

Middlesbrough Virtual School Annual Report 2024-2025



Academic Year: 2024–2025

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Introduction

This annual report has been produced by the Acting Headteacher of Middlesbrough Virtual School for the academic year 2024-25, in compliance with the statutory duty of informing stakeholders about the work undertaken by Middlesbrough Virtual School throughout the year.

At Middlesbrough Virtual School, we believe every child and young person deserves to feel supported, encouraged and ambitious about their future. We are committed to enabling our Children Looked After, Care Leavers and Children with a Social Worker to succeed in the pathways they choose - whether that is education, employment or training.

We work in close partnership with schools, colleges, post-16 providers and colleagues across Education and Social Care to secure stronger outcomes and sustained progress for our children and young people. As Corporate Parents and education champions, we are committed to ensuring that children's voices are heard, their views shape the planning of support and interventions, and that avoidable barriers are identified and removed so they can succeed.

This annual report sets out the educational outcomes for Middlesbrough's Children Looked After, Care Leavers and Children with a Social Worker. It reviews performance across the Key Stages and celebrates the successes and achievements of our children and young people.

The report also describes the contribution of Middlesbrough Virtual School in improving educational experiences and outcomes through partnership working and targeted support. Finally, it provides context on the barriers and challenges children and young people may encounter, and how these can influence both present performance and future life chances.

Over the past academic year Middlesbrough Virtual School has been proud to recognise the achievements of our children and young people. We continue to champion high aspirations and will maintain our commitment to supporting each child and young person to progress towards their future goals.

Key highlights for our Children Looked After

- We are delighted to celebrate the exceptional achievements of our highest attainers at the Early Years Foundation Stage. 10 children secured the strongest possible outcomes across every area of learning, achieving the expected level in all 17 Early Learning Goals - reflected in a maximum total point score of 34 and a Good Level of Development for each child. Their strengths span communication and language, personal, social and emotional development, physical development, literacy and mathematics, as well as understanding the world and expressive arts and design. These results demonstrate the positive impact of stable, high-quality early education experiences and the commitment of early years settings, carers and multi-agency partners in supporting our children to flourish. Most importantly, these outcomes provide a strong foundation for a confident transition into Key Stage 1 and continued success as learners.
- We are proud to celebrate the strong outcomes achieved by our highest six attainers at Key Stage 2. This group demonstrated secure attainment across the curriculum, with all pupils assessed at the expected standard in both Writing (Teacher Assessment) and Science (Teacher Assessment). Outcomes in statutory assessments were also particularly encouraging: Reading scaled scores ranged from 104 to 113, with several pupils achieving scores of 109+ and one pupil reaching 113. In Mathematics, scaled scores ranged from 101 to 111 (with a highest recorded outcome of 114 where shown), and in Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling (GPS) scores ranged from 102 to 109 (with outcomes shown up to 112). Collectively, these results reflect consistent learning, strong foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, and the hard work of pupils supported by carers, designated safeguarding/teacher leads and school colleagues. These achievements provide a secure platform for a confident transition into Key Stage 3 and continued success in secondary education.
- We are proud to celebrate the GCSE achievements of five young people, whose outcomes reflect resilience, hard work and sustained commitment. Attainment across the core subjects was particularly strong, with high grades achieved in English and Science, including an outstanding set of results of English Language 8 and Literature 7 alongside Combined Science: Trilogy 8/7 and a Grade 7 in Mathematics. Across the group, pupils secured strong passes in English (with outcomes including Language and Literature at Grades 5–7) and Mathematics (Grades 4–7), demonstrating secure foundations in literacy and numeracy at the end of Key Stage 4. Science outcomes also show breadth and achievement across different pathways, with positive results in Combined Science (including 5–4 and 4/4) and separate sciences (Biology 5, Chemistry 4 and Physics 4). These results are a real testament to the ambition of our young people and the collective support of carers, schools and the Virtual School in helping learners stay focused, overcome barriers and progress confidently into post-16 education, training or employment.

DATA trends across Key stage 2 and 4

Key Stage 2 Outcomes

In 2024/25, outcomes for Middlesbrough’s Children Looked After at the end of Key Stage 2 were encouraging and compare positively with both national and Northeast CLA benchmarks.

	Cohort	CLA Matches	RWM*		Avg. SS	READING			WRITING TA		Avg. SS	MATHS			Avg. SS	GPS		
			≥ Exp	High		< Exp	≥ Exp	High	≥ Exp	GDS		< Exp	≥ Exp	High		< Exp	≥ Exp	High
NCER National (CLA)	3,890	100.0%	34.0%	2.0%	101.5	48.0%	51.0%	16.0%	44.0%	4.0%	99.7	52.0%	46.0%	9.0%	100.7	52.0%	47.0%	11.0%
DfE Region - North East (CLA)	290	100.0%	38.0%	3.0%	102.2	47.0%	52.0%	19.0%	45.0%	5.0%	100.2	50.0%	50.0%	11.0%	101.1	53.0%	47.0%	14.0%
Virtual School - Middlesbrough	19	100.0%	47.4%	0.0%	102.5	42.1%	57.9%	21.1%	57.9%	0.0%	101.7	31.6%	68.4%	15.8%	101.1	47.4%	52.6%	10.5%
Local Authority - Middlesbrough (all schools)	2,058	0.8%	62.8%	6.5%	105.1	25.3%	74.3%	29.7%	74.6%	11.1%	104.9	25.5%	74.0%	24.7%	104.7	29.4%	70.1%	25.7%

Nearly half of pupils (47.4%) achieved the expected standard in the combined Reading, Writing and Maths measure, with particularly strong performance in Mathematics where 68.4% met the expected standard and 15.8% achieved the higher standard. Reading outcomes were also a strength, with an average scaled score of 102.5 and 21.1% of pupils reaching the higher standard. Writing (teacher assessment) was similarly positive at expected standard (57.9%); however, no pupils were assessed at greater depth this year, identifying a key next-step focus on stretching writing outcomes. GPS remains an area for development, with around half of pupils meeting the expected standard, and will be an important lever for further strengthening literacy and increasing the proportion achieving the combined RWM measure. As the cohort size is small (n=19), individual pupil circumstances can have a notable impact on headline measures; therefore, our approach continues to combine robust data analysis with case-level understanding and targeted support.

Key Stage 4 (GCSE) Outcomes

This section presents GCSE outcomes for Children Looked After supported by Middlesbrough Virtual School in 2024/25. The cohort size for Key Stage 4 was 49 pupils. Outcomes are considered alongside national and regional Children Looked After (CLA) benchmarks to provide context. Given the size and complexity of the cohort, headline measures are interpreted alongside pupil-level factors such as placement stability, attendance, SEND, and curriculum access.

	Cohort	CLA Matches	Attainment 8	Progress 8			9-5			EBacc		Entry			
				Cov.	Avg. Score	Conf. Int.	EBacc Eng. LL	EBacc Mat.	E&M	Entry	APS	EBacc Slots	Other Slots	Triple Sci.	≥2 Lang.
NCER National (CLA pupils)	7160	100.0%	16.8	0.0%	+0.00	-	15.0%	11.0%	8.0%	10.0%	1.39	1.4	1.3	4.0%	0.0%
DfE Region - North East (CLA)	470	100.0%	17.1	0.0%	+0.00	-	16.0%	13.0%	9.0%	9.0%	1.40	1.3	1.3	3.0%	-
Local Authority - Middlesbrough (all schools)	1594	-	41.0	0.0%	-	-	55.5%	41.3%	36.7%	28.2%	3.54	2.6	2.7	13.6%	1.1%
Virtual School - Middlesbrough	49	100.0%	16.5	0.0%	-	-	14.3%	12.2%	8.2%	6.1%	1.29	1.2	1.3	2.0%	-

Headline Attainment Measures

Attainment 8

- Middlesbrough Virtual School (CLA): 16.5
- National CLA: 16.8
- Northeast CLA: 17.1
- Middlesbrough (all schools): 41.0

These outcomes show that overall attainment for Middlesbrough's Children Looked After is broadly in line with national and regional CLA benchmarks, while remaining significantly below the all-schools comparator, reflecting the continued national attainment gap for Children Looked After.

Strong Pass Outcomes (Grades 9–5)

- English (Language or Literature): 14.3% (≈ 7 pupils)
- Mathematics: 12.2% (≈ 6 pupils)
- English & Mathematics combined (9–5): 8.2% (≈ 4 pupils)

Strong pass rates in English and mathematics are closely aligned with CLA benchmarks nationally and regionally, with mathematics outcomes marginally above the national CLA figure. These results highlight the importance of continued focus on English and maths as gateway qualifications for post-16 progression.

Curriculum Breadth and EBacc Entry

- EBacc entry: 6.1% (≈ 3 pupils)
- EBacc Average Point Score (APS): 1.29
- EBacc slots: 1.2 | Other slots: 1.3
- Triple Science entry: 2.0% (≈ 1 pupil)

EBacc participation for Children Looked After is lower than national and regional CLA benchmarks. This reflects a curriculum profile shaped by individual pathways, SEND, placement stability, inclusion considerations, and, in some cases, late entry to schools or alternative provision. While not all pupils will benefit from an EBacc pathway, curriculum breadth remains an important equity consideration.

KS4 Headline Summary

KS4 CLA 2024/25 (n=49)

- Attainment 8 (16.5) is in line with national and regional CLA benchmarks
- Strong pass rates (9–5) in English and maths are comparable with CLA national outcomes
- EBacc entry remains low, highlighting curriculum access as a priority area

What the Data Tells Us

Strengths

- Overall attainment compares favorably with CLA benchmarks.
- Strong pass outcomes in mathematics and combined English and maths demonstrate that high achievement is possible within the cohort.
- Individual GCSE results show evidence of high grades and ambition, particularly where stability and sustained support are in place.

Areas for Development

- Increasing strong passes (Grades 9–5) in English and mathematics remains a key priority.
- Curriculum breadth and EBacc access require continued review to ensure pupils are not disadvantaged by restricted subject entry where this is avoidable.
- KS4 outcomes remain sensitive to attendance, placement change, and SEND, reinforcing the need for early identification and intervention.

Middlesbrough Virtual School Impact

- Advocacy and challenge with schools to address barriers to curriculum access, attendance and exam readiness
- Targeted intervention and tutoring, particularly in English and mathematics
- Proactive post-16 transition planning, aligning KS4 provision with sustained education, training or employment destinations

Priorities for 2025/26

1. Increase strong passes (9–5) in English and maths through earlier identification and targeted intervention.
2. Review curriculum pathways, ensuring EBacc entry is considered where appropriate and aligned with pupil aspiration and stability.
3. Strengthen exam readiness, including early access arrangement planning and attendance recovery.
4. Reduce disruption at KS4, through timely multi-agency response to placement or school changes.

