

Walsall Virtual School **Annual Report** **2023-2024**



Walsall Council



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to offer a comprehensive look at the work of the Virtual School in supporting children in care and care leavers and promoting the education of children with a social worker. The report outlines the demographic profile of the 691 children and young people in care, spanning from early years to post-16 education.

Educational outcomes are a central focus of the report, with data provided on statutory assessments at various stages, including early years, key stages 1, 2, and 4. Progress measures for key stages 2 and 4 are also included, offering insights into both achievements and areas needing improvement. This data is compared against national, regional, and local benchmarks to identify areas of focus.

Attendance and exclusion rates are another key aspect covered in the report. It details overall, authorised, unauthorised, persistent, and severe absence rates among children in care, comparing them with national, regional, and local averages. The number and rate of permanent and fixed-term exclusions are also documented, along with the actions taken by the Virtual School to prevent and reduce exclusions.

The report delves into the responsibilities of the Virtual School, including coordinating personal education plans, monitoring academic progress, attendance, and exclusions, and implementing targeted interventions to raise academic standards. It also outlines the Virtual School Team, the Virtual School Management Board, and the Corporate Parenting Pledges, providing a structure for their work.

Lastly, the report highlights various projects and activities initiated or commissioned by the Virtual School to support and enhance the educational outcomes and well-being of children in care and care leavers. These include initiatives such as the Attachment Aware Schools Project, the Artslink Project, the Aspire to University Project, the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Programme, and the Celebrating Achievement event. Case studies are provided to illustrate the impact of these efforts on the educational outcomes and well-being of individual children and young people in care and care leavers.

2. Executive Summary

The overall number of children in care on the role of the Virtual School (N-Y13) increased slightly over the last 12 months from 611 in 2023 to 691 at the end of July 2024.

The Pupil Premium funding continues to be available to all children in care aged 3-18 and is distributed to schools through an 'individual needs based' model requested through the child/young person's personal education plan. In addition to pupil premium funding, School Led Tutoring (SLT) and Recovery Premium grants were allocated to authorities in 2023/24.

With Personal Education Plans (PEPs) still taking place both online and face to face, the Virtual School Team attended 698 PEP meetings during the academic year. We have continued to see improvements in our PEPs, especially in early years and primary schools with the majority of PEPs being rated good or better.

The number of children in KS2 who achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined was better than national, regional, and equal to our statistical neighbours.

3. Purpose of the report

The purpose of the report is to provide an overview of the work of the Virtual School during the academic year 2023/24.

Contextual data in this report is for all Walsall's children in care as of 31st July 2024

Attainment data in this report is for children who have been in care for 12 months or more as of 31st March 2024

4. The Role of the Virtual School

The Virtual School is a multidisciplinary team that promotes the educational achievement of children in care, wherever they live or attend school. The Virtual School coordinates and quality assures personal education plans, monitors and challenges the use of pupil premium, tracks the academic progress, attendance and exclusions of children in care, and implements a range of targeted interventions to raise academic standards.

Our key responsibilities are:

- Coordinating and quality assuring all Personal Education Plans (PEPS).
- Monitoring and challenging schools to make effective use of Pupil Premium in line with the 'Pupil Premium Grant 2023/24 Conditions of Grant and Pupil Premium: Virtual Heads' Responsibilities
- Tracking the academic progress, attendance and exclusions of all children in care
- Using our tracking data to highlight individuals who are not on target to achieve their predicted outcomes and providing them with additional educational support.
- Ensuring children with special educational needs or disabilities are supported appropriately.
- Implementing a range of targeted interventions to raise academic standards.
- Providing support and challenge to students, schools, social workers and carers.
- Ensuring effective transition between schools or specialist providers.
- Encouraging our young people to have high aspirations about their futures and remove barriers to further education.
- Leading training for foster carers, designated teachers, school governors and staff, and delivering bespoke training for alternative learning providers.
- Recognising and celebrating Achievement

5. The Virtual School Team (as of 31st July 2024)

The Virtual School is a multidisciplinary team of dedicated professionals who provide support and guidance to our children and young people in a variety of ways. This year, to ensure we provided the right support to the right children, we redesigned the Virtual School. We developed two teams with the Virtual School, the School Improvement and Pupil Outcomes Team and Inclusion & Participation Team

Role	Responsibility
Virtual School and Vulnerable Groups Lead	<p>Has a strategic responsibility to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> all children and young people in the care of Walsall Local Authority have the opportunity to fulfil their educational potential, including Walsall Children in care who live in another authority. parents of children who have or who were previously looked after, receive information advice and guidance on any education matters. Promoting the education of children with a social worker
School Improvement & Pupil Outcomes Team	
Virtual School Deputy Head	Leads the School Improvement & Pupil Outcomes Team, focusing on raising attainment and improving educational experiences for children in care.
Early Years Development Officer	The Years Development Officer leads on improving outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage
Early Years Education Support Officer (ESO)	Our Early Years Education Support Officer works closely with early years settings and schools to ensure our children are making good educational progress and have the support they need to succeed. They also provide direct interventions with children, delivering individual learning programmes, enrichment activities, therapeutic interventions and Speech and Language assessments
Education Advisor	The Education Advisor tracks and monitors the attainment and progress of children and allocates appropriate resources where needed. They are also responsible for ensuring pupil premium is used effectively to improve educational outcomes
3x Education Support Officers - Learning (ESO)	Education Support Officers model and coach strategies to improve outcomes, attend PEP meetings, provide advice and guidance to parents/carers and social workers in relation to improving education. ESOs also collaborate with designated teachers to help facilitate and improve personal education plans
Post-16 Development Officer	Our Post-16 Development Officer leads on improving outcomes for young people in Post-16 education and training.
Education Employment & Training Officer	Provide targeted guidance on college courses, apprenticeships, traineeships, and employment pathways, working closely with young people, carers, and professionals to remove barriers to participation. The EET Officer also delivers bespoke interventions for those who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), helping them re-engage through employability skills and partnership work with local providers.
Post 16 Education Support Officer	Our post 16 ESO works with colleges and post 16 providers to ensure our young people are in appropriate education, employment or training placements to reduce the number of young people who become NEET

Inclusion & Participation Team

Education Advisor for Inclusion	Ensures that children in care have a suitable school place, are attending regularly, and are not at risk of suspension or exclusion. They work closely with schools, social workers, and other professionals to secure appropriate placements, monitor attendance, and intervene when issues arise. The Advisor also manages the SEN Casework Officer, ensuring children with special educational needs receive the right support and that Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) processes are managed efficiently
Education Liaison Officer	Our Education Liaison Officer line manages the Education Support Officer for Inclusion. They also provide specialist advice to schools where children and young people are at risk of poor school attendance, suspensions and exclusion
2x Education Support Officer (Inclusion)	ESO in the Inclusion Team work with schools to help improve attendance and reduce exclusions
SEN Casework Officer	Our SEN Casework Officer works part time in the SEN assessment team to enable us to have a better oversight of those children and young people undergoing a SEN assessment and avoid any drift and delay in the EHCP process
PEP/Attendance Coordinator	The PEP/ Attendance Coordinator manages our ePEP process and tracks and monitors the attendance of our children and young people

Specialist Support Team

Speech & Language Therapist	Our Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs) support schools and carers, provide training and work directly with children and young people to maximise their communication skills.
Educational Psychologist	Educational Psychology Services are commissioned to support children who are experiencing social and emotional difficulties within the school or care placements
CAMHS Practitioner	The primary role of the CAMHS practitioner is to support education placement stability by delivering direct support to designated teachers, teachers and support staff to increase and improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health provision for children

6. The Virtual School Management Board

The Virtual School reports termly to the Virtual School Management Board. The board is chaired by a Walsall primary school head and consists of the following people.

- HT Primary School (Chair)
- Group Manager Youth Justice Service (Vice Chair)
- Early Years Adviser
- Principle Educational Psychologist
- Head Teachers x 2
- School Attendance Manager
- School Improvement Manager
- Head of Service- Corporate Parenting
- Foster Carer
- Post 16 Officer- Walsall College
- Head of Service-Safeguarding

The Virtual School sits structurally under the Access & Inclusion Service but is geographically situated within Children's Social Care to support and work closely with our Corporate Parenting social worker teams. The Virtual School Lead reports directly to the Director of Access & Inclusion and is part of the Access & Inclusion Senior Management Team.



7. The profile and characteristics of the Virtual School cohort:

As of 31st July 2024, there were 650 children and young people on the role of the Virtual School, ranging from early years to post-16. The cohort was made up of 53% male and 47% female, 57% educated in Walsall and 43% educated outside of Walsall. 51% of the cohort had an identified special educational need, and 32% have an education, health and care plan.

Year Group	Phase Summary	No. of LAC	Male	Female	Walsall School	OOB School	SEN Support	EHCP
-3	98	14	7	7	5	4	1	0
-2		32	13	19	17	15	5	0
-1		26	15	11	15	11	2	1
R		26	11	15	16	10	11	5
1	186	40	22	18	27	13	12	11
2		33	17	16	23	10	12	6
3		28	13	15	20	8	5	8
4		28	13	15	16	12	6	9
5		34	16	18	17	17	6	9
6		23	13	10	17	6	2	10
7	227	40	26	14	19	21	9	18
8		45	24	21	21	24	7	22
9		41	26	15	13	18	9	22
10		47	20	27	17	30	11	22
11		54	29	25	26	28	7	16
12 & 13	139	139	80	59	47	63	19	51
Total	650	650	345	305	316	279	124	210

8. What type of schools are our children and young people attending?

Statutory guidance 'Promoting the Educational Achievement of looked after children' states that children in care should be educated in good or outstanding schools and unless there exceptional, evidence-based reasons, children in care should not be placed in a schools judged to be Inadequate.

We always aim to place a child in a good or outstanding school if it's in their best interest to do so. We will never place a child in an inadequate school unless there is no alternative options and we carefully monitor the education of those placed in requires improvement schools.

We recognise the importance of placement stability so would not move a child from a school rated less than good if the young person was safe, happy and making progress. If a school receives an inadequate rating, a meeting is held with the child's parent/carer and social worker to discuss what actions should be taken. We also discuss any move of school with the young person if appropriate to do so. In the last 12 months we have not moved any young person due to the school being given an inadequate Ofsted rating.

As of 31st July 2024:

- 99% of children in early year's settings attend a good or better provision.
- 91% of children attend a primary school rated good or better.
- 83% of children attend a secondary school rated good or better
- Overall 91% of children in care attend a good or outstanding provision

There is a small number of children who are placed in schools/settings which do not have an Ofsted grade due to being an academy converter or new school. These have been excluded from the figures which are based on schools with an official Ofsted grade

9. Special Educational Needs

Children in care continue to face significant educational challenges, with the latest data showing that they are over three times more likely to have a special educational need (58.1% compared to 17.1% of all pupils) and more than seven times more likely to have an Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plan (30.8% compared to 4.3% of all pupils). These figures highlight the critical need for targeted support, ensuring that children in care receive the right interventions to help them overcome barriers to learning and achieve their full potential.

In 2023/24, 210 (32%) children and young people had an EHCP, undergoing an SEN and 124 (19%) have an identified SEN without an EHCP. This equates to 51% of our cohort having an identified SEN

The table below is based on March 24 published data and compares Walsall EHCP figures to that of national and regional averages.

Area	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Walsall CiC	24%	24%	24%	25%	32%
West Mids CiC	24%	24%	25%	25%	26%
Stat Neighbours	24%	25%	25%	26%	27%
England CiC	27%	27%	29%	30%	31%

Due to the work of the Virtual School SEN team in identifying children and young people who need an EHCP we have seen a significant increase in the number of children in care with an EHCP. In 2024 the Virtual school in collaboration with the children social worker made 16 parental requests for an EHC needs assessment. All 16 resulted in an EHCP being issued

Children in care are 3 times more likely to have social emotional and mental health (SEMH) as their primary needs than their peers. This is reflective in Walsall where 169 (43%) of our Children and young people with an identified SEN have SEMH as their primary need

Due to the high number of requests for an EHC assessment and the specialist intervention required to ensure we were meeting the needs of all our children and young people with special educational needs, an Education Support Officer for SEN post was created to work alongside the SEN Casework Officer. This will enable us to ensure all children with an identified SEN are receiving the support they needs and are going through the graduated approach within a timely manner.

10. Attainment and Progress

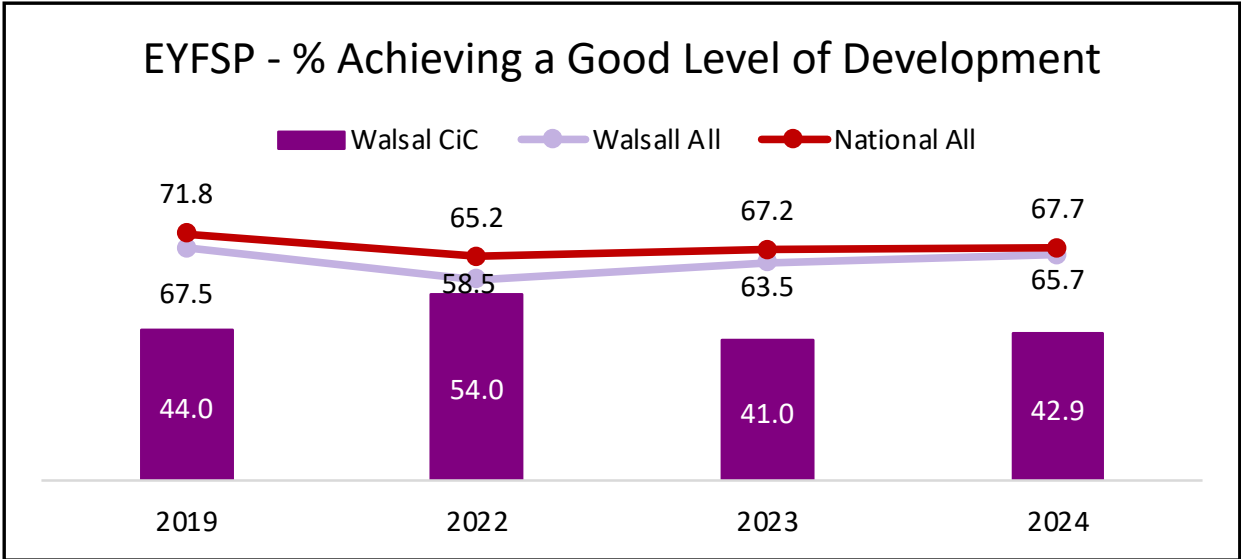
The attainment and progress of children in care at different key stages: The report shows the results of assessments for children in care at the end of early years, key stage 1, key stage 2, and key stage 4, as well as the progress measures for key stage 2 and 4. The report compares the performance of children in care with national, regional, and local averages, as well as with statistical neighbours. The report highlights the gaps and trends in attainment and progress, and the areas of strength and challenge for the Virtual School.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Early years practitioners were instructed to complete the statutory EYFS assessment in the summer term of the 2023-2024 academic year, when a child reaches the age of five.

