

Up-to-speed on: the extension of the virtual school head (VSH) role

This article breaks down what you need to know about the recently published guidance on how the virtual school head (VSH) role is being extended to pupils with a social worker

Key points

The key points are as follows:

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The role of VSH is changing

The government's "[Review of children in need](#)" made a commitment to explore the capacity needed to ensure the leadership of VSHs covers pupils who have a social worker. As a result, the role of VSH is being extended.

From September 2021, VSHs are being asked to take on a strategic leadership role for the cohort of pupils who currently have, or previously had, a social worker. VSHs will enhance the partnerships between schools and LAs, and work with agencies to further understand and address the disadvantages that pupils with a social worker can face in education.

VSHs will need to identify the needs of the cohort and address barriers to poor educational outcomes in order to ensure that pupils make educational progress. VSHs will also help to demonstrate the benefits of school attendance, as well as ensuring there are measures in place to offer advice and support to teachers and social workers.

Funding for the role extension

LAs will receive funding to support the VSHs to work with early years settings, schools, colleges and social care leaders. This funding must not be used for any other purpose. All LAs are eligible to receive grant funding to support VSHs in taking on this additional role, and will be invited to participate in research to help the DfE understand how VSHs can be deployed

effectively to drive educational outcomes. The funding is sufficient to recruit additional team members and to support them with their responsibilities.

The funding will commence from September 2021 and is confirmed until 31 March 2022, when a review of the official guidance will be conducted; the guidance and funding will not be revised beyond this date if the review concludes that it is no longer needed.

A funding formula has been used to establish the allocations for each LA, based on the number of education settings with an LA. Those with the greatest number of schools will receive 'top up' funding to reflect the additional capacity they will need to work with these settings.

The Grant Determination Letter explains what each LA can expect to receive and the conditions against which this funding must be used. In addition to this, all LAs must sign and return a Memorandum of Understanding to the DfE no later than 31 July 2021 in order to receive their funding allocation. The Grant Determination Letter and the Memorandum can be downloaded from [this page](#).

Once the Memorandum of Understanding has been returned, the DfE will make three payments to all LAs in September 2021, December 2021, and March 2022.



Defining the cohort of pupils with a social worker

The term 'pupils with a social worker' covers all pupils aged up to 18 in all education settings who were assessed as needing a social worker at any time, due to safeguarding and/or welfare reasons. This includes those with a Child in Need plan or a Child Protection plan.

This cohort has been identified as a group of pupils who face significant barriers to education as a direct result of experiences of trauma and adversity, e.g. abuse and neglect.

The remit of the extended VSH role will include pupils who are disabled and currently or previously had an allocated social worker; however the VSH role should not duplicate support available to pupils under existing LA duties.



The strategic leadership of VSHs

VSHs will become the strategic leaders who champion the educational attendance, attainment and progress of pupils with a social worker. They will be expected to utilise their knowledge and expertise gained through their work of promoting the educational outcomes of looked after and previously looked after pupils.

VSHs will help to:

- Bring greater awareness to the disadvantages that pupils with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between schools and LAs.
- Promote practise that supports pupils' engagement in education, recognising that school attendance can be an important factor in helping to keep pupils safe.
- Improve pupils' outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child can reach their potential, including ensuring that pupils with a social worker benefit from catch-up support in response to the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19).
- Offer support and advice to key professionals to help pupils make progress, including through increasing their confidence in using evidence-based interventions.

As strategic leaders, VSHs must be mindful of pupils' needs at different stages of education and use this knowledge to work closely with schools in their local area.



Enhancing partnerships with schools

To ensure effective support for pupils with a social worker, schools and LAs should work together. Leaders of all agencies can play a crucial role in establishing a culture where every pupil is able to make progress.

Schools and LAs will have different responsibilities, but establishing shared priorities can help to drive positive change for pupils.

