identify or isolate key components of the virtual school approach in this way), they were described in some way as important or influential to the success of the virtual school. We identified four overarching key features from the literature:

- Position within the local authority, including
  - seniority, power, and credibility of the role;
  - influence over budget/spending; and
  - support and supervision for post-holders.
- Collaborative working, including
  - a culture of collaboration in the local authority; and
  - access to a mix of professionals/expertise.
- Access to data, including
  - the availability of useful, high-quality data; and
  - monitoring to allow timeous follow-up (e.g. unexplained absence).
- Ability to offer individualised support, including
  - knowing the young people as individuals; and
  - assessing and addressing individual needs.

Six interviews were conducted by the first author, and seven by the second author, according to availability. Each author then transcribed the other's interviews, which facilitated a greater understanding of the content of those interviews. This contributed to familiarisation

with the data, and to the identification of 'key issues, concepts and themes' in the development of codes for 'framework analysis' (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

The transcripts were then coded for the four *a priori* themes which were identified from the existing literature, as well as for additional themes which were identified through the familiarisation and thematic framework development stages. We used nVivo 12 software to support the organisation of our data and facilitate our discussion, reflection and interpretation. Our analysis was then shared for 'sense checking' with a VSHT who had not taken part in an interview, and the Education Lead at the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS), whose remit includes convening the Network.

Our focus here is on reporting the findings relating to the four foundational themes which emerged from our review of existing literature. Having been developed from the literature on virtual schools in England, we considered these to be the most pertinent to our aim of comparing the context and experiences of practitioners in England and Scotland.

## FINDINGS

Our findings are presented here under the four key themes we identified from the limited existing literature on virtual schools. These related to local authority structures; working with others and creating relationships; access and barriers to accurate information; and the different layers of support that were offered to children and those who live with and teach them. In order to ensure a clear distinction between our findings, and our learning from the existing literature, we focus here on what VSHTs in Scotland told us about their experiences. In the Discussion, we relate these findings to the literature on the VSH role in England.

The VSHTs who took part in interviews were all educators by professional background, but had a range of experience within education, and were positioned differently in the structures of the local authority. This positioning, and their past experience in senior roles, were considered to contribute to perceptions and credibility of the role. This in turn influenced the ways in which participants were able to make connections and build relationships with other professionals, both within and beyond the local authority. These relationships and collaborative working sometimes enabled challenges such as access to data to be addressed, and helped to ensure that VSHTs were well positioned to offer support to individual learners, as well as at all other levels of the system.

### Position in the local authority

We found that the postholders in Scotland were positioned in a variety of ways within their local authority. This included differences in the department in which they were located (for example, education, social work, or children's services), the line management structures within which their posts were located, their job titles and the level of their post on national pay scales.

All of the respondents had a background in education; that is, they were qualified teachers with classroom teaching experience. Most, but not all, had previous experience in 'promoted posts' above main-grade classroom teacher, such as Principal Teacher, Depute [Deputy] Head or Head Teacher. Not all were designated as 'Head Teachers' in their current role. Some were at Depute Head or Principal Teacher level, while others were on non-teaching scales such Quality Improvement Officer or Education Officer (see SNCT, n.d.). In moving to their present roles, some respondents had remained on the same terms and conditions, and the same pay point as in their previous post (e.g. from a school-based Depute to their

current local authority-wide Depute role), while for others their current role was a promotion or a change to a non-teaching contract and pay scale.

Respondents reflected on the importance of the seniority of the role in establishing credibility and recognition. In particular, identifying a post as 'Head Teacher' was described as contributing to the status and respect for the post, especially amongst education colleagues.

I am a Head Teacher, so that gives you a lot of status and power and credibility that you wouldn't have if you weren't a head teacher, to get attention from schools you actually need to be a Head Teacher.

(Participant 3)

I think within different local authorities they have it in different teams and also the grading of the post [is different], so I will be very honest, I think that a lot of the successes I've had in [my local authority] have been because I was already an established Head Teacher [...] there's a certain level of respect that came with me, and I think that that's where the placing of the post is incredibly important.