Children are defined as having reached a good level of development if they have achieved at least the expected level for the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning personal, social and emotional development, physical development, and communication and language as well as in the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.

There were no assessments in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore these years are absent from the chart below.



In 2024 there were 21 children in reception. Of this 21, 42.9% (9) of children in our care achieved a good level of development at the end of reception, 1.9% higher than in 2023.

Compared to 2023, the gap to Walsall All has widened slightly in 2024 from 22.5% in 2023 to 22.8% in 2024. However, the gap to National has narrowed slightly from 26.2% in 2023 to 24.8% in 2024.

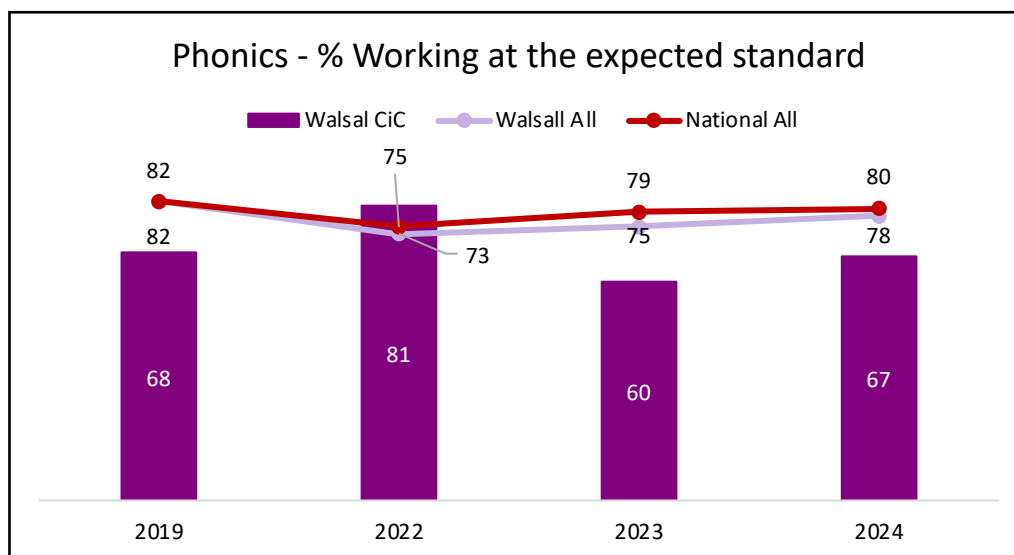
In this cohort, 3 children had an EHCP which equates to 14% of the cohort having an identified SEN. 100% of the cohort had at least one placement move, 48% (10) had two placement moves, 19% (4) had 3 placement moves, 5% (1) had 4 placement moves and 14% (3) had more than 4 placement moves. 86% (18) of the cohort were in an ofsted rating good or outstanding provision and 5% (1) were in a provision rated requires improvement and 10% (2) were in a provision without a current Ofsted grading

Working At the Expected Standard of Phonic Decoding (WA)

Pupils take the Phonics Screening Check at the end of year one, when most children have reached six years of age. The check is designed to confirm whether pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard.

The test comprises 20 real words, and 20 pseudo-words that each pupil must read aloud to the check administrator. Each pupil is, therefore, given an overall mark for the phonics screening check out of 40.

Each year, after the checks have been administered, the DfE announce the phonics screening threshold mark (32). If a pupil has scored at or above the threshold mark, they are said to be 'working at the expected standard of phonic decoding' (WA).



There are 33 children in the Year 1 cohort. The percentage of year one pupils working at the expected standard of phonic decoding has increased from 60% in 2023 to 67% in 2024 (+7%). 2024 results are now closer with pre pandemic results in 2019.

The gap to National all has narrowed in 2024 from 19% below in 2023 to 13% below in 2024. Similarly, the gap to Walsall all has narrowed from 15% below in 2023 to 11% below in 2024.

In this cohort, 30% (10) had an EHCP and 18% (6) were on SEN Support. This equated to 49% (16) of the cohort having an identified SEN. 100% of the cohort had at least one placement move since being in care, 30% (10) had two placement moves, 21% (7) had 3 placement moves, 5% (1) had 4 placement moves and 9% (3) had more than 4 placement moves. 91% (30) of the cohort were in an ofsted rating good or outstanding provision and 9% (3) were in a provision rated requires improvement.

Key Stage 1 (KS1)

KS1 assessments have become non-statutory since the 2023/24 academic year onwards. The cohort that entered year 2 in Autumn 2023 have taken the new statutory Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA).

Pupils participate in KS1 Teacher Assessments at the end of year 2 (when most pupils reach the age of 7) in reading, writing, maths, and science.

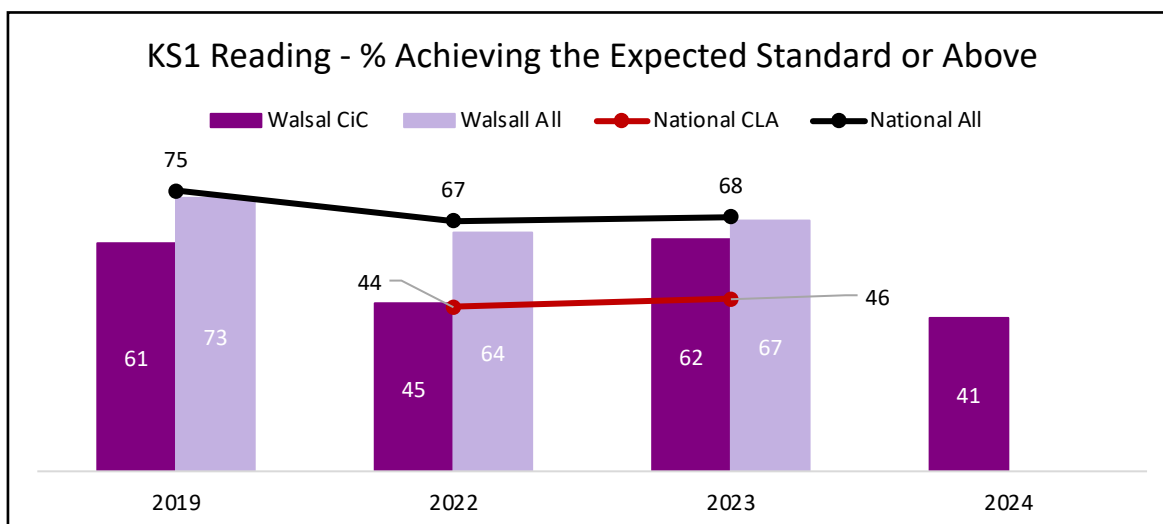
There were no assessments in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and there is no local or national comparator data for 2023/24 now this is non-statutory, therefore these years are absent from the charts below.

Reading

41% of children in our care achieved the expected standard in Key Stage 1 reading in 2024, 21% lower than in 2023. No Walsall or national comparator data for 2024 is available.

The gap to national children looked after has widened from 1% above in 2022 to 16% above in 2023.

The gap to national all has narrowed from 22% below in 2022 to 6% below in 2023. The gap to Walsall All has also narrowed from 19% below to 5% below.

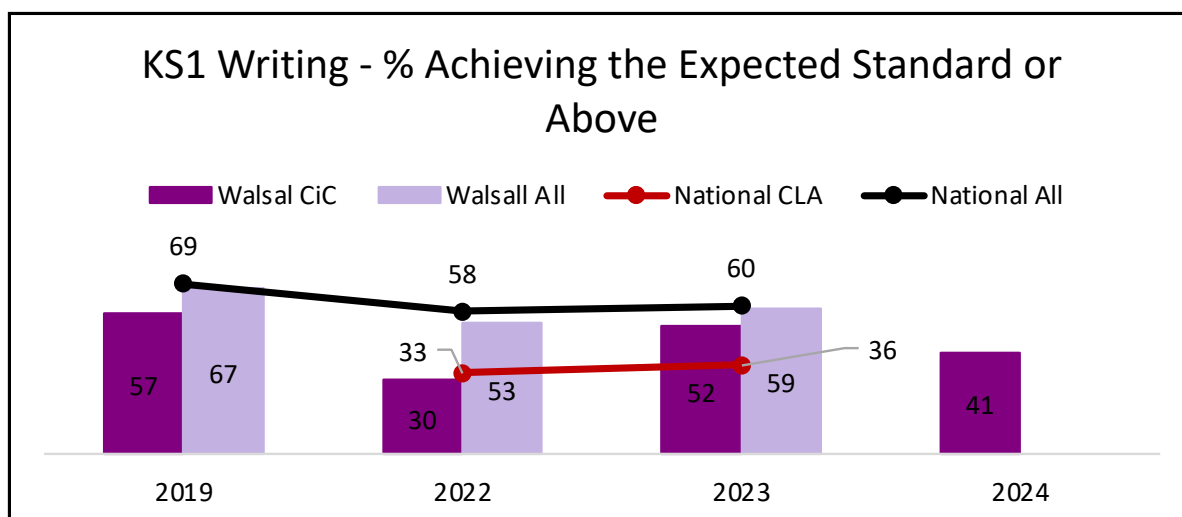


Writing

41% of children in our care achieved the expected standard in Key Stage 1 writing in 2024, 11% lower than in 2023. No Walsall or national comparator data for 2024 is available.

The gap to national children looked after has widened from 3% below in 2022 to 16% above in 2023.

The gap to national all has narrowed from 28% below in 2022 to 8% below in 2023 and the gap to Walsall All has also narrowed from 23% to 7% below.



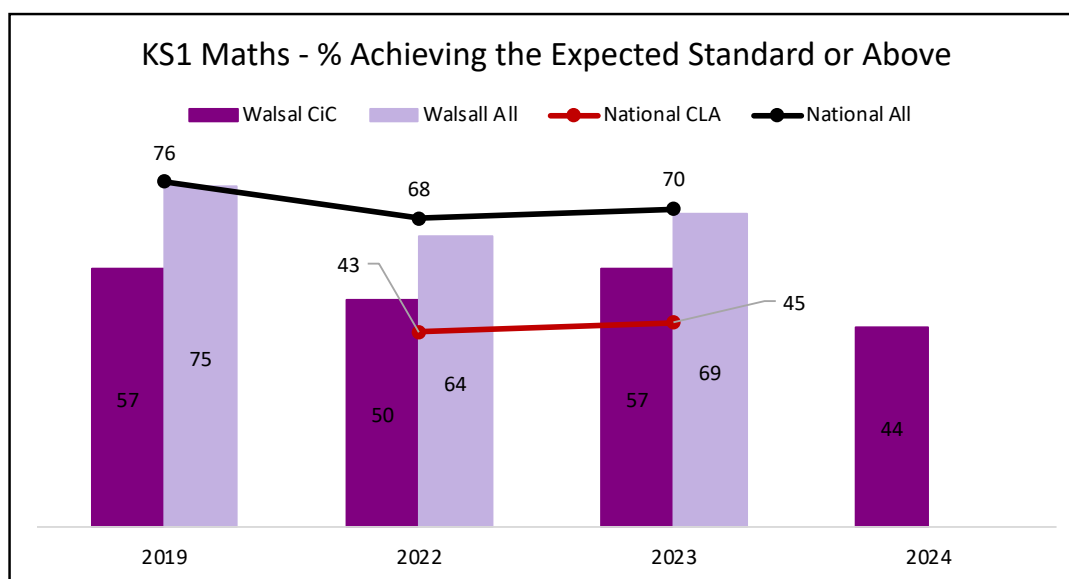
Maths

44% of children in our care achieved the expected standard or above in Key Stage 1 maths in 2024, 13% lower than in 2023. No Walsall or national comparator data for 2024 is available.

The gap to national children looked after has widened from 7% above in 2022 to 12% above in 2023.

The gap to national all has narrowed from 18% below in 2022 to 13% below in 2023 and the gap to Walsall All has also narrowed from 14% to 12% below.

There were 27 children in the KS1 cohort, of which, 22% (6) had an EHCP, and 30% (8) were on SEN Support, this equates to 52% (14) of the cohort having an identified SEN. 100% of the cohort had 1 placement move since entering care, 37% (10) had 2 placement moves, 22% (6) had 3 placement moves and 19% (5) had more than 3 placement moves. 93% (25) attended and Ofsted rating good or outstanding school, 4% (1) attended a RI school and 4% (1) was home schooled in Scotland.