Context and Barriers

KS4 outcomes for Children Looked After can be affected by placement and school moves, attendance disruption, SEND and SEMH needs, and the impact of trauma on exam readiness and confidence.

These factors must be considered alongside headline data.

About Our School Aged Children – cohort make up

The table below provides a snapshot of the Children Looked After cohort and helps contextualise the outcomes that follow. It summarises the size of the cohort, stability indicators (time in care), SEND prevalence and where children are educated. These factors are important because they shape both day-to-day experience and the capacity of children to sustain progress over time

<p>439 Children Looked After</p>	<p>363 School Age Children Looked After</p>	<p>125 Became Looked After during the year</p>
<p>89 Care period ended during the year</p>	<p>75% Have been in Care for over 12 months</p>	<p>28% Have an EHCP</p>
<p>33% Have an SEN Support Plan</p>	<p>59% Educated in borough</p>	<p>Years 11 and 10 were the largest year groups</p>

School Ofsted Ratings

73% of schools attended by our Children Looked After were rated Good by Ofsted, with 11% reaching the Outstanding grade. 4% of schools where our children attended were schools which Required Improvement, 1% were rated as Serious Weakness, 11% have no rating.

What did we do to promote the best possible outcomes?

The 8 factors below have a major impact on outcomes:

1 Personal Education Plans

2024-2025: a total of 1,722 PEPs were completed for 587 children and young people. 6% PEPs were for the early year's cohort, 71% were for the statutory school age cohort and 23% were for the post-16 cohort.

2024-2025	No. PEPs Completed	No. and % Gold	No. and % Green	No. and % Amber	No. and % Red
Early Years	101	0	41 (41%)	32 (32%)	28 (28%)
Statutory School Age	1231	3 (0.2%)	459 (37%)	502 (41%)	267 (22%)
Post-16	390	4 (1%)	112 (29%)	152 (39%)	122 (31%)

Overall, PEP activity increased between 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, reflecting a larger cohort and sustained completion rates. In 2023–2024, 1,672 PEPs were completed for 562 children and young people. This rose in 2024–2025 to 1,722 PEPs for 587 children and young people. In both years, Statutory School Age (SSA) accounted for the majority of PEPs, remaining stable at just over 71%. There was a small proportional increase in Post-16 PEPs in 2024–2025, while Early Years represented a slightly smaller share of activity.

Across both years, analysis of PEP quality through RAG ratings shows a changing profile of need:

- In Early Years, there was a small reduction in Red-rated PEPs in 2024–2025, alongside a shift from Green to Amber, suggesting earlier identification of emerging concerns rather than crisis-level need.
- For Statutory School Age, there was a notable and positive reduction in Red PEPs, with a significant increase in Amber ratings. This indicates strengthened early intervention and improved responsiveness, rather than escalation to high-risk situations.
- Post-16 remains the most complex and vulnerable cohort. While PEP numbers increased in 2024–2025, both Amber and Red ratings rose proportionally, highlighting increasing levels of need as young people transition into adulthood.

Across all cohorts, Gold-rated PEPs remain very low, suggesting few children and young people are experiencing sustained stability and high progress.

As of July 24th 2025, the completion rates for PEPs within the last four and six months are as follows:

2025	Last PEP within 4 months	Last PEP within 6 months
Early Years	97%	100%
SSA	98%	99%
Post 16	95%	97%
Overall	98%	99%

In summary, PEP completion remains consistently strong and improving in volume, with evidence of a more proactive, earlier-intervention approach, particularly within statutory school age. However, the data also highlights growing complexity for Post-16 learners. Maintaining high completion rates alongside targeted quality improvement—especially for Post-16 and progression toward green and gold

outcomes—will be essential to improving educational stability and outcomes for children and young people in care.

2 Training

During 2024–2025, Middlesbrough Virtual School delivered a comprehensive training and support programme for Designated Teachers (DTs) for Looked After Children, designed to strengthen statutory practice and improve educational outcomes for Children Looked After.

The programme focused on raising attainment, improving attendance and wellbeing, and enhancing the quality and impact of Personal Education Plans (PEPs). Training supported Designated Teachers to use accurate attainment and progress data to set SMART, outcome-focused targets and to ensure PEPs remained robust, timely and reflective of pupils’ needs throughout the academic year. A key strand supported effective and accountable use of Pupil Premium Plus, promoting creative, evidence-based interventions that directly support progress.

Additional sessions addressed attendance and engagement, including strategies to increase attendance for children looked after and to respond effectively to Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) using an assess–plan–do–review approach. Training on school moves and transitions reinforced the importance of stability, careful planning and adherence to local policy to minimise disruption and promote positive outcomes.

The programme also prioritised professional collaboration, providing opportunities for Designated Teachers to share best practice and strengthen networks across schools.

Overall, the training programme aimed to strengthen Designated Teachers’ confidence, consistency and leadership in delivering high-quality educational support, ensuring schools are well equipped to meet their statutory responsibilities and secure the best possible outcomes for children looked after.

Virtual School Conference 2025 - Equality and Equity

The Equality and Equity Conference, held at Teesside University on 10 April 2025, brought together education, social care and partner professionals with a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children with a social worker and Children Looked After. The conference focused on the distinction between equality and equity, emphasising that while equal access is important, equitable support is essential to ensure that vulnerable children receive what they need to thrive. Through keynote addresses, workshops and opportunities for professional reflection, the event created a dedicated space for learning, challenge and collaboration across systems.

The purpose of the conference was to deepen understanding of the lived experiences of care-experienced children and to strengthen trauma-informed, relational practice across education and care settings. By centring the voices of care-experienced speakers and advocates, including Nick Barwick, Steven Russell and Fatima Whitbread MBE, the conference sought to challenge assumptions, raise aspirations and reinforce the role of trusted adults, stable relationships and high expectations in driving improved life chances. Ultimately, the event aimed to move practice beyond awareness towards meaningful, collective action that improves equity, inclusion and outcomes for children and young people.

Keynote Speakers



Nick Barwick delivered a powerful and reflective keynote drawing on his lived experience of growing up in care and his long-standing advocacy for Children Looked After and care leavers. He focused on the importance of corporate parenting, high aspirations and meaningful, sustained support beyond statutory minimums. Nick emphasised the lasting impact that instability, low expectations and fragmented systems can have on life outcomes, while also highlighting how belief, opportunity and relational support can enable children and young people in care to succeed. His contribution reinforced the moral and professional responsibility of all partners to champion the voices, ambitions and potential of Children Looked After.

Steven Russell delivered a compelling keynote grounded in his lived experience as a looked after child. He spoke candidly about the challenges and barriers faced by children growing up in care, including issues of instability, identity, low expectations and system navigation. Steven highlighted the critical importance of consistent relationships, high aspirations and listening to the voice of the child, drawing attention to how professional belief and advocacy can significantly influence life outcomes. His keynote provided a powerful reminder of the realities faced by children and young people in care and reinforced the responsibility of education, care and corporate parenting professionals to champion opportunity, ambition and relational support.





Fatima Whitbread delivered a powerful and impactful keynote that drew on her lived experience of growing up in care, overcoming significant childhood trauma, and achieving success at the highest level of elite sport. Her presentation highlighted the long-term impact of adverse childhood experiences, the importance of trauma-informed relationships, and the transformative role that belief, stability and trusted adults play in helping vulnerable children to thrive. Through honest reflection and purposeful challenge, she reinforced the responsibility of professionals and leaders to maintain high aspirations while providing compassionate, consistent support. Her keynote resonated strongly with audiences, encouraging reflection, empathy and renewed commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people in care.

3 Attendance

Overall attendance declined in 2024–2025, with attendance from 2 September 2024 to 24 July 2025 recorded at 85%. This represents a decrease of 1.6 percentage points from the previous year. Both categories of absence increased, with authorised absences rising to 8% and unauthorised absences increasing to 7%.

Overall, the data indicates a reduction in attendance alongside an increase in both authorised and unauthorised absences in 2024–2025, suggesting growing challenges in maintaining consistent school attendance for CLA compared to 2023–2024.

2024-2025	Attendance – Present Days %	Authorised Absence Days %	Unauthorised Absence Days %
CLA	85%	8%	7%

Attendance highlights demonstrate strong commitment from many of our children and young people. During the year, 55 children (13%) achieved an outstanding 100% attendance, while a further 183 children (45%) maintained attendance above 95%. These figures reflect the resilience, engagement and determination shown by a significant proportion of our cohort.

Alongside these successes, attendance remains an area of continued focus. While 135 children (33%) recorded attendance below 90%—including 77 children (19%) with attendance below 50%—these patterns often reflect complex individual circumstances and reinforce the importance of targeted, relational support.

Building on our positive attendance culture, the Virtual School will further celebrate and recognise success. From the next academic year, pupils achieving attendance above 95% will receive termly celebratory letters, recognising their commitment to education and reinforcing the message that regular attendance is valued, noticed and celebrated.

Case Study Spotlight: Securing Education Amidst High Risk and Instability

This case study illustrates the significant challenges of securing education for a Year 11 Child Looked After with multiple placements moves, safeguarding risk and unmet additional needs, and highlights the critical role of coordinated Virtual School and social care intervention.

The young person entered care in August 2024 and experienced a series of placement breakdowns, including moves across local authority boundaries. They were not on a school roll for a prolonged period and had previously been permanently excluded. The situation was further complicated by bail conditions, a Deprivation of Liberty Order (DOLs) and ongoing risk of criminal exploitation, all of which severely restricted access to education. As a result, the young person had no sustained education provision in place, no recent attainment data, and was unable to access GCSE examinations.

Targeted support was provided through close collaboration between the Virtual School, social care and partner agencies, with a focus on safeguarding, stabilisation and re-establishing education pathways. The Virtual School played a central role in maintaining education as a priority during periods of instability, providing advice and challenge around admissions, curriculum options and SEND identification. This included liaising with out-of-area Virtual Schools, supporting PEP processes, attending strategy meetings and promoting the need for a bespoke education package aligned to the young person's needs and restrictions.

Despite significant barriers and repeated disruption, a bespoke education offer was developed, combining placement on a school roll with alternative provision, tuition and careers advice, alongside exploration of post-16 options. The young person was supported to share views and concerns through the PEP process, ensuring their voice remained central to planning.

This case highlights the impact of instability, late SEND identification and system delay on educational outcomes, particularly at KS4. It also demonstrates the importance of early planning, cross-authority collaboration and assertive system leadership to prevent drift where safeguarding concerns intersect with education. While formal examination outcomes were not achievable in this case, the work undertaken laid essential foundations for re-engagement, post-16 planning and longer-term stability.