(Participant 6)

Furthermore, the positioning of the post, for example, being located in a team which included education, social work and educational psychology, could facilitate collaborative working. Respondents reported that although they tended to be regarded as 'the education person', their role and position allowed them to make connections, including with social work colleagues.

I'm employed by children services, but because of my title and because of my background, I'm seen as within education.

(Participant 2)

I kind of straddle the two. I was based in the education office but spent as much time in the social work office.

(Participant 3)

Respondents generally felt that the positioning of the posts, and the ways in which they were able to position themselves by proactively building relationships, were important in developing the connections they needed to ensure the effectiveness of the role.

## Collaborative working and relationships

Participants generally reported a good or improving culture of collaboration within their local authority, and described the broad range of meetings and groups they were able to attend to build awareness of their role and develop connections. As alluded to above, participants most commonly referred to their role in connecting social work and education. Involvement in both areas supported, and acted as a driver of, collaborative practice.

[My] role is developing in an absolutely, far more [working] with our social work colleagues in particular. I do feel that I'm involved in a lot of what they are doing now.

(Participant 4)

The VSHTs were able to make connections both internally, for example between local authority services, and externally to link up with other agencies such as those in the third sector.

Notwithstanding differences in the focus of the role in each local authority (for example, on different age groups or living arrangements), all participants described building connections at different levels, including between specific individuals (e.g. carers and teachers) and groups (e.g. social work teams and schools), although the extent of this varied according to the length of time that the VSHT role had been in place. Participants described a continuum of professional activity, ranging from direct operational work with children, families, and schools, to more strategic activity:

The school were at a loss. [Team member was there for] four days, and now we've got the head teacher crawling under tables to support [child] because [team member] said [the child] just wants to feel close to somebody. So the head teacher emailed [us] straight away to say, you know, this worked. I got under the table and [child] came out with me no problem.

(Participant 7)

Every year, schools do renewal plans or kind of school improvement plans. So just [recently] I wrote guidance on actually what should be included in the renewal plan, underneath the kind of equalities page, with a care experience lens on and I did that in line with the Promise around about the kind of loved, safe and respected kind of themes as well.

(Participant 6)

This demonstrates that range of work undertaken by VSHTs at all levels of 'the system' to effect change and drive improvements.

The ability to understand the language, processes and frameworks of both education and social work, to 'talk both languages' (Participant 1), as well as a sophisticated understanding of family and care-experienced contexts, gave VSHTs credibility and influence. A recurring theme was a sense that participants were able to link up different parts of a complex system; they 'joined the dots', creating both informal and formal networks to drive and influence change at different levels according to their particular context.

I've met so many different people and over time you get to know them. You get to know their, their way of working and they know my needs and what I need to do, so it's it's just built so many more bridges.

(Participant 2)

## **Access to data**

The VSHTs reported collecting data for multiple related reasons, including to track the cohort, raise awareness of children in schools, maintain strategic oversight, and to direct resources appropriately. They routinely collected a range of both quantitative and qualitative data to monitor progress and evidence impact. All attempted to collect traditional outcome metrics such as attainment, attendance and exclusions, while some were working towards systematic collection of data on experiences and outcomes such as engagement, well-being, interventions and feedback.

Almost all respondents reported problems, frustrations and issues with the collection and monitoring of data. Limitations around routinely collected data, and the numbers of changes that children experienced, added to the complexity of bringing together information from education and social care.



The first thing for me was to find out who are our care experienced young people, because you have the social work and education databases. Both have most but nothing has all, so I set out to create an Excel spreadsheet with everybody that I knew that was on a compulsory supervision order. But separately those that I know were care experienced in the wider aspect. That's been quite a hard job, it's quite hard to keep it up to date.

(Participant 3)

While most felt like they had the information they needed, the process of accessing it was often frustrating, bureaucratic, time consuming and complex. While all respondents were on a different part of the journey towards improving this, most were grappling with processes to combine, create and design bespoke data systems to ensure a holistic picture of their learners. Those few respondents who described having access to dedicated administrators or data analysts, and those with good links with the relevant departments, reported this as a particular strength in getting useful, timely information that directed the work. Several expressed frustration that commonly used management information systems were not easily reconfigured to meet their needs for data access.

