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Developing a Virtual School Kinship Care programme: an exploratory co- production study

Surrey Virtual School

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Kinship care refers to situations where a child is raised by relatives or friends rather than their parents. In England, approximately 141,000 children live in kinship care—double the number in foster care. Evidence suggests kinship care often provides stronger relational stability and trust compared to unrelated foster care. However, challenges can persist for children in kinship care, including bullying, overcrowded living conditions, and limited engagement with social workers. Educational support is frequently inadequate, with high levels of unmet special educational needs and mental health difficulties among this group.

Kinship Care and the role of the Virtual School

In 2024, following a commitment in the National Kinship Strategy, the Department for Education (DfE) extended the strategic role of virtual schools to include children in kinship care. This role focuses on raising visibility of kinship needs, promoting attendance and engagement, and narrowing achievement and attainment gaps. Virtual schools also provide advice and information to all kinship carers with a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order regardless of care experience or social care support. Virtual Schools across the country have a strong collective track record of improving educational outcomes of looked after, previously looked after and children with a social worker.¹² The DfE is now making these duties statutory through the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill. There is currently very little research focussing on educational experiences and outcomes of children in kinship care, therefore the Surrey Virtual School and Achieving for Children Virtual Schools identified this as their starting point, to ensure an evidence-based approach to delivering new statutory duties.

¹ [Evaluation of the Extension of Virtual School Heads’ Duties to Children with a Social Worker Final Report](#)

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² [Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Methodology

The study adopted a co-production, iterative, mixed-methods approach across three phases (Dec 2024–July 2025). The study had four aims:

1. To create a theory of change for the kinship care education programme to include Virtual School activities and the short-, medium- and long-term outcomes of the programme.
2. To identify initial progress against the short- and medium-term outcomes of the programme.
3. To explore the contribution of a 'cluster group' approach with education professionals to inform the development of the kinship programme and initial progress against the TOC outcomes.
4. To enable participating Virtual Schools to draw on an initial evidence base when planning their approach to delivering against DFE duties around improving educational outcomes of children in kinship care.

Data collection included interviews with kinship carers and teachers, surveys at two time points with teachers, a cluster group focus meeting, and a Ripple Effect Mapping workshop. Ethical approval was secured from St Mary's University, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Findings

The study developed a theory of change to guide the kinship care education programme. This framework identified resources, activities, and outcomes across short-, medium-, and long-term horizons. Short-term outcomes focused on understanding barriers to identifying children in kinship care and defining inclusive practices. Medium-term outcomes aimed to increase visibility, expand advice provision, and strengthen partnerships. The long-term goal is for children in kinship care to thrive and achieve in education.

- Barriers to identifying children in kinship care

Participants described some of the challenges with there being no legal basis for local authorities to identify kinship arrangements at time of admission. Because of this lack of

guidance from the Department of Education, schools and local authorities lack systematic processes to record kinship care status. Admissions forms and management information systems often omit this information, leaving identification dependent on informal knowledge. Carers themselves may not recognise their role as kinship carers, further complicating accurate recording.

- Challenges for kinship carers and children

Kinship carers in the study described how carers can face emotional strain, financial hardship, and systemic pressures. Many carers can take on caregiving unexpectedly, often sacrificing employment or pensions. Family dynamics can be disrupted, creating tension among relatives. Carers also reported the difficulties there can be in accessing relevant training and support from social workers, alongside administrative hurdles such as obtaining legal documents. Carers described how children frequently experience loss, stigma, and identity challenges, compounded by educational gaps and emotionally disruptive contact arrangements.

- Inclusive practice and gaps in provision

Professionals described how effective support relies on attachment and trauma -informed approaches, flexibility in school provision, and targeted interventions. Schools that offered breakfast clubs and extracurricular activities described how it helped to help foster stability and engagement with children and their kinship carers. However, gaps in provision remain including: a lack of visibility, absence of a centralised resource given that children living in kinship care include a broad range of contexts: inconsistent mental health support for children in kinship care, and limited respite opportunities for carers.

