29 February 2024

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUITINY COMMITTEE

VIRTUAL SCHOOL UPDATE

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

1.   Purpose of the report

1.1   To update members of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee on the outcomes for Cared for Children and Young People and how they are supported by the Virtual School.

2.   Background

Role of the Virtual School

2.1   Local Authorities have a duty to 'Promote the education of Cared for Children' (CfC) under Section 52 of the Children Act 2004.

2.2   The Virtual School report on key performance indicators for Cared for Children to:
  - ***Governing Board***
  - ***Corporate Parenting Board***
  - ***Ofsted and the DfE***

2.3   Each Local Authority area in England has the statutory role of Virtual School Head (VSH), who supports colleagues in the Local Authority to discharge their role as Corporate Parent for all matters related to the education of Cared for Children and Young People.

2.4   This is the mainstay of the work of the staff within the Virtual School, each of the caseworkers, in the phase-based teams, provide support and advocacy to around 60 young people. We do this by providing support, advice and constructive challenge to schools, social care colleagues, other professionals, carers and young people through the Personal Education Planning (PEP) process, a statutory part of the Care Plan.

2.5   The role of the VSH was expanded in 2018 to include 'Promoting the Education of Previously Cared for Children' (PCfC). In 2021, VSH's were given the additional strategic responsibility to 'Promote the Education of Children with a Social Worker' (CWSW). For PCfC and CWSW we provide advice, guidance, and signposting, we do not act in the capacity of Corporate Parent, therefore, our role is not to monitor outcomes or to provide direct interventions as we do

with CfC but to raise awareness of the disadvantage faced by these children and young people. The role is set to expand further in September 2024 to incorporate those children in Kinship Care.

Educational Barriers

2.6   There are approximately 1.6 million children (between 2012 – 18) in England and Wales who have or have had Social Care interventions, which equates to approx. 3 children in every classroom and compared to their peers, they are:

- 3 times more likely to be a Persistent Absentee (>90% school attendance)
- Children with > 50% school attendance are now identified as at higher risk of safeguarding concerns including criminal and sexual exploitation (Attendance Guidance, DfE 2022)
- 4 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school
- Only 50% achieve a good level of development in Early Years, compared to 72% of their peers
- They are 50% less likely to achieve a good pass at GCSE's compared to peers
- 3 times less likely to study for A Levels
- Only 6% go to University compared to 27% of peers

2.7   Many of our young people have experienced educational neglect, often for years before coming to the attention of services who can support. This includes, poor attendance, lack of stimulation in the home, gaps in learning, multiple school moves, suspensions and exclusion often as a result of low parental aspiration or poor educational experiences.

Raising Awareness of Barriers to Learning and Support for Colleagues

Support for Schools

2.8   Virtual School staff are raising awareness with school staff of the impact adverse childhood experiences have on a child's ability to learn, the barriers faced by CWSW, and the need to minimise these barriers.

2.9   The Virtual School Head (VSH) works closely with the SIO for Safeguarding when advice and guidance is requested, or concerns are raised.

2.10   Collectively we provide the following support and network/training opportunities to staff in school:
- Termly network meetings for Designated Teachers
- Termly network meetings for Designated Safeguarding Leads

- Training for Chair of Governors and Headteachers on Roles and Responsibilities for CWSW
- Provision of a training bursary to raise awareness in school staff around trauma informed practice for all schools in Sunderland
- Training programme for individual schools – thresholds, improving the quality of referrals, KCSIE, roles and responsibilities of DSL in care teams
- Newsletters – Virtual School and Safeguarding
- Signposting to external training and awareness raising events, conferences, and meetings
- Annual VS Conference for schools 'Impact of ACE's and mental health'
- Annual Safeguarding Conference
- Signs of Safety Training delivered to all DSL's and 30 Headteachers in the city

Provision of Support to Colleagues in Social Care and Health Services

2.11   Section 31 grant funding has enabled the Virtual School to strengthen our relationship with social care colleagues, including a weekly advice surgery within the Social Care base. Social workers can seek advice and support around education issues for children and young people when they have concerns.

2.12   Post 16 Team provide support to the Next Steps Teams in Stansfield Centre one day per week.

2.13   VSH provides briefings and training for social care staff which outline the composition of our cohort, educational neglect and the importance of school attendance in keeping children safe. VSH attends Social Care Team meetings to promote the support we are able to offer to colleagues around education.

2.14   Strategic Leaders in Education and Social Care meet half termly for a Keep in Touch Meeting to discuss any issues arising, share information and practice and provide early intervention for complex children.

2.15   When support is requested from caseworkers they will, contact schools on behalf of the Social Worker or families to ensure the correct strategy is followed and appropriate challenge is given when issues are brought to our attention.

2.16   We also offer support to schools and social care colleagues in professionals' meetings to facilitate a resolution to issues for children and young people in their education.