I again [work] with social work colleagues and education colleagues and the IT people, I've been involved in that which involves us looking at both [the education data system] and [system name], which is the social work system, and looking at how to pull the data from both, and looking at how to link that with the data from [other databases], you know, our employability and outcomes data. So that the picture that we'll get for care experienced children will be immediate, at the moment our picture tends to be historic [...] and also only as good and as up to date as depending on which system is feeding in.

(Participant 13)

In parallel with the common challenges faced by VSHTs around accessibility, accuracy and timeliness of data, all reported similar views on the necessity and purpose of ensuring the availability of high-quality data. Broadly, this allowed VSHTs to monitor changes, for example, to exclusions or attendance in a particular cluster or school. At an individual level, reliable data allowed respondents to identify those learners most in need of support, and to target support where needed.

## Individualised supports and beyond

Respondents reported a broad remit to offer support to all care-experienced children and young people, and sometimes to families on the 'edge of care', although some noted that resource constraints meant that they had a focus on particular group (such as school leavers, or children in residential settings). The VSHTs described the provision of interventions and supports which were tailored to the needs of individual children, and which included, but were not limited to, academic interventions. This could sometimes mean encouraging school leaders to consider how to make best use of existing in-school resources, and sometimes allocating members of the virtual school team to provide support to staff or children in their own school. Examples of mental health, self esteem, and practical supports were also given.

I've got one [team member] working in a school and she's doing half-hour to hour sessions with lots of children. [...] I've got somebody going into a high school and

taking a child out for a walk and a milkshake and a chat, more in a befriending and mentoring type of thing. So that's an individualised and bespoke [approach]. Em, I've got people going in to support a family over the summer holiday. They had no capacity in term time, but over the holidays they're available, so we're going to support a family on the verge of a crisis.

(Participant 7)

Although all participants were able to give examples of ways in which support was focused on the needs of individuals, their descriptions also highlighted that such supports were not only offered to the children and young people themselves, but also to teachers and other school staff, as well as to families more holistically. As with the development of professional relationships, a key feature of the role for many was that support could be identified and offered at all levels of 'the system' and was not focused only on the learner, or on their academic attainment, but in ways which recognised the wider context and the social and systemic barriers which might influence an individual's academic progress or capacity to engage with school life.

The support offered in each local authority was influenced by funding allocations and budgetary controls, including which individuals held the authority to allocate resources. Several, but not all, of the local authorities in Scotland directed their CECYP Fund allocation to the creation of a VSHT-type post, but the specific supports and interventions themselves were often described in interviews as being funded or accessed through other mechanisms.

The care experienced fund that comes in, covers my post and my [team], and what's left is really up to me, how I spend it.

(Participant 8)

I don't have an individual fund for individual interventions [...] the funding's a tricky one, and I think that the Scottish Government probably intended that care experience fund would have been used for individuals who needed specific interventions, but we've used broadly in [this local authority] and never, didn't keep a lot back for individual work.

(Participant 6)

The VSHTs reported frequently working in close collaboration with other local authority teams and departments, such as social work, Additional Support Needs and Educational Psychology, to access support for learners. In addition, they accessed supports through other services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service referrals, or via third sector organisations, rather than these necessarily being directly funded through specific care-experienced funding such as the CECYP Fund.

## **DISCUSSION**

We anticipated that the VSHT role in Scotland was likely to have some similarities and differences compared with the role in England, given that the educational contexts in the two countries are themselves distinct. The existing, albeit limited, literature on virtual schools in England allowed us to identify some shared and divergent features of the roles. The learning from these comparisons has implications for the introduction of the virtual school concept in new contexts.

## Similarities

### Seniority and positioning of the role

The positioning of the post-holder at a senior level within the local authority was a key point of commonality, reported by participants in this study and identified in the existing virtual school literature. Berridge et al. (2009, p. 2) found that the 'background and structural position within the local authority' influenced the extent to which Virtual School Heads were able to build relationships with the Heads of the schools in their local authority, and reported that '[t]hose who had previously held school headships or were otherwise senior educationists and were placed at a senior level in the organisation were able to exert particular influence and operate more effectively'. Similarly Sebba and Berridge (2019, p. 551) found the 'status of the VSH in the LA [local authority]' to be 'key to the influence they command'.