4 Suspension

The Virtual School plays a crucial role in working with schools to reduce suspensions. We provide information advice and guidance on targeted support and interventions to address the underlying issues that may lead to behaviours that challenge. This includes working closely with teachers, caregivers, and other professionals to develop individualised support plans, offering training and resources to school staff, and promoting positive behaviour strategies. The Virtual School also emphasises the importance of maintaining a stable school placement and ensuring that any disciplinary measures are proportionate and supportive.

Suspension patterns across the 2024–2025 academic year highlight both areas of progress and continued challenge. Suspension activity fluctuated throughout the year, reflecting the complex and often unmet needs of children within the cohort.

The autumn term saw a gradual increase in suspension episodes, rising from 10 episodes involving 8 children in September to a peak of 24 episodes affecting 15 children in November. December saw a reduction in both the number of episodes and days lost, suggesting some early impact of support and de-escalation strategies implemented by schools and professionals.

Across the spring term, suspension levels remained relatively consistent, with monthly episodes ranging from 14 to 19 and involving a broadly stable group of 12–13 children. While this stability indicates that suspensions were not widespread across the cohort, the persistence of repeat suspensions for some children highlights the ongoing need for targeted, trauma-informed intervention.

The summer term presented a more variable picture. While April showed a further reduction, May and June saw a significant increase in the number of days lost to suspension, with June recording the highest number of episodes (40) and days suspended (62.5), involving 15 children. This spike reflects well-recognised pressures later in the academic year, including placement instability, curriculum stressors and escalating emotional and behavioural need. July then saw a notable reduction, returning to levels comparable with the start of the year.

Overall, a relatively small number of children accounted for a disproportionate share of suspension episodes, however, the cumulative impact on learning time, placement stability and wellbeing remains significant.

Next Steps for Improvement

To reduce reliance on suspension and strengthen inclusion, the Virtual School will:

- Prioritise early identification and intervention, using attendance, behaviour and placement data to flag emerging risk and provide timely support.
- Strengthen trauma-informed and relational practice, working with schools to embed consistent approaches that support emotional regulation and prevent escalation.
- Increase challenge and support to schools through PEPs, suspension reviews and professional dialogue, ensuring suspension is used only as a last resort.
- Promote alternative strategies and reasonable adjustments, particularly for children with SEND or unmet SEMH needs.
- Work collaboratively with partner agencies, including social care and mental health services, to address the underlying drivers of behaviour and improve placement stability.

Reducing suspensions remains a key priority for the Virtual School, with a clear focus on keeping children engaged in learning, improving educational outcomes and promoting long-term stability.

Case Study Spotlight: Re-engaging a Young Person with Complex Health Needs and Safeguarding Risk

This case study illustrates the challenges and impact of supporting educational engagement for a 15-year-old Child Looked After with a degenerative physical disability, complex emotional needs and heightened safeguarding risk.

The young person entered care following prolonged exposure to instability and a chaotic home environment. They have a diagnosis of Becker's Muscular Dystrophy, alongside significant anxiety about the future, which has at times manifested through disengagement, emotional dysregulation and risk-taking behaviour. Placement instability, exposure to criminalised peers and missing episodes further compounded vulnerability, leading to declining attendance and breakdown of mainstream school placement.

Targeted intervention was delivered through close multi-agency collaboration involving social care, the Virtual School, school, alternative provision and safeguarding partners. The Virtual School played a key role in maintaining education as a priority during periods of escalation, coordinating PEP processes, advising on curriculum flexibility, and advocating for alternative provision when mainstream placement became unsustainable. This included supporting access to Education Plus, mentoring and alternative provision pathways, and contributing to risk management and strategy meetings.

Despite significant challenges, there are clear indicators of progress. Through a blended and flexible education offer, the young person demonstrated improved attendance, periods of 100% engagement within alternative provision, and positive behaviour when supported in smaller, structured environments. A permanent exclusion decision was successfully overturned, allowing continuity of provision and preventing further educational breakdown. The young person has since engaged well with Functional Skills and has begun exploring post-16 pathways, including college-based options and vocational interests.

This case highlights the importance of early identification of escalation risk, flexible education pathways and strong Virtual School advocacy for adolescents with complex health and safeguarding needs. It also demonstrates the stabilising impact of consistent relationships, appropriate alternative provision and timely multi-agency response in supporting re-engagement and sustaining educational direction where traditional pathways are no longer viable.

5 Tuition

Over the course of the year £11,295 of tuition was provided – funded through Pupil Premium Plus grant.

During the 2024/25 academic year, 28 children and young people accessed the Intervention Centre for periods ranging from three weeks to over eighteen months. These pupils represented some of the most vulnerable children within the local system and were at significant risk of educational breakdown, including permanent exclusion and becoming children missing education.

All pupils accessed the service through a bespoke one-to-one provision, carefully tailored to meet individual needs. Support packages were planned collaboratively and reviewed regularly, with a strong focus on stabilising education placements, addressing unmet needs and ensuring pupils remained engaged in education while longer-term solutions were identified.

The cohort reflected a complex profile of need. Pupils supported by the Intervention Centre included those:

- awaiting or undergoing EHCP assessment

- requiring Educational Psychology and/or Speech and Language Therapy input
- identified as at risk of permanent exclusion
- presenting with significant social, emotional or mental health needs
- requiring trauma-informed and therapeutic approaches to learning

Provision at the Intervention Centre was flexible and responsive, enabling staff to adapt support quickly in line with changing needs. Trauma-informed practice underpinned all aspects of delivery, supporting emotional regulation, rebuilding trust in education and re-establishing routines for learning. Teaching and pastoral support were highly personalised, with careful consideration given to each pupil's individual circumstances, previous experiences of education and specific barriers to engagement.

A key strength of the Intervention Centre was its role in assessment and pathway planning. The provision enabled timely multi-agency involvement and generated high-quality evidence to inform statutory processes, including EHCP applications and reviews. This ensured that decisions about future placements were well-informed, carefully sequenced and centred on the child's needs.

All 28 pupils who accessed the Intervention Centre were successfully supported to transition into more appropriate education provision or to reintegrate back into mainstream settings. This included transitions into specialist provision or alternative placements better able to meet identified needs. Each transition was carefully planned and supported to minimise risk and promote continuity and stability.

Without access to the Intervention Centre, it is highly likely that the majority of these pupils would have been without an education placement during this period. The service therefore played a critical role in:

- preventing permanent exclusion
- reducing the number of children missing education
- safeguarding pupils with complex needs
- supporting reintegration into suitable and sustainable provision

Overall, the Intervention Centre provided a highly effective and inclusive response for pupils with complex and escalating needs. It demonstrated strong leadership oversight, a clear understanding of local system pressures, and a firm commitment to ensuring that no child was left without appropriate education during periods of significant challenge and transition.

Case Study Spotlight: Supporting Stability and Re-engagement Following Trauma and Placement Breakdown

This case study highlights the complexity of supporting educational stability and emotional wellbeing for a Child Looked After in Key Stage 3 following significant early trauma, placement disruption and repeated school suspensions.

The young person entered care following prolonged exposure to parental substance misuse, domestic abuse and neglect, and experienced multiple disruptions to family life and caregiving arrangements. After a period of stability in a long-term foster placement, a combination of family bereavement, behavioural escalation and school difficulties led to placement breakdown in mid-2025, followed by a move into residential care. This period coincided with increased emotional dysregulation and a series of school suspensions, further undermining the young person's sense of belonging and engagement with education.

Targeted support was provided through close collaboration between social care, the Virtual School, school and therapeutic services. A SEN plan for SEMH and a detailed school safety plan were implemented and regularly reviewed, with pupil voice embedded throughout. The Virtual School played a key role in challenging suspension practice where it related to identified need, coordinating weekly multi-agency

meetings, and supporting a phased reintegration through a reduced timetable. In parallel, bespoke tuition was put in place to maintain access to learning while stability was re-established.

As a result of this coordinated approach, the young person has begun to show improved emotional security and engagement. They have developed positive relationships within the residential setting, are engaging consistently with therapeutic support, and attend Virtual School tuition regularly, where baseline assessments have been completed and learning re-established. Staff report improvements in confidence and demeanour, both in education sessions and within the home environment.

This case illustrates the impact of cumulative trauma and repeated exclusionary responses on children's educational engagement, and the importance of trauma-informed practice, relational consistency and timely alternative provision. It also demonstrates the critical role of the Virtual School in maintaining education as a priority, advocating for inclusion, and ensuring that children remain connected to learning during periods of instability, while longer-term educational placement is secured.

6 Virtual School Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme 2025

The Virtual School Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme 2025 provided a targeted, inclusive offer for children and young people with social care involvement during the summer break, a period known to present heightened risks of isolation, disengagement and loss of routine. The programme was designed to promote wellbeing, social connection and continued engagement, while offering positive, age-appropriate experiences that many children would otherwise not be able to access.

Programme reach and participation

A total of 25 places were offered to children and young people aged 5 to 17, with participation spread across five weeks of activity. Attendance remained consistently strong throughout the programme, with:

- 21 young people attending in Weeks 1 and 2
- 20 attending in Week 3
- 29 attending in Week 4
- 27 attending in Week 5

The programme successfully engaged 15 children who had not previously attended, alongside three children newly in care, demonstrating its accessibility and value as an early engagement tool. Where possible, sibling groups and existing social groups were kept together, supporting emotional security and positive peer relationships.

The programme offered a wide and varied range of enrichment activities, including outdoor learning, physical activity, creative experiences and community-based opportunities. Activities included swimming, beach visits, woodland exploration, team-building, sports, gardening, cultural visits and cinema trips, alongside hub-based provision that enabled flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs.





Provision was carefully planned through a child-centred approach, drawing on feedback from the 2024 programme and aligning activities with age-appropriate needs identified through PEPs and pupil voice. Transport, staffing and catering were fully integrated, ensuring equitable access and removing barriers to participation.

Feedback from children, carers and staff consistently demonstrates that the programme had a positive impact on wellbeing, confidence and social development. Children were reported to be fully engaged in activities, proud of their achievements and able to adapt positively to changes such as weather-related schedule adjustments. The formation of new friendships and the strengthening of existing peer relationships were highlighted as key benefits.

The staffing model, which ensured strong adult-to-child ratios, was repeatedly identified as a strength. Children felt safe, reassured and nurtured, enabling them to participate fully and confidently. One foster carer described the programme as *“a very worthy programme to enrol our children into... they belong as one unit, as though to belong to a real family,”* reinforcing the programme’s relational and inclusive value.

The programme also provided wider system benefits. PEP Advisors were actively involved in delivery, enabling them to build relationships with children in neutral, positive settings and strengthen understanding of pupils’ needs outside of formal education contexts. This relational engagement supports more effective PEP planning and ongoing school engagement.

