Dorset Virtual School Annual Report

2025/26

Contents

Introduction 4
Purpose of the report 4
A year in summary 4
Virtual School Structure and responsibilities 5
Children and young people in the Virtual School 6
Educational Engagement for Children in Care 7
Attendance 7
Children in Care Not in Full Time Education 8
Permanent Exclusions 9
Suspensions 9
Attainment data for Children in Care 10
Early Years 10
Phonics Screening 10
Year 4 multiplication check: 10
Key Stage 2: 10
Key Stage 4: 10
Key Stage 5: 11
Main qualification (year 13) 11
Main qualification (year 12): 12
Personal Education Plans and resources including Pupil Premium Plus 12
Pupil Premium Plus 13
Educational engagement for Children in Need and on Child Protection Plans 13
Attendance 13
Children in Care Not in Full Time Education 14
Exclusions 14
Permanent Exclusions 14
Suspensions 14
Elective Home Education 15
Attainment data Children in Need and children on Child Protection plans 15
Key Stage 2 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Support for children who are adopted, Post Looked After or in Kinship Care arrangements 15
Child Voice and Virtual School Projects 16
Celebrating Child Successes 16
Oracy Project 16
Numeracy project 16

Creative Music Course 17
Supporting Learning 17
Supporting our children with SEN 17
Support for our Early Years Children 18
Support for our Unaccompanied young people 18
Knowledge Exchange Programme with University College London 18
Big Bids 19
Virtual Reality training 19
Higher Education project 20
Pre-16 provision 20
Virtual School training 20
Appendix 1: School Development Plan 2026/27 21
Appendix 2: Attendance for 2025/26 22

Introduction

Dorset Virtual School is a proud educational advocate for our children. Our vision for our children is that they thrive in the right educational setting; they attend, feel included and listened to and are understood, to prepare them to become independent and resilient young people.



We have had a very busy 2025 – 26 supporting our children and young people to thrive in education whilst supporting our settings to improve practice for all children within the Virtual School through a range of targeted, proactive work to improve outcomes and experiences. The Virtual School team understands the need for patience, resilience, innovation and the importance of building effective relationships to ensure that we can create the environments in which our children and young people can thrive.

It is a privilege to be the Head of Service with responsibility for the work of the Virtual School including the extended role of the Virtual School Head

Jo Smark-Richards: Head of Children Thriving in Education and Virtual School Headteacher

Purpose of the report

This report provides an overview and analysis of the impact of Dorset Virtual School's work during the academic year 2025 – 26 and is the key educational advocacy service of Dorset's Education Service within the Children's Services Directorate for Dorset's Children in Care, Care Leavers, children with a Social Worker, children in Kinship Care arrangements and children previously looked after.

A year in summary

2025/26 has been a year of reflection and transformation within the team to embed the work of the extended role alongside our work with our Children in Care and Care Leavers and has given the opportunity to build relationships with our partners to ensure that our children and young people have the opportunity to achieve and be successful.

We have focused on highlighting and celebrating belonging and inclusion within our work and practice, embedding proactive training opportunities for our settings and reflecting on how we capture and use our children's' voices to improve our practice.

Virtual School headline data is reported weekly to the Children's Services Leadership Team with Key Performance Indicators reported monthly to ensure that there is a line of sight of the work of the Virtual School. Performance is also reported monthly to the Corporate Parenting Board. The Virtual School Governing Body has a forward plan of monitoring activity linked to the priorities on the School Development Plan and continues to challenge the Virtual School to ensure that it is providing all our children with the best education possible.
Some of the key strengths this year have been:

- Delivery of 4th Knowledge Exchange Programme in collaboration with University College London - working in partnership with a cross-phase group of specialist and mainstream providers to develop practice

- Proactive staff training offer implemented and focused annual conference on Belonging for our children
- Reduction in suspensions for Children in Care over a three-year period
- Ensured that there has been no increase in suspensions for children with on Child in Need plans
- Reduction in the number of permanent exclusions for Children in Care (0 children) and for children on Child Protection Plans (6 children compared to 20)
- Increase in attendance 88% (Children in Care), 77% (children on Child Protection plans) and 80% for Children in Need
- Reduction in the use of reduced timetables for Children in Care over a three-year period
- Reduction in Children in Care not having a school place over a 3-year period
- Increase in the number of Post 16 who are in Education, Employment or Training (75% monthly average) (Children in Care)
- Focus on targeted interventions for all children within the Virtual School
- Outstanding PEP Quality Assurance (98% good or outstanding)
- Weekly celebrations of 267 children and young people who have excelled in education or overcome significant barriers
- Delivery of a bespoke Key Stage 4 programme to support our Children in Care back into school and Post 16 provision
- Development of our support for children in kinship care arrangements
- Good outcomes for phonics, year 4 multiplication check, Key Stage 2 SATs, GCSE and Post 16 for Children in Care
- Developed offer for our children living in Kinship Care arrangements

We need to focus on:

- Improving attendance for those children with persistent and severe absence
- Reduce suspensions for children on Child Protection plans
- Embedding our children's voice within our work
- Working with locality practitioners and partners to develop good practice to reduce suspensions, particularly for children with Special Educational Needs
- Develop a robust monitoring report for children with a Social Worker who are Electively Home Educated in preparation for Children's Wellbeing Act.
- Develop bespoke training for Virtual School on Post 16/18 offer
- Consider impact of tutoring funding on Pupil Premium+
- Monitoring of attainment outcomes for Children on Child in Need and Child protection plans

Virtual School Structure and responsibilities

The Virtual School is led by the Head of Children Thriving in Education and Virtual School Headteacher. The Virtual School team delivers their work within Dorset Council localities, enabling best practice to be disseminated and shared within the wider Children's Services structure. This enables the best possible support and guidance to be available for our schools and children and young people.

The Virtual School team consists of:

• One Specialist Teacher with responsibility for data and assessment for Children in Care and Care Leavers

• Two Team Managers with responsibility for children with Social Worker and children in kinship care arrangements and responsibility for children with SEND

•One Inclusion Lead with responsibility for ensuring the monitoring of attendance, progress and inclusion for children with Social Worker and children in kinship care arrangements

• Fourteen Virtual School Leads (11.8 FTE): responsibilities are for a case load of 45 children in each locality (and a share of those children out of authority), ensuring that children have a suitable and ambitious education offer, there is strong liaison with their settings and Designated Teachers, and the Personal Education Plan (PEP) is effective in supporting children's progress.