The VSHTs in this research similarly felt that the location of their post at a senior level was important for the effectiveness of their role. Although there were variations between Scottish local authorities in the exact positioning of the post, all were in some form of 'promoted post' (higher grade than classroom teacher). Regardless of their exact position within the local authority, interview participants felt able to make the necessary connections to be effective in their role. This suggests that VSHTs in Scotland felt that they had what OFSTED (2012a, p. 43) describes as 'the necessary "clout" to be able to access resources and a high level of professional credibility'. In interviews, participants alluded to their 'credibility' in relation to professional colleagues, particularly in education, as well as to the families they were seeking to support, and to the value of holding a senior level post in this regard.

### Speaking 'both languages' and building relationships

Relatedly, the positioning of the postholder as a link between social work and education was a common feature in our interviews, which was also reported in the earlier literature. OFSTED (2012a, p. 43) describes differences in culture between education and social work, and identifies a critical factor for the effectiveness of the VSH role as a 'well-embedded culture of multi-agency working'. This largely reflects the situation described by our participants in Scotland, who emphasised the importance of making connections between education and social work colleagues and beyond. Despite being identified as 'the education person', VSHTs were able to work between education and social work, even when these were not part of a shared 'Children's Services' department within the local authority.

Sebba and Berridge (2019, p. 546) report that '[s]everal VSHs felt that co-location was important as it encouraged more interaction over decisions'. The promotion of professional relationships is considered to be amongst the benefits of co-location of virtual school posts. Few of the interview participants in the present study reported physical co-location with social work colleagues; however the timing of the interviews, during a period of the Covid-19 pandemic when home working was still being strongly encouraged, meant that physical locations of workspaces were not as clearly established as had previously been the case.

As well as collaborative working between education and social work, a number of authors indicated the importance of developing networks across a broader range of potentially disparate groups, and contributing towards a shared language and vision, as features of the VSH role (e.g. Berridge et al., 2009; Rivers, 2018). Whatever the structure, the paramountcy of relationships resonates throughout the literature. Relationships are the strongest indicator of good outcomes, and teachers report the involvement of the virtual school as strengthening relationships (OFSTED, 2012a). The quality of relationships between VSHs and traditional head teachers is important in helping schools to offer more effective

support (Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Virtual school heads create and improve relationships directly with learners (Berridge et al., 2009; Jackson, 2015), and with carers, schools and the local authority, as well as wide range of internal and external agencies (OFSTED, 2012a; Rivers, 2018), and at all levels of the system (Drew & Banerjee, 2019). Again, this parallels our findings from the VSHTs in Scotland, who described developing relationships with, and offering support to, teachers and other school staff, families (including foster families), and the staff of residential children's houses, as well as children and young people themselves; and in making connections with local community organisations to meet the needs of the children and young people.

## Data

The literature also demonstrates numerous similarities and parallels in experiences around data between England and Scotland. Virtual School Heads recognise that any head teacher could not do their job without ready access to good quality information (Berridge et al., 2009). There is broad consensus on the multiple benefits of access to good data: to demonstrate their own effectiveness (Jackson, 2015; Sebba & Berridge, 2019), improve attainment, prioritise need (Drew & Banerjee, 2019), facilitate sound performance management (OFSTED, 2012a) and consider impact on culture, well-being and broader psychological development (Drew & Banerjee, 2019; Jackson, 2015). One of the key functions of the Virtual School Head role in England is to be able to identify all the looked after children and young people in the local authority, and know where they are cared for and educated (NAVSH, 2019).

Nevertheless, the existing literature illustrates that most VSHs encountered challenges in accessing relevant data, including discrepancies between datasets, inconsistencies and variable quality, time-consuming manual data gathering to understand performance, and systems containing only historical, rather than recent or 'live', data (Berridge et al., 2009; OFSTED, 2012a; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). Similar challenges have been noted more recently in England, in relation to 'children with a social worker', following the expansion of the remit of VSHs to include these children (Sebba et al., 2022).