To support effective partnerships, VSHs should:

- Establish strong relationships with schools and social care services, and develop an expectation that any leaders or professionals supporting pupils with a social worker hold high aspirations for this cohort of pupils.
- Consider how to bring school and LA leaders together to effectively develop goals and set direction for improving pupils' outcomes. These goals should take account of other local strategic priorities, e.g. meeting Opportunity Area objectives.
- Clarify the VSH role to schools and social care services, including communicating their offer of advice and support.
- Be mindful of pupils' needs at different stages of education and use this knowledge to work closely with schools in the area.
- Enhance partnerships between schools and LAs to ensure agencies can successfully work together.
- Identify the needs of the cohort and address the barriers to education to ensure pupils can make educational progress.
- Offer advice and support to key professionals to help pupils make progress.



Identifying the cohort's needs and addressing barriers to education

Many pupils who have social workers live in complex circumstances that often cause significant barriers to education. Pupils with social workers are more likely to have faced overlapping disadvantages and trauma that can adversely impact their attendance, learning, behaviour and wellbeing without the proper support. It can sometimes be challenging to recognise the barriers these pupils face, and to help them overcome these barriers; however, with appropriate support, these pupils can, and do, achieve.

With the correct support in place, pupils can and do achieve; however, it can sometimes be challenging for professionals to recognise and overcome the barriers these pupils face.

To effectively identify the needs of pupils with a social worker and ensure they have access to the necessary interventions, VSHs should:

- Use data and analysis to understand and monitor the cohort's needs, including making links to local strategic priorities e.g. attendance, suspension, permanent exclusion rates, and overlaps with other kinds of disadvantage such as FSM eligibility and SEND rates.

- Share knowledge and expertise to strengthen schools' and social care services' understanding of the impact trauma and adversity can have on the educational outcomes of pupils.
- Promote professional practice for schools and LAs which:
 - Champions high levels of support alongside high standards for pupils with a social worker.
 - Recognises how stability and consistency in relationships can help pupils to overcome educational barriers.
 - Encourages effective information sharing between professionals so that anyone supporting pupils and families understands their context.

Attendance

Regular school attendance is important for vulnerable pupils; not only does it improve learning outcomes, but schools can also act as a protective factor where home is not a safe place for pupils.

VSHs may want to provide support, guidance, and challenges to school leaders to strengthen provision that is already in place, specifically focusing on pupils with a social worker. This may include advice on how to promote and secure good attendance. The ['Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities'](#) guidance may be a useful resource for VSHs to refer to.

Elective home education (EHE)

EHE is when a parent chooses not to send their child to school full-time, but assumes responsibility for ensuring their child receives a full-time education other than at school. Most parents' decision to home educate is made with their child's best education at heart; however, this is not always the case and EHE can lead to some children becoming less visible to the services that are there to keep them safe and supported.

When a family notifies an LA of their intention to home educate, VSHs should work with LAs, schools, and other key professionals such as social workers, to coordinate a meeting with parents where possible. This is to ensure that the parents have considered what is in the best interests of each pupil, which is particularly important if the pupil has SEND or an EHC plan.

VSHs should refer to government [guidance](#) on EHE.

Mental health and wellbeing

Pupils with a social worker are more likely to experience social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues than their peers e.g. they may struggle with executive functioning skills, forming trusting relationships, or social skills. This can negatively impact their behaviour and education.

Many schools will have appointed a senior mental health lead responsible for making links with mental health services. Neither mental health leads nor VSHs are expected to be mental health experts, to diagnose mental health conditions or to deliver interventions; however, they have an important role in signposting schools to appropriate training and specialist services.

VSHs should work with the LA officer responsible for making links with mental health services or mental health school leads to ensure the following:

- Schools are able to identify signs of potential mental health issues and know how to access further assessment and support where necessary
- Schools adopt the graduated approach to assessing, understanding and meeting the SEMH needs of pupils with a social worker
- Schools understand the impact that issues such as trauma, attachment difficulties and other mental health issues can have on pupils with a social worker, and are 'attachment aware'
- Recognise the value of engaging the child's voice in the process of identification and support

Pupils with SEND

Some pupils with a social worker will also be identified as having SEND, which can exacerbate a pupil's vulnerability and increase pressure on their family due to care demands.