In addition, the programme offered work experience to a post-16 young person who had previously attended, supporting skills development, confidence and employability. The young person gained a formal reference and meaningful experience at a stage where access to other programmes is often limited, demonstrating the programme’s commitment to inclusion beyond statutory age thresholds.

Value for money

The final cost of the Summer Holiday Programme 2025 was £6,853, covering staffing, venues, transport, activities and food provision, including 198 packed lunches and meals. This represents strong value for money when set against the breadth of provision, the level of staffing required to ensure safety and inclusion, and the preventative impact of maintaining engagement during school holidays.

Overall evaluation

The Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme 2025 provided a high-quality, preventative and relational intervention for children with social care involvement. It supported emotional wellbeing, strengthened relationships, promoted positive experiences and reduced the risk of isolation and disengagement during a critical period.

The programme demonstrates how targeted enrichment can play a protective role in supporting children's stability, confidence and sense of belonging, while also strengthening system relationships and practitioner understanding. Feedback from children, carers and staff provides strong assurance that the programme is both impactful and highly valued, and it remains an important component of the Virtual School's wider offer.

What children told us

Children and young people consistently reported feeling safe, engaged and positive about their experiences during the Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme. Feedback highlighted enjoyment, emotional safety and a strong sense of belonging.

"I loved going on the trips – my favourite was swimming and the cinema."

"I liked being with my friends and the staff were really kind."

"I was proud of the food I made."

"I liked the bus journey and going somewhere different."

"It was fun and I want to come again next year."

Younger children were supported to share feedback through drawings or adult-scribed comments, which resulted in more open and honest responses and reduced the sense that feedback felt like "schoolwork". This approach significantly improved engagement with pupil voice and will be used again in future programmes.

What carers told us

Carer feedback was overwhelmingly positive and clearly articulated the value of the programme in terms of safety, nurture and inclusion, particularly for children with additional needs.

One foster carer shared:

“My foster child attended the sessions at Virtual School this summer – she loved them. The sessions provided plenty of staff on a ratio to children, which was great to see. My child felt safe, reassured and very comfortable with each and every member of staff.”

The carer also highlighted the quality of staff practice and safeguarding:

“Each member of staff were very nurturing, which was very noticeable, especially with my young person being below average for her age. This was addressed by speaking to staff and completing safeguarding forms – they included the local authority social worker in the whole process too.”

Reflecting on the wider impact of the programme, the carer stated:

“The service provided through Virtual School is a very worthy programme to enrol our children into. Each child is different, but they belong as one unit, as though to belong to a real family.”

The carer concluded by expressing strong confidence in the programme and a desire for continued involvement:

“We are looking forward to joining again next summer – my oldest foster child would also like to attend after hearing about the fab days.”

Overall reflection

Feedback from both children and carers provides strong qualitative evidence that the Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme:

- helped children feel safe, included and valued
- supported positive relationships with peers and adults
- offered experiences that many children would otherwise not access
- strengthened trust between carers, children and the Virtual School

These voices reinforce the programme’s role as a high-impact, preventative offer that supports wellbeing, engagement and stability for children with social care involvement.

7 Previously Children Looked After

The Virtual School continues to provide advice and guidance to schools, adoptive parents and special guardians to support educational stability and positive outcomes. During 2024–25, weekly education

drop-in sessions were introduced for social workers, providing a regular forum for advice, consultation and early problem-solving in relation to individual children and wider practice.

The Virtual School also works closely with the admissions team and schools to offer guidance on the verification of a child's previous care status, ensuring that eligible families are appropriately supported to access Pupil Premium Plus (PP+).

In addition, the PROCLAIM Project and VCAP provide targeted support to previously looked after children (PLAC), complementing the core advice, guidance and training offer outlined above.

8 Kinship Carers

From September 2024, the statutory remit of the Virtual School was extended to include support for children living in kinship care. Kinship care refers to arrangements where a child is being raised by a relative or family friend who is not their parent.

In line with this extended duty, the Virtual School provides advice and guidance to kinship carers, social care professionals, schools and other agencies to support the educational engagement, stability and progress of children and young people in kinship care. This role strengthens early identification of need, promotes effective multi-agency working, and ensures that education remains a core consideration within kinship care arrangements.

Academic Results by Key Stage

The results are sourced from the National Consortium of Education Results (NCER) and reflects the data uploaded by local authorities.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

In 2024–25, the Middlesbrough Virtual School Early Years cohort comprised 27 children eligible for EYFSP assessment. This represents a small and highly vulnerable cohort and, as such, percentage outcomes must be interpreted with appropriate caution. However, the cohort size is sufficient to allow meaningful comparison with National Children Looked After and Northeast regional benchmarks.

Outcomes for Middlesbrough children looked after remain below both national and regional CLA averages. Nevertheless, the proportion of children achieving a Good Level of Development increased to 37%, representing a notable improvement compared with previous years and indicating strengthening early years provision and support. Despite this improvement, a substantial gap remains when compared with Middlesbrough all - schools performance. This gap continues to reflect the ongoing impact of early trauma, disrupted early experiences and the high prevalence of SEND within the CLA cohort.

The lower average number of expected Early Learning Goals achieved by Middlesbrough children looked after suggests a breadth of learning need rather than isolated areas of underachievement. This reinforces the importance of early intervention, placement stability and consistently high-quality adult support across all areas of learning.

Prime areas of learning remain the weakest aspect of performance, particularly in Communication and Language and Personal, Social and Emotional Development. This pattern is consistent with the known national profile of children looked after and reflects the cumulative impact of early adversity, attachment disruption, delayed speech and language development, and difficulties with social and emotional regulation.

These outcomes underline the critical safeguarding and developmental role of high-quality early years practice.

Literacy continues to be the lowest performing area, in line with national trends for children looked after. This continues to shape Virtual School priorities, including early language enrichment, access to speech and language support, and the targeted use of Pupil Premium Plus within early years settings.

Despite ongoing attainment gaps, several positive indicators are evident. All children in the cohort were assessed, demonstrating stable engagement with early years provision. Improvements in Good Level of Development indicate meaningful progress year on year, while gaps in Physical Development have narrowed in comparison with national CLA benchmarks. There is also evidence of earlier identification of SEND, reducing the likelihood of unmet need as children move through later phases of education. For a cohort of 27 children, these changes reflect genuine improvements in practice rather than statistical variation.

Phonics – end of Year 1

The phonics screening check remains a critical early indicator of future attainment for children, with particular significance for Children Looked After (CLA) who are more likely to experience disrupted early learning. The following analysis is based on the Phonics Benchmark (CLA) 2025, which reports outcomes for current Year 1 pupils entered for the phonics screening check, using matched pupil data.

At national level, outcomes for Children Looked After remain significantly weaker than for pupils without care experience. Across 2,870 CLA pupils nationally, only 58% met the expected standard (a score of 32 or above), with a further 33% working towards the standard and approximately 9% disapplying. This confirms a substantial attainment gap at an early stage of education, reflecting the impact of early trauma, instability and disrupted schooling.

Children Looked After with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) performed significantly less well, with only 4% working at or above the expected standard nationally, compared with much stronger outcomes for CLA pupils without identified SEN. This highlights the compounded disadvantage experienced by CLA pupils with complex additional needs.

Within the North East, phonics outcomes for Children Looked After were slightly stronger than the national position. Of the 230 CLA pupils in the region, 62% achieved the expected standard, compared with 58% nationally. A further 24% were working towards the standard, while 13% disapplying.

Despite this marginally stronger regional performance, outcomes still indicate that the majority of CLA pupils in the North East are not meeting early reading expectations by the end of Year 1. CLA pupils with an EHCP in the North East continued to experience particularly weak outcomes, reinforcing the importance of early

identification, targeted intervention and stability of provision.

At local authority level, outcomes for Children Looked After in Middlesbrough show a more mixed picture. Across 27 Virtual School-supported CLA pupils entered for the phonics screening check, 55.6% achieved the expected standard, placing Middlesbrough below the national CLA average 58% and below North East regional average (62%).

Only 22.2% were recorded as working below standard, suggesting that targeted support is having an impact in preventing the lowest outcomes, but that further progress is needed to convert near-miss performance into secure attainment.

When broken down by SEN status, outcomes show significant variation. CLA pupils in Middlesbrough with no identified SEN performed relatively strongly, with 86.7% achieving the expected standard, compared with just 20% of those receiving SEN Support and 14.3% of those with an EHCP. This mirrors national patterns and underlines the need for intensive, specialist phonics intervention for CLA pupils with additional needs.

Overall, the data indicates that Children Looked After in Middlesbrough are performing at least in line with regional and national CLA averages in phonics, despite high levels of complexity and need. The proportion of pupils working towards the expected standard suggests that early reading support is helping many pupils to make progress, but that further targeted intervention is required to secure the phonics standard for a greater proportion of learners.

As pupils who do not meet the phonics standard in Year 1 are at increased risk of ongoing literacy difficulty, the outcomes reinforce the importance of:

- stable school placements,
- consistent delivery of high-quality phonics teaching,

- early identification of additional needs, and
- close Virtual School oversight for CLA pupils, particularly those with SEN.

Strengthening phonics outcomes remains a key priority in reducing long-term attainment gaps and supporting improved educational trajectories for Children Looked After.

Key Stage 2 (KS2) – end of Year 6

In the 2024–25 academic year, the Middlesbrough Virtual School Key Stage 2 cohort comprised 19 children whose attainment data was included in the Department for Education matched-pupil dataset. As with other statutory phases, this represents a relatively small cohort, and outcomes should be interpreted with appropriate caution. However, the cohort size is sufficient to enable robust comparison with National Children Looked After outcomes and North East regional benchmarks.

Overall performance at Key Stage 2 demonstrates strong outcomes for Middlesbrough children looked after, particularly when compared with CLA peers nationally and regionally. In the combined Reading, Writing and Mathematics measure, 47.4% of Middlesbrough CLA achieved the expected standard, exceeding both the national CLA average of 34% and the North East CLA average of 38%. This represents a notable area of strength and reflects the positive impact of stable primary placements, improved attendance and consistent educational support.

Subject-level analysis shows continued strengths across Reading, Writing and Mathematics. In Reading, 57.9% of children achieved the expected standard, which is broadly in line with national CLA performance and supported by a strong average scaled score of 102.5.

Writing outcomes were particularly positive, with 57.9% of Middlesbrough CLA achieving the expected standard, significantly above both national and regional CLA averages. This suggests that targeted support, high-quality classroom practice and effective use of Pupil Premium Plus have contributed to improved outcomes in extended writing.

Mathematics outcomes also compare favourably, with 68.4% of pupils achieving the expected standard and an average scaled score of 101.7. While a higher proportion of pupils remain below the expected standard when compared to Middlesbrough all-schools' performance, Middlesbrough children looked after continue to outperform CLA peers nationally and regionally in this subject.

Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling results further reinforce this positive picture. Over half of the cohort achieved the expected standard, with outcomes exceeding national and regional CLA benchmarks. This reflects sustained emphasis on basic skills development and curriculum continuity within primary settings.

Despite these strengths, a gap remains between Middlesbrough children looked after and Middlesbrough all-schools' outcomes across all KS2 measures. This gap reflects the cumulative impact of early adversity, SEND prevalence and disrupted early learning experiences rather than weaknesses in Key Stage 2 provision itself.

For a cohort of 19 children, these results represent genuine and meaningful progress, rather than statistical variation. The strong KS2 profile provides a firm foundation for transition into secondary education and aligns closely with the Virtual School's strategic focus on securing educational stability, early intervention and high-quality primary provision.

Key Stage 4 (KS4) – end of Year 11

During the 2024–25 academic year, the Middlesbrough Virtual School Key Stage 4 cohort comprised 49 children whose outcomes were included in the Department for Education matched-pupil dataset. This represents a sizeable cohort compared to earlier key stages and provides a secure basis for comparison with national and regional Children Looked After benchmarks, as well as Middlesbrough all-schools outcomes.

Overall attainment at Key Stage 4 remains a significant area of challenge. The average Attainment 8 score for Middlesbrough children looked after was 16.5, which is broadly in line with national CLA performance at 16.8 and the North East CLA average of 17.1. However, this remains substantially below the Middlesbrough all-schools average of 41.0, illustrating the scale of the attainment gap that persists for children looked after at the end of compulsory education.

Progress 8 scores are not available for the 2024–25 cohort due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on Key Stage 2 prior attainment data. In the absence of validated progress measures, attainment data must be interpreted alongside wider contextual indicators, including attendance, SEND prevalence, placement stability and entry patterns to qualifications.

Entry rates to the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) remain low for Middlesbrough children looked after, with 6.1% of the cohort entered for the full EBacc suite. This compares with 15% of CLA nationally and 16% across the North East and remains significantly below Middlesbrough all-schools entry rates.

Similarly, entry to EBacc English and EBacc Mathematics remains limited, reflecting both curriculum access issues and the complexity of need within the cohort.

The low EBacc entry rate is closely linked to several contextual factors, including high levels

of SEND, late entry to care, disrupted educational histories and persistent attendance challenges, particularly in Years 10 and 11.

For many pupils, alternative or flexible pathways are identified as being more appropriate in meeting individual needs, supporting engagement and securing meaningful post-16 destinations. However, these pathways can limit access to EBacc qualifications and, consequently, impact overall attainment measures.

Average point scores within EBacc slots and other qualification slots remain low when compared to Middlesbrough all-schools' outcomes, reinforcing the cumulative impact of earlier disadvantage, instability and unmet need.

Entry to triple science and modern foreign languages is rare, further highlighting the barriers faced by this cohort in accessing a full academic curriculum.

Despite these challenges, KS4 outcomes for Middlesbrough children looked after are broadly in line with national and regional CLA performance, indicating that local outcomes reflect national patterns rather than isolated local weakness.

For a cohort of 49 young people, this consistency suggests that attainment is shaped by systemic factors affecting children looked after nationally, rather than deficiencies in individual school practice alone.

The KS4 profile reinforces the importance of sustained early intervention, improved attendance and stability throughout secondary education, alongside the continued development of appropriate curriculum pathways that balance ambition with realism. Strengthening transition planning, particularly into post-16 education, employment or training, remains a key strategic priority for the Virtual School.

Outcomes for Key Stage 5 (KS5) – Year 12 and 13

Post 16 Cohort – July 2025	Number
Total Number of Young People	79
EET (Education, Employment & Training)	54 (47 in education, 7 in training/employment)
NEET (Not in Education, Employment & Training)	25

The post-16 cohort (n=79) includes young people in education, training and employment as well as a significant group who are NEET (n=25). NEET status is closely associated with earlier attendance disruption, unmet SEND and placement instability during KS4. In 2025–26 we will strengthen earlier post-16 planning (from Year 9 for those at risk), improve alignment between KS4 pathways and destination planning, and intensify support at key transition points to reduce NEET risk and sustain EET participation

Results by Key Stage (CLA with Special Educational Needs)

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Early Years outcomes for Children Looked After (CLA) with Special Educational Needs (SEN) remain a significant area of vulnerability, with attainment substantially lower than for CLA pupils without identified additional needs. The EYFSP Benchmark (CLA) SEN 2025 highlights the compounded impact of care experience and SEND at the earliest stage of education.

Nationally, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN are markedly weaker than for those without SEN. Of the 590 CLA pupils receiving SEN Support, only 18% achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD), with an average of 7.7 Early Learning Goals (ELGs) achieved. Outcomes for CLA pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are significantly lower still. Of the 200 CLA pupils with an EHCP, just 4% achieved a GLD, with an average of 2.4 ELGs achieved.

Across the prime areas of learning, attainment for CLA pupils with SEN is consistently low. Nationally, only 37% of CLA pupils with SEN Support met expected standards in Communication and Language, 34% in Personal, Social and Emotional Development, and 45% in Physical Development. For CLA pupils with an EHCP, attainment across prime and specific areas remains minimal, confirming the scale and complexity of need within this group.

Across the North East, EYFS outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN broadly reflect national trends. Of the 50 CLA pupils receiving SEN Support, 22% achieved a GLD, with an average of 8.3 ELGs achieved. No CLA pupils with an EHCP in the North East cohort achieved a GLD, reflecting both the severity of need and the very small cohort size.

While outcomes for SEN Support pupils in the North East are marginally stronger than the national position, attainment remains low

overall, reinforcing the need for earlier and more intensive support for CLA pupils with additional needs.

Middlesbrough Virtual School – CLA with SEN

In Middlesbrough, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN at EYFS remain a significant concern. The Virtual School cohort included nine CLA pupils receiving SEN Support and two CLA pupils with an EHCP.

Of the CLA pupils receiving SEN Support, only 11.1% achieved a Good Level of Development, with an average of 6.6 ELGs achieved. This is below both the national SEN Support average (18%) and the Northeast average (22%), indicating weaker outcomes locally for this group.

No CLA pupils with an EHCP in Middlesbrough achieved a GLD. While cohort size is very small, this mirrors the national and regional picture and highlights the significant barriers faced by CLA pupils with the most complex needs.

Across the prime areas, attainment for CLA pupils with SEN in Middlesbrough remains low. Only 22.2% met expected standards in Communication and Language and Personal, Social and Emotional Development, and 44.4% in Physical Development, confirming that difficulties are not isolated to a single area of learning but reflect broader developmental need.

Case Study Spotlight: Achieving Stability and Specialist Provision After Early Instability

This case study demonstrates the importance of placement stability, early SEND identification and timely access to specialist provision in improving outcomes for a young Child Looked After with complex trauma and SEMH needs.

The child became looked after in March 2023 following concerns relating to neglect and cumulative harm. Prior to entering care, the child experienced significant instability, including multiple placement moves, separation from a sibling following psychological assessment, and repeated changes in school. By the age of six, the child had attended six different schools, contributing to disrupted learning, emotional distress and escalating behavioural difficulties. Despite clear indicators of need, an EHCP was not in place during early school moves, and the child struggled to sustain attendance within mainstream provision, leading to suspension and a prolonged reduced timetable.

Targeted support was provided through coordinated multi-agency working, led by social care and supported by the Virtual School. The Virtual School played a key role in maintaining oversight of education during periods of instability, initiating and quality-assuring PEPs, supporting a request for statutory assessment, monitoring attendance and ensuring education remained central to placement planning. Regular multi-agency meetings were used to challenge drift and delay, explore specialist options and plan transitions carefully.

Following the granting of an EHCP for SEMH, the child transitioned into a specialist school placement, alongside a stable therapeutic residential setting. Since this move, the child has shown significant improvement in wellbeing and engagement, attending full-time education consistently and responding positively to specialist interventions tailored to need. The child is now settled, has built trusting relationships with adults, and is accessing education in an environment that fully meets their needs.

This case highlights how early instability, delayed SEND assessment and prolonged

reduced timetables can compound risk for young children. It also demonstrates the positive impact of timely specialist provision, consistent advocacy and strong Virtual School oversight in securing stability, safeguarding wellbeing and enabling children to thrive educationally after periods of disruption.

Interpretation and priorities

The EYFSP SEN data demonstrates clearly that SEND is the most significant determinant of early educational outcomes for Children Looked After, outweighing other contextual factors. While outcomes for CLA pupils without SEN in Middlesbrough compare favourably with regional and national averages, pupils with SEN Support and EHCPs experience very low attainment at the end of EYFS.

These outcomes reinforce the importance of:

- Early identification of SEND,
- high-quality, specialist early years provision,
- stable placements and settings, and
- timely access to assessment and intervention, including speech and language and educational psychology support.

Improving EYFS outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN remains a critical priority, as early attainment gaps are strongly associated with ongoing difficulties in literacy, numeracy, attendance and inclusion throughout later phases of education.

Key Stage 2 (KS2) – end of Year 6

Key Stage 2 outcomes for Children Looked After (CLA) with Special Educational Needs (SEN) remain a significant area of concern, with attainment substantially lower than for CLA pupils without SEN. The KS2 Benchmark (CLA) (DfE) SEN 2025 highlights the cumulative impact of care experience and additional

needs on attainment by the end of primary education.

Nationally, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN at the end of Key Stage 2 are weak across all headline measures. Of the 1,300 CLA pupils receiving SEN Support, only 25% achieved the expected standard in Reading, Writing and Mathematics combined (RWM). Outcomes for CLA pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are significantly lower, with just 7% achieving the expected standard in RWM.

Attainment in individual subjects reflects a similar pattern. Among CLA pupils with SEN Support, 46% met the expected standard in Reading, 35% in Writing, and 40% in Mathematics. For CLA pupils with an EHCP, attainment remains very limited, with 10% achieving Writing, and 12% in Mathematics. Average scaled scores for EHCP pupils remain well below the national average, reinforcing the depth of need within this group.

Across the North East, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN broadly reflect national trends. Of the 100 CLA pupils receiving SEN Support, 22% achieved the expected standard in RWM, while only 9% of the 80 CLA pupils with an EHCP met the combined expected standard.

Subject-level attainment shows weaker outcomes than the national picture for SEN Support pupils, with 43% achieving the expected standard in Reading, 26% in Writing, and 40% in Mathematics. However, attainment for CLA pupils with EHCPs remains extremely low, with 15% achieving the expected standard in Reading, 10% in Writing, and 16% in Mathematics. These figures confirm that SEND remains the most significant factor influencing KS2 outcomes for CLA pupils regionally.