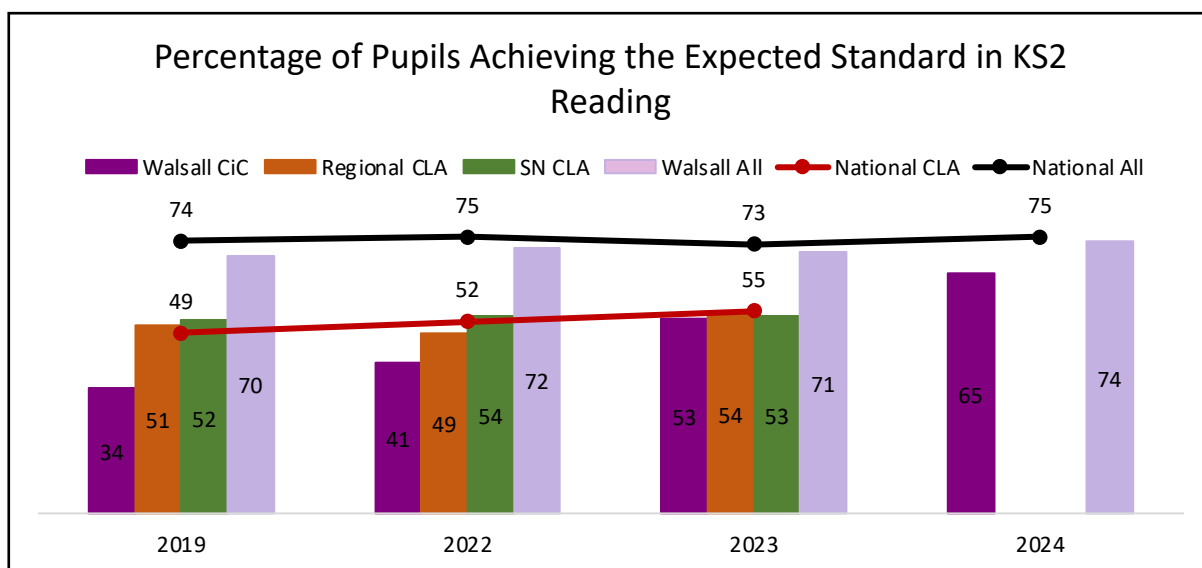


Key Stage 2 (KS2)

Pupils take KS2 national curriculum assessments in year 6, when most children reach the age 11 by the end of the school year. Pupils take tests (commonly referred to as SATs) in reading, maths and grammar, punctuation, and spelling (GPS) and receive a teacher assessment (TA) in reading, writing, maths, and science.

There were no assessments in 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore these years are absent from the charts below.

Reading

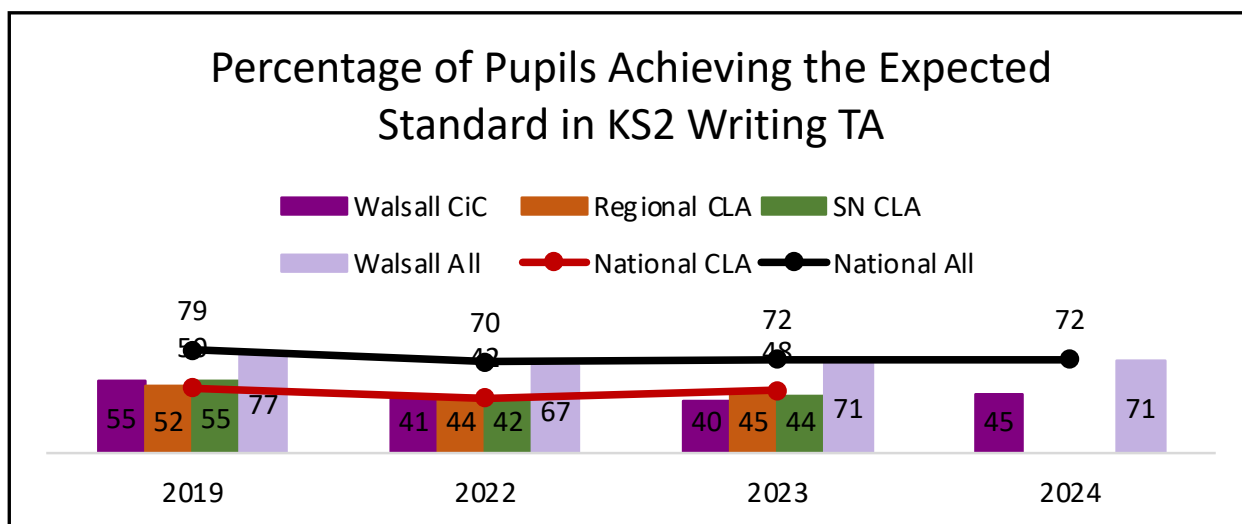


The percentage of children achieving the expected standard in reading continues to improve for children in our care in Walsall from 53% in 2023 to 65% in 2024.

The gap to national CLA, regional CLA and statistical neighbours has closed with Walsall children in our care exceeding the statistical neighbour average by 9%, 10% above regional CLA and 12% above national CLA.

Similarly, the gap to Walsall All has closed from 18% below in 2023 to 9% below in 2024. The gap to national all has also narrowed from 20% below in 2023 to 10% below in 2024.

Writing Teacher Assessment



The percentage of children achieving the expected standard in writing has increased for children in our care in Walsall from 40% in 2023 to 45% in 2024.

The gap to national CLA and statistical neighbours has narrowed in 2024 to 3% below statistical neighbours and 1% below national CLA, with no change in the gap to regional CLA which remains at 6%.

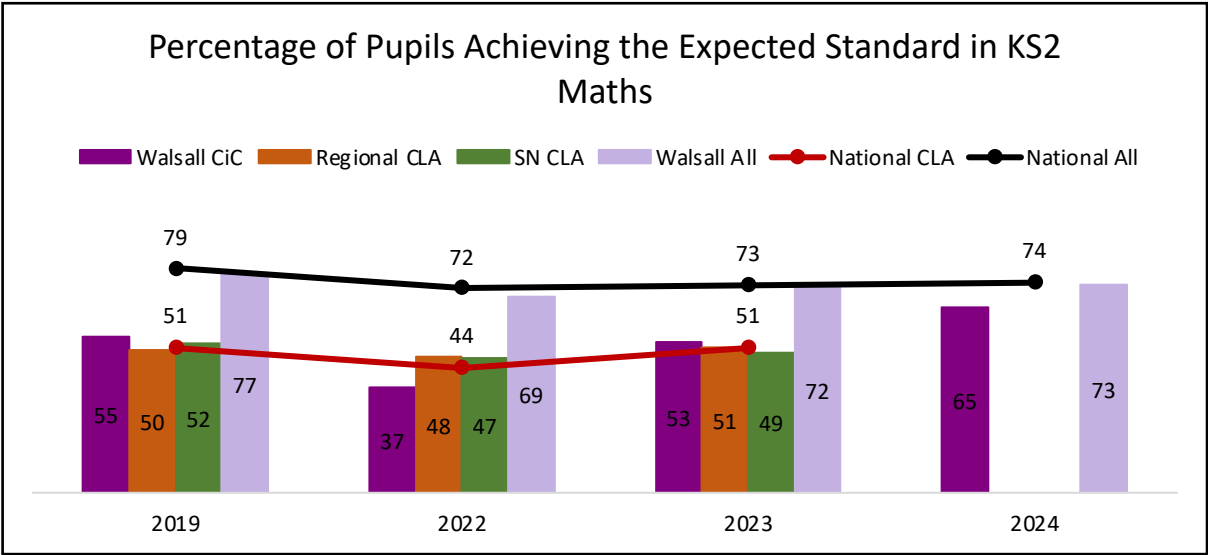
Similarly, the gap to Walsall all has narrowed from 31% below in 2023 to 26% below in 2024 and the gap to national all has also narrowed from 32% below to 27% below.

Maths

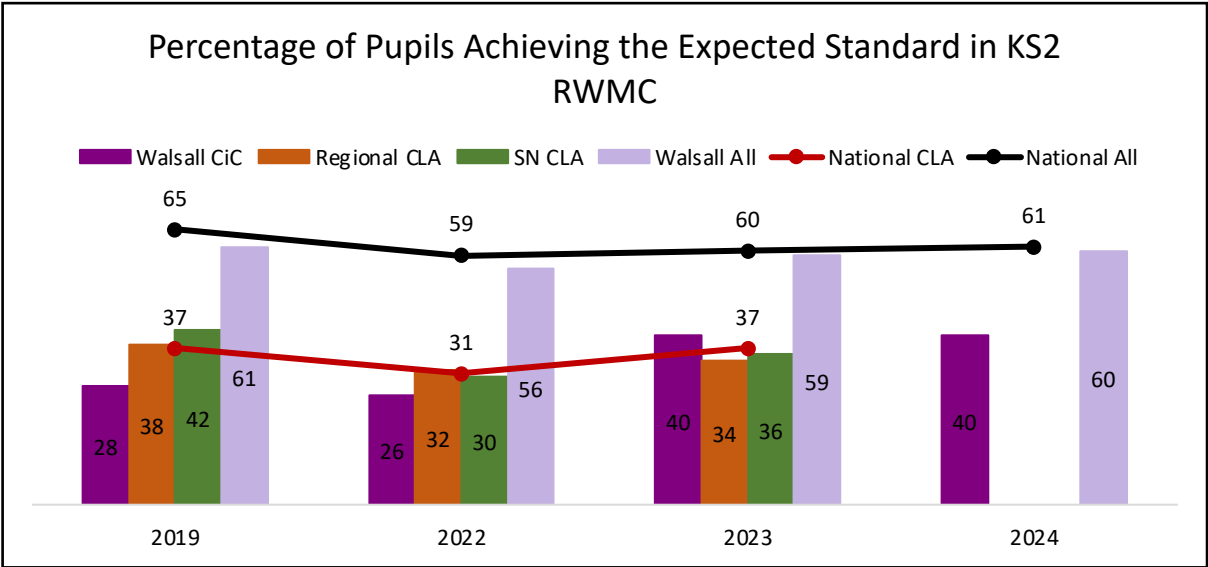
The percentage of children achieving the expected standard in maths has increased by 12% for children in our care in Walsall from 53% in 2023 to 65% in 2024.

Walsall children in our care performed better than national, regional and were above the statistical neighbour average, same as in 2023.

Coincidentally, the gap to Walsall all has narrowed from 19% below in 2023 to 8% below in 2024. Similarly, the gap to national all has also narrowed by 11% from 20% below to 9% below.



Reading, Writing and Maths Combined (RWMC) – Headline Measure



The percentage of children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined was 40% for children in our care in Walsall in 2024, same as in 2023.

Walsall CLA performed better than national and regional CLA, with Walsall CLA matching the statistical neighbour average (40%), although the gap to Walsall all widened slightly from 19% below in 2023 to 20% below in 2024. Similarly, the gap to national all has also widened by 1% from 20% below to 21% below.

There were 20 children in the KS2 cohort, of which, 50% (10) had an EHCP and 2 (10%) were on SEN support, this equates to 60% (12) of the cohort having an identified SEN. 100% of the cohort had at least 1 placement move during Primary school, 50% (10) had 2 placement moves, 20% (4) had 3 placement moves and 15% (3) had more than 3 moves. 90% (18) of the cohort attended a school rated good or outstanding and 105 (2) attended a school rated requires improvement.

Key Stage 2 Progress

The progress measures aim to capture the progress that pupils make from the end of KS1 to the end of primary school. They are a type of value-added measure, which means that pupils' results are compared to the actual achievements of other pupils nationally with similar prior attainment.

Please note, changes to 2024 and 2025 year's reporting are as follows – [KS2 progress will not be produced or published for 2024 or 2025 due to primary tests and assessments being cancelled in 2020 and 2021 in response to the pandemic](#). There will be no relevant KS1 data to calculate KS2 progress, therefore, the DfE will not be publishing progress measures for these result years.

Key Stage 4 (KS4)

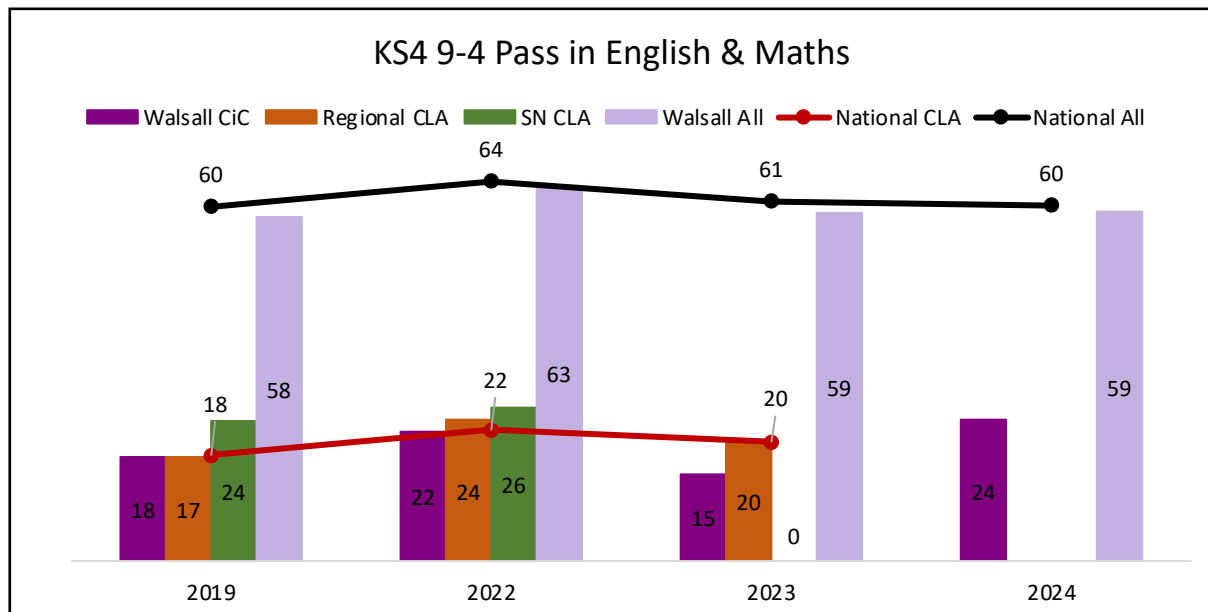
Please note, comparisons are made to 2019 and 2022 results, the more meaningful being with 2019, the last year that summer exams were taken before the pandemic.