VSHs should work strategically with the LA head of SEND and, where appropriate, with school leaders and SENCOs. This is to ensure that schools adopt the graduated approach to assessing, understanding and meeting the special educational needs of pupils with a social worker.



Advising and supporting key professionals

There may be a diverse range of agencies involved in the lives of pupils with social workers. For pupils who are currently known to social care services, social workers will play a critical role in supporting them and their families. For pupils who are no longer known to social care services, relationships with schools and other universal services will be essential in supporting them to reach their potential.

VSHs will be able to offer advice and information to professionals who are supporting pupils with social workers.

When offering advice and information to workforces, VSHs should do the following:

- Identify and engage with key professionals, helping them to understand the role they have in improving learning outcomes for pupils – this includes DSLs, social workers, headteachers, governors, SENCOs, and other LA officers
- Provide advice on evidence-based intentions that can address barriers to education
- Engage with research organisations to help develop good practice and a strong evidence base for what is effective in improving outcomes of pupils with social workers
- Support schools and social care services to be creative and thoughtful in building relationships with pupils and families, including taking account of pupils' wishes and feelings when understanding how to meet their needs
- Ensure that aspirations for pupils' with SEND are high, and that professionals do not make assumptions about a pupil's ability to progress and achieve solely because they have SEND.

Pupil premium

Schools have been encouraged to design their pupil premium strategy to meet the needs of eligible pupils and others who may benefit from extra support, such as those with a social worker. VSHs may want to take account of ['What Works in Education for Children Who Have Had Social Workers'](#) which analyses data looking at the impacts of educational interventions on the attainment of pupils who have had a social worker.

What is not required of the extended VSH role

The extension of the VSH role does not require those in the role to carry out the following:

- Work with individual pupils and their families, including tracking and monitoring educational progress or providing academic or other interventions
- Respond to requests from parents or carer regarding advice, intervention and support in relation to individual pupils with a social worker
- Take responsibility for pupils with SEND who do not require a social worker

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic

A range of recovery programmes have been developed and additional funding made available in order to reduce the impact of lost learning due to coronavirus.

Some of the key initiatives the VSHs should be aware of are:

- [Summer school programme](#): for 2021, secondary schools are offering face-to-face Summer schools, mainly focused on Year 7 pupils to help them with the transition from primary to secondary school. Secondary schools have been encouraged to identify those most in need of the programme and to encourage pupils with a social worker to attend.
- [Recovery premium](#): a new one-off £320 million recovery premium has been made available for primary and secondary schools, building on the pupil premium. Schools are able to use this funding however they see fit to support disadvantaged pupils, including pupils with a social worker.
- [National Tutoring Programme](#) (NTP): schools are able to work with highly-trained tutors to run one-to-one, online or small group teaching with specialist tutors. The NTP is designed specifically to support disadvantaged pupils in England, defined by their pupil premium eligibility. Schools have discretion to identify the pupils most likely to benefit from support and this may include pupils with a social worker.

Research and good practice

Those in the role of VSH will be invited to participate in research commissioned by the DfE to help develop a strong evidence base for how they can effectively promote the learning outcomes of pupils with social workers.

The DfE will ask all LAs to share information about how their VSH has been supporting pupils with a social worker and what the funding has been used for.

Additionally, some LAs will be invited to participate in focussed interviews to understand what helps VSHs to be effective in supporting pupils with a social worker. VSHs will be involved with these interviews, alongside their teams and partner agencies. The aim of these interviews

is to offer more detailed insights and help ensure VSHs can learn from each other, and the DfE can support the sharing of best practice.

The independent research partner will produce a report that summarises their findings.



What's next?

- Find more guidance on the extension of the VSH role [here](#).

Bibliography

DfE (2021) 'Promoting the education of children with a social worker: virtual school head role extension'

DfE (2021) 'Virtual school head role extension to children with a social worker' <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/virtual-school-head-role-extension-to-children-with-a-social-worker>> [Accessed 1 July 2021]