Support for Parent/carers

2.17   Virtual School staff seek engagement with a range of parent/carer forums
- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Support Group
- Kinship and Connected Carers
- More than Grandparents
- Adoptive Parent Forums and support groups

2.18   We offer advice and guidance to parents and carers around a range of educational issues and signpost to services which can meet the needs of their children.

2.19   We facilitate workshops for parents/carers on 'the impact of trauma on children and their education' and 'how to access support to meet their children's needs'.

Representation

2.20   The Virtual School provides representation to a wide range of local authority, education, and health panels, such as:

- Vulnerable Pupils Panel
- Dynamic Support Register
- Children's Partnership Commissioning Panel
- In-year Fair Access
- Health Partnership
- Headteacher Forums

2.21   When attending panels/forums, we advocate on behalf of children with a social worker and provide additional advice and guidance around their educational needs.

2.22   The Virtual School Head attends NHS workstream groups to raise issues of health and well-being which impact on disadvantaged children and young people and works closely with the National Association of Virtual Schools and regional colleagues to share common challenges and explore good practice.

3. Outcomes

3.1 Data provided in the tables in this report is the latest available validated version from LAIT (for academic year ending in Summer 2022), however, locally sourced data has been provided where possible to give an up-to-date context for some of our outcomes.

Admissions

- All cared for children should be educated, wherever possible, in a good or outstanding school. Schools operate their own admissions policies and criteria for oversubscription; however, they must give the highest priority in their criteria to a Cared for or Previously Cared for Child. (School Admissions Code)
- Similarly, a maintained school or academy cannot refuse to admit a child on the grounds of challenging behaviour, neither can they refer the child to the Local Authority Fair Access Protocol.
- The VS staff support social care colleagues and carers in identifying a suitable education provision and assist in the admission of any child where a change of school is considered essential.

3.2 **School Ofsted Ratings for Sunderland Cared for Children**

	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate or awaiting inspection
2019 – 2020	14%	50%	14%	21%
2020 - 2021	14%	65%	14%	7%
2022-23	13%	71%	10%	6%

- 84% of our children are educated in Good or Outstanding schools, an improvement on previous years, with 10% in schools which required improvement, these predominantly being in the secondary sector.
- When children and young people are educated in schools which Require Improvement, attention is always given to ensure the care, guidance and support offered by the school is of a good standard.
- 30% of our children are educated in schools outside of Sunderland, the majority of which were in our neighbouring authorities, however, children are educated in 27 different local authority areas across England, Wales and Scotland.

3.3 Attendance

Percentage of absence from school of children who have been cared for continuously for at least 12 months		
Area	**2021**	**2022**
Sunderland	9.10	7.10 (↓ -2.00)
North East	8.50	7.00 (↓-1.50)
England	9.10	7.80 (↓-1.30)
National Rank		45
Quartile Banding		B

- Overall attendance for our cared for children in 2021/22 was 92.9%, (last validated data from LAIT), on par with attendance of all pupils nationally for the same period and above that of Cared for Children regionally and nationally.
- Currently (January 2024) our local data shows Primary attendance well above that of primary children in both Sunderland and National at 96.5%, although in secondary, attendance remains a major challenge (86.5%) below that of all secondary pupils locally and nationally.
- Attendance is monitored daily by Welfare Call, a service commissioned by the Virtual School which telephones the child's school daily to check they are in school.
- Casework Leads monitor attendance weekly with their team on a case-by-case basis to ensure early intervention, advice and next steps are given to carers, schools, and social worker.
- Attendance issues are quickly flagged up on PEPs and targets set at the PEP meeting, where appropriate.
- Vulnerable Pupil Panel applications are supported for those pupils with emotional school-based avoidance, or those who have disengaged with mainstream provision, to ensure referrals for local authority commissioned alternative provision is detailed and appropriate provision is identified.
- Associate Teachers within the Virtual School provide 1:1 tutoring whilst children are awaiting access to alternative provisions, should they be unable to access their named school or to support reintegration back to school following a long-term absence.

3.4 Suspensions and Exclusions

| Percentage of children with at least one fixed term suspension from school		
	2020	**2021**
Sunderland	13.45	9.24 (↓-4.21)
North East	9.50	9.70 (↑0.20)