2022 outcomes broadly reflected a mid-point between 2019 and 2021, to take account of the impact of the pandemic and in line with Ofqual's approach to grading in 2022. It was expected that performance in 2023 would generally be lower than in 2022. For this reason, please take caution when comparing as the difference may not have been impacted by pupil performance alone.

9-5 Pass in English and Maths

Published data for the 9-5 measure has been suppressed and replaced with a letter 'c' (Confidential) in this year's statistical first release. This is where data has been deemed to be sensitive and potentially identifiable. Therefore, charts for this measure have not been included in the report.

9-4 Pass in English and Maths



Over the past six years, the percentage of children in our care in Walsall achieving a grade 4 or above in English and maths has increased by 6% from 18% in 2019 to 24% in 2024.

Compared to 2022, the gap to Walsall All has closed from 44% below in 2023, to 35% below in 2024. The gap to national overall has also closed from 46% to 36% below.

The statistical neighbour average has not been included for 2023 due to suppressed values in the statistical first release.

There were 38 children in the KS4 cohort, of which, 29% (11) had an EHCP and 11% (4) were on SEN Support. This equates to 39% (15) of the cohort having an identified SEN. 6 (100% of the cohort) had a placement move while in secondary school, 32% (12) had 2 placement moves, 16% (6) had 3 placement moves and 215 (8) had more than 3 placement moves. 74% (28) attended a school rated good or outstanding, 18% (7) attended a school rated requires improvement, 3% (1) attended a school rated inadequate and 5% (2) attended a school without a rating.

Attainment 8

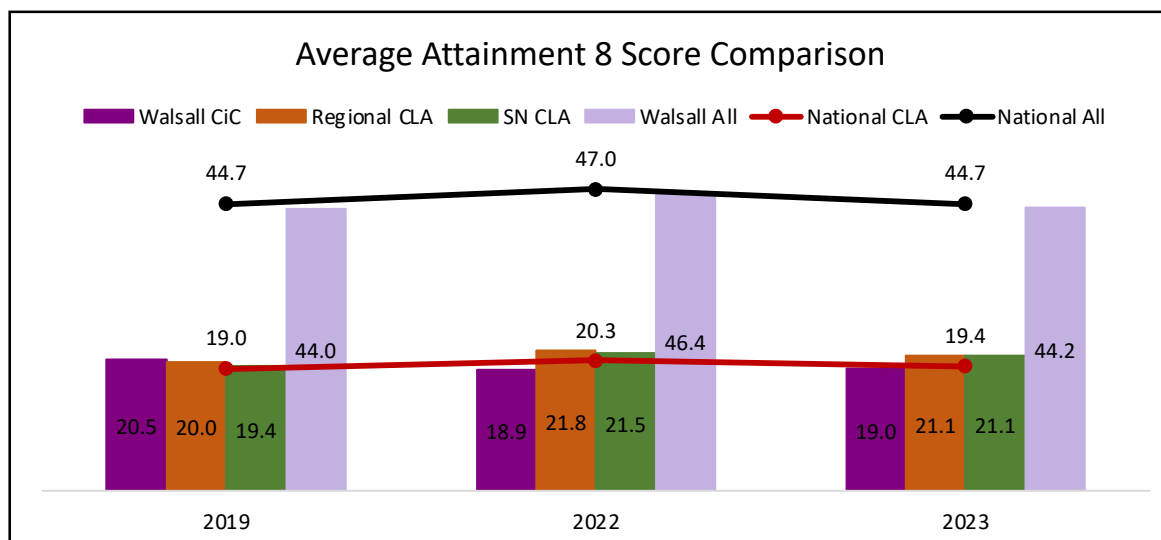
Attainment 8 measures the results of pupils at state-funded mainstream schools in eight GCSE subjects to see how well pupils do in KS4. The eight subjects which make up Attainment 8 include;

- English (double weighted if both English language and literature are sat) and maths. (Double weighted)
- Three subjects that count towards the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), for example sciences, languages, and history.
- The remaining three subjects can be either GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or technical awards from a list approved by the Department for Education.

Each grade a pupil gets is assigned a point score from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest). Each pupil's Attainment 8 score is calculated by adding up the points for their 8 subjects.

A school's Attainment 8 score is the average of all the scores of eligible pupils and rounded to 1 decimal place.



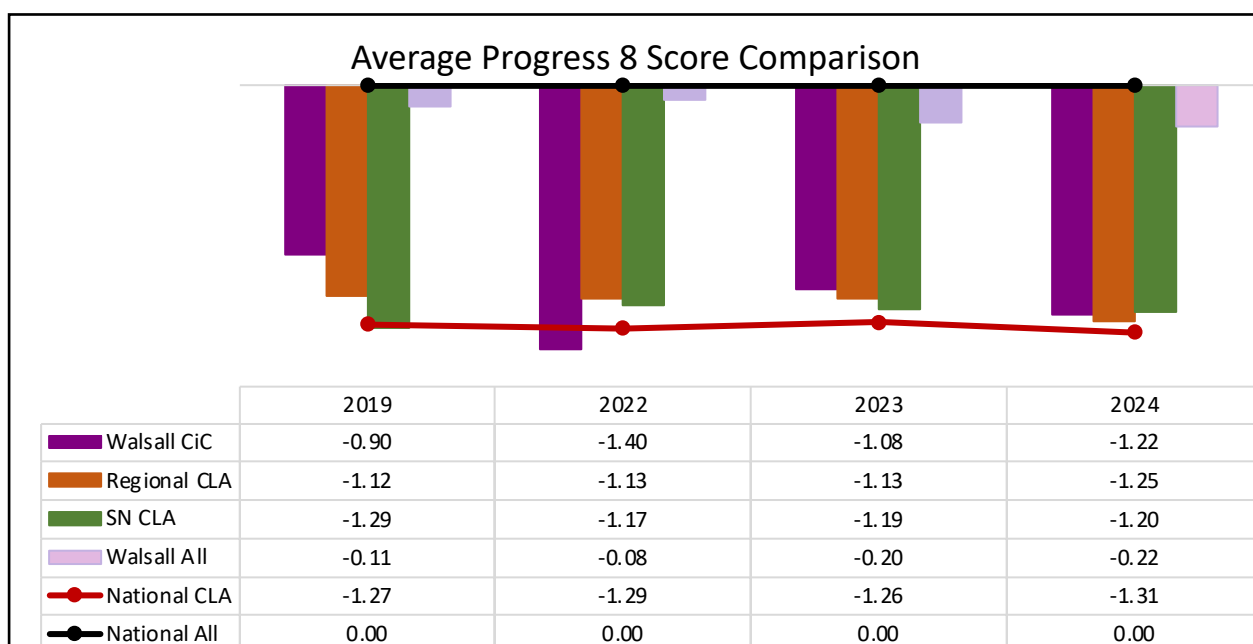


*-2024 statistical neighbours calculated using individual LA figures to provide an indication, this may change slightly when published.

- Over the past six years, the average Attainment 8 score for children in our care has increased from 20.5 in 2019 to 22.1 in 2024, with lows of 18.9 in 2022 and 19 in 2023.
- Children in our care are now above national CLA, regional CLA and the statistical neighbour average in 2024. The gap to national CLA has narrowed from 0.4 below in 2023 to 3.8 above in 2024.
- The gap to regional CLA has narrowed from 2.1 below in 2023 to 2.3 above in 2024. Similarly, the gap to the statistical neighbour average has narrowed from 2.1 below in 2023 to 1.8 above in 2024.
- The gap to Walsall all has narrowed in 2024 by 4.3 points from 25.2 below in 2023 to 20.9 below in 2024.
- The gap to national all has also narrowed by 3.6 points from 25.7 below in 2023 to 22.1 below in 2024.

Progress 8

A score of zero means pupils on average did as well at KS4 as other pupils across England who got similar results at the end of KS2. A score above zero means pupils made more progress and a score below zero means pupils made less progress, on average, than pupils across England who got similar results at the end of KS2.

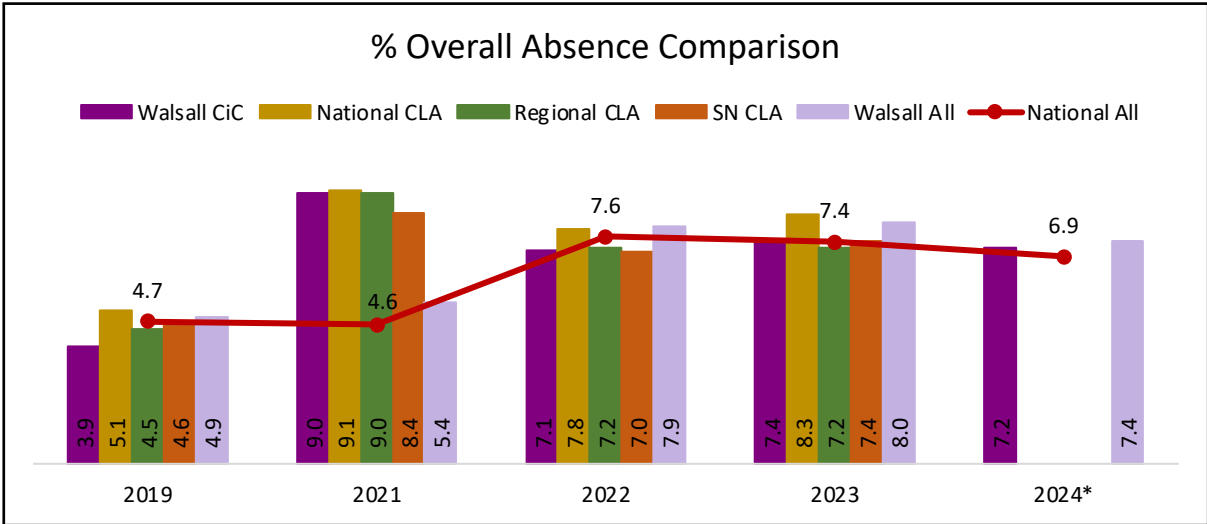


11. Attendance & Exclusions

Absence Rates

Due to the disruption during the 2021 and 2022 academic years, caution should be taken when comparing data to previous years.

Overall Absence

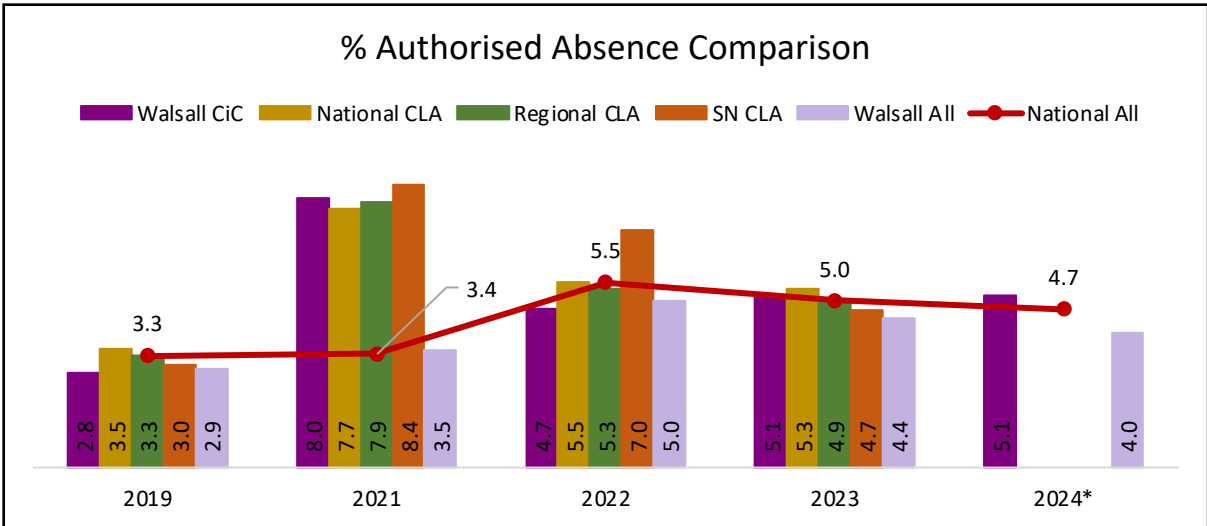


In 2024, the overall absence rate for children in our care has decreased by 0.7% from 7.4% in 2023 to 6.7% in 2024.

Children in our care’s rate was below national CLA by 2.1%, below the statistical neighbour average by 1.5% and was below regional CLA by 0.9%.

In 2024, children in our care’s overall rate continues to be below Walsall all by 1.1% and below national all by 0.4%.

Authorised Absence



In 2024, children in our care’s authorised absence rate decreased by 0.8% from 5.1% in 2023 to 4.3% in 2024.

Children in our care’s rate was below national CLA by 1.1%, below regional CLA by 0.6%, and below the statistical neighbour average by 1.1%.