Each member of the team holds a whole school responsibility to support the priorities of the Virtual School. This enables the team to develop leadership skills and have a sense of autonomy over the priorities within the school.

The School Development Plan 2026/27 has set three strategic priorities with an overarching aim to ensure that all children within the Virtual School are ambitious around education and feel they belong. (further details in appendix 1):

A programme of half-termly Continuous Professional Development is in place for the Virtual School Team. CPD training themes in the academic year 2025/26 have included:

- Using Welfare Call to monitor attendance
- PEP quality assurance
- SEND annual reviews and EOTAs
- VSEND
- Working with the Youth Justice Service

Children and young people in the Virtual School

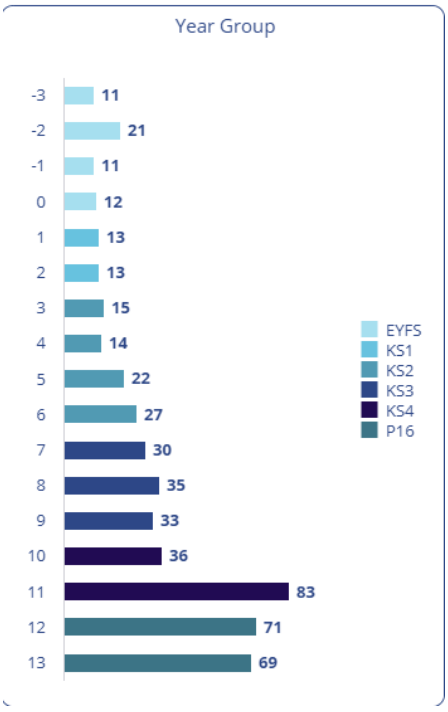
Children join the Virtual School from the age of 2 to the end of the academic year following their 18th birthday. In this way the Virtual School can bridge the change from Social Worker to Personal Advisor (PA) and maintain advice and guidance about education from a position of best knowledge of the young person. The Virtual School ensures that the PA is involved in post-16 PEPs alongside the social worker and is well briefed with regards to the young person's ambitions and any barriers to learning.



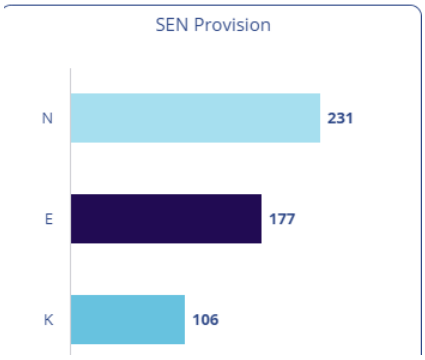
The Virtual School work with children with a Social Worker and children in kinship care arrangements or previously looked after from the age of 2 to the end of the academic year following their 18th birthday. This allows the Virtual School team to support settings and our Social Work teams to champion the educational progress and outcomes for these young people and ensure that our children's voice is heard throughout their educational career.

At the end of the reporting period, 516 children and young people were part of our school as Children in Care or Care Leavers (an increase from 491 in July 2025). The Virtual School cohorts range from early years to our Post 16 cohort, which is made up of young people in Sixth Form, Further Education colleges, those in apprenticeships and those in employment.

The Virtual School has a higher number of young people across Key Stage 4 and 5 and an increasing number of children in Early Years in 2025/26.



The Virtual School Children in Care cohort is 62% male, with 51% of our young people living in County. 34% of our children have an EHCP and a further 21% of our cohort have an identified SEN need. In terms of SEN, 61% of our children have SEMH listed as their primary need (63% in 2024/25) with a further 33% listing complex needs.



At the end of the reporting period, 333 children and young people on Child Protection Plans and 1080 children and young people on Child in Need plans sat within the extended role of the Virtual School.

The Virtual School Children in Need cohort is 51% male and on Child Protection Plans is 52% male, with 22% of our Children in Need and 18% of our children in Child Protection having an EHCP. Additionally, four children on Child Protection Plans and 9 Children in Need are currently electively home educated.

Educational Engagement for Children in Care

Attendance

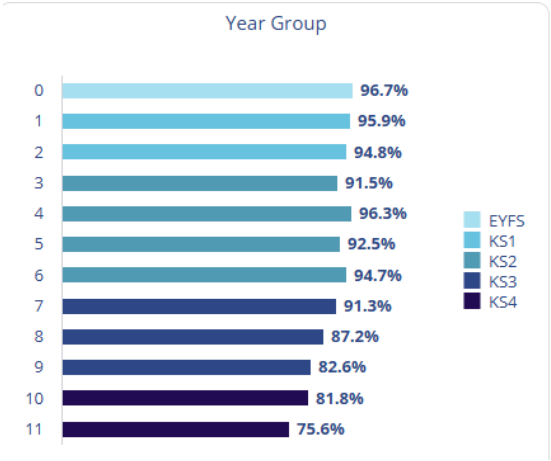
The Virtual School undertakes daily attendance monitoring through Welfare Call's live dashboard, providing dynamic and instant overview of attendance for all cohorts. This robust system provides data at a cohort and individual level to give an accurate view of attendance, reasons for absence and patterns of absence. This has enabled the Virtual School to monitor, analyse and respond to attendance concerns rapidly and remains a key area for improvement (priority 1 on the School Development Plan). The attendance overview for statutory school age children in the academic year 2025 - 2026 is provided in Appendix 2.

Our ambition is to ensure that all our children thrive and achieve through the targeted monitoring of and challenging of attendance within the Virtual School. This also includes the reduction of persistent absence and unauthorised absence.

Dorset's attendance was above the Welfare Call Local Authorities average (87% compared to 86%) and slightly below Dorset in 2024/25 (88%).

Additionally, there are 25 children with 100% attendance, 151 children with above 95% attendance and 203 children with above 90% attendance.

Attendance for children with an EHCP was slightly lower compared to the whole cohort (84.7%) with the lowest attendance seen in year 10 (74.7%) and year 11 (73.4%). Attendance for children with a SEN need was higher (86.4%) with the lowest attendance seen in year 11 (64.1%).