England	9.35	9.80 (⬆0.45)
National Rank		58
Quartile Banding		B

- The latest validated data on suspensions for 2021 showed a drop in the percentage of children who received at least one fixed term suspension to slightly below that of national and regional levels, however, suspensions have risen by 26% this year compared to 2021, although remain significantly lower than the rise in suspensions for all pupils in the city.
- Higher levels of suspensions follow a national rising trend, and also mirror that which is experienced by other virtual schools in the area
- Support and professional challenge around the use of suspensions is given before and during reintegration meetings, which are attended by caseworkers to ensure school, carers and the young person are clear on the support needed to prevent an exclusion
- Targets around conduct and engagement are becoming more explicit in PEPs, and swift referrals are instigated by Caseworkers for Formal Statutory Assessment to identify any unmet SEN need, particularly related to Social, Emotional or Mental Health
- Referrals to Alternative Education placements are prioritised through the Vulnerable Pupils Panel for those who require alternative commissioned education provision
- Work is ongoing with new Multi-academy Trusts moving into the area, who may initially implement zero tolerance policies, which can lead to a lack of inclusion for our children in Sunderland
- Caseworkers work with carers, schools, and alternative providers to find alternative solutions which supports both the child and the school to reengage with learning and maintain the child on their school roll
- Support is given to social care colleagues, through the Sandhill Surgery, to upskill them in the knowledge and signposting they need to effectively challenge in situations where unmet need leads to a pattern of suspension.
- Virtual Schools in the Northeast area are reporting their first permanent exclusions (PEX) taking place this year, with a rise in challenging behaviours, a shortage of appropriate alternative education places, and special school provisions which are full
- Eight incidents which could have resulted in a permanent exclusion have been avoided through the intervention of the Virtual School staff this year, however sadly, we have also seen our first permanent exclusion for six years.