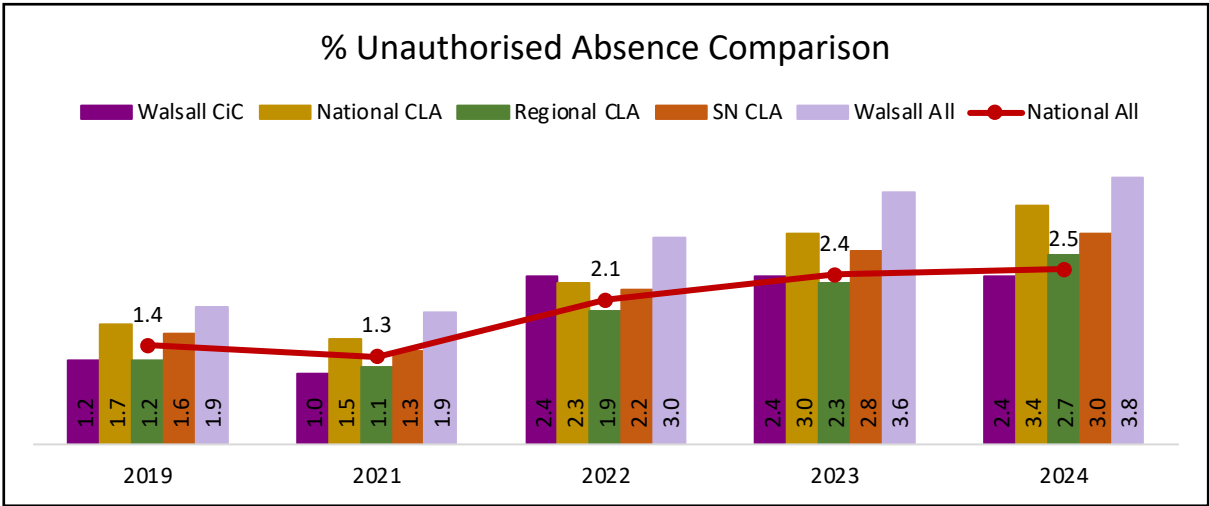
In 2024, children in our care’s authorised rate was above Walsall all by 0.3% and below national all by 0.4%.

Unauthorised Absence

In 2024, children in our care’s unauthorised absence rate remained stable at 2.4%.

Children in our care’s rate was below national CLA by 1.0%, below the statistical neighbour average by 0.6%, and below regional CLA by 0.3%.

In 2024, children in our care’s unauthorised rate continues to be below Walsall all by 1.4% and below national all by 0.1%.



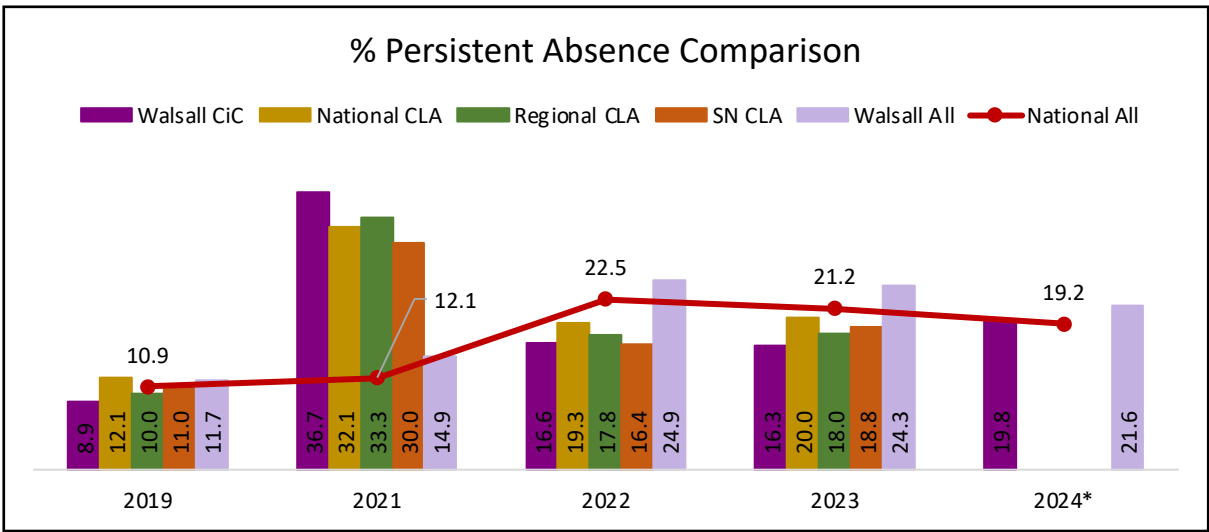
Persistent Absence

A pupil is classified as a persistent absentee if they miss 10% or more of their own possible sessions. Therefore, if an enrolment’s overall absence rate is 10% or higher they will be classified as persistently absent.

Persistent absence rates decreased in 2024 for children in our care by 1.9% from 16.3% in 2023 to 14.4% in 2024.

Children in our care’s persistent absence rate was below national CLA by 6.4%, regional CLA by 3.9%, and the statistical neighbour average by 5.2%.

In 2024, children in our care’s rate continues to be below Walsall all by 8.6% and national all by 5.6%.



Persistent absence rates increased in 2024 for children in our care by 3.5% from 16.3% in 2023 to 19.8% in 2024.

In 2024, children in our care’s rate continues to be below Walsall all by 1.8% and just 0.6% above national all.

Severe Absence

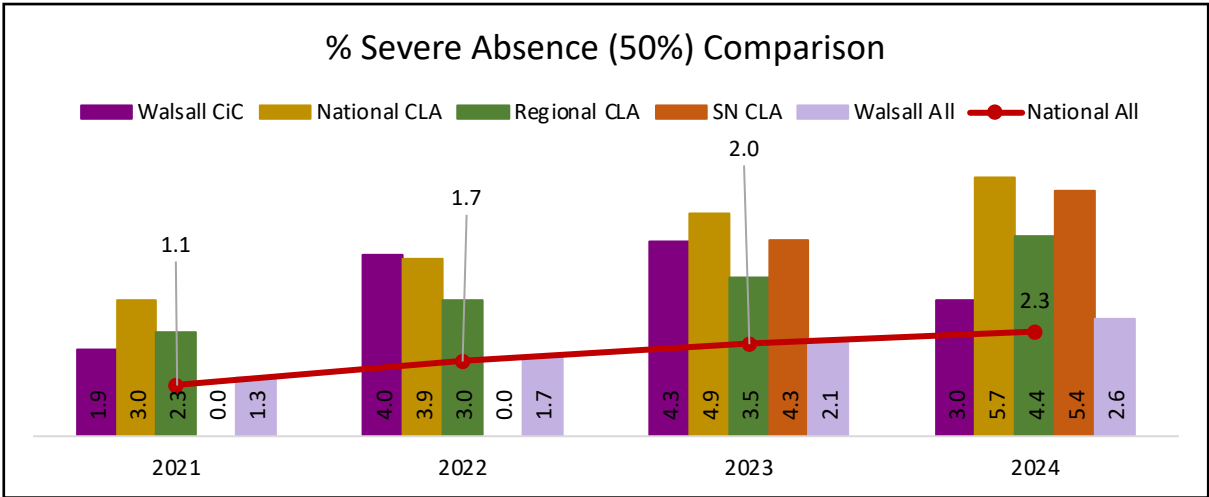
A pupil is classified as a severely persistent absentee if they miss 50% or more of their own possible sessions.

*-2024 statistical neighbours calculated using individual LA figures to provide an indication, this may change slightly when published.

In 2024, severe absence rates have decreased for children in our care by 1.3% from 4.3% in 2023 to 3.0%.

Children in our care’s severe absence rate was below national CLA by 2.7%, below the statistical neighbour average by 2.4% and below regional CLA by 1.4%.

In 2024, children in our care’s rate continues to be above Walsall all by 0.4% and above national all by 0.7%.



Exclusion Rates

Permanent Exclusions

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	21-22 Difference
Walsall CiC	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	c	-
National CLA	0.11	0.05	0.03	0.06	0.10	0.04
Regional CLA	0.13	0.13	c	c	c	-
SN CLA	c	c	c	c	c	-
Walsall All	0.14	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.04	-0.05
National All	0.10	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.05	-0.03

'c' - Confidential. This is where data has been deemed to be sensitive and potentially identifiable.

*- Walsall All and National All figures for 2023 include the autumn term 2023-24 only, full year expected July 2025.

There have been no permanent exclusions for children in our care since 2005.

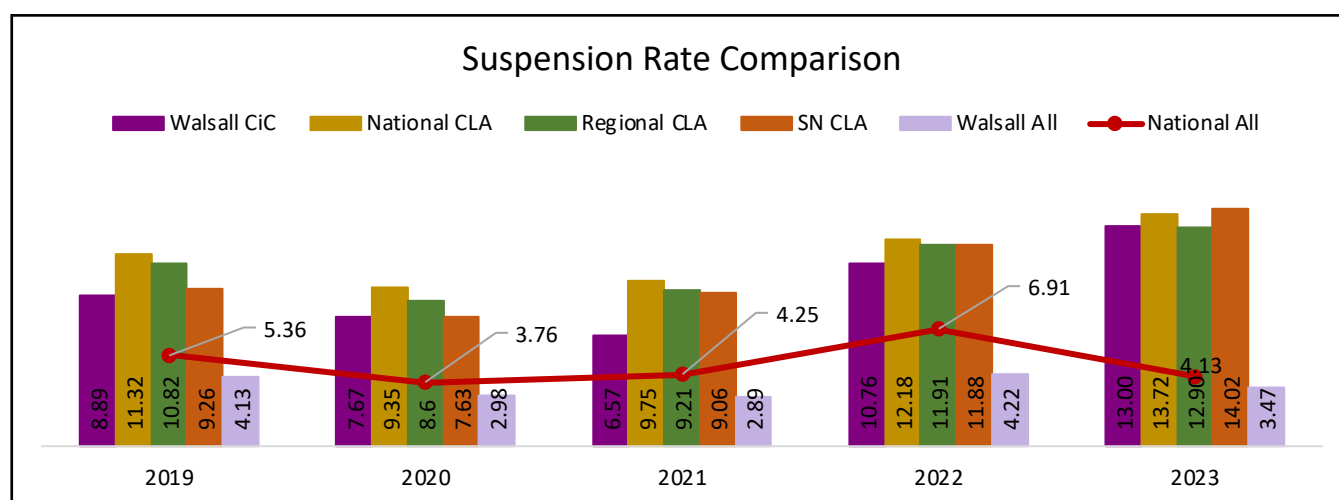
Suspensions

*-2024 statistical neighbours calculated using individual LA figures to provide an indication, this may change slightly when published.

Compared to 2022, the suspension rate for Walsall children in our care has increased by 2.24% from 10.76% to 13% in 2023.

Walsall children in our care was above regional CLA but remain below the national CLA and the statistical neighbour average, but the gap has narrowed. Compared to 2022, the gap to national has reduced from 1.42% below to 0.72% below, the gap to regional has reversed from 1.15% below to 0.10% above, and the gap to statistical neighbours has narrowed from 1.14% to 1.02% below.

Compared to Walsall all, the gap has widened from 6.54% in 2022 to 9.53% in 2023. The gap to national all has also widened from 3.85% to 8.87%.



In 2023/24, 'Looked After Call' collected real-time attendance and exclusion data for Walsall children in care, ensuring that any concerns are swiftly identified and addressed. The system alerts Virtual School staff when a child has an unauthorised absence, is suspended from school, or has five consecutive days of authorised absence. This allows our Education Support Officers to take immediate action, challenging absences, recalling Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, and identifying appropriate interventions to improve attendance and reduce exclusions.

To address persistent unauthorised absence, we introduced weekly monitoring meetings to review any young person with an unauthorised absence. These cases are followed up with schools and carers, with tailored actions implemented to support children, particularly those experiencing anxiety-related school avoidance. In some instances, school miscoding of absences has been identified and challenged by our Attendance Officer to ensure accuracy in reporting.

Recognising the need for additional targeted support, we used Recovery Premium funding to appoint an Attendance Mentor. This role focuses on working with children who have severe attendance issues or are at risk of developing them, providing direct intervention to help them engage with education and overcome barriers to attendance.

Preventing suspensions remains a priority, and Virtual School staff work closely with schools to explore alternative strategies wherever possible. However, one-off exclusions—especially for children placed outside the borough—can be difficult to prevent. While we receive immediate notification of an exclusion, it is typically after the decision has been made by the school. Children and young people who experience multiple exclusions receive ongoing, often intensive support from Virtual School staff to help stabilise their education and prevent further exclusions.



12. Key Stage 5

Walsall Virtual School is responsible for children in care up to the end of Year 13, with a strong focus on ensuring that all young people have a suitable post-16 destination and remain in education, employment, or training (EET).

To strengthen this, we used Post-16 Pupil Premium funding to appoint an Education, Employment, and Training (EET) Officer, who is a Level 5-qualified careers adviser to join our Post 16 Development Officer and Post 16 Education Support Officer. This specialist role provides targeted support to young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) or at risk of becoming NEET, ensuring they receive tailored guidance and intervention to help them progress.

Our Post-16 team attends all Year 11 Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings to ensure that any young person at risk of becoming NEET has appropriate intervention in place. In addition, we use our Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) in Key Stage 3 and 4 PEPs to provide early identification of young people who may be at risk of disengaging from education. Our careers adviser now works with young people from Year 9 onwards, ensuring they receive the right advice and guidance to support them into their chosen post-16 career path.

The Post-16 Development Officer also attends the monthly NEET Action Group (NAG) meeting, where young people aged 16-25 who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET are discussed. This ensures that appropriate support and interventions are identified to help them engage in education, employment, or training.

Each young person also receives personalised support and guidance towards their desired destination. For those moving on to university, the post 16 team provide support at each step of the process, ensuring a smooth transition into higher education.

The table below shows the provision of all young people in year 12 and 13 as of the 31stth of July 2024

2023/24 post 16 provision	Number
6th Form	18
6th Form (specialist provision)	3
College	53
Training provider	18
Employed	7
Tuition	2
Independent School	3
Hospital School	1
NEET	34
Total	139

Post 16 outcomes and transitions

In 2023/24, 54 young people completed their final stage of their post 16 education. Our focus has been ensuring young people remain engaged in education, achieve qualifications, and progress into meaningful post-18 pathways.