Persistent absence is defined as attending less than 90% of school sessions. Persistent absence figures have increased since the previous year with 34.23% having less than 90% attendance and above the Welfare Call average at 30.2%.

Severe Absence is defined as attending 50% or less. There has been a slight decrease in children with severe absence (9.31% of our children) compared to 9.4% in 2024/25. Dorset Virtual School have lower levels of severe absence compared to the Welfare Call average of 10.94% for 2025/26.

A piece of work has been undertaken by the team to unpick barriers to education for this cohort of children with illness as the biggest driver of the increase in absence; an increase in anxiety and capacity within specialist provision to support places also contributing, as well as changing behaviours and habits during the Pandemic.

Attendance monitoring will remain a focus for the Virtual School in 2025/26 with targeted support for children with persistent absence. Further scrutiny through bi-monthly Virtual School Inclusion Monitoring Board meetings involving the Virtual School Leads, SEN Leads and Social Workers allows discussion, analysis and support for targeted children to monitor and address concerns.

Children in Care Not in Full Time Education

Reducing the number of children in care who are missing out on education is within priority 1 of the development plan. To address this there are robust methods for identifying, supporting and tracking these children The Virtual School Inclusion Monitoring Board focuses on actions being taken to re-engage identified children and young people in education (or training and employment if relevant post-16) with a cross Children's Services panel. The meeting gives clear oversight of these children and ensures that robust actions are in place to secure suitable full-time education.

Children in Care and Care Leavers	Children missing education	Reduced timetables	Young People Not in Education Employment or Training
2023/24	39	17	73
2024/25	33	19	78
2025/26	23	15	61

Dorset Virtual School has ensured that 75% of its Post 16 young people are in education, employment or training with 20 Post 16 young people also employed in part-time or full-time employment or accessing tutoring as their provision. These young people are still monitored on the fortnightly inclusion monitoring board to ensure that the correct support and guidance is offered throughout their career and close collaboration with the Leaving Care and Education, Employment and Training team has been crucial to this success. School-aged children without a school place and on reduced timetables has reduced for the third year running through the use of the monitoring board to ensure support is provided.

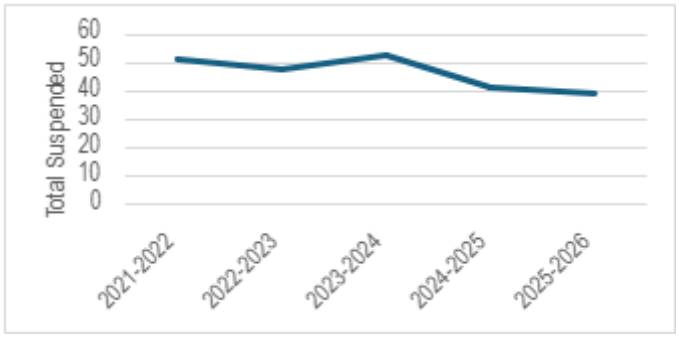
Permanent Exclusions

There have been zero permanent exclusion during 2025/26. This is a three-year reduction in permanent exclusions for Children in Care.

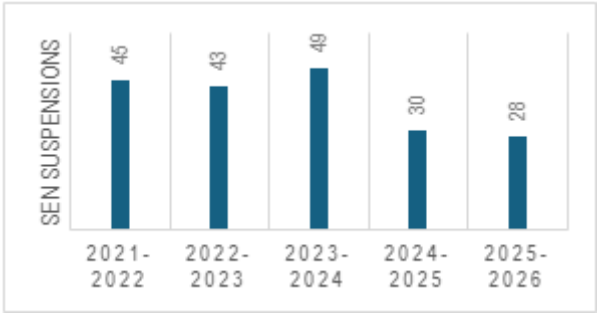
Suspensions

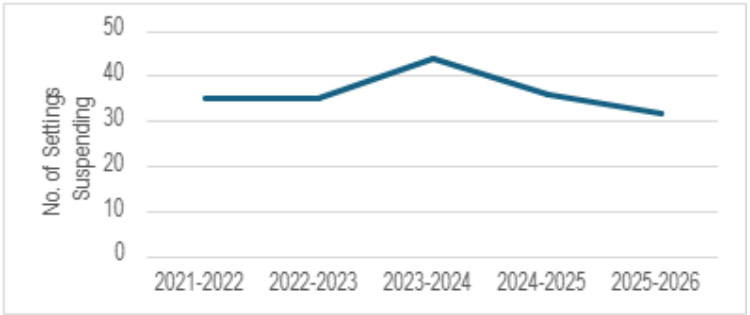
The Virtual School undertakes daily monitoring of suspensions and permanent exclusions through Welfare Call's live dashboard, providing dynamic and instant overview of exclusions of our young people.

With a focus on reducing suspensions, 11.40% (39 children) of children had at least one suspension during the academic year, highlighting a three-year decrease in suspensions. 64$ of these children were in secondary education.



There has also been a three-year reduction in the number of suspensions for children with an EHCP or SEN need (8.19%) and a three-year reduction in the number of settings suspending children (9.36% of settings)





Reasons for suspensions are persistent disruptive behaviour (18 suspensions), Other (vaping and smoking) (14 suspensions) and verbal abuse towards an adult (10 suspensions).

Due to the work undertaken by the Virtual School, there has been a reduction in suspensions for young people and a reduction in the number of schools who repeatedly suspend our children. Virtual School Leads attend every reintegration meeting with the

school and team around the child and collate feedback from the child and team about strategies to prevent further suspensions. Further focused meetings for suspensions are planned in 2026/27 to further improve our suspension rates.

Attainment data for Children in Care

Early Years

There are 36 children in Early Years settings. 81% (29 children) are making good progress towards their Early Years Foundation Stage Good Level of Progress checks.

Phonics Screening

There are thirteen children in year 1 with 100% taking the screening test. Conclusions are difficult to draw due to the small number of children within our cohort. 77% are working at expected outcomes which is an increase on 2024/25.
Twelve of the children have been with the Virtual School for 12 months plus and progress reports throughout the year from teaching staff have been positive with 80% of the children making good or expected progress.

Year 4 multiplication check:

In year 4, there were 14 children on roll. Three children are in specialist provision with both unable to access and disapplied from the assessment. The mean average score for Dorset Children in Care is 19 (maintained at 19 from 2024/25) with five children scoring full marks; the mean average for the year 4 multiplication check for all children is 19.