Access to complete, up-to-date, usable data was similarly an early challenge for the VSHTs in Scotland, often because the systems which held this information were not linked, post-holders did not have direct access to necessary databases and information on some groups (e.g. 'previously looked after' children such as those who had been adopted) was not routinely collected. Sebba and Berridge (2019) noted, as did the VSHTs in Scotland, the benefit of dedicated administrative support and data analysts with dedicated time to access the required information, and the necessary skills to easily provide this in a useful format.

Although the availability of data has been a similar challenge in Scotland as was identified in the existing literature on VSHs, there has been significant progress around data monitoring in England since the role became statutory in 2014. This includes the development of a national analysis service through a collaboration of NAVSH and the National Consortium for Examination Results (see ACDS, 2015), which offers an online platform for VSHs to analyse statistical information at a national, local, and child level. At present, the Scottish educational information management systems do not offer this type of functionality, and several VSHT interview participants expressed a hope that this might be considered in future system developments. While the challenges of data access were broadly similar at the outset of these roles, it is not yet clear whether the trajectory of change to address the challenges in Scotland will parallel that in England.

## Differences

### Remit

Although the remit of the VSH and the VSHT is broadly similar, that is, to provide educational support with the aim of raising attainment amongst a particular cohort of learners, the specifics of their remits vary. In England, the role was initially focused on currently looked after children only, and was later expanded to include previously looked after children. The statutory guidance for VSHs in England makes the distinction between their responsibilities as a corporate parent of currently looked after children, 'to be the educational advocate that parents are for others' and their more indirect role in the 'provision of advice and information' to the families of previously looked after children (DfE, 2018, p. 5; and for a fuller explanation, see Adoption UK, 2022). More recent non-statutory guidance has further expanded the role to include 'strategic responsibility for [all] children with a social worker' (DfE, 2022, p. 3).

In contrast, the remit of VSHT in Scotland was to support all care-experienced children and young people from the outset. This sometimes also included those on the 'edge of care', although this was not formalised as all 'children with a social worker', as in England. As described above, there were variations between Scottish local authorities in the ways in which supports were accessed and funded, but this did not seem to depend on the legal status of the child or young person (i.e. currently or previously looked after), but rather on how specific elements of local authority budgets were accessed, such as through funding for care-experienced learners, or through budgets intended to support any children with additional support needs.

This significant difference between the emerging role in Scotland, and the more established virtual school concept in England, may relate in part to the statutory nature of the role in England, where legislation, and statutory and non-statutory guidance, have provided VSHs with a clear outline of the expectations on them in relation to specific, legally defined groups of children; for example, as a corporate parent to currently looked after children. In Scotland, where the VSHT role is not statutory, local authorities have been able to determine the precise remit of their staff, in line with current policies such as 'Getting it right for every child' (also known as 'GIRFEC', Scottish Government, n.d.-a), and the findings of the Independent Care Review (ICR, 2020). While some relevant active legislation and policy, such as the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2009), still refer to supports and entitlements for 'looked after' children only, more recent policy and guidance recognise the needs of the broader group of care-experienced children, and this is reflected in the remits of VSHTs. The independent review of children's social care in England similarly recognises the need for societal supports for 'all care experienced people' (MacAlister, 2022), although there was no recommendation of change to the existing guidance for VSHs to reflect this.

### Influence and authority

Previous research has emphasised the importance of VSH posts being situated at a senior level (e.g. Berridge et al., 2009; Sebba & Berridge, 2019), and the value of developing and maintaining relationships and connections with colleagues in and beyond education (e.g. OFSTED, 2012a). As described above, these views largely parallel those of the VSHTs in the present study. Nevertheless, our findings highlight some differences around the ways in which the influence and authority of these postholders are used in undertaking their roles.