3.5 Attainment Outcomes
- Source for the following graphs on attainment (NCER 2022)

Early Years Outcomes

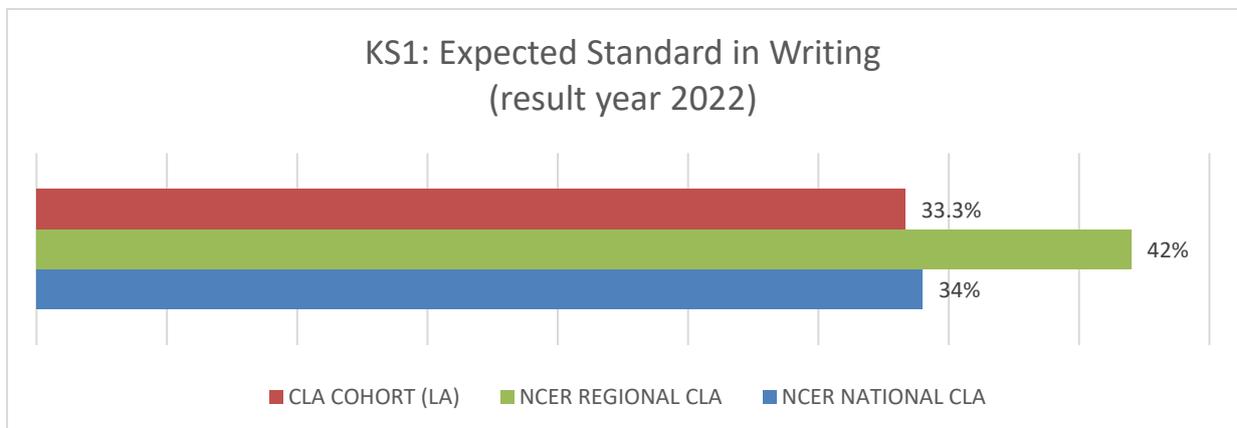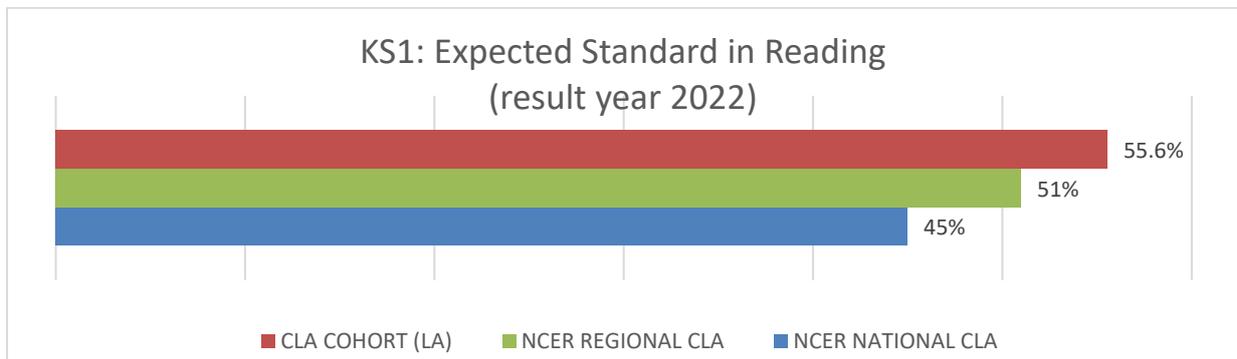**EYFS: Good Level of Development (GLD)
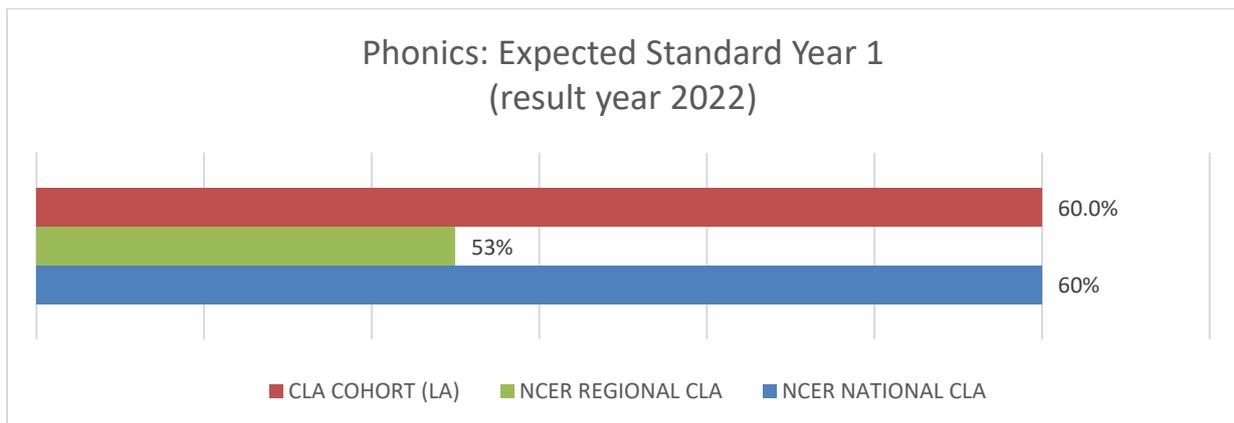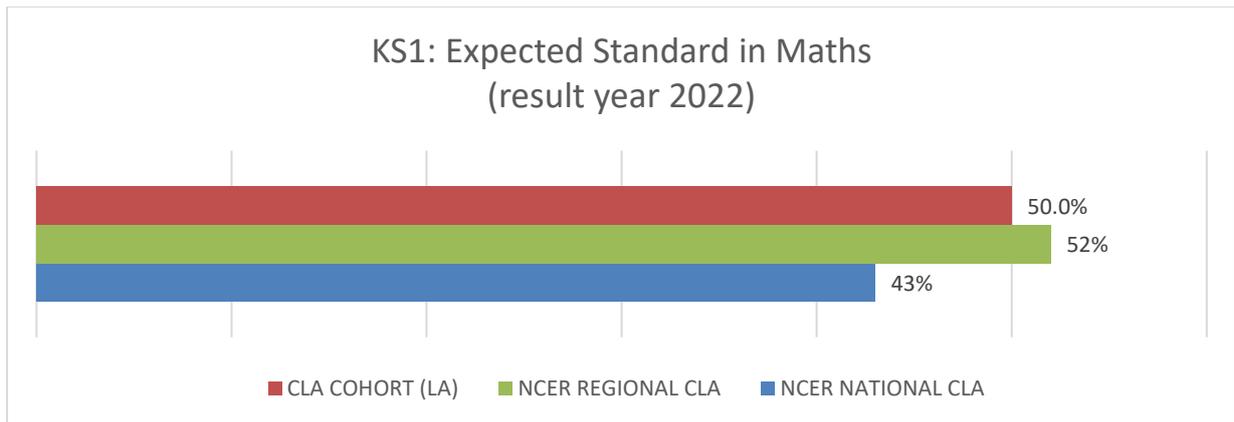(result year 2022)**
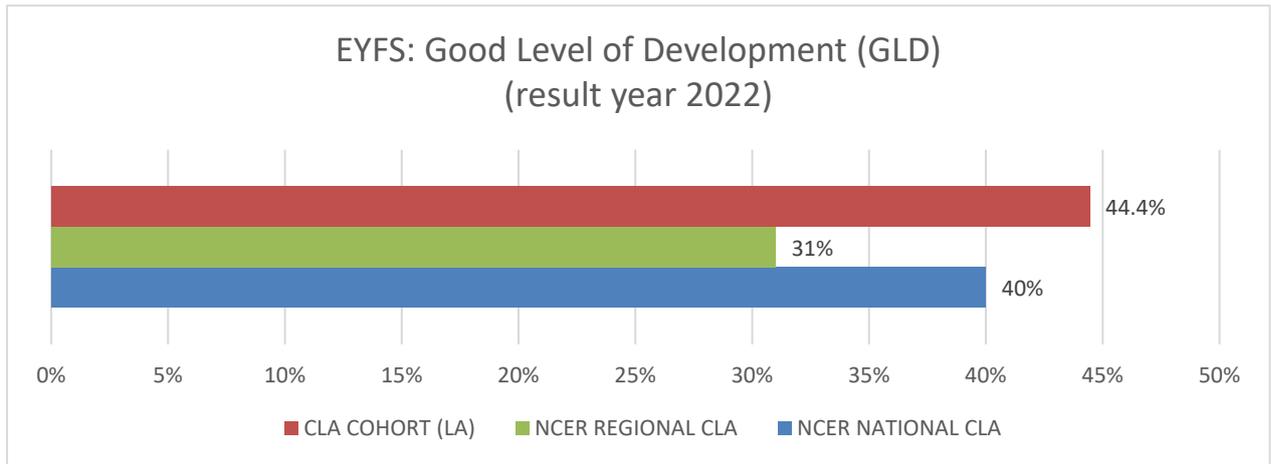
- Red is Sunderland Cared for Children; Green is Regional CfC and Blue is National CfC

From the above table the following salient points can be noted:
- The cohort was assessed using the early years foundation stage profile,
- 44.4% of children in Sunderland achieved a good level of development
- This is 4.4% higher than the national (CLA) average of 40% and 13.4% higher than the regional (CLA) average of 31%.