Key Stage 2:

In year 6, there are 27 children with 26 children on roll. Nineteen of these children have either an EHCP or SEN need with four children in specialist provision who were disapplied from the assessment.

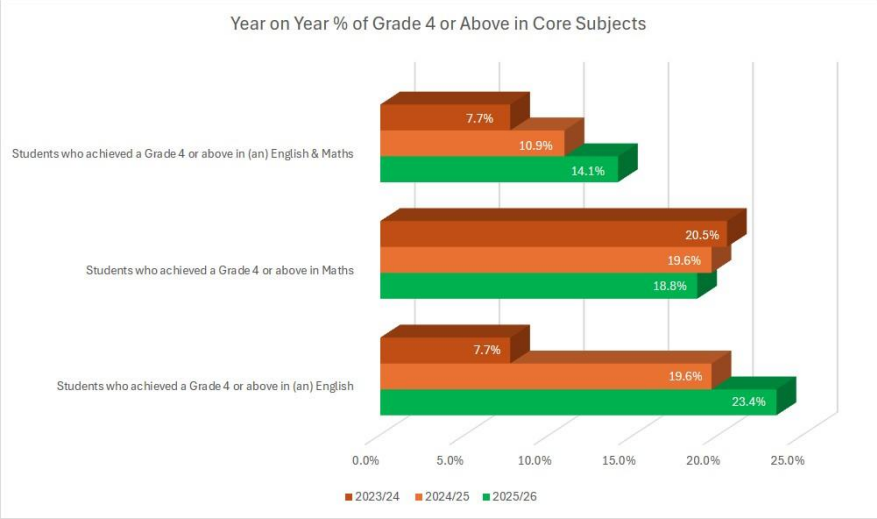
40% of our children are working at expected standard in maths, 48% at reading and 40% of our children are working at expected standard for Spelling, punctuation and grammar. This is 8% higher for reading and 2% higher for maths and SPaG in 2024/25.

Key Stage 4:

In year 11, there were 81 children on roll during 2025/26 (59 in 2024/25) with 14.81% being children seeking asylum. 45% of year 11 have an EHCP and 14% have a SEN need.

59.3% of our young people are in mainstream provision and 19.8% within specialist provision. 2.5% of our young people (2) were not in education to take examinations. 23% of our young people (15) did not sit exams this year.

We have seen a sustained achievement rate with 18.8% (12 children) of our cohort achieving a grade 4 or above in maths (19.6% - 9 children in 2024/25) and a marked improvement with 23.4% (15 children) (achieving a grade 4 or above in English (19.6% - 9 children in 2024/25). There has also been an improvement in the number of children gaining a grade 4 or above in both English and maths 14.1% (10.9% in 2024/25).



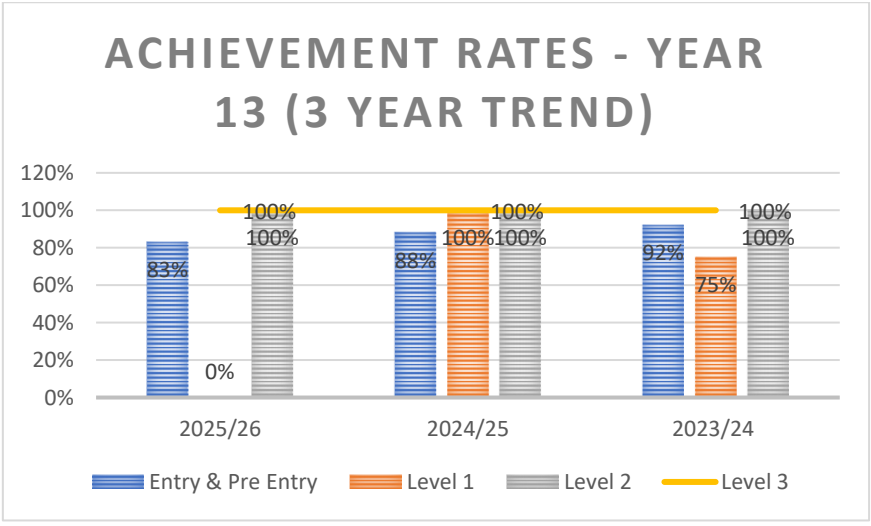
There has been a marked improvement in the number of children achieving grade 5 or above in English (10.9% vs 8.7%) and maths (14.1% vs 10.9%) in 2025/26 compared to the previous year and this is due to targeted interventions for young people, including tutoring, revision resources and targets set during termly PEPs that have focused on final outcomes. There has also been an improvement in the number of young people achieving five or more grade 4s and above (including English and maths) 10.9% (7 children) compared to 2024/25 (8.7% 4 children).

Key Stage 5:

Main qualification (year 13)

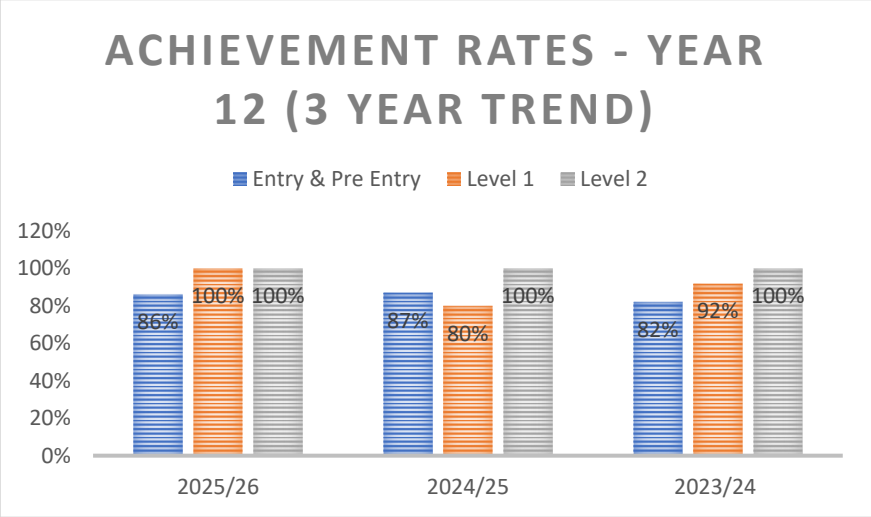
There were 69 young people in year 13, Six of the young people are in employment, ten are engaged with tutoring and 27 young people were not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). 26 young people were enrolled on provision in further education. Additionally, 11 young people in year 13 are unaccompanied young people accessing ESOL courses and Functional Skills maths. Of these, 82% (11) passed their main qualification.