Vocational qualifications saw strong success, with 100% of BTEC students passing their course. Two out of three T Level students completing their course and 86% of sixth-form qualifications achieved. 83% of A-Level students moved into higher education, while the remaining 17% secured full-time employment, marking a 100% success rate for this group.

Care Leavers Apprenticeship Programme

The Apprenticeship Programme for Care Leavers was established to provide young people with lived experience of care who are interested in a career within the local authority the opportunity to gain the experience, skills, and qualifications needed to secure permanent employment and achieve independence and economic stability.

The programme offers care leavers paid apprenticeship placements for a fixed-term period (typically 13–18 months), allowing them to develop confidence, acquire new skills, and work towards accredited qualifications while earning a wage.

To ensure that all young people undertaking an apprenticeship receive the right support, we have developed a Pre-Apprenticeship Offer, which includes:

- A 12-week paid trial to help young people determine if the apprenticeship is the right fit before committing to a full placement.
- A named mentor to provide guidance and support throughout the apprenticeship.
- A clothing and equipment allowance to ensure they have everything needed to start their role confidently.
- Help with travel costs to and from the workplace.
- Tuition support for the maths and English elements of the apprenticeship.

As of 31st July 2024, three young people were either engaged in or preparing to start an apprenticeship through this initiative.

13. Placement stability

A core priority of the Virtual School is to minimise disruption to children's learning, ensuring they have stability in their education wherever possible. Research highlights the significant impact that school moves can have on a child's progress, often contributing to the attainment gap between children in care and their peers. To mitigate this, we make every effort to maintain school placements when a child moves home.

Virtual School managers attend social care panels where children at risk of placement breakdown or undergoing a planned move are discussed. This enables us to proactively plan and implement any necessary school transitions to minimise disruption.

The Virtual School takes lead responsibility for all school moves, including:

- Transitions due to special educational needs (SEN)
- Moves to adoptive placements
- Relocations where attending the current school is not feasible
- Emergency school moves required for safeguarding reasons

In 2023/24, 34 children moved school, a reduction of 24 compared to the previous year. The reasons for these moves included:

- 25 children moving due to a placement change
- 1 child moving to prevent permanent exclusion
- 8 children moving due to a change in SEN needs

14. Personal Education Plans

This year, we continued to conduct Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings both online and face-to-face, with the majority taking place online. To ensure Virtual School Officers attended the most impactful PEPs, we streamlined our approach by prioritising key year groups and cases where our involvement was essential. As part of this strategy, we attended all initial PEP meetings.

As a result, Virtual School staff attended 753 PEP meetings during the academic year.

Ensuring PEPs were completed within statutory timescales remained a priority, and 100% of PEPs were completed on time across the autumn, spring, and summer terms.

Quality of PEPs

There was a notable improvement in the quality of PEPs throughout 2023/24, reflecting the dedicated work of the team in supporting schools to enhance PEP standards.

- Autumn Term: 65% of PEPs met the expected standard
- Spring Term: 70% met the expected standard
- Summer Term: 77% met the expected standard

While this progress is encouraging, challenges remain, particularly in secondary PEPs, where only 62% met the expected standard.

However, we have seen significant improvements in Post-16 PEPs, rising from 35% meeting the expected standard in autumn to 75% in summer. This improvement is largely due to the efforts of the Post-16 team in working closely with providers and the introduction of a more streamlined PEP process in the summer term.

The quality of Early Years and Primary PEPs remains strong, with:

- 93% of Early Years PEPs meeting the expected standard
- 89% of Primary PEPs meeting the expected standard



15. Pupil Premium Plus

The Virtual School’s main budget is the pupil premium plus which is devolved to the local authority and is used as seen appropriate by the VSH to improve outcomes for children in care. The local authority received £1,206,810 pupil premium for the 2023/24 financial year. Allocations are based on the number of pupils in care for 1 day or more in the previous financial year.

In addition to the pupil premium funding for children inc are aged 5-16, we received further funding for post 16 young people, funding to support the work of the virtual school around previously looked after children and funding to support our new duties around promoting the education of children with a social worker

In addition to the grants above, we also received grants from the DfE to help children and young people catch up after covid. We were allocated £70k School Led Tutoring Grant, and £136k Recovery Premium.

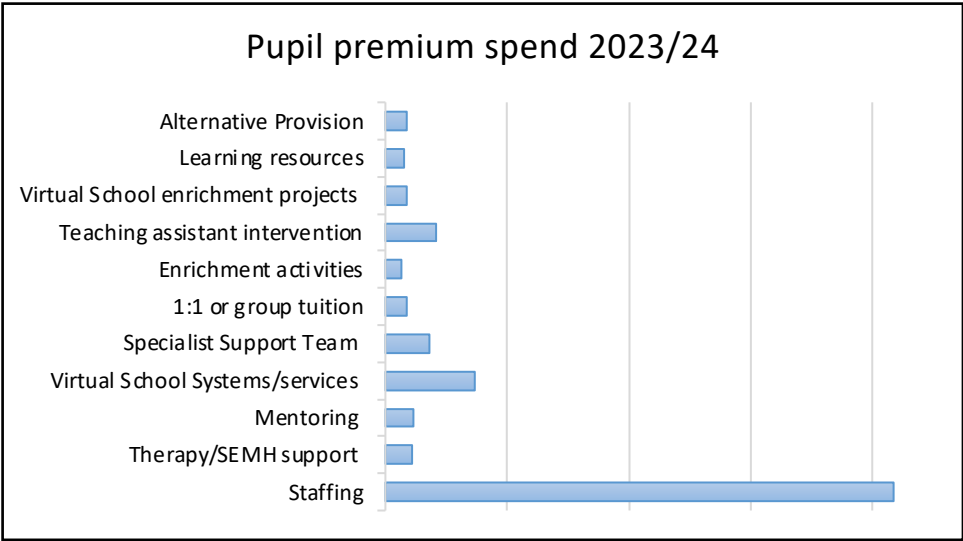
The school led tutoring funding was used to pay for additional tutoring for our children and young people who wanted extra tuition. In 2023/24, 145 children in mainstream school and 12 children in special school received extra tuition funded through the grant. Over 4000 hours of tuition was delivered to our children. Schools could request funding directly to pay their own tutors or the Virtual School referred children to appropriate tuition agencies who were official NTP Providers.

The recovery premium grant was used to fund a number of interventions such as enrichment activities, specialist support, trips and projects, therapeutic interventions etc

In line with our pupil premium policy, we continued to deliver a needs-based model of allocating all funding. Additional drop-down boxes were added to the PEP to enable schools to access the School Led Tutoring funding and Recovery Premium

We continue to review our services to ensure we are meeting the educational, social, emotional and personal needs of our children and young people. This year, the continued focus was to use pupil premium to help children and young people catch up from missed education due to the pandemic.

The tables below provide a breakdown of activities funded through pupil premium.



17. Projects, Activities & Trips: Enhancing Cultural Capital

We are committed to ensuring that all children in care have access to meaningful experiences that enrich their education, broaden their horizons, and develop their cultural capital. Our programme of projects, activities, and trips is designed to provide young people with opportunities that they may not otherwise have access to, helping them to build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging.

Throughout the 2023/24 academic year, we have delivered a diverse range of educational, cultural, and enrichment experiences. From theatre visits and residential trips to creative projects and higher education outreach programmes, each initiative has been carefully planned to raise aspirations and support personal development. These opportunities have given our young people the chance to explore the arts, engage with history, develop literacy and STEM skills, and participate in outdoor learning.

Alongside these activities, our targeted educational support programmes, including Aspire 2 Uni, Book in a Bag, transition mentoring, and careers guidance, have provided children and young people with the tools and encouragement they need to succeed. By working closely with schools, carers, and external partners, we have ensured that these initiatives not only offer memorable experiences but also have a lasting impact on academic progress and future aspirations.

From producing their own short film with Vamos Theatre, exploring London's landmarks, and engaging in STEM-focused university visits, to receiving literacy support through book gifting schemes and participating in arts and drama workshops, our children and young people have benefited from a wide range of opportunities.

This section outlines the projects, activities, and trips delivered during the 2023/24 academic year, demonstrating the impact of these initiatives in fostering ambition, creativity, and confidence among the children and young people we support.

Projects

Artslink Project

The Artslink Project was established in 2018 as a collaboration between 14 Virtual Schools across the West Midlands, aiming to create a high-quality arts and cultural offer for children in care. The programme follows a structured progression pathway, allowing children to explore different art forms and develop their creative skills. In 2023/24, children participated in a range of exciting activities, including a commercial dance workshop, a drumming workshop, an interactive DJ workshop, and a celebration event with Women & Theatre. These experiences not only provided cultural enrichment but also helped young people build confidence and discover new talents.

Aspire 2 Uni (A2U)

The Aspire 2 Uni Project is a joint initiative between Wolverhampton University and the Virtual Schools of Walsall, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, and Staffordshire. Designed to increase the number of children in care progressing to higher education, Aspire 2 Uni provides young people with essential information about university life, subject choices, and career pathways. Over 30 young people are currently engaged in the programme across seven cohorts from Years 7-11. Each group takes part in three outreach activity days per year, which have included visits to university faculties, media and arts workshops and a 'Speak Up' challenge. The programme also offers mentoring, work experience opportunities, and additional academic support to ensure that young people have the guidance they need to achieve their potential.

Forest School

This year, we launched our Forest School project for children in Years 3-6, providing an exciting opportunity for outdoor learning. As part of this initiative, we ran after-school Forest School sessions at Watling Street Primary School, offering Key Stage 2 children a chance to engage in hands-on activities designed to build confidence, resilience, and key life skills.

The sessions focused on helping children develop problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and self-esteem while also enhancing their cultural capital through meaningful outdoor experiences. By learning in a natural setting, children were able to explore, take risks, and develop a sense of independence in a safe and supportive environment.

Following the success of these sessions, we will be expanding the project next year, ensuring that more children have access to the benefits of outdoor education. We are excited to continue developing Forest School as a key part of our wider support for children in care, helping them to thrive beyond the classroom.



Vamos Theatre

Over the Easter holidays, we partnered with Vamos Theatre to create a powerful and engaging film about the challenges of transitioning to a new school. Seven of our children worked alongside professional theatre practitioners to write, film, and star in 'Who Cares?', using their own experiences to shape a story that highlights the emotions, fears, and hopes that come with moving schools.

This project provided a unique opportunity for our young people to develop creative skills, build confidence, and express their voices in a way that resonates with others going through similar transitions. Their dedication and enthusiasm throughout the process were truly inspiring, and the final film is a testament to their hard work and talent.

In June, the children proudly presented 'Who Cares?' to Walsall Children's Services at our staff conference, giving professionals valuable insight into the lived experiences of young people in care as they navigate school changes. Their performance was met with great enthusiasm, and we are excited to share the film more widely in the coming months.

We are incredibly proud of the children who took part, and we hope this project will not only raise awareness of the challenges of school transitions but also encourage more conversations about how we can better support young people through these important changes.

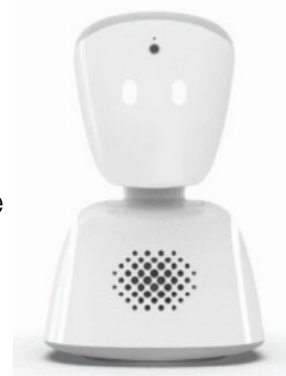
Learning Resources

AV1 Robots: Supporting Remote Learning

This year, we have partnered with No Isolation to introduce AV1 telepresence robots as a new way to support children who are on roll at a school but unable to attend due to illness. These innovative robots provide a live connection to the classroom, allowing children to continue their learning alongside their peers while maintaining a sense of belonging.

Through the AV1 app, children can remotely connect to their AV1 robot, which is placed in their classroom. This enables them to listen, interact, and participate in lessons in real time, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and making reintegration back into school smoother when they are ready to return.

We will begin using AV1 robots to support our children from September 2024, ensuring that those facing extended absences remain engaged with their education and connected to their school.



community. This initiative is another step towards removing barriers to learning and providing inclusive support for our children and young people

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Early literacy is a crucial factor in a child's future educational success, and our participation in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has played a key role in fostering a love of reading among our youngest children. This initiative, operated by the Dollywood Foundation, provides a free book every month to children from birth to age five. In 2023/24, 230 children received books through this programme, giving them access to high-quality reading materials that support early language development. The success of the project gained wider recognition when Walsall Virtual School was invited to speak on BBC Radio about the impact of the initiative, highlighting the importance of literacy support for children in care.

IXL Learning Platform

To support academic progress, we subscribed all children in Years 1-11 to the IXL learning platform, an adaptive online resource that provides personalised English and maths tuition. This initiative ensures that young people have access to tailored learning experiences that address their specific needs, helping them to build confidence and achieve their potential in core subjects.

Storytime Magazine & Britannica Subscriptions

Recognising the importance of varied and engaging reading materials, we provided subscriptions to Storytime Magazine for 100 children in Years 1-4, delivering a monthly collection of illustrated stories and accompanying activities directly to their homes. For older children, we introduced a subscription to Britannica's 'What on Earth!' magazine, ensuring that young people in Years 7 and 8 had access to high-quality non-fiction content that sparked curiosity and a love of learning.

Book in a Bag & Pack in the Post

To encourage reading for pleasure, we launched Book in a Bag, a book gifting programme for children in Years 1-8. Each term, around 300 children received carefully selected books, accompanied by activity packs and guidance for carers to support reading at home. Additionally, for children who required a different approach, we introduced Pack in the Post, a termly resource pack tailored to their individual needs. The first edition featured a Halloween-themed sensory box, providing an engaging and accessible way for children to develop a love of books and storytelling.



