

New Ofsted report warns of barriers to academic progress for children in care, despite positive work of schools and colleges

12.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

A new Ofsted report, published today, describes the challenges some schools and colleges face in supporting children in care to reach their potential, due to inconsistencies in local authority practice, unclear national expectations, and a lack of training for staff.

- Research reveals how inconsistencies across local authority practices are creating barriers to academic and personal progress for some children in care.
- Leaders and staff in most schools and colleges demonstrated flexible and inclusive approaches to meeting children's individual needs, despite lottery of resources.
- Clearer national expectations, better virtual school provision, and enhanced training for staff needed to ensure no child in care falls through the gaps.

Some schools and colleges visited for the research said access to resources and virtual school provision often depended on which local authority a child was placed under, creating a 'lottery' effect. Further education providers highlighted that personal education plan (PEP) meetings were sometimes not held beyond age 16, reducing oversight and support for older learners. These inconsistencies limited timely interventions and contributed to delays in support for children in care.

Read the full report: [How schools and colleges support the academic and personal progress of children in care](#)

Despite these difficulties, the leaders of most of the schools and colleges visited demonstrated a deep understanding of each learner's circumstances. They applied flexible and inclusive approaches to support individuals' specific needs, often adapting policies to reflect their emotional and behavioural challenges. Support was most effective when staff were well trained. Leaders who invested in specialist professional development - particularly in understanding the needs of care-experienced children and the impact of issues such as trauma - were better equipped to create supportive environments.

Researchers found that effective communication was essential to timely and coordinated support for children in care. This included collaboration between leaders and staff in schools and colleges, as well as regular engagement with carers, social workers and virtual school headteachers. Virtual schools were widely valued by schools and colleges for their role in providing funding, training and specialist advice.

Nationally, children in care face significant disparities in academic achievement compared to their peers. In the schools and colleges visited, academic and learning support was an important focus,

with targeted interventions including one-to-one tutoring, small-group teaching and in-class support. Many schools and colleges also prioritised emotional and social development, fostering trusting relationships to ensure learners felt seen and supported.

The research, conducted during the 2024/25 academic year, explored how mainstream schools and colleges help support the 81,770 children and young people currently in local authority care across England. Today's report makes several recommendations to help create more effective education provision for these children, including:

- Ongoing specialist training for school and college staff, to better understand and respond to the needs of children in care. Training should be continuous rather than one-off, with regular refresher sessions.
- A standardised national approach to PEP formats, funding approvals (particularly pupil premium plus), and virtual school provision to reduce delays in support.
- Improved collaboration between education providers and local authorities, through shared protocols and expectations. Information co-produced with learners should also be shared with staff, through online platforms or pupil passports, to keep staff informed about learners' needs and circumstances.
- Local authorities should ensure ongoing support for care-experienced young people beyond 16, including effective PEPs.
- Extra support for colleges for mentoring, emotional support and academic help, alongside early transition planning with clear routes into education, employment or training.

Informed by this research, Ofsted's renewed education inspection framework (introduced in November 2025) now has a sharper focus on children known, or previously known, to local authority social care.

Sir Martyn Oliver, His Majesty's Chief Inspector, said:

Children in care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society, and we know there are significant disparities in their academic and personal achievement compared to their peers.

While this report highlights the fantastic work some schools and colleges are doing to support these children's progress, it's also clear that we need a more consistent national approach to local authority support and practice.

Understanding how leaders meet the needs of vulnerable children is my top priority, and a golden thread running through all our education inspections under the renewed framework. I hope this report's findings help leaders and decision-makers understand how children in care are best supported in their education, so that no child falls through the gaps.

Notes to editors:

1. The research involved surveys of inspectors and virtual school heads, as well as visits to 15 mainstream schools and colleges, where researchers spoke with representatives from senior leadership teams, 51 learners and the staff that supported them, 20 virtual school representatives, and 26 social workers, parents, carers and care workers.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-ofsted-report-warns-of-barriers-to-academic-progress-for-children-in-care-despite-positive-work-of-schools-and-colleges>