

Submission from the Rees Centre, Oxford University
to the House of Commons Education Select Committee
Inquiry in Children's Social Care

About the Rees Centre

The Rees Centre, situated in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, was established in 2012 with a mission to produce research and evidence which enables practitioners, policymakers and the research community to understand and improve children's social care and education. Our focus is on children and young people supported by children's social care services, and what needs to happen to ensure they achieve stronger and more stable relationships, better educational outcomes, and better lives. We conduct research to understand the nature and causes of outcomes and to test ideas about how things might improve, to inform policy and practice.

The Centre has recently published its new five year strategy [5-Year Strategy](#) setting out its future research priorities.

Context of this submission

The Education Selection Committee has invited submissions to inform its recently re-opened inquiry into children's social care. The inquiry has a wide-ranging terms of reference. While the Centre has researched many of these themes, our submission focuses on four priorities for a more effective social care system – by which we mean improved lives for children and families during childhood and beyond - which emerge from the Centre's published and live work. These are:

1. **A focus beyond children 'in care'.** The need for the system to work more effectively for children and young people previously looked after or on the edges of care, as well as children in care. This includes the large numbers of children in kinship arrangements.
2. **More joined-up local systems:** that are easier for children, young people and their families/carers to navigate, and with more consistent culture, language and practice across constituent agencies.
3. **The importance of relational practice,** especially in the education system and its approach to working with children supported by Children's Social Care.
4. **More effective and ethical use of children's information** as part of a revised model of performance and accountability.

The main studies we have drawn on are referenced at the end of this submission, with a brief summary of each and links to the main outputs.

We are conscious that there are other issues faced by the children's social care system, in particular the increasing complexity and demand for more intensive services, and the associated challenge of protecting primary prevention services; the fragility of the workforce and the dependence on agency staff; and the increasing role of the private sector. We have focused this submission on Rees Centre work but would like to draw the Committee's attention to the very recently published work of Dr Calum Webb at University of Sheffield, with whom researchers at the Centre have previously collaborated, which provides important new evidence on the case for [Investing in Prevention & Support in Children's Social Care](#).

We have kept our initial submission short but would be happy to expand upon these points if the Committee would like further information.

1. A focus beyond children 'in care'

Research at the centre has found that children in longer-term care do better than those 'in need' (children with a social worker but not in care), or those in short term care – see for example the [comparative study on the educational progress of looked after children in England](#) by Sebba et al (2015). This suggests that being in care might mitigate some of the effects trauma and abuse has on young people, prior to entering care, but raises questions about whether the much larger group of children on the edge of care, or who have previously been looked after are receiving sufficient focus and attention by the children's social care system.

By way of example, work on 'stability' of care focuses exclusively on placements of children in care, rather than understanding the broader trajectories of children who come into contact with the CSC system and move between care, birth parents, and kinship care (whether formal or informal). And until recently, most statutory entitlements – such as the Personal Education Plan - have been limited to children 'in care'. In the last five years, though, eligibility for more recent initiatives has been more widely drawn: the introduction of Pupil Premium Plus includes previously looked after children, and the extension of the responsibility of Virtual School Head now covers educational support for all 'children with a social worker' (CWSW), building on the Rees Centre's work [evaluate the initial pilots of the virtual school head's extension of duties to children with a social worker and the post-16 pupil premium plus](#)

In addition to producing research that has been instrumental in supporting the case for the introduction of these welcome changes, we are also involved in evaluating their impact. Our current work to [evaluate the expanded duties of virtual schools](#) on behalf of the Department of Education has shown (in its first two phases, the first of which was the evaluation of the initial pilots) that schools are now more aware of the needs of the broader group of 'children with a social worker' which has led to more tailored support for a wider group of children and a reduction in suspensions and improvements in attendance. The results of the third phase of this evaluation are due to be published in the first half of 2025

A separate study exploring [higher education pathways for young people with a social worker](#) for the 'Transforming Access and Student Outcomes' (TASO) 'what works' centre similarly focuses on 'children in need' on the basis of existing evidence that additional and complex barriers are faced by this wider group. We find substantially lower rates of entry to HE for children in need

than for children eligible for free school meals, even taking into account school achievement and related factors.

The Rees Centre will continue to be involved in producing evidence to define and understand the needs, experiences and trajectories of the different groups of children who need the support of children's social care, including children of children previously looked after, children in kinship arrangements (not all of whom were previously in care) and children on the margins of care. We think this work is needed because the current 'Children in Need' definition is not sufficiently clearly defined or consistently applied, which in turn makes it difficult for those who care for them to understand what they are eligible for and navigate access.

2. More joined-up local systems

Many of our research studies involve qualitative work to understand the experience of children who are supported by the CSC system, and with their families and carers. A recurring theme is huge range of professionals they need to engage with to support a wide range of complex needs – including a high proportion who have a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND) - and the lack of join-up or consistency of approach between these professionals. This leaves birth families, kinship carers and foster carers - who are already facing additional hurdles in caring for children in need – having to expend precious emotional, cognitive and practical energy trying to navigate the highly variable local system and join up the dots. This is energy that could be better spent directly helping the children in their care.