Key Stage 1 Outcomes

**KS1: Expected Standard in Reading
(result year 2022)**

**KS1: Expected Standard in Writing
(result year 2022)**

KS1: Expected Standard in Maths
(result year 2022)

CLA COHORT (LA): 50.0%
NCER REGIONAL CLA: 52%
NCER NATIONAL CLA: 43%

■ CLA COHORT (LA)   ■ NCER REGIONAL CLA   ■ NCER NATIONAL CLA

Phonics: Expected Standard Year 1
(result year 2022)

CLA COHORT (LA): 60.0%
NCER REGIONAL CLA: 53%
NCER NATIONAL CLA: 60%

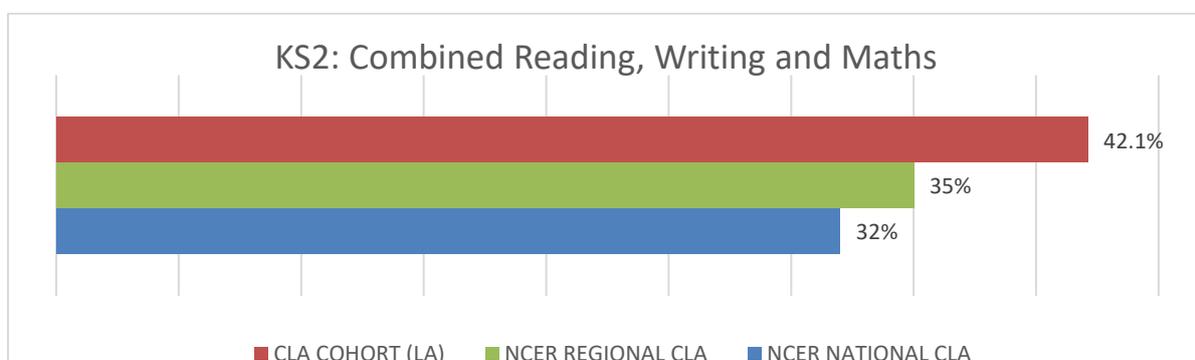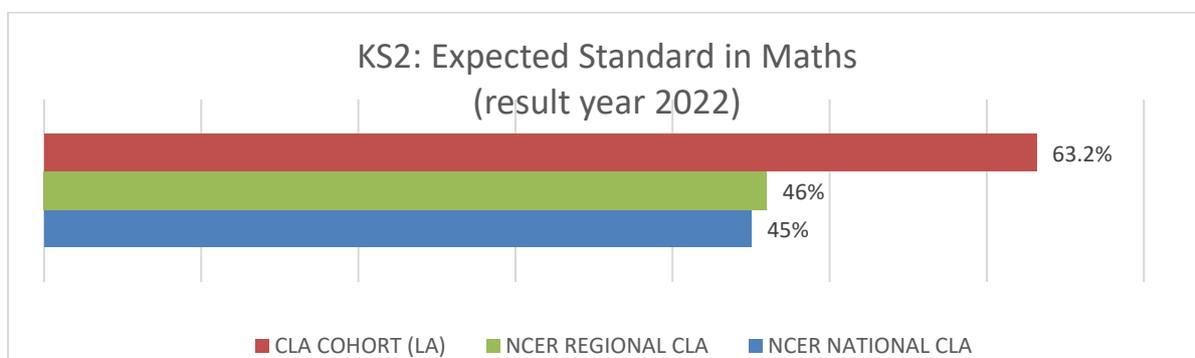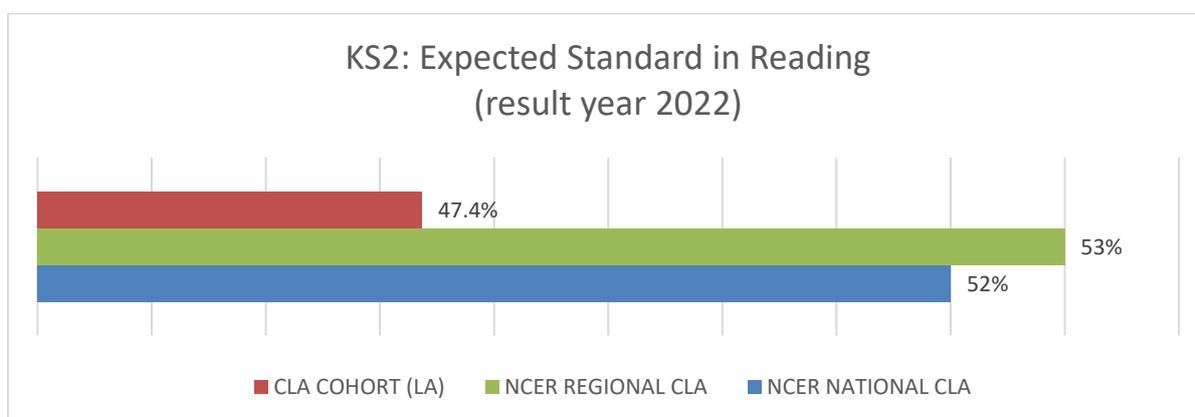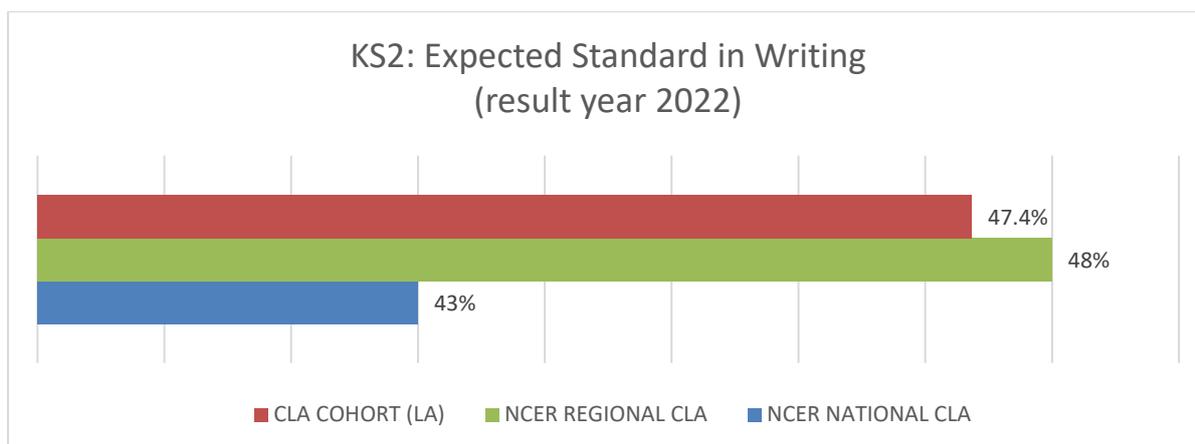■ CLA COHORT (LA)   ■ NCER REGIONAL CLA   ■ NCER NATIONAL CLA