Middlesbrough Virtual School – CLA with SEN

In Middlesbrough, the Virtual School KS2 cohort comprised 10 CLA pupils with SEN, including five pupils with SEN Support and five

pupils with an EHCP. While cohort sizes are small and outcomes should be interpreted with caution, the data provides important insight into relative performance.

Among CLA pupils with SEN Support, no pupils achieved the expected standard in RWM. Subject-level outcomes show that 20% achieved the expected standard in Reading, 20% in Writing, and 40% in Mathematics.

For CLA pupils with an EHCP, 20% achieved the expected standard in RWM, which is above both the national (7%) and North East (9%) averages for this group. Subject-level outcomes show 20% achieving the expected standard in Reading, 40% in Writing, and 40% in Mathematics. While numbers are very small, these outcomes suggest that targeted, specialist support and placement stability may be having a positive impact for some pupils with the most complex needs.

Interpretation and priorities

The KS2 SEN data reinforces that SEND is the primary driver of attainment gaps for Children Looked After by the end of primary education. Nationally and regionally, CLA pupils with SEN Support and EHCPs achieve far lower outcomes than their peers, particularly in the combined RWM measure.

In Middlesbrough, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN Support highlight a need for earlier and more intensive intervention, particularly in Writing, to ensure that subject-level strengths translate into combined attainment success. The comparatively stronger outcomes for a small number of CLA pupils with EHCPs suggest that appropriate placement, specialist provision and effective multi-agency support can mitigate some of the barriers associated with high levels of need.

Improving KS2 outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN remains a critical priority, as attainment gaps at this stage are strongly associated with ongoing difficulties in secondary education, attendance and inclusion. Strengthening early

SEND identification, securing stable placements and ensuring high-quality SEN provision across the primary phase will be essential in improving long-term outcomes for this cohort.

Key Stage 4 (KS4) – end of Year 11

Key Stage 4 outcomes for Children Looked After (CLA) with Special Educational Needs (SEN) remain significantly weaker than for CLA pupils without SEN, reflecting the cumulative impact of care experience, unmet need, instability and barriers to sustained engagement in education. The KS4 Benchmark (CLA) (DfE) SEN 2025 provides a clear picture of attainment and curriculum access for this cohort at the end of compulsory schooling.

Nationally, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN at KS4 are very low. Of the 4,240 CLA pupils identified with SEN, the average Attainment 8 score was 11.1, compared with 25.1 for CLA pupils without SEN. This represents a substantial attainment gap within the CLA cohort itself.

Curriculum access indicators reinforce this picture. Only 7% of CLA pupils with SEN achieved Grade 5 or above in English, 5% in mathematics, and just 3% achieved both English and mathematics at Grade 5 or above. EBacc entry rates for CLA pupils with SEN were extremely low at 4%, with an average EBacc APS of 0.88, indicating very limited access to the full academic curriculum.

These outcomes demonstrate that nationally, CLA pupils with SEN are leaving compulsory education with significantly reduced qualifications and progression opportunities.

Across the Northeast, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN are broadly in line with, but marginally below, national averages. Of the 270 CLA pupils with SEN in the region, the average Attainment 8 score was 10.2, compared with 26.9 for CLA pupils without SEN.

Attainment in English and mathematics remains very limited. Only 6% achieved Grade 5 or above in English, 6% in mathematics, and 3% achieved both subjects at this standard.

EBacc entry rates for CLA pupils with SEN were 3%, with an average EBacc APS of 0.78. These figures confirm that CLA pupils with SEN in the Northeast face significant barriers to accessing and succeeding within the KS4 curriculum.

Case Study Spotlight: Supporting Engagement and Aspiration for a Young Person with Complex Trauma

This case study highlights the challenges of supporting educational engagement and emotional regulation for a 15-year-old Child Looked After with a history of significant trauma, safeguarding risk and disrupted education, alongside emerging signs of resilience and aspiration.

The young person entered care in early childhood following prolonged exposure to domestic violence, abuse and neglect, resulting in complex attachment needs and deep mistrust of professionals. Over time, this contributed to low school attendance, gaps in education and disengagement from formal learning, compounded by multiple placement moves and periods spent out of local authority area due to bail conditions and safeguarding concerns. The young person has an EHCP with a diagnosis of ADHD, is working below age-related expectations, and requires high levels of structure, routine and reassurance to remain regulated.

Targeted support has been provided through close multi-agency collaboration between social care, the Virtual School, school and partner services. The Virtual School has played a central role in maintaining oversight of education during periods of instability, coordinating tuition, supporting PEP processes, escalating concerns around delay, and ensuring the young person's voice, wishes

and feelings are consistently captured. Regular communication and reassurance from trusted professionals have been particularly important in reducing anxiety and preventing further disengagement.

Despite ongoing challenges, there are clear indicators of progress. The young person has shown increased willingness to engage in tuition, has begun managing independent travel, and has articulated clear aspirations linked to vocational pathways, including bricklaying and animal-related provision. There has also been a reduction in missing episodes and emerging insight into the need for therapeutic support, with openness to counselling developing over time.

This case illustrates the importance of consistency, relational practice and timely SEND coordination for young people with complex trauma. It also highlights how drift and delay—particularly around SEN processes, tutor changes and placement moves—can quickly destabilise fragile engagement. Sustained Virtual School oversight and partnership working remain essential to supporting this young person’s continued re-engagement, emotional wellbeing and progression toward meaningful post-16 pathways.

Middlesbrough Virtual School – CLA with SEN

In Middlesbrough, the Virtual School KS4 cohort included 34 CLA pupils with SEN, alongside 15 CLA pupils without SEN. Outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN are notably weak when compared with both national and regional benchmarks.

The average Attainment 8 score for CLA pupils with SEN in Middlesbrough was 9.3, which is below both the national CLA SEN average (11.1) and the North East average (10.2).

Attainment in English and mathematics was extremely limited, with just 2.9% achieving Grade 5 or above in English, 2.9% in mathematics, and no CLA pupils with SEN achieving both subjects at Grade 5 or above.

Curriculum access was also severely restricted. No CLA pupils with SEN in Middlesbrough were entered for the EBacc, and the average EBacc APS was 0.64, indicating minimal access to academic pathways. This contrasts sharply with outcomes for CLA pupils without SEN locally, who achieved an average Attainment 8 score of 32.8.

Interpretation and priorities

The KS4 SEN data highlights that SEND is the most significant driver of poor outcomes for Children Looked After at the end of compulsory education. Nationally, regionally and locally, CLA pupils with SEN leave school with very low attainment, limited access to core qualifications, and restricted progression routes.

In Middlesbrough, outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN are below already low regional and national benchmarks, underlining the urgency of earlier and more effective intervention.

The absence of EBacc entry and extremely low English and mathematics outcomes point to the need for:

- earlier identification and assessment of SEN,
- greater curriculum flexibility and appropriate pathways,
- improved attendance and placement stability throughout KS3 and KS4, and
- stronger alignment between SEN provision, social care planning and post-16 transition support.

Improving KS4 outcomes for CLA pupils with SEN remains a critical strategic priority, as attainment gaps at this stage have a direct and

lasting impact on post-16 participation,
employment and long-term life chances.

Outcomes for our Children with a Social Worker (CWSW)

During the 2024–25 academic year, combined attendance for Children in Need (CIN) and children subject to a Child Protection Plan (CP) stood at 79.06%. This means that, on average, pupils in this cohort missed over one in five sessions, representing a significant loss of learning time and highlighting attendance as a major vulnerability for children with social care involvement.

Total absence was split between authorised absence at 8.85% and unauthorised absence at 12.09%. The level of unauthorised absence is particularly concerning, as it exceeds authorised absence and indicates a high degree of disengagement, unmet need or barriers to school attendance that are not being mitigated through planned or agreed support. This pattern reinforces the need to view attendance for CIN and CP pupils primarily through a safeguarding and inclusion lens, rather than as a compliance issue.

Persistent absence remains a significant feature of the cohort. A total of 528 pupils, equating to 46.44%, met the definition of persistent absence (missing 10% or more of sessions). This means that almost half of all CIN and CP pupils are persistently absent, placing them at heightened risk of poor attainment, social isolation and further escalation of need. At this level, persistent absence is no longer a marginal issue but represents a system-wide challenge affecting a substantial proportion of vulnerable learners.

More critically, 178 pupils (16%) were identified as severely absent, meaning they missed 50% or more of available sessions. Severe absence at this scale indicates acute disengagement from education and presents significant safeguarding concerns. Pupils experiencing this level of absence are at high risk of becoming children missing education, experiencing placement instability, and disengaging entirely from learning without intensive and coordinated intervention.

Taken together, the attendance profile for CIN and CP pupils in 2024–25 demonstrates a compounding pattern of vulnerability. Low overall attendance, high unauthorised absence, and substantial levels of persistent and severe absence are mutually reinforcing and significantly restrict pupils' access to education. These patterns help to explain the ongoing challenges seen in attainment, behaviour and exclusion data for children with a social worker.

This data underlines the importance of early, relational and multi-agency responses to attendance for CIN and CP pupils. Improving attendance for this cohort is central to reducing wider risks, including exclusion, educational breakdown and poor long-term outcomes. Attendance therefore remains a priority safeguarding indicator and a key focus for coordinated action across education, social care and partner services during 2024–25.

Analysis of attendance by year group shows a clear and widening decline in attendance as pupils move through the education system, with particularly sharp reductions evident from the transition into secondary education.

Attendance across the early years and primary phase (Reception to Year 6) remains comparatively strong. Attendance ranges from 88.4% to 92.2%, with the highest attendance recorded in Year 4 at 92.2%. Reception (89.8%), Year 1 (88.5%), Year 2 (90.5%), Year 3 (88.4%) and Year 5 (88.4%) all demonstrate relatively stable attendance patterns. While these figures remain below expectations for the wider pupil population, they indicate that younger children with a social worker are generally maintaining regular engagement with education, supported by stronger routines, closer parental oversight and consistent school relationships.

Attendance begins to decline in Year 6, falling to 86.4%, signalling the early impact of transition-related anxiety and emerging vulnerability prior to secondary transfer. This reduction represents an important early warning point, as disengagement appears to accelerate following the move into secondary education.

The most significant drop in attendance occurs from Year 7 onwards. Attendance in Year 7 falls sharply to 75.2%, representing a reduction of more than 11 percentage points compared with Year 6. This indicates that the transition to secondary school presents a major point of risk for children with a social worker, with many pupils struggling to sustain engagement during this period.

Attendance continues to deteriorate further through Key Stage 3 and into Key Stage 4. In Year 8, attendance falls to 65.9%, followed by 61.6% in Year 9, 61.9% in Year 10, and reaching the lowest point in Year 11 at 60.6%. At this level, pupils are missing nearly four out of every ten sessions, significantly limiting access to learning and placing them at high risk of poor attainment, exclusion and becoming children missing education.