In his scoping review of approaches to improving educational outcomes for looked after children, Macdonald (2020, p. 9) described 'the impact of the VSH's status, and the power to influence that goes with this'. He further explained:

For example on the issue of admissions, the VSH is able to put pressure on mainstream Headteachers to ensure that they adhere to statutory requirements and that appropriate places are secured for [looked after children], if necessary taking them to court.

This demonstrates clearly the different contexts in which VSHs and VSHTs are working, in relation to the legislative and policy drivers underpinning their roles. While VSHs in England are empowered by legislation and can reference statutory requirements in their engagement with schools, VSHTs in Scotland do not have these legal powers, and must rely on collaborative working and creative approaches to encouraging schools and local authorities to adhere to local and national policy.

Their ability to work effectively in this way may be influenced by the differences in types of school and the school governance landscapes of the two countries, including the role of the local authorities in relation to schools (see Bharkhada & Long, 2019; Long, 2022). In Scotland, there are fewer 'models' of school governance, and the local authorities which employ the VSHTs are also directly responsible for the schools attended by the majority of care-experienced children and young people. In England, VSHs are also employed by the local authority, but several models of school governance exist, meaning that the schools with which VSHs work with are not always the direct responsibility of that local authority. The details of school governance in the two countries are beyond the scope of this paper, but the ways in which relationships are established between individuals in these roles, and the schools attended by the looked after and care experience children for whom they are responsible, may be influenced by these structures.

## Financial and funding arrangements

Similarly to the above, the funding context is a significant difference between the two nations. In England, VSHs have control of one element of 'Pupil Premium' funding, which was initially introduced in 2011 for families on a low income, and for children who had been 'looked after' for 6 months or more (OFSTED, 2012b). This funding has been described as one of two 'main levers to hold schools to account' (Jackson, 2015, p. 330). It is mainly paid directly to schools for eligible pupils from low-income families, but the component for looked after, and now previously looked after, children (sometimes known as 'Pupil Premium Plus' or PP+) is paid directly to the Virtual School Head (DfE, 2023a, 2023b). This funding cannot be used as core funding for the VSH role (Sebba & Berridge, 2019), but Read et al. (2020, p.20) found examples of supports and interventions covering 'a number of areas: educational support; mental health or attachment support; extracurricular activities and transition support'. Virtual School Heads have responsibility for managing and allocating this funding, subject to Department for Education guidance and accountability to OFSTED.

In Scotland, some local authorities retain a portion of their CECYP Fund allocation to benefit the whole cohort, for example, by funding the VSHT role itself. In some local authorities, the funding allocation is entirely utilised for this purpose (sometimes supplemented with other funding); in others, the remaining funding allocation is sometimes available for individual interventions, although this is not always under the direct control of the VSHT, and is often reliant on connections and relationships with other departments and agencies.

The financial arrangements in the two countries again highlight that, although the overall purpose of the virtual school is similar, the context in which the post-holders operate necessitates different ways of working to meet the needs of the children and young people. In England, VSHs were able to directly commission appropriate supports via the PP+ budget (Read et al., 2020), while in Scotland VSHTs often had no specific budget responsibility,

and accessed supports for children and young people through working closely with the leadership teams of individual schools, and through connecting with other statutory and non-statutory services.

## Reflections and implications

The findings from our interviews with VSHTs in Scotland provide some insight and learning around the use of the virtual school concept in a new context, with a different education, legislation and policy from the original context. A key underpinning feature of the difference is that the role is statutory in England, but is emerging more organically in Scotland, with reference to recent policy but no specific directive legislation mandating the role. Nevertheless, there are important elements of the role and remit of Scottish VSHTs which parallel those of colleagues in England. While the legislation underpinning the virtual school concept in England specifies that the post-holder must be a senior level role, VSHTs in Scotland were all in 'promoted posts' (although not all at 'Head Teacher' grade) and emphasised the importance of this for credibility and connection-building. Similarly, the importance of the role as a conduit between education and social work was recognised in the early White Paper in England (DfES, 2007), although it does not appear overtly in legislation; the importance of this element of their remit was also highlighted by VSHTs in Scotland. Furthermore, post-holders in both Scotland and England have had similar experiences around the collection and use of high-quality, accurate and timely data for identifying areas of need and for demonstrating impact. The implication here is that, even in the absence of legislation and policy specific to the role, it has emerged and developed in Scotland in very similar ways to that in England. These elements are therefore likely to be an important focus for the development of the role in any new contexts.