Our year 13 young people performed well in their main qualifications with 100% of our young people passing, level 1 and 3 programmes. 83% of our young people on Entry Level programmes passed (11 out of 13 young people).



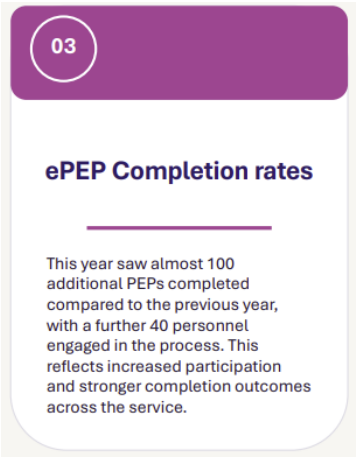
Main qualification (year 12):

There were 70 young people in year 12 within the Virtual School. Three of the young people are in employment, 3 are accessing tutoring and 9 young people Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). 52 young people were enrolled on provision in further education with 38 sitting assessments this year. In 2025/26, the Virtual School had comparable entrants on each level of full-time course but saw higher achievement rates for every level of programme in comparison to 2024/25



Personal Education Plans and resources including Pupil Premium Plus

The Virtual School uses a PEP quality assurance process for all PEPs. There are clear quality assurance criteria and training has been delivered to the Virtual School Team on what a good PEP looks like. Training has also been delivered to Designated Teachers and there is a strong focus on the PEP in the Virtual School Handbook. All PEPs are peer Quality Assurance (QA) reviewed. The QA outcome appears on the PEP so that all involved in the PEP are able to see the grading and any feedback given. Themed audits of PEPs review specific aspects of the school development plan, such as the quality of the use of the child's voice through person centred planning, are a central part of link governor monitoring. QA outcomes are fed back to the Full Governing Body Meeting for oversight.



The impact of the work to strengthen the PEP process can be seen in the PEP QA results with 98% of PEPs found to be good or better (95% 2024/25) with an increase in the number of gold PEPs being awarded (44). As a breakdown, each cohort has seen an improvement in PEP quality with a maintaining of quality for Post 16;

- Early Years 100% good or outstanding
- Primary 100% good or outstanding
- Secondary 99% good or outstanding
- Post 16 98% good or outstanding

Completion of PEPs within 20 days of the PEP date has remains an area of strength with all PEPs being completed, signed off by the Designated Teacher, Social Worker and Virtual School Lead. Overall, 96% of PEPs were completed within 20 days of the PEP date with the

remaining PEPs being completed within 25 days. This has involved 374 staff being involved in the PEP process.

Term	Number of PEPs completed	Average number of days to be signed off by the Designated teacher, Social Worker, Virtual School Lead and quality assured.
Autumn 2025	501 (442 in 2024/25)	17 days
Spring 2026	508 (459 in 2024/25)	15 days
Summer 2026	495 (495 in 2024/25)	17 days

Attendance to PEPs has also improved in 2025/26 with termly feedback given to our Social Care terms so that they can further support our children and young people at the next PEP.

Term	Child/Young Person	Social Worker/ Personal Advisor	Designated Teacher
Autumn 2025	46%	70%	94%
Spring 2026	46%	70%	94%
Summer 2026	59%	73%	97%

Pupil Premium Plus

Pupil Premium Panel meet on a weekly basis to consider requests for funded interventions. These decisions are recorded and shared with Children's Services Accountant. The document is reconciled with the Council's Financial Ledger each month. This ensures that payments have been allocated, and it is clear how much of the Grant is available to use to inform future funding requests. Outcomes from the meetings are reported to the Virtual School Governing Body.

During 2025/26, £463,829 of interventions were approved with 51% being spent on secondary school children, 21% on Post 16 young people and 28% on primary and Early Years children. The average pupil premium cost per child of PEP outcomes achieved was £1230 (£386 per outcome). 50% was spent on targeted academic support and 33% was spent on wider strategies. Targeted academic support interventions include tutoring and small group sessions whilst wider strategies include social, emotional support, trips and arts interventions.

Educational engagement for Children in Need and on Child Protection Plans

Attendance

National data for attendance will not be released until Spring 2027 as a comparison. Dorset Children in Need overall attendance stands at 80% (78.68% in 2025/26) whilst attendance for children on Child Protection plans stands at 77% (77.12% in 2025/26). There has been a slight improvement in persistent absence for children on Child Protection plans 58% (59% in 2025/26) and Children in Need 50% (53% in 2025/26.)

Severe absence (Child Protection 15% and Children in Need 17%) has stayed at similar levels to 2025/26 and this is an area to focus on in 2026/27, working in collaboration with locality teams to increase awareness of the impact of attendance for young people.

The Virtual School undertakes weekly cohort attendance monitoring through the Inclusions dashboard to provide tracking of trends for these children. This has enabled the Virtual School Extended Team to monitor, analyse and respond to attendance concerns rapidly and remains a key area for improvement (priority 1 on the School Development Plan). The attendance overview for statutory school age children in the academic year 2025 - 2026 is provided in Appendix 2.

Children in Care Not in Full Time Education

An Inclusion Monitoring Board is chaired by the Locality Learning and Belonging Service Manager fortnightly that focuses on actions being taken to re-engage identified children and young people in education (or training and employment if relevant post-16) with the Virtual School extended team supporting with this. The meeting gives clear oversight of these children and ensures that robust actions are in place to secure suitable full-time education or equivalent.

The team have focussed on identifying the children within the cohort and plans to support children back into education through the locality teams. During 2025/26, there have been 31 Children in Need and 5 children on Child Protection plans opened to a reduced timetable and 7 Children in Need and 2 children on Child Protection plans became CME (reduction on 2024/25).

The Extended Team are working with the locality Learning and Belonging Service Managers fortnightly to monitor this cohort and ensure there is timely responses to finding suitable education.

Currently, tracking for young people in Post 16 provision is monitored through the Education, employment and training team and the Extended team have worked closely to ensure monitoring of year 11 young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training in year 12.