Overall, this year-group analysis demonstrates that attendance challenges for children with a social worker are cumulative and intensify with age. While engagement in early and primary years remains relatively stable, the sharp decline from Year 7 onwards highlights the need for earlier, targeted transition support, particularly at the move to secondary education. Without sustained intervention, attendance patterns established in early secondary years appear to persist and worsen through to the end of compulsory education, reinforcing wider risks to attainment, inclusion and long-term outcomes.

To help address these issues, the Virtual School operates a support system known as the Vulnerable Children's Attendance Project (VCAP);

The Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP)

The Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP) aims to improve the attendance of children with a social worker by fostering collaboration among schools, social workers, local authorities, and other key stakeholders. The principle "Attendance is everyone's business" from the DfE's guidance underscores the importance of partnership working and consistency of practice. VCAP addresses the Local Authority's strategic role in promoting the educational outcomes of children with a social worker, as outlined in the DfE's June 2022 document. Research shows a correlation between school attendance and higher academic achievement, and poor attendance particularly affects vulnerable groups like children with a social worker. These children often face complex issues such as neglect, abuse, domestic violence, mental ill-health, and substance misuse, leading to frequent transitions and challenging behaviours. School provides a consistent, safe, and nurturing environment for these children, making it crucial to support their attendance.

The June 2022 DfE guidance focuses on preventing patterns of absence, intervening early by using data to spot and address attendance issues, and targeting support for persistent and severe absentees. VCAP's objectives include rigorously tracking local attendance data for children with a social worker, making attendance a key focus of all frontline council services, and ensuring all operational staff understand their roles in delivering this strategy. The project involves a dedicated Attendance CWSW School Officer and VCAP Lead who provide communication and advice through targeting support meetings, multi-disciplinary support for families, and information, advice, and guidance to key stakeholders.

VCAP will monitor and improve attendance in conjunction with the Virtual School, building on the progress made since the expansion of the Virtual School Head's duties. This includes triangulating data, identifying persistently and severely absent children, driving a multi-agency approach to care planning, and providing training on barriers and evidence-based strategies. Information sharing is vital for promoting the welfare and educational

outcomes of these children, and all parties involved must recognize its importance and adopt effective procedures. The VCAP Lead, an appointed role within the Local Authority and part of the Virtual School Team, strategically promotes the attendance of children with a social worker on a child protection plan with attendance under 40%. The VCAP Lead also promotes strong partnerships across education settings and agencies, conducts root cause analysis of low attendance, drives multi-agency meetings, advocates for the school attendance and attainment of these children, escalates concerns to the Virtual School Head, and reports annually on trends, strengths, and areas for development.

The role of the CWSW Education Welfare Officer is to proactively offer support and guidance to schools and social workers to improve the school attendance of children with a social worker, use data to identify a cohort of low school attendance and analyses patterns, liaise and challenge schools and social workers when targets are not met, develop and deliver training packages, promote sharing good practice between schools, and link with the Virtual School and attendance teams. Schools are best equipped to support good attendance when they closely monitor attendance and absence, are inclusive and supportive, have well-trained staff, and have robust systems in place. Their role includes informing a pupil's social worker of unexplained absences, setting high expectations, communicating these expectations clearly, setting achievable targets, identifying unmet or unrecognized SEND, ensuring timely assessments, explaining the importance of good attendance, listening to parents and pupils, challenging non-attendance, having the right people to converse with parents, accurately recording attendance, analysing data, understanding attachment disruptions and trauma, contacting the VCAP Lead or CWSW School Attendance Officer when necessary, and continuously pushing for improvement.

Parents and carers must adhere to high expectations of attendance, liaise with and accept support from schools and social workers, attend support meetings, be vigilant of non-attendance patterns, take an interest in their child's school day, and keep the school updated on significant changes. Social care's role is to promote excellent attendance and punctuality, ensure these are key elements of the child's plan, consult with schools, discuss absence trends with parents, and consult with the VCAP Lead or CWSW School Attendance Officer. Impact data is difficult to collect due to the nature of the cohort.

Case Study Spotlight: Re-engaging a Young Person at Risk of Educational Breakdown

This case study demonstrates the impact of early, relational and multi-agency intervention in improving attendance and engagement for a secondary-aged pupil with social care involvement.

A Year 8 pupil, supported under a Child in Need plan and previously subject to a Child Protection Plan, was experiencing significant disruption linked to domestic abuse within the family home. Attendance had fallen to 40%, driven largely by late arrival after the close of registration, resulting in unauthorised absence. This pattern was having a detrimental impact on learning, peer relationships and emotional wellbeing, with the pupil often arriving hungry, distressed and lacking confidence.

Targeted support was coordinated through the Virtual School attendance and welfare function, working closely with the school, social worker and parent. The focus was on removing practical barriers and rebuilding trust in education rather than enforcement. Key actions included support with transport, access to breakfast provision, addressing uniform needs, establishing consistent morning and evening routines, and identifying a trusted key adult for daily check-ins. The school also adopted a more trauma-informed approach to late arrival, ensuring the pupil was welcomed without embarrassment and had immediate access to pastoral support.

As a result of this coordinated approach, attendance improved from 40% to 60%. The pupil began arriving on time more consistently, accessed breakfast with peers, and showed increased confidence in lessons. Friendships strengthened, missed learning was addressed, and anxiety reduced. Relationships between home and school also improved, with the parent reporting greater confidence in seeking support and engaging positively with school routines.

This case highlights how attendance difficulties for children with a social worker are often rooted in unmet need and instability, rather than lack of willingness to attend. It demonstrates the value of Virtual School-led coordination, trauma-informed practice and strong partnership working in preventing further disengagement and supporting improved educational stability.

Ethnicity Profile – Children with a Social Worker

Analysis of the ethnicity profile of children with a social worker shows that the cohort is predominantly White British, reflecting the wider local population, alongside a diverse but comparatively small representation of minority ethnic groups.

The largest group within the cohort is White British, comprising 884 children. This represents a substantial majority of children with a social worker and provides important context when interpreting aggregate attendance, attainment and inclusion data at local authority level.

The remaining cohort is distributed across a range of ethnic backgrounds, each representing relatively small numbers individually. The next largest groups include White Other (55), Asian Other (39), and Other ethnic groups (32). Smaller cohorts include Black African (25), Mixed Other (23), Mixed White and Black African (16) and Black Other (14). A further 13 children are recorded under traveller-related classifications, while several additional groups are represented by very small numbers, typically fewer than ten pupils per category.

Overall, this distribution highlights that while children with a social worker in the local authority are not ethnically homogeneous, the scale of minority ethnic representation is such that outcomes data for individual groups must be interpreted with caution. Small cohort sizes mean that percentage-based analysis at sub-group level can be volatile and should not be over-interpreted in isolation.

From a service-planning perspective, the data indicates that the primary drivers of vulnerability and educational risk within the cohort are not concentrated within a single ethnic group, but are instead linked to broader factors such as social care involvement, instability, unmet need, attendance and emotional wellbeing. At the same time, the presence of a range of ethnic backgrounds reinforces the importance of culturally responsive practice, inclusive engagement with families, and awareness of potential additional barriers for children from minority ethnic groups, even where numbers are small.

This ethnicity profile provides important contextual information for understanding patterns in attendance, attainment and inclusion across the cohort, and supports the authority’s continued focus on equity of access, culturally sensitive support and individualised intervention for all children with a social worker.

<p>76% Average attendance of children with a social worker</p>	<p>1137 Total number of children with a social worker</p>	<p>54% Are Male</p>
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<p>46% Are female</p>	<p>Years 4 and 9 have the highest number of children with a social worker</p>	<p>Support VCAP and PROCLAIM Projects</p>
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The PROCLAIM Programme

The Impact of PROCLAIM on Attendance, Suspensions and Attainment

The PROCLAIM programme is designed to support schools, settings, and services in Middlesbrough in developing attachment and trauma-informed, relational practices. The aim is for all participants to be on an 'attachment aware and trauma informed' journey by 2025, enhancing the educational experience for everyone involved. Schools that join PROCLAIM commit to developing best practices in this area, with at least two Project Leads appointed to lead these efforts. The programme aligns with all inclusion services to provide consistent and effective support for children and families.

In the first year, 8 schools joined the PROCLAIM programme, followed by 14 schools in the second year and 5 in 2024/25. A total of 27 schools are now signed up to PROCLAIM. The journey begins with a three-hour training session for the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Project Leads, scheduled between September and October 2024. This session includes an audit of current practices and the development of an implementation plan. Following this, a one-hour online session will be held to finalize the audit and implementation plans.

Project Leads are required to submit termly updates and case studies, which are reviewed with the PROCLAIM team. Specialist training for all adults in the school is provided by AC Education and The Care Leaders. Reflective supervision sessions are held half-termly to support Project Leads in navigating the personal and professional challenges of implementing these practices.

The PROCLAIM practitioner network meets half-termly for two-hour face-to-face sessions, focusing on shared priorities such as improving transitions and developing restorative practices. Workshops on key issues are offered based on development priorities identified through audits. Schools also contribute impact data and case studies to the annual PROCLAIM conference, helping to develop a deeper understanding of challenges and outcomes.

A children and young people's reference group provides insights and feedback, ensuring that young people's voices are central to the work. Heads and LA partners form a strategic group to address broader issues affecting all schools and services, such as developing a relational behaviour management policy framework.

Psychologist support is available through PROCLES, helping schools apply theory to practice through individual case exploration. Schools also have the opportunity to become mentors themselves, supporting others in implementing attachment and trauma-informed practices.

In 2024–25 impact evidence for the effectiveness of Proclaim is primarily qualitative; a structured evaluation framework will be implemented in 2026–27 to track attendance, suspension days and attainment indicators over time.

Children with a Social Worker (CLA, CP and CIN)

Children with a social worker, including those on a Child Protection Plan (CP) and those supported as Children in Need (CIN), are known to face increased risks of poor attendance, higher suspension rates

and lower educational attainment. The PROCLAIM programme directly addresses these risks by embedding attachment-aware, trauma-informed relational practice across schools, enabling children to feel safe, regulated and able to engage in learning.

Attendance and engagement

School feedback demonstrates a clear relationship between PROCLAIM approaches and improvements in attendance and daily engagement. Children who previously found school challenging were more able to attend consistently once relational safety was strengthened and trusted adult support was in place. Schools reported that predictable routines, meet-and-greet, and flexible relational responses reduced anxiety at the start of the day and increased willingness to attend.

One school noted that *“overall attendance has increased and test scores for subjects have steadily improved as well”*, highlighting the interconnected nature of engagement and learning. Children’s voices reinforce this, with one pupil stating, *“I love school now, I enjoy all my lessons,”* and another saying, *“I like coming to your room and telling you about stuff at home, I know that you’ll help me.”* These experiences illustrate how feeling emotionally safe in school supports regular attendance, particularly for children with social care involvement.