In contrast, the legislative and policy differences also underpin a number of elements of difference between the two contexts. The remit of post-holders in England varies, and has recently been expanded through non-statutory guidance, in relation to the legal status of the children and young people they work for; that is, the expectations and responsibilities of the VSH are different depending on whether the child is currently looked after, previously looked after, or has a social worker. In Scotland there is less overt definition around this. VSHTs are generally working in support of the broader care-experienced population aged 0–26, although in some instances with resource-driven focus on specific groups within that. There is no specific legislation or guidance underpinning this, but national and local policy (such as GIRFEC and the local responses to *The Promise*) are no doubt influential. Similarly, there are contrasting financial positions and legal powers of post-holders in the two countries, necessitating different ways of working to achieve their common aims. Again, the influence of legislation, policy and guidance to drive the development of a virtual school, and to support the relevant post-holders to achieve the virtual school's aims, is a key consideration in the translation of the concept to new contexts or countries.

## Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this paper is that it has implications for jurisdictions both in and beyond the UK who may be considering a system approach to supporting the education of care-experienced children and young people. It also represents the first peer reviewed research to document the development of the virtual school model in Scotland.

This paper also has important limitations. Although we spoke directly to VSHTs and equivalents in Scotland, our information on the VSH role in England was drawn from existing

literature rather than direct engagement. Furthermore, research participants in Scotland were drawn from an existing support organisation, which has established parameters around membership. In those local authorities which do not have an identified VSHT or equivalent, there may still be individuals carrying out similar operational or strategic work who did not have the opportunity to contribute to this research.

The focus of the study was intentionally narrowed to four pre-determined foundational themes around the similarities and differences in the role in Scotland and England. Our analysis yielded other themes that were beyond the scope of this paper but could be further explored. Future research in this arena could fruitfully include a wider pool of relevant post-holders in Scotland, England, and beyond, in which the virtual school concept is emerging or being utilised, to generate more in-depth learning on their roles and experiences.

## CONCLUSIONS

We conducted semi-structured interviews with Virtual School Head Teachers, and individuals in equivalent roles, in Scottish local authorities. We asked about their role and remit, with a focus on four key themes which had been identified in the existing literature on the Virtual School Head role in England. In this paper we have utilised a form of 'home international' comparison to report on some of the similarities and differences we found as the virtual school concept begins to emerge and become established in the Scottish context. We have further reflected on the implications of these for the translation of this concept into other new contexts.

We conclude that despite the important and influential variations between the contexts, in terms of the overarching education system, legislation and funding especially, the main purpose of the role is largely parallel in the two countries, that is, to improve educational outcomes and attainment for looked after and care-experienced children and young people. There are a range of similarities in how this work is carried out, including through seniority and credibility amongst colleagues, and building and developing relationships (especially with social work). Postholders in both countries have also experienced similar challenges in the establishment of their role, for example in accessing robust and reliable data.

Owing to differences specifically in the legal position of the role and the funding mechanisms underpinning it, some elements are of necessity different in the two countries. In England, different levels of support are available from the virtual school depending on the legal status of the learner (e.g. currently or previously looked after, or 'with a social worker'), while in Scotland support is described as being for all care-experienced learners but can be focused or targeted according to need, resourcing or capacity. The 'levers' available to post-holders also vary, with VSHs in England having powers to take legal action to ensure that schools meet their obligations. In Scotland, no such legal routes are available, and VSHTs rely instead on 'support and challenge' within professional relationships to ensure that policy is enacted as expected.

There remains very little research on virtual schools for looked after and care-experienced learners. Further exploration of the key features for effectiveness of the role, impact for learners and cohorts of learners, and of the contextual nuances and implementation of the approach is needed. This paper seeks to contribute to a wider understanding of the development of the virtual school concept in a new context.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


Research data are not shared.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was conducted in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines, and underwent ethical review at the University of Strathclyde.

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