- Kinship Care Padlet

To address the need for a central resource, the Virtual School and St Mary's University developed the Kinship Care Education Padlet. This online tool consolidates guidance and signposts kinship carers and relevant professionals to national and local guidance and support. Feedback from teachers and carers highlighted its comprehensiveness and ease of sharing. Challenges included digital literacy among some carers, which could be mitigated by

printable sections and face-to-face introductions. At the time of writing, there had been 401 views of the Padlet by 198 visitors. Since the end of the pilot, the Padlet has been continued to be shared with professionals, carers and the wider community. By December 2025 this had increased to 474 views from 228 visitors; this reflects the appetite for this resource.

- Strengthened partnerships

The Virtual School raised the profile of kinship care and the educational needs of children through multiple means including presentations, flyers, and in person engagement with local support groups. Through collaboration with the national charity Kinship the knowledge and understanding of professionals increased and kinship carers heard more about the work and specific role of the Virtual School. Attendance at a national conference further promoted the Kinship Care Padlet as an innovative resource.

- Systemic approaches to identifying children in kinship care

Participants proposed three approaches to improve systemic identification of children in kinship care:

- I. Introducing identifiers in school MIS systems
- II. Amending school intake information forms
- III. Introducing a kinship code for the national school census to identify children in kinship care and target resources.

Each approach offers advantages but requires time and coordination to implement effectively.

- Cluster group impact

Overall, the findings showed that the cluster group approach had been a promising approach in contributing towards progress against the programme outcomes. Participants valued the opportunities for networking and peer learning provided by the cluster group. It provided a forum for sharing best practices and discussing common challenges with colleagues from other settings, those with lived experience and professionals from the LA and university.

Participants reported the following outcomes:

- I. enhanced understanding of the kinship care context for the children and for carers such as, for example, a clearer grasp of informal arrangements and the unique challenges faced by kinship carers and their children
- II. increased knowledge and understanding of the needs of children in kinship care and their carers
- III. increased confidence to improve inclusive practices such as, for example, explicitly including children in kinship care in a Vulnerable Groups spreadsheet which was regularly reviewed in Designated Safeguarding Lead update meetings
- IV. prioritising equity and emotional well-being for children in kinship care with, for example, improved communication between schools and kinship carers.

Summary and recommendations

The study demonstrates that co-production and collaborative approaches can accelerate progress in supporting children in kinship care within their education. The combined findings from the various data collection methods showed that the Virtual School was making good progress against the short-term outcomes programme outcomes and four of the five medium term programme outcomes. The following recommendations are made.

National:

- Department of Education to amend admissions legal requirements to include an option to identify kinship care
- In England (and Wales), kinship care is not currently a standard category in the School Census or in the National Pupil Database. DfE to consider adding an identifier to raise the visibility of children in kinship care
- Alongside this, DfE (with expert sector support) to consider creation of guidance for parents and carers explaining the benefits of making kinship care experience known to their child's school
- Ensure that Pupil Premium Plus Conditions of Grant makes clear reference to children in kinship care and explains their eligibility (or not) for PP+ funding. Consider

expanding eligibility so that there is an equitable PP+ offer for all children in kinship care.

Local Authority/ Virtual School:

- Ensure equitable support for carers, including respite and emotional wellbeing services recognising the important role they play in children's education
- Develop and maintain a high-quality central resource to offer advice and guidance around improving the educational outcomes of children in kinship care
- Continue to share learning from the pilot with schools and education settings to enable sustainable change through training and targeted support
- Continue to support schools with attachment aware trauma informed training and resources to expand inclusive practices, increasing visibility of children in kinship care
- Ensure that the Virtual School's programme of advice and guidance is integrated into the LA's Local Offer around Kinship.

Schools:

- Amend school onboarding or admissions forms to enable the identification of kinship care within the school community
- Expand inclusive practices through trauma and attachment-informed training and resources
- Ensure curriculum resources reflect and include a positive and inclusive narrative about the experiences of children in kinship care families and avoid contributing to assumptions about traditional family structures
- Careful consideration about the intersectionality of children in kinship care, and the different ways in which they (and their families) may view different aspects of their identity
- Consider the specific needs of kinship carers (many of whom are 'returners' to education) when developing parent/carer engagement activities.