From the above tables the following salient points can be noted:

There were 18 pupils in the reportable cohort at the end of Key Stage 1:

- 55.6% achieved the expected standard in Reading and 5.6% achieved a greater depth in Reading.
- This compares favourably with the regional average of 51% and is 10.6% above the national average of 45%.
- A third of pupils achieved the expected standard in Writing, broadly in line with national average for Cared for children, however, this is lower than the regional average at 42%
- 50% of our children achieved the expected standard in Maths with 5.6% achieving a greater depth. This is 7% higher than the national average of 43% although slightly lower than regional at 52%.
- 60% achieved the expected standard of 32 in Phonics at the end of Year 1 which is equal to that of National (CLA) and 7% above that of the regional (CLA) cohort at 53%.

Key Stage 2 Outcomes

KS2: Expected Standard in Writing (result year 2022)

- CLA COHORT (LA): 47.4%
- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 48%
- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 43%

KS2: Expected Standard in Reading (result year 2022)

- CLA COHORT (LA): 47.4%
- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 53%
- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 52%

KS2: Expected Standard in Maths (result year 2022)

- CLA COHORT (LA): 63.2%
- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 46%
- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 45%

KS2: Combined Reading, Writing and Maths

- CLA COHORT (LA): 42.1%
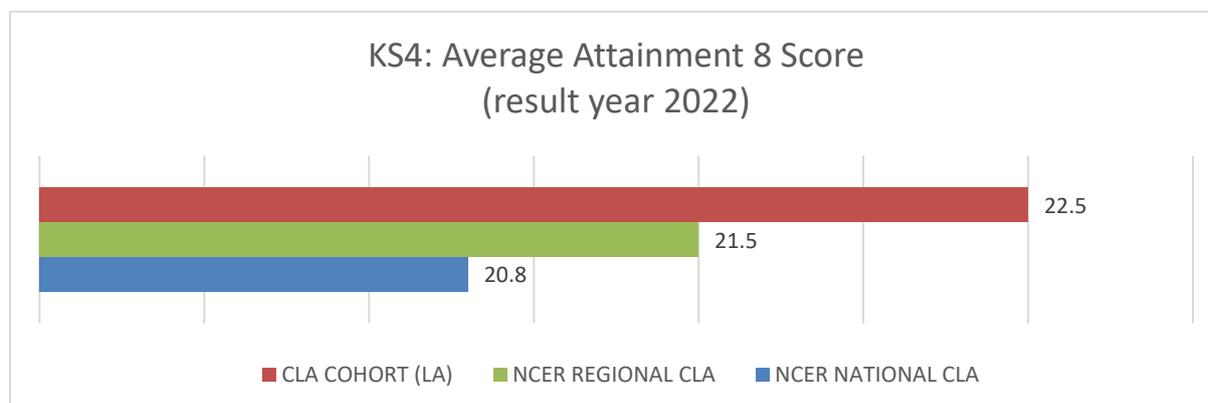- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 35%
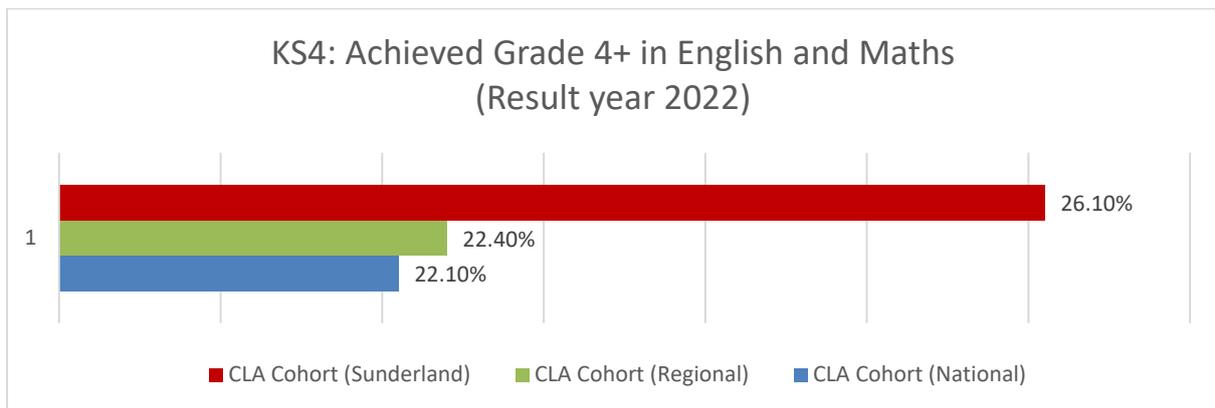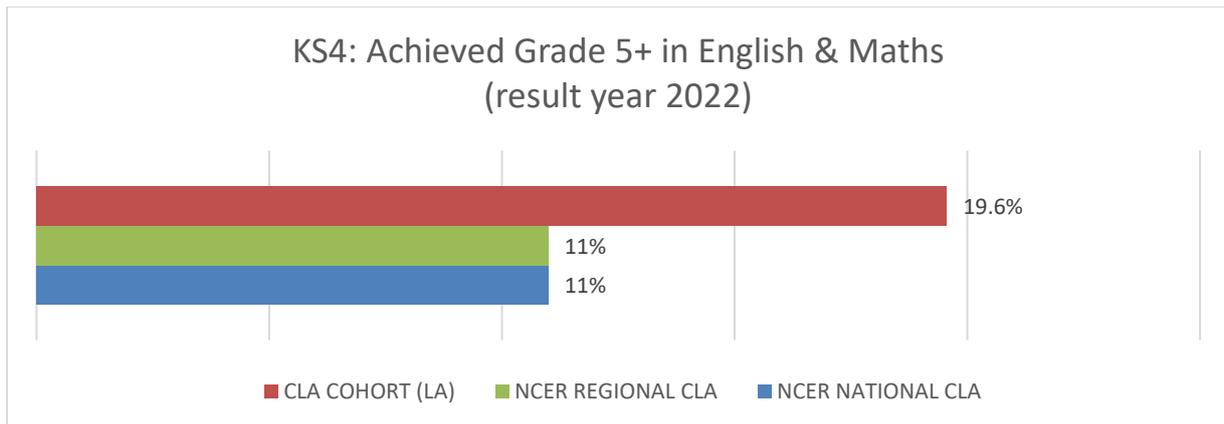- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 32%

From the above tables the following salient points can be noted:

There were 19 pupils in the reportable cohort at the end of Key Stage 2:

- In Writing, 47.4% achieved the expected standard broadly in line with regional and 4.4% higher than national average.
- 47.4% achieved the expected standard in Reading, 4.6% lower than national and 5.6% lower than the regional average.
- In Maths, 63.2% of our children achieved the expected standard 18.2% higher than National at 45% and 17.2% higher than regional at 46%.
- The Combined measure for KS2 of Reading, Writing and Maths was 42.1%, this is 10.1% higher than the national average of 32% and 7.1% higher than the regional average of 35%.
- An intervention programme has been developed to provide 1:1 tutoring through the National tutoring programme for children who require additional support, to close the gap from lost learning due to the pandemic.
- Where reading is found to be of concern the newly established early years and primary team, through their attendance at PEP meetings, provide greater support and challenging for targets to be specific within PEPs
- Two reading programmes are being explored to encourage reading for our children, Letterbox Book Club and StoryTime Magazine, both specialising in encouraging reading with cared for children aged 4-9 years.