Our work on the extension of Virtual School Heads' duties to children with a social worker, and especially the [Phase Two Interim Report](#), highlighted the valuable role that Virtual School Heads and their support teams play in mapping local provision and building strengthened partnerships between schools, social care, and other services. Virtual Schools therefore play a vital role in facilitating a more coordinated and collaborative approach to supporting children with a social worker, and – with appropriate resource – could build on this role to help improve the interface with health-led services to support health, wellbeing and development of children in support of their educational progress and wider life outcomes.

3. The importance of relational practice

Two further findings from our work to evaluate the work of virtual school heads highlight the importance of inclusive practices and engagement with parents and other carers. Virtual Schools Heads and their teams worked with schools to promote and implement more inclusive practices for children with a social worker, resulting in improved attendance and reduced exclusions. Similarly, their efforts to increase the capacity of parents and carers to support their children's education showed positive trends, though challenges remain.

Our projects with the Alex Timpson Trust, and with the Hadley Trust, provide further evidence that improved outcomes are best supported by positive relationships with supportive adults. This is relevant in education and for the homelife of children in care, or with a social worker.

Specifically, it is crucial to the development of positive supportive relationships for supporting adults to take a **trauma-informed approach** to understanding of the challenges felt by children and young people who have experienced abuse or neglect.

The [Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme](#) studied the perceived impact of ‘whole school’ attachment and trauma awareness training on experiences and outcomes for vulnerable young people. The programme ran between 2017 and 2022 involving 305 primary, secondary and special schools across 26 local authority areas in England. Teachers involved in the programme identified reported **enhanced student engagement, wellbeing and enjoyment of school**, as well as positive impacts on students’ sense of support and ability to communicate their needs. Head teachers observed **improvements in attendance, learning and attainment**. A significant number reported reductions in the need for sanctions, including suspensions. In addition, the programme fostered **a more empathetic and relationship-focused school ethos, contributing to a supportive environment for all students**.

These findings suggest that whole-school attachment and trauma awareness training can lead to significant improvements in student outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations. The success of such programmes depends on sustained commitment, comprehensive training, and collaborative efforts across the educational community.

Although a trauma-informed approach is necessary, it is unlikely to be sufficient. Relational practice needs to be developed to be complementary to other approaches to promote educational belonging and progress. In the next phase of our work, we will be exploring how SEND needs are assessed alongside trauma, abuse and neglect, and whether a more integrated model of practice can be developed. This is crucial as education, SEND, and Children’s Social Care professionals working with the same children and young people currently adopt practice models with different theoretical underpinnings, languages and cultures. This can present additional challenges for the children, their families and carers when trying to ensure professionals have a holistic understanding of needs, and when accessing support.

4. More effective and ethical use of children’s information

Our past work shows that an effective Children’s Social Care system requires meaningful information about the children, families and carers it supports, and the capacity to analyse and make appropriate use of that information – at local as well as national level. For example, the [Phase Two Interim Report](#) of the Virtual School Heads evaluation highlighted the need to maintain and further develop data sharing between agencies to ensure timely identification and support for children with a social worker.

[The Children’s Information Project](#), funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is supporting local authorities in England in how they listen to children so that their voices and wider needs are better represented within the data that are collected about them, and about how that information is used. A team of researchers from five universities (including the Rees Centre) is

working closely with practitioners, children and families in four local sites to develop ways to ethically collect, process and share this data, to improve support and services for children.

At present, data requirements are largely set by and for a range of central government departments. This information is often not joined up across returns and provides a one-dimensional view which does not reflect the reality of an individual child's needs or experiences.

The design of these information systems rarely supports practitioners doing direct work with children or local decision-making. The resulting data is not sufficiently granular to support local leaders to understand better the needs of local population and how services can be shaped to meet them, and the requirements of national data returns absorb practitioner time and limited local analytical capacity which could be better spent on improving local services. There is an increasing interest in the use of machine learning to address these challenges, but without an effective framework to help local players develop approaches that will make effective use of technology while avoiding the known risks of AI amplifying underlying biases in data, protecting the role of professional judgement, and ensuring transparency and accountability for data subjects to understand – and challenge where necessary – how decisions about them have been made.

The Children's Information Project team has drawn on the local approaches being developed in response to these challenges to propose a 'Framework' for effective use of children's information. In its current iteration – to be refined over the final two years of this project which runs to 2026 – this Framework covers five elements: the importance of **integrating voice** within information that is generated and held, and about how it is used; the need for information systems to help national and local decision-makers **understand needs** in a more holistic and consistent way; the desirability of **making best use of all available information**, including drawing on a wider range of locally available local data, alongside care work to ensure **appropriate use and learning** that reflects sound understanding of local delivery systems, data quality and interpretation, and what each partner contributes to intended outcomes. All of this needs to be underpinned by **ethical information governance approaches** so that local partners take a consistent, principled approach to information use which balances legal and purposeful data sharing and use with avoidance of harm and opportunities for redress.

We believe this Framework would be equally valuable to those responsible for developing national information systems and the Project is keen to work alongside central government in the next stages of development of initiatives like the Children's Social Care dashboard, a consistent identifier for children (single unique identifier) and the development of the 'school readiness' milestone as part of the national missions for government. We believe this is essential to the delivery of a more meaningful performance and accountability system that ensures the children and families supported by children's social care are both seen and heard.

Professor Leon Feinstein, on behalf of the Rees Centre, University of Oxford

5 February 2025