Exclusions

Permanent Exclusions

There have been six permanent exclusions during 2025/26 for Children on Child Protection plans and 8 permanent exclusions for Children in Need compared to five children subject to a Child Protection Plan and 20 Children in Need in 2024/25. The Extended Team are focusing in 2026/27 on the schools that have permanently excluded children with a Social Worker to consider alternative ways to suspension and preventative approaches.

Suspensions

In Dorset, there was a reduction in suspensions (1766 children compared to 1905 children in 2024/25). 48 children on a Child Protection Plan and 179 children on Child in Need plans had at least one suspension during the academic year. This is an increase in children on Child Protection plans having a suspension (16.9% against 11%) but suspensions for children on Child in Need plans has maintained at 22% of the cohort receiving a suspension.

In 2026/27, the focus for the Extended Team will be on Alternatives to suspensions, working collaboratively with Education Challenge Leads, Locality Learning and Belonging, the Youth Voice, Family Help and Educational Psychology teams who will lead the co-ordination in their localities of working with primary phase schools where a child has had one suspension and secondary phase schools where a child has had more than two suspensions.

Monthly data monitoring in 2026/27 will ensure there is oversight and focus particularly for children on Child Protection plans.

Elective Home Education

In 2025/26, there were 0 Children in Care, 7 children on Child Protection plans and 26 Children in Need who were electively home educated at some point during the academic year. Locality Learning and Belonging Teams monitor the home learning offer as part of the statutory role with Social Workers and Family Workers supporting the care aspect to the child's plan.

Attainment data Children in Need and children on Child Protection plans

The Virtual School has focused on collating attendance, suspensions and permanent exclusion data to improve outcomes. Work is underway to collect attainment data based on the March Census point for care status and this will be a focus in 2026/27 to ensure the accuracy of this data.

Support for children who are adopted, Post Looked After or in Kinship Care arrangements

The Virtual School aims to ensure outstanding educational achievement for our children who have previously been in care and in kinship care arrangements. We have amended our tracking system that monitors enquiries to the Virtual School that are allocated to locality based Virtual School Leads who provide support and guidance to families, schools and settings. This tracking is now incorporated in a half-termly board meeting, giving Virtual School Leads to discuss children and settings that they have worked with and to consider next steps.

The Virtual School has responsibility for supporting educational progress for children in kinship care arrangements. This has led to 98 enquiries from families and settings for support with key queries related to SEN and admissions. Attendance at the kinship steering group ensures that education remains a key support for our families. A new handbook to support families and settings around kinship was implemented in September 2025.

	Spring		Summer		
	Adoption	Kinship	Adoption	Kinship	Total
Total Number of Young People	15	6	14	8	43
Total Requests for Support	21	11	16	7	55
General Information	0	5	2	0	7
SEN	6	3	7	3	19
Attendance	6	0	1	3	10
Anxiety	2	0	1	3	6
Pupil Premium	1	1	1	0	3
Admissions	0	1	1	0	2
Transition	0	1	1	0	2
Exclusions	0	0	2	1	3
Funding	0	0	4	2	6
Attainment	0	0	1	0	1
Suspensions	0	0	1	0	1

Attachment	0	0	1	0	1
Behaviour at Home	0	0	1	0	1

Child Voice and Virtual School Projects

Dorset Virtual School have worked hard to ensure that our children and young people feel that they belong within the educational settings and also belong to the Virtual School. At every PEP, work is undertaken with our young people to collect their views and be curious about their interests. Further meetings have been held with two groups of children around ideas about belonging; This feedback informed the Education focused Corporate Parenting Board meeting in January 2026 and has led to new priorities for 26/27 set by out young people.

Celebrating Child Successes

The Virtual School has a strong focus on celebrating child successes and sharing these widely including with the extended Children's Services leadership team to ensure that our children's lived experience is in everyone's minds in a positive, strengths-based way and to celebrate good practice from teams working with our children.

Children's successes are celebrated weekly within the team, with each identified child receiving a £10 book voucher. During 2025/26, 267 children and young people were celebrated for a variety of reasons, including leading their PEP, accessing education full time after missing education for one term completing their ESOL qualification and moving to the next qualification. The positive acknowledgement of children's successes in the PEP meetings was recognised in governor monitoring as a strength of the PEPs.

The 2026 Virtual School Awards took place in July 2026 at Monkey World, Bovington following young people's feedback around the type of event they would like where they would be able to spend time with their families. 154 children and young people were nominated and celebrated at this event with five children and young people having an additional celebration from the Corporate Director for Education and Director of Children's Services. Additionally, nineteen Designated Teachers were nominated for their hard work and commitment to our young people and celebrated at the award this year alongside our 12 Designated Teachers of the month awards. The awards provided a valuable opportunity to show our young people, our Designated Teachers, and their supporters just how much they are appreciated and how proud we are of all they've achieved.

Oracy Project

The Extended Team have collaborated with the Education Challenge Leads to implement a bespoke oracy programme aimed at children in Key Stage 2 to improve literacy and oracy. This started on 25th April 2025 involving 12 settings in Chesil. The intended aims of the programme are to improve implementation climate for settings; Develop Accountable Talk knowledge and practice. There is much research into the significant benefits for disadvantaged pupils where schools have a strong focus on oracy and deliver this in a high quality and consistent way. Feedback has been positive; 'I think the training has put 'oracy' on the map in our schools (which has been slightly ahead of the game). Every school is giving more oracy opportunities to pupils'.

Numeracy project

The Extended Team have collaborated with the Education Challenge Leads to implement a bespoke numeracy programme aimed at children in Key Stage 2. Feedback is positive and teachers were able to take away some ideas to try out. In 2026/27, a focused CPD session is planned on assessment and curriculum adaptations for those pupils who are below or

significantly below expected levels highlighting supporting children to move from scaffolded support to independent learning.

Creative Music Course

Dorset Virtual School offered a one-day creative music course in collaboration with the Dorset History Centre and Dorset Music Service. Eight young people took part, exploring their creativity by making music using digital software, including working with backing tracks and overlaying with vocals and instruments. Plans are underway to offer this as an online afterschool club for our young people.

Supporting Learning

During 2025/26, the Virtual School supported 69 children and young people to have access to the Letterbox Literacy Club to encourage and foster a love of reading and to improve literacy. Feedback from this project was positive with one carer noting 'how excited our young person was to receive his first parcel. It is in his bedroom, by his bed waiting to be read!'