Key Stage 4 Outcomes

KS4: Average Attainment 8 Score
(result year 2022)

- CLA COHORT (LA): 22.5
- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 21.5
- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 20.8

KS4: Achieved Grade 5+ in English & Maths (result year 2022)

- CLA COHORT (LA): 19.6%
- NCER REGIONAL CLA: 11%
- NCER NATIONAL CLA: 11%

KS4: Achieved Grade 4+ in English and Maths (Result year 2022)

- CLA Cohort (Sunderland): 26.10%
- CLA Cohort (Regional): 22.40%
- CLA Cohort (National): 22.10%

From the above tables the following salient points can be noted:

- There were 46 pupils in the reportable cohort at the end of Key Stage 4:
- The cohort in Sunderland has an Attainment 8 score of 22.5, which is 1.7 points higher than the national cohort at 20.8, and 1 point above regional average of 21.5
- The English Baccalaureate average point score is 1.77, which is marginally higher than the national and regional point scores, EBacc is a suite of subjects which includes English, maths, science, a humanities subject, and a modern foreign language
- 19.6% of our cared for children achieved a grade 5 or more in English and Maths which is 8.6% higher than National and regional at 11%
- 26.1% of our young people achieved a grade 4 or more in English and Maths, again higher than national and regional. Prior to the pandemic this figure in 2019 was 17%

3.6 Support from the Virtual School to Raise Attainment

- Quality Assurance, moderation, and standardisation of PEP's takes place with an increased focus on attainment and progress data, and in school support for underachievement. CPD has been delivered to both Primary and Secondary casework teams around national assessment requirements.

- A tracking document has been established to measure progress, engagement and conduct, attendance, emotional health and well-being and attitude to learning and is fully populated with data which is then analysed for targeted intervention.
- 1:1's are held with casework leads to review pupil progress, supervision by casework leads with their team occurs every two weeks using the new tracker.
- The tuition tracker is now fully functioning with 1:1 tuition delivered for the following groups of learners: Primary, Complex Secondary, UASC pre and post 16, Year 11 and resit Maths and English Post 16.
- VSH attends the majority of Y11 PEPs and many Y6 PEP's with the caseworker to ensure appropriate challenge is given to schools when academic intervention is needed, and to offer targeted additional 1:1 teaching support by Virtual School teachers.
- A comprehensive identification and intervention programme was introduced to provide individual 1:1 tuition through the National Tutoring Programme for any Year 11 pupil who is underachieving in English and/or Maths. This was extended to Year 10 in Spring term of 2023 and to Year 9 in the summer term of 2023. Meanwhile, the increased capacity of caseworkers affords greater support and challenge across all key stages through attendance at all PEP meetings.
- Weekly tuition meetings ensure efficiency and effectiveness of the many strands of tuition currently in operation.
- The intervention programme has ensured 91 students this year have received 1:1 tutoring to close gaps in knowledge in English and/or Maths at Key stage 4, Reading, Writing and/or Maths at Key stage 2, and Phonics intervention at Key stage 1, with a total of 1,900 hours delivered.
- The tuition Team are in the initial stages of developing an evidence-based assessment to review the effectiveness of the tuition provided by the associate teachers in the VS. This package will include an audit of the quality of provision and measure outcomes.
- A further 16 teaching assistants were funded by the Virtual School to work in schools to ensure individual students were able to access the curriculum whilst awaiting formal statutory assessment.
- The Virtual School has commissioned 7 alternative education provisions this year for young people who were unable to manage within their mainstream school to ensure their education remained on track – this included the provision of both English and Maths.
- Funding for 10 young people to attend specialist schools or provisions has been made available by the Virtual School whilst they are awaiting an EHCP, or the availability of a specialist school place.
- A thrive target for the secondary caseworker around raising aspirations has resulted in the creation of a central register which has identified 12 young people (Y7-Y12) who are now participating in the Choices Together- Raising Aspirations Programme (NERAP). This gives the young person access to experiences relating to Higher Education.

3.7 Post 16 Pathways

Strengthened Relationships with Colleges

- The expansion of the team and increased hours has enabled more intensive support to our young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and those who are at risk of leaving education/training.
- Caseworkers currently liaise with 35 colleges, training providers and employers to support our cared for young people (this number fluctuates throughout the year).
- Improved attendance and timely completion of PEPs – 301 PEPs were completed in the 2022/2023 academic year with 98% rated as Good.
- Improved liaison with SEN caseworkers - 25% of the cohort had an EHCP and 22% were SEN Support.

Share Good Practice Regionally and Nationally

- Post 16 Leads met with Durham and Northumberland colleagues