Early Years Enrichment Pack

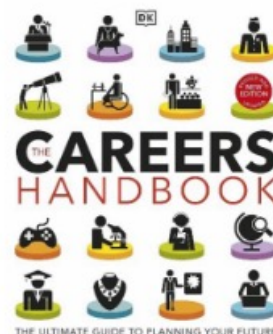
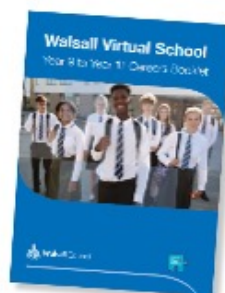
Recognising the importance of early education, we developed the Early Years Enrichment Pack, a termly resource provided to carers to support the development of our youngest children. The pack includes engaging activities and learning materials designed to promote early literacy, numeracy, and communication skills, while also encouraging positive bonding between children and their carers. Alongside the distribution of these resources, we work closely with carers, parents, and social workers to model how to use the materials effectively, ensuring that young children benefit fully from these early learning opportunities.

KS2 Writing Packs

To further support literacy development and creative expression, we introduced Writing Packs for children in upper Key Stage 2. These carefully designed packs help children build confidence in writing, structure their ideas effectively, and develop key literacy skills. Distributed based on Personal Education Plan (PEP) data, the packs were targeted at children who would benefit most from additional writing support. Each pack included a range of interactive resources and exercises aimed at enhancing storytelling, descriptive writing, and sentence structure, helping children to develop into more confident and capable writers.

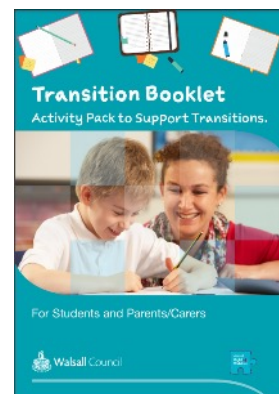
Careers Pack

To encourage young people to think about their future aspirations, we introduced a Careers Pack for Year 9 students, reaching 30 young people. The pack included a careers book, personalised letter, highlighters, and activity materials designed to guide young people and their carers through important discussions about career pathways. This initiative aimed to increase awareness of career options, build ambition, and provide practical tools to support decision-making about future education and employment opportunities.



Transition support

We offer additional support to our children and young people during times of significant transition. This may be phase transfers – from nursery to Reception, primary to secondary or secondary to post 16 – or it could be a planned school move. We work on an individual level, which allows us to support the individual needs of the young person but would always start by meeting with the social worker, current education setting, new education setting, home and any other appropriate adults to ensure a transition plan is in place. Within these meetings we look to ensure additional visits to the new setting and opportunities for the child/ young person to build relationships with new staff are in place, and that strategies to support are shared. If it is appropriate, Virtual School staff can offer direct work to support the transition. Our Senior Mental Health Practitioner can also offer support where indicated by the child/ young person's need. We send out our transition booklet in June so our children can work through it with their parents/carers.



Trips & Enrichment Experiences

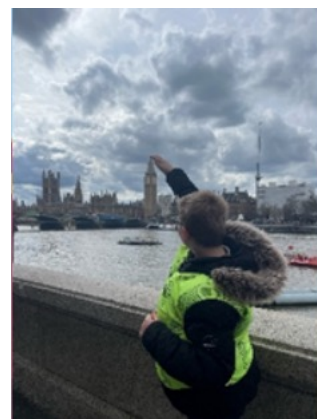
For many children in care, access to enrichment opportunities can be limited, which can impact their confidence, engagement, and understanding of the world around them. By offering trips, visits, and cultural experiences, we aim to bridge this gap, giving our young people the chance to explore, learn, and develop skills that will support them in education and beyond.

Over the past year, we have delivered an exciting and varied programme of activities, from theatre trips and residential experiences to cultural outings and skill-building workshops. These opportunities not only support academic learning but also foster personal development, confidence, and resilience.

This report highlights the enrichment activities delivered throughout the 2023/24 academic year, reflecting the positive impact these experiences have had on our children and young people. Each activity has been carefully designed to align with our core aims of inclusion, aspiration, and personal growth.

Enrichment Activities

Theatre trips played a key role in introducing children to live performances, offering them an immersive and inspiring cultural experience. A highlight of the year was a visit to London's West End to watch *Matilda the Musical* at the Cambridge Theatre during the Christmas season. The trip gave children the chance to experience a world-renowned production, many for the first time. Another memorable theatre visit was to Birmingham Symphony Hall, where children enjoyed *Paddington in Concert*, a unique experience combining film and live orchestral music. In addition, a group attended the Ministry of Science show at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, which brought science to life with exciting experiments featuring liquid nitrogen, hydrogen explosions, and a self-built hovercraft.



Residential trips provided invaluable opportunities for children to build confidence, develop teamwork skills, and experience new challenges in a supportive environment. The Year 6 transition residential at Hilston Park offered a two-night stay designed to help pupils prepare for secondary school.



Activities such as zip wire, rock climbing, and campfire bonding encouraged resilience and personal growth. For older pupils, the Kingswood residential provided a similar experience, focusing on aerial adventure activities, problem-solving initiatives, and team-building exercises to help key stage three students develop character and independence. Additionally, children in key stage two took part in a London residential, staying in the city for two nights and visiting top attractions such as the Science Museum, Natural History Museum, Tower of London, and Madame Tussauds. A separate London residential for key stage three students provided a slightly different itinerary, including a boat ride on the River Thames, a visit to the London Eye, an open-top bus tour, and a trip to Wembley Stadium.

Day trips allowed children to explore new places and take part in hands-on experiences. A visit to Brean Sands provided a fun-filled beach day where children enjoyed rock pooling, building sandcastles, and exploring the seaside before heading to Brean Theme Park. A trip to the Silverstone Museum gave young people the chance to walk on the famous motor racing track and test their skills in a driving simulator. Football enthusiasts had a particularly exciting opportunity to visit both Manchester football stadiums in one day, touring dressing rooms, media areas, and club museums while learning about the history and technology behind two of the country's most famous teams. Another popular day out included a trip to Warwick Castle, where children explored the castle dungeons and attended a falconry display, followed by a visit to Hatton Park for animal encounters, tractor safaris, and other hands-on activities.

These activities were funded through pupil premium and have provided children and young people with the opportunity to develop new skills, gain confidence, and create lasting memories.

17. Attachment Aware Schools Project

As part of the local authority's Building Resilient & Inclusive Communities & Schools (BRICS) Project, we have developed our own Attachment Aware Schools Project to enhance understanding of trauma and attachment in relation to children's behaviour and learning.

Now in its fifth year, the project continues to grow, with over 50 schools actively participating as of 31st July 2024. Schools progress through different award levels based on their implementation of attachment-aware and trauma-informed practices:

- 10 Platinum Award schools
- 12 Gold Award schools
- 2 Silver Award schools
- 16 Bronze Award schools
- 10 schools currently working towards their Bronze Award

In November 2022, our work was nationally recognised when we received the Attachment Research Community's Alex Timpson Collaboration Award for our efforts in supporting schools to understand the impact of trauma and attachment difficulties on children in care.

This year, we have further strengthened our commitment to trauma and attachment-informed practice by introducing a Practitioner and Lead Practitioner Programme. This initiative is designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of professionals working with children and young people who have experienced trauma, neglect, or loss.

As part of this programme, we offer both three-day and five-day training courses for schools engaged in the Trauma and Attachment Aware Schools Project. The three-day practical course is tailored for professionals who work closely with children, young people, and families, helping them to develop a nurturing approach that promotes inclusion, equity, and wellbeing in educational settings. It is particularly suited to designated teachers, teaching assistants, ELSA-trained staff, mentors, coaches, and other practitioners supporting children with attachment and trauma-related needs.

Through this training, practitioners gain a deeper understanding of attachment theory, trauma-informed practice, and relationship-based approaches, alongside practical strategies to support children's learning and development. This work builds on the Walsall Attachment Aware Schools Project, ensuring that schools and professionals can embed sustainable, nurturing approaches that improve outcomes for children and young people.

18. Development of the Nurture Hubs

In response to the growing need for specialist support for children who have experienced trauma, we worked with 5 schools to develop Locality Nurture Hubs. The hubs were developed to provide targeted intervention for children struggling with social, emotional, and behavioural challenges. The hubs were designed to offer a safe, structured, and nurturing environment where children could develop their confidence, self-regulation, and readiness to learn while remaining connected to their mainstream school.

The decision to establish the nurture hubs was driven by evidence highlighting the impact of early intervention in improving behaviour, attendance, and academic outcomes. Many children in care and those with a social worker face significant barriers to learning due to adverse childhood experiences. By embedding attachment-aware and trauma-informed practices, the hubs provide short-term, intensive support that enables children to transition back to their mainstream classrooms with improved emotional resilience and engagement in learning.

To ensure the hubs were strategically placed for maximum impact, schools were selected based on geographical distribution across our four localities—North, South, East, and West—ensuring accessibility for schools and families across Walsall. The selection process also considered each school's commitment to inclusive practice, existing expertise in nurture-based approaches, and capacity to host and sustain the hub. Schools that demonstrated a strong ethos of supporting vulnerable learners were prioritised, and all participating schools received specialist training to embed nurture principles effectively.

Since their launch, the nurture hubs have supported a growing number of children, equipping them with the social and emotional skills needed to succeed in their education. We continue to monitor the impact of the hubs, working closely with host schools to refine and enhance the provision. Moving forward, we aim to expand this model, ensuring that even more children benefit from the nurture-based support that helps them reintegrate into mainstream education and thrive.

Nurture Uk National Schools Award



We are currently working towards achieving the Nurture UK Schools Award, reflecting our commitment to embedding nurturing approaches across our work with children in care. This process is driven by our Nurture Leads, who are leading the way in developing and implementing our own core principles and pledges, ensuring that every child we support feels valued, safe, and empowered to succeed.

Our vision is for all children in care to receive a nurturing and inclusive education, where they are supported to overcome barriers and reach their full potential. To achieve this, we have developed a framework that ensures our approach is rooted in understanding, communication, and consistency. Our principles highlight the importance of recognising that every learning journey is different, that children need to feel safe in order to learn, and that their voices and experiences must shape the support we provide.

19. Support for previously children and young people who were previously in care

Under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 local authorities and schools have a statutory role to support young people who have previously been in care such as those who have been adopted from care and who left care under a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangement Order (Residence Order). The Virtual School has always provided support, advice and guidance in relation to children who were previously in care but as a result of the additional funding provided by the DfE to help support VSHs to deliver the additional duties we appointed a highly skilled officer who has a wealth of experience working with children and young people who have previously been in care to take on this responsibility.

At the end of July 2024, we have 354 children who were previously in care attending schools in Walsall:

- 157 left care through a Special Guardianship Order
- 155 left care through adoption
- 28 left care through a Child Arrangement Order
- 14 left care through a Residency Order

Some of the work we have carried out in relation to children who were previously in care was

- Challenging schools to avoid drift and delay in relation to the admissions
- Challenging schools in relation to exclusions
- Attended school meetings
- Provided intervention from our own staff
- Contribute to the SGO carers newsletter
- Challenge schools on the use of pupil premium funding

20. Support for children and young people with English as a second language

Although we have relatively small numbers of UASC in Walsall, the number of young people arriving at Walsall has increased slightly over the last 12 months to 34 young people classed as UASC.

To provide support to this cohort of young people our we commissioned the work of a local tuition company who specialised in provide bespoke package of support to our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.

22. Training for professionals

The Virtual school has a role to ensure that professionals working with children in care have the right knowledge, information and skills to enable them to fulfil their role in contributing to improving the educational outcomes of all care experienced children.

In the 2023/24 academic year the following training was delivered to schools, social workers and foster carers.

- An introduction to PACE training
- An introduction to Trauma and Attachment
- Working with the traumatised child to promote effective learning.
- Supporting Neurodiversity in the classroom
- Understanding Adult Presence
- Improving PEPs training
- DT termly briefing sessions
- Nurture UK training

Training for foster carers

We also developed a new training package for foster carers to enhance their understanding of education, raise expectations, and support aspirational progress for children in care. Research from EEF highlights that carer involvement can boost academic progress by 3-5 months per year, making this a crucial focus for us.

To support this, we created an educational resource pack designed to encourage carers to engage children in literacy, numeracy, and speech and language activities at home. Alongside this, we delivered one-to-one training to eight carers, tailored to their child's attainment and progress. These sessions covered key topics such as academic expectations, practical ways to support learning at home, and the role of the Virtual School. Carers received a copy of the resource pack, and feedback was positive, with one carer stating, "It's really good, and I think he will love it." Another carer demonstrated increased confidence in understanding educational terms, moving from "disagree" to "strongly agree" when asked about their awareness of Age-Related Expectations (ARE).

We also delivered group training to 18 carers in three-hour sessions, which allowed for wider discussions on attitudes towards education, confidence in supporting learning, and sharing of strategies. Many carers left with valuable resources, and feedback was encouraging. One commented that the session was "helpful and informative," while another showed significant improvement in their understanding of ARE. However, while we had hoped to establish an ongoing parent/carers support group, only one carer expressed interest, with others citing time constraints as a barrier.

In addition, we worked with Walsall Fostering Team to offer training at their events, though coordination proved challenging. We managed to deliver one session to three carers, all of whom found it useful and left with educational resources. While the training successfully increased awareness and engagement, confidence levels in supporting education varied (rated between 5-10), highlighting the need for continued focus in this area.

23. Celebrating Achievement

Each year, we recognise the achievements of children in care with a special celebration event.