The Virtual School has also invested in a range of support materials and online learning packages for our children and young people to support with maths and English learning at Key Stage 2 and 4. This has been offered to 37 Children in Care and 13 Children with a Social Worker to be used as an additional revision resource for examinations with 23 young people making use of the programme during the year. 102 laptops have been offered to our young people during the year to support learning as well as offering 59 IXL licences for English, maths and science learning. Half-termly evaluations of the impact of the IXL licences is being undertaken by the team to ensure usage and feedback is gained from young people about its benefits.

Supporting our children with SEN

Dorset Virtual School have embedded and further developed the learning packs designed for children with a SEN need in 2025/26. These packs have been designed for children in homes with new carers who are waiting on a school place and allow learning to take place for up to four weeks. Each pack included resources based on The Gruffalo, The Snail and The Whale and Room on the Broom with activities based around literacy, numeracy, geography, art, music, science, cooking, outdoor education and drama opportunities. Each pack was designed to be flexible in terms of ability.

By providing our resource following a move, Dorset Virtual School are ensuring there is education in place for up to a month while SEN process is followed, and appropriate and welcoming provision secured.



In 2025/26, the Virtual School have developed further resources for older children and these will be introduced in 2026/27.

Support for our Early Years Children

One priority in 2025/26 was to embed the best practice for our children within early years settings. A focused literacy intervention for our Early Years children has been developed and had positive feedback from our families; The Gruffalo being the favoured set in the SEND pack, scoring 5/5 overall with 'How could the transition packs be improved? - "Don't think it could"' they will be using it everyday from one family. The Book Trust Story Explorers Literacy programme has also been offered to 26 children in care and 21 children on child in need or child protection plans to further support progress in literacy.

Targeted training for our Early Years settings has led to 100% of PEPs being graded as good and better and greater collaboration between the Dorset Best Start in Life Team, Virtual School and Health Visitors has ensured there is greater scrutiny and support educationally for children on Child in Need and Child Protection plans.

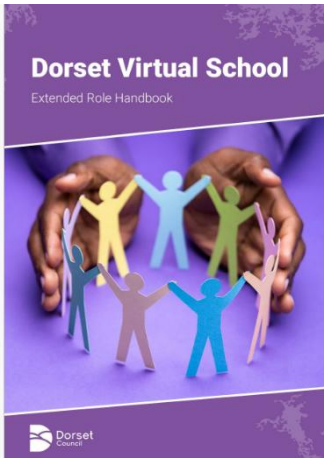
Support for our Unaccompanied young people

The Virtual School have built upon its support for our increasing numbers of unaccompanied young people during 2025- 26. A new toolkit for settings supporting our young people is being developed and a further review of the 'Welcome Pack', providing language learning resources and games that can be used within the family settings to encourage immersion in the English language has occurred. This has led to 18 packs being delivered to young people during the year.

Each young person is also provided with a laptop and language tuition as part of their welcome package and a targeted residential visit is planned for 2026/27 for our young people to develop an understanding for Dorset alongside a guide for educational staff to support or young people seeking asylum.

Knowledge Exchange Programme with University College London

The Virtual School partnered for the fourth year running with University College London (UCL) to deliver their Knowledge Exchange Programme that seeks to support practice in schools and colleges to improve outcomes for children within the Virtual School. It originated as a result of the dearth of evidence available to support schools in developing practice for this group of children and young people.



The programme engaged seven settings in a collaborative year long programme through access to research findings, a comprehensive school/college audit tool and regular support from facilitators with research and school practitioner backgrounds. Participants had the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the academic year.

A set of case studies is due to be published by UCL demonstrating the impact and learning from each of the projects and the school/college lead for each project will be sharing their work through workshops in the Virtual School Conference in January 2027.

Big Bids



Following feedback from our colleagues within schools and settings around 'dream projects' if funding was available, the Virtual School has continued to offer its Big Bids process for schools and settings for the fifth year running. This initiative encouraged settings to bid for funding to implement a project or creative idea that would support our children within the Virtual School as a cohort within the school to achieve and be successful.

During this period 35 bids were received (20 from Dorset settings). Projects ranged from resourcing for ELSA and literacy rooms, sensory equipment, indoor and outdoor sensory spaces, targeted books for library spaces and training courses for staff to support emotional well-being of children.

Feedback from settings involved has been positive; 100% said the project had very good or good impact on their children and 100% said the project had an impact on attendance of our children.

Virtual Reality training

To support the Extended Role of the Virtual School and children with a Social Worker, we have rolled out our training offer using the Cornerstone Virtual Reality training programme which allows the user to experience the impact of our conversations and interactions with children who may have experienced trauma through the eyes of the child.

"We have had several discussions about the content of the sessions and how powerful they were in helping staff to understand trauma on a very unique level. This deeper understanding goes a long way to help staff support pupils who have experienced trauma. It certainly reinforces that behaviour is communication, sensory responses are communication and belonging and mattering are key"

15 staff were trained to deliver sessions with settings, focusing on the impact that adult interactions have with young people. This year, 54 sessions have been held across our settings and teams with 8 settings having their whole staff teams trained using the technology to impact culture change. As part of our wider promotional activity, we have attended six conferences and training events, providing short demonstrations to delegates. More recently, there has been growing interest from alternative providers, enabling delivery of this training to six external organisations.

Feedback has been provided through evaluations forms and has been positive, achieving an average of 4.70 out of 5. We have also seen a slight reduction in the number of suspensions in a school that previously had a high number of them for our children on a child protection plan in the first year of the project.

Higher Education project

The Virtual School offered Higher Education mentoring to those young people who have aspirations to study at University. In 2025/26, there was a small uptake from young people who felt that they were able to access the offered programme through alternative methods with visits to two universities offered through the Virtual School. In 2026/27 the team are developing a new offer of HE experiences via webinars and visits to local universities in collaboration with Arts University Bournemouth.



Pre-16 provision

The Virtual School have offered a Pre-16 provision at a local provider for six young people.
They young people were confident to attend and engaged in activities and performed well as a group. Attendance at this intervention was 85% with two young people missing just one session each and other not attending before officially withdrawing. 100% of children will have a confirmed destination place for Post 16 from the KS4 programme and 100% of children undertaking the programme will achieve ASDAN accreditation with 2 children also achieving Entry 3 in maths and one child achieving level 1 in maths.