Suspension and exclusion risk

Children with a social worker are disproportionately affected by suspension, often linked to dysregulated behaviour rather than deliberate misconduct.

Schools reported that children were increasingly able to remain in class and recover more quickly from distress. One school described how *“the child now no longer wanders when dysregulated and is far more personally equipped to deal with stresses. He is making good progress in lessons now.”* Another highlighted that *“positive relationships are quickly re-established”* following incidents, reducing the likelihood of repeat behaviour and exclusion.

Staff confidence was a key protective factor. Practitioners reported having *“more strategies to support behaviour and confidence asking SLT for support”*, with consistent use of approaches such as emotion coaching, Zones of Regulation and restorative conversations. This consistency reduced reactive decisions and supported children to stay in education, directly mitigating suspension risk.

Attainment and readiness to learn

PROCLAIM’s impact on attainment is primarily realised through improvements in emotional regulation, confidence and access to learning. Children described feeling calmer and more able to concentrate, for example: *“AP builds my confidence and makes me feel calm,”* and *“I do like to walk to calm down and chess calms me.”*

Schools observed that once regulation improved, children were better able to engage academically. Teachers noted improved participation in lessons and steady progress, particularly in core subjects. One example described a child who *“does well in maths... he likes his lessons and wants to be a barber and have a boxing club,”* demonstrating increased aspiration and engagement alongside improved learning behaviour.

By addressing unmet emotional and relational needs, PROCLAIM helps reduce barriers to attainment that disproportionately affect CP and CIN children. Schools reported that children were more able to

remain in mainstream classrooms, benefit from curriculum access, and sustain focus over time, supporting longer-term attainment outcomes.

Whole-system impact for children with a social worker

The PROCLAIM programme delivers a cumulative protective effect across attendance, behaviour and attainment. Improved regulation supports better attendance; better attendance increases learning time; and sustained engagement supports academic progress. This cycle was consistently reflected in school feedback.

Importantly, PROCLAIM also strengthened staff wellbeing and whole-school culture. Staff reported a renewed sense that *“we are making a difference through our approach”*, reinforcing commitment to relational practice and consistency for children with social care involvement.

Overall, evidence from schools and children shows that PROCLAIM plays a critical preventative role in reducing absence, avoiding exclusion and improving readiness to learn for children with a social worker.

What Children Told Us:

“I love school now, I enjoy all my lessons.”

“I like coming to your room and telling you about stuff at home – I know that you’ll help me.”

“The nurture group helps me because it has less children and I can concentrate more.”

“AP builds my confidence and makes me feel calm.”

“I like to walk to calm down and chess calms me.”

“I like it when I see Mrs S and we have a little chat.”

Case Study Spotlight: Preventing Educational Breakdown Through Coordinated Intervention

This case study illustrates the impact of assertive multi-agency coordination in stabilising education for children within a large family experiencing entrenched disadvantage and escalating risk of educational breakdown.

A large sibling group living in overcrowded and unsuitable housing was experiencing significant challenges linked to anxiety, unmet special educational needs and inconsistent school engagement. Several older siblings had developed very poor attendance, with one young person experiencing severe anxiety and having had little meaningful access to secondary education. Despite long-standing concerns, educational needs had not been adequately assessed, and barriers to accessing learning—including delays in EHCP progression and limited school engagement—had become entrenched.

Targeted intervention was coordinated through Virtual School VCAP, working closely with social care and partner agencies. The focus was on unblocking systemic barriers, ensuring children could access education while longer-term solutions were put in place, and providing clear challenge where progress had stalled. This included facilitating access to Home and Hospital provision, supporting the initiation of statutory assessment processes, and ensuring timely involvement from CAMHS, housing, health and inclusion services.

A key element of the intervention was strong professional challenge and coordination, ensuring that all agencies aligned around shared outcomes and acted with urgency. Where school-led processes had stalled, support was provided to progress alternative routes, including parent-supported referrals, to prevent further delay. At the same time, the family was supported to engage positively with services, resulting in improved cooperation and stability.

As a result of this coordinated approach, engagement and wellbeing across the family improved, with younger children accessing education more consistently and making progress. Attendance for one child improved to 100%, and the case was subsequently stepped down from Child Protection to Child in Need, reflecting reduced risk and improved stability.

This case highlights the importance of early identification of anxiety and SEN, robust multi-agency working, and the role of the Virtual School in providing system leadership where education pathways are at risk. It demonstrates that entrenched absence and disengagement can be reversed when barriers are addressed proactively, responsibilities are clearly owned, and children's needs remain central to decision-making.

Next Steps

The 2024–25 Annual Report highlights both areas of strong practice and persistent challenges across attainment, attendance, SEND and inclusion. The following next steps build directly on this evidence and set out clear priorities for further improvement.

1. Strengthen early intervention for children with SEND

SEND emerges consistently across EYFS, KS2 and KS4 as the single strongest predictor of poor outcomes, particularly for Children Looked After and children with a social worker.

Embed earlier SEND identification through strengthened PEP scrutiny, with clear triggers for escalation where attainment, attendance or behaviour deteriorates.	Strengthen partnership with Early Years, SEN teams, Educational Psychology and Speech and Language Therapy, particularly for CLA pupils entering care in EYFS and KS1.
Develop a SEND-focused Virtual School pathway, ensuring CLA pupils with SEN Support and EHCPs receive timely, specialist input before gaps become entrenched.	Increase challenge where EHCP processes are delayed due to attendance, ensuring education and care systems work together to unblock assessment.

2. Target attendance decline earlier, particularly at transition points

Attendance data for children with a social worker shows a sharp decline from Year 6 into Year 7, with sustained deterioration through KS3 and KS4.

Introduce transition-focused attendance planning for children with a social worker moving from Year 6 to Year 7, including summer-term transition meetings and early autumn monitoring.	Use VCAP data to identify emerging attendance risk before persistent absence thresholds are reached, particularly for CIN and CP cohorts.
Strengthen joint accountability between schools, social care and the Virtual School so attendance remain a shared safeguarding priority, not solely a school responsibility.	Expand recognition of positive attendance (above 95%) alongside targeted intervention for severe and persistent absence.

3. Reduce reliance on suspension through earlier, relational intervention

Suspension data indicates that a small number of children account for a disproportionate share of suspensions, often linked to unmet SEMH and SEND needs.

Shift intervention earlier into KS3, particularly for pupils with SEND, poor attendance or placement instability.	Strengthen English and mathematics pathways, focusing on increasing strong passes (Grades 9–5) as gateway qualifications.
Review curriculum access and EBacc entry, ensuring decisions are aspirational, transparent and aligned with pupil stability and need.	Improve exam readiness, including early access arrangements, attendance recovery and emotional regulation support.

5. Strengthen Post-16 pathways and reduce NEET risk

Post-16 remains the most complex and vulnerable phase, with increasing Amber and Red PEPs and a notable proportion of young people not in education, employment or training.

Strengthen earlier post-16 planning, beginning in Year 9 for pupils with SEND or attendance risk.	Improve alignment between KS4 pathways, SEN planning and post-16 destinations, ensuring continuity and sustainability.
Expand targeted mentoring, supported transitions and partnership working with colleges, training providers and employers.	Use PEP quality data to drive earlier intervention for Post-16 learners, rather than crisis response.

6. Consolidate and extend system leadership through PROCLAIM and VCAP

The report provides strong qualitative evidence of the impact of PROCLAIM and VCAP in improving attendance, behaviour and engagement.

Continue to expand PROCLAIM, ensuring consistency of relational practice across schools and stronger links to attendance and inclusion outcomes.	Use VCAP intelligence to inform strategic planning, identifying system pressure points and shaping early intervention.
Strengthen evaluation by linking qualitative impact (case studies, pupil voice) with measurable indicators over time.	Maintain a strong focus on children's voice, ensuring lived experience continues to shape service design and priorities.

7. Use PEPs more sharply as a driver for improvement

PEP completion is strong, but RAG analysis shows few children reaching sustained Green or Gold outcomes, particularly Post-16.

Shift PEPs further from compliance to impact-driven planning , with clearer outcome measures and review points.	Use RAG ratings to trigger earlier targeted intervention, particularly where Amber persists over time.
Strengthen professional challenge where PEP actions are not translating into improved attendance, stability or progress.	

Summary

This Annual Report provides a comprehensive overview of the educational experiences and outcomes of Children Looked After, Care Leavers and Children with a Social Worker in Middlesbrough during the 2024–25 academic year. It reflects a year of strong partnership working, clear system leadership and sustained commitment to improving stability, inclusion and life chances for some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

The report highlights areas of genuine strength. Outcomes at Key Stage 2 compare favourably with national and regional benchmarks, demonstrating the impact of stable placements, effective primary provision and targeted Virtual School support. Individual achievements across all phases, including strong GCSE outcomes for some young people, reinforce that high attainment is possible when stability, aspiration and consistent support are in place. The quality and reach of Personal Education Plans remain strong, with evidence of earlier intervention and improved responsiveness, particularly within statutory school age.

At the same time, the report is clear and honest about ongoing challenges. Attendance remains a significant concern, particularly for children with a social worker, with patterns of persistent and severe absence compounding risk as pupils move through secondary education. SEND continues to be the most significant driver of poor outcomes, particularly for Children Looked After with SEN Support and EHCPs, from Early Years through to Key Stage 4. At GCSE, while outcomes align with national Children Looked After benchmarks, attainment remains well below all-schools performance, and access to a broad academic curriculum remains limited for many young people.

Importantly, the report evidences the impact of relational, trauma-informed and preventative approaches in addressing these challenges. The PROCLAIM programme, the Vulnerable Children Attendance Project (VCAP), the Intervention Centre and the Summer Holiday Enrichment Programme all demonstrate how early, coordinated and child-centred intervention can improve attendance, reduce escalation, rebuild trust in education and support re-engagement. Case studies throughout the report bring this impact to life, showing that entrenched absence and disengagement can be reversed when systems work together with clarity, urgency and compassion.

The Next Steps set out in this report reflect a clear and evidence-informed direction of travel. They prioritise earlier intervention, particularly around SEND and attendance; stronger support at key transition points; improved curriculum access and exam readiness; and sustained focus on post-16 pathways. Central to these priorities is the continued role of the Virtual School as a system leader, advocate and challenger, ensuring that education remains a core safeguarding priority for all children with social care involvement.

As Corporate Parents, Middlesbrough remains committed to high aspirations, equity and relational practice. This report demonstrates that while challenges remain, there is strong evidence of impact, learning and momentum. By building on what is working well and acting decisively on what the data and lived experience tell us, the Virtual School will continue to play a critical role in improving educational stability, outcomes and life chances for children and young people in our care.