In previous years, this has taken the form of a trip to Drayton Manor; however, in 2023, we decided to take a different approach by hosting a formal awards-style celebration event at Walsall's Town Hall. This decision was made to ensure that children and young people had the opportunity to be individually recognised for their hard work, resilience, and personal growth, while also creating a memorable and inspiring experience for them and their families.

The event, held on Friday 30 August, was structured into two parts to cater to different age groups. The first half, The Excellent Tea Party, provided a fun and engaging celebration for primary-aged children, with a relaxed atmosphere where they could enjoy refreshments and entertainment. The second half, The Excellent Awards, was dedicated to secondary and post-16 young people, featuring a formal awards ceremony to recognise their achievements.

Around 100 people attended, including children and young people, their carers, social workers, independent reviewing officers, Virtual School staff, and key council representatives. The awards were designed to celebrate a range of accomplishments, including academic progress, personal development, resilience, and contributions to the community. Each award highlighted the hard work and determination of young people in care, ensuring they felt valued, recognised, and celebrated.

This new approach to our annual celebration was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback, reinforcing the importance of providing individual recognition for children and young people in care. The event not only but also created a sense of community, aspiration, and belonging, making it a truly special occasion for all involved.



24. Extension to role of the Virtual School – Promoting the education of children with a social worker.

Since Sept 2021, the Virtual School has a non-statutory role to promote the education of children with a social worker and those who have had a social worker in the last 6 years. In response to the additional responsibilities, we developed the Inclusion Hub. The Inclusion Hub comprises of an Inclusion Manager, two Inclusion Officers and a data and information Officer. The role of the hub is to:

Make visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities, including with children's social care, to help all agencies hold high aspirations for these children

promote practice that supports children's engagement in education, recognising that attending an education setting is an important factor in helping to keep children safe from harm

level up children's outcomes to narrow the attainment gap so every child has the opportunity to reach their potential

The Inclusion Hub track and monitor the attendance, suspensions/exclusions and reduced timetables of all children with a social worker. They provide support and challenge to schools, social workers, and other local authority teams/services to ensure there is no drift and delay in providing the support needed to ensure this cohort of children are accessing appropriate education. During the 2023/24 academic year, 348 referrals were made to the Inclusion Hub from social workers, schools, and other professionals. This was an increase of 81 referrals from the previous academic year.

In June 2024, two more Inclusion Officers joined the Inclusion Hub enabling there to be an Inclusion Officer in each locality in the borough



25. Case studies

1. Supporting children & Young people with mental health challenges

Child's core experiences

C, a Year 11 student with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) for Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs, has been in care for over ten years due to neglect. In 2023, he briefly returned to live with his mother, but after a few months, he requested to go back into care and was placed with a foster carer. These transitions had a significant impact on his emotional well-being, leading to feelings of uncertainty and instability.

School Context

C is enrolled in a specialist provision due to his SEMH needs. His school attendance declined significantly when he moved back in with his mother and siblings, making it difficult for the school to assess his academic progress. This also created uncertainty about his post-16 education and employment options, as he was not engaging consistently enough to work towards his qualifications.

Child's needs at school

C needed a structured, supportive approach to re-engage with education. His declining attendance meant he had missed key learning opportunities, making it difficult to assess his ability and track his progress. The unpredictability of his home life and his emotional struggles further impacted his ability to focus on schoolwork. While he had access to transport and a personalised timetable, he lacked motivation and struggled with a negative perception of education. His disengagement also extended beyond academics, as he found it difficult to maintain social connections or engage in activities that could improve his emotional well-being.

Virtual School Intervention

C was identified as needing intervention from the Virtual School after the school was unable to re-engage him. Weekly mentoring sessions were introduced to build a relationship with C, understand the barriers to his attendance, and provide mental health support. These sessions explored his reluctance to attend school, his preference for staying at home, and his increasing withdrawal from daily routines.

Despite support, C struggled with low mood, a negative attitude towards education, and a lack of motivation. He often stayed awake at night and slept during the day, making school attendance difficult. Initial attempts at home study were unsuccessful, so the focus shifted towards helping C recognise the long-term impact of missing education. Through structured conversations, he explored the importance of gaining qualifications, the expectations of employers, and the benefits of developing resilience and routine. Over time, he agreed to attend school on a reduced timetable, gradually increasing his presence, although he rarely completed a full week before Christmas.

One of C's passions was music, particularly the guitar and heavy rock. The Virtual School staff member supporting him also played the guitar, which provided a shared interest and a way to build trust. Through conversations about music and playing the guitar together, C became more open to engaging with support and began to see school as a more positive space. His confidence grew, and he eventually performed at the Children in Care Awards Evening, joining a band of other children in care.

Child's Views of the support

"I find education challenging and I am looking forward to leaving school, but I know I need to get as much from school as possible to help me in the future".

Impact of Intervention

C began attending school three days per week, gradually re-establishing a routine that extended beyond the classroom and included socialising with peers. His passion for music became a key outlet,

providing him with both motivation and confidence. This was particularly evident when he performed at the Children in Care Awards Evening, joining a band of other looked-after children. The experience marked a turning point, helping him develop a sense of achievement and belonging.

As his confidence grew, he engaged in post-16 planning and attended an interview at an Arts College. Although he ultimately decided this was not the right path for him, he gained a clearer understanding of the need to balance his aspirations of becoming a musician with realistic career options.

With ongoing support from the Virtual School, C continued his transition towards independence, equipping himself with the skills and opportunities needed to move forward successfully.

2. Supporting a child with special educational needs at risk of permanent exclusion

Child's Core Experiences:

J has been in care since he was two months old and has experienced six different placements. He is the younger of two siblings but has lived separately from his sibling since April 2019. These changes in placement and the separation from his family have contributed to a complex emotional landscape, requiring careful educational and emotional support

School Content and child's needs at school:

Up until a move of home, J had a successful primary school placement where he was working at Age-Related Expectations (ARE) and making good progress both academically and personally. He was settled, engaged in learning, and well-supported in his school environment. However, a subsequent move to a residential placement with in-house education led to a significant change in his behaviour. The shift in routine, expectations, and peer influences in the residential setting impacted his ability to self-regulate, resulting in increased behavioural challenges.

Academically, J is highly able and has strong aspirations of attending university. When his residential placement ended, a school with an on-site specialist resource provision (SRP) was identified to support his transition back to mainstream education. J expressed a clear preference for attending a mainstream secondary school, and with the support of the SRP, this was facilitated.

In Year 7, J moved to a local mainstream secondary school. Initially, he coped well in lessons and engaged positively with his learning. However, unstructured times became increasingly difficult, and his ability to regulate his emotions deteriorated outside of lessons. This resulted in heightened behaviours that the school struggled to manage, leading to multiple suspensions.

Virtual School

Following J's initial suspension, Virtual School staff worked closely with the school, attending meetings and supporting discussions on how best to meet his needs. The school expressed challenges in managing his behaviour when he became overwhelmed and dysregulated. As a result, the annual review of J's Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) was brought forward to allow for a detailed discussion and to prepare the case for the decision-making panel regarding alternative provision.

In the interim, direct work was undertaken with J to explore his interests and identify suitable alternative provisions to prevent a permanent exclusion. While J initially hoped to attend a particular provision, this was not possible due to the Ofsted rating of the setting. The Virtual School worked closely with J, involving him in all decisions to ensure that an appropriate school place was identified where his needs could be met.

Several schools were consulted, and J's preferred school was identified, but they could not offer him a place until June, when Year 11 students would leave. As J was highly motivated to attend this school, a bespoke education package was put in place to support him through the transition, ensuring he remained engaged in learning while waiting for his placement to begin.

Child's view of support:

J responded positively to the direct work carried out while he accessed alternative provision and waited for his new school placement. Initially, he was reluctant to change schools. However, as his experience in the mainstream setting became increasingly challenging, with support and guidance from staff at his home and the Virtual School, he recognised that it was not the right environment for him.

Impact of Intervention:

J was successfully prevented from being permanently excluded from his mainstream provision and is now accessing a specialist setting that meets both his SEMH needs and his high academic potential. He has settled well into his new school, where he is much happier, and there have been no reported behavioural concerns.

J has shared his aspirations with school staff, who are fully supportive of his academic ambitions and are committed to ensuring he is challenged appropriately. Progress reports from the last term indicate that he is making at least expected, if not accelerated, progress since the move. His new environment has provided the stability and structure he needs to thrive, setting him on a positive path towards his future goals.

3. Supporting academic progress through targeted intervention

Child's Core Experiences:

E came into care in July 2019 at age 11 due to abuse and family dysfunction. She is one of three siblings and has lived with her maternal grandparents since November 2019, providing a stable and consistent placement.

School Content & child's needs at school

E has moved schools multiple times, currently attending her second secondary school since Year 9. She has accessed SEMH support through school and completed a CAMHS intervention in 2023 due to historic trauma.

Although emotionally settled, teachers noted that E needed to revise more effectively, ask for help, and attend additional study sessions to secure her target grades. She was predicted grade 7 in English and grade 6 in Maths but was working below these levels when support began.

Virtual School Intervention:

In November 2023, the Virtual School began weekly direct work with E, delivered in her home by an Education Support Officer (ESO). The intervention was structured around both academic development and study skills, with a focus on English and Maths—the two subjects critical to securing her post-16 progression.

E completed an IXL diagnostic assessment, which identified key gaps in her knowledge. These were used to shape session content and ensure targeted learning. She brought her school books to each session, and the ESO reinforced current learning, addressed misconceptions, and extended her understanding of key topics.

The intervention included regular retrieval tasks and reflective discussion to help EW explain her thinking and reinforce memory. One strategy introduced was the 'rainbow tree', a visual learning aid used to help her summarise key characters, themes, and quotes in texts like A Christmas Carol.

To support exam readiness, E practiced breaking down complex, word-heavy questions, highlighting key terms, and structuring answers methodically. The ESO also worked with her to build and revise a personalised study timetable, which was reviewed weekly for accountability and adjusted based on her feedback.

The support also extended beyond academic tutoring. E was encouraged to attend school-led interventions and speak to staff when she needed help. Sessions included coaching conversations to help her manage anxiety around exams and take ownership of her learning. Exam dates were mapped on a calendar and revision aligned with these deadlines to ensure consistent preparation throughout the term.

By building a positive, trusting relationship with the ESO, E gained in both confidence and independence. The home-based approach removed barriers and created a space where she could reflect, practise, and prepare with consistent encouragement.

Child's view of support:

E reported increased confidence in her ability to learn, remember information, and explain her thinking. By the end of the intervention, she felt better prepared for learning and revision. She stated: "Katie (ESO) is really helpful and her sessions have been very useful. It has been good that she has been able to come and see me at home and I want to thank her for all the sessions."

Impact of Intervention:

E achieved grade 4 in both English and Maths, securing her place on her chosen post-16 course. Her school praised her engagement and commitment.

She is now settled in sixth form, studying L3 BTEC Health & Social Care, Sport, and Travel & Tourism, with good attendance and positive progress. EW aspires to become a paramedic, and school staff are supporting her with career guidance.



5. Improving confidence, attainment and transition for a year 6 pupil

Child's Core Experiences:

L was on the SEN register for SEMH during Year 6 and had difficulties with focus and confidence in lessons, particularly in Maths. School support included small group work, weekly interventions, and mixed ability pairing. L had shared in her PEP that she was “definitely not” making good progress in Maths and needed additional help. Her Summer 2023 PEP highlighted vulnerabilities around her mindset, with tendencies to rush or disengage depending on mood. She also had some social and behavioural needs which required support ahead of her transition to secondary school.

School Content & Child's needs at school

L was working at Age-Related Expectations (ARE) for Reading and Writing, and just below ARE for Maths. She needed targeted input to build resilience, develop reflection skills, and secure the foundational understanding needed to pass her SATs and manage the move to secondary. There were also concerns about her emotional regulation and social readiness for Year 7.

Intervention:

Following a planning discussion with the Designated Teacher, carer, and social worker direct work started with L. Initial sessions focused on building a relationship through games and familiarisation with the IXL online platform, where L completed a maths diagnostic to identify next steps.

Sessions used a mix of IXL and metacognitive strategies, including reflection on recent lessons, ‘traffic light’ self-assessments, and practical problem-solving. L was regularly encouraged to verbalise her thinking, explain methods, and extend her answers—building both her confidence and understanding. Strategies such as underlining key words and breaking questions into steps were also introduced to support her approach to assessments.

After an initial dip in engagement, L rejoined sessions in January with a friend present. This adjustment helped her re-engage with the intervention. Sessions also included reviewing class SATs papers, confidence-building conversations about asking for support, and revision techniques tailored to her needs.

Following her SATs, the focus shifted to transition. L completed a transition booklet and discussed worries about Year 7. She explored her new school's website and raised questions to be shared with the Designated Teacher. By the final session, she expressed excitement about starting secondary school.

Child's view of support:

L's confidence increased significantly across the intervention. She moved from answering “sometimes” to “most” or “always” when asked about:

- Confidence in learning English and Maths
- Ability to explain her learning to others
- Knowing how to improve in class
- Using different ways to remember things

She commented: “Katie (ESO) helps me with my learning when she comes in on Wednesdays and I feel most proud of my improvement in Maths.”

Impact of Intervention:

Between November 2023 and June 2024, L received weekly targeted support. She progressed from below ARE in Maths to meeting ARE by the end of Year 6 and successfully passed her SATs in both English and Maths.

The school noted: "The sessions with Katie were going well, and L's learning and confidence had improved greatly."

L is now settled in secondary school. Though there have been some minor SEMH-related concerns, these are being monitored through SDQ scores and PEPs, with Virtual School support in place. At her first Year 7 PEP, no significant concerns were raised.

Her current school reports she is working at ARE and making expected progress in English and is working above ARE and making more than expected progress in maths

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