Virtual School training

The Virtual School provides an extensive training and development programme via termly Virtual School training, new to the Designated Teacher role training and bespoke training on themes identified from cohort need.

During 2025/26, these have included:

- Using Strength Based Language
- PEP interventions and Target setting
- Emotionally based school absence
- Hear My Voice (voice of our young people)
- Supporting children engaged with the Youth Justice Team
- How our Children in Care nurses can support children



Based on feedback from Designated Teachers, the Virtual School offered its fourth Virtual School Annual Conference in January 2026 focused on belonging and mattering. Dr Lisa Cherry and Steven Russell delivered key note addresses, focusing on how we can support children within the Virtual School and a series of workshops offered takeaways for participants. A marketplace for stalls allowed networking opportunities and further opportunities. Feedback from this event was excellent with 95% stating that the CPD would have a good or significant impact on their practice. The Virtual School are planning a fifth Conference in January 2027 around lived experience and supporting children who have been adopted.

Appendix 1: School Development Plan 2026/27

Priorities on a page: Dorset Virtual School Development Priorities 2026 – 27

AIM	**To ensure that Children within the Virtual School are ambitious around education and feel that they belong**		
STRANDS	**Achieving educational stability**	**Improving how children are represented in our work**	**Developing opportunities for children to achieve their ambitions**
PURPOSE	To provide children and settings the right support to enable full time stable education age 2 - 18	To provide children with the best support led by them	To provide high quality opportunities that lead to educational and employment success and belonging
12 MONTH GOALS	• (1.1) Improve attainment for children in the Virtual School at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 • (1.2) Reduce the use of suspensions for Children within the Virtual School • (1.3) Develop and deliver a programme of CPD for professionals working with Children within the Virtual School, including collaborative work with UCL • (1.4) Improve the attendance of SSA children and remove barriers to belonging in school • (1.5) Reduce the number of children missing education, use of reduced timetables, children who receive a permanent exclusion and young people who are NEET • (1.6) Improve progress and outcomes for children with a SEN need	• (2.1) Provide a sense of belonging for Early Years children • (2.2) Promoting a sense of belonging for children seeking asylum • (2.3) Provide support for settings to better meet the needs of children previously in care and children in Kinship Care arrangements • (2.4) Collect and respond to child feedback to improve our service	• (3.1) Embed a structured programme for young people with aspirations for higher education • (3.2) Embed a personalised programme for young people to develop a sense of belonging and resilience in education • (3.3) Develop wider learning opportunities and positive experiences • (3.4) Embed clear plan to engage with Locality teams through Pathfinder
OUTPUTS	• 75% engagement with IXL English and maths programme for all children • 75% engagement with IXL KS3 and 4 science programme for all targeted children • 75% partially or fully met targets with online and face to face 1:1 tutoring for Children in Care • Ensure that an introductory session is held by commissioned tutors for our children in care • 65% Children in Care making expected progress in KS2 maths • 18% Children in Care achieving grade 4+ in English at KS4 • 25% Children in Care achieving grade 4+ in maths at KS4 • 40% Children with a Social Worker making expected progress in KS2 reading, writing and maths • 20% Children with a Social Worker achieving grade 4+ in English and maths • 75% engagement with Literacy Gold programme for targeted children in care • 75% engagement with Letterbox literacy programme • 75% engagement with Story time and Story Explorers literacy intervention	• Implementation of bespoke training for Early Years setting • Implementation of method of capturing the voice or our early years children via most appropriate method • 100% of children needing additional support with communication is being monitored through the PEP process. • Collaborate with VSEND operational group on Early Years to reception pathway to implement a next steps pathway for Children in Care and all children with a social worker. • 75% engagement with Story Explorers • Develop monitoring system for children not in educational settings • 90% of young people seeking asylum engage with the resource pack and induction booklets (CPD and offer) • Develop monitoring and support of use of IXL for children seeking asylum • Develop a targeted programme of extra-curricular activities for our children seeking asylum. • Develop process for targeted toolkit and Pupil Premium+ funding • Develop the use of the induction booklet • Embed monitoring system for children previously looked after and in kinship care arrangements includes record of advice, guidance or	• Target group of 6 (child in care) young people to participate in initial HE programme and taster day with evidence of impact via child voice feedback • Introduce a guide to Post 16 education for young people (links to open days) • Implement offer for financial and lifelong education • Develop bespoke training for Virtual School on Post 16/18 offer • Target group of 10 young people in care to participate in belonging programme with evidence of impact via child voice feedback • 100% of children in care will have a confirmed destination place for Post 16 from the KS4 programme • 100% of children in care undertaking the KS4 programme will achieve unit accreditation • Implementation of education mentors for Young People with a Social Worker with the EP service • Development of an Annual programme of events linked to belonging and child voice • Develop the Virtual School annual awards • Every child is celebrated at least once during the year • Refine the reading list for settings

Appendix 2: Attendance for 2025/26

Attendance Trend

Year	Children in Care Overall absence (%)	Children in Need Overall absence (%)	Children on Child Protection Plans Overall absence (%)
2023/24	13.0%	-	-
2024/25	12.0%	23%	23%
2025/26	13.4%	20%	22%

2025/26 Attendance for Children in Care

2025-6	Overall Attendance Year to Date
Whole Cohort	86.54%
Reception	96.70%
Year 1	95.90%
Year 2	94.80%
Year 3	91.50%
Year 4	96.30%
Year 5	92.50%
Year 6	94.70%
Year 7	91.30%
Year 8	87.20%
Year 9	82.60%
Year 10	81.80%
Year 11	75.60%

2025/26 Persistent and Severe Absence Children in Care

Year	Persistent absence (%)	Severe absence (%)
2023/24	28.0%	6.0%
2024/25	25.8%	9.4%
2025/26	34.23%	9.31%

2025/26 Persistent and Severe Absence Children in Need plans

Year	Persistent absence (%)	Severe absence (%)
2023/24	-	-
2024/25	58%	15%
2025/26	50%	10%

2025/26 Persistent and Severe Absence Children on Child Protection plans

Year	Persistent absence (%)	Severe absence (%)
2023/24	-	-
2024/25	76%	17%
2025/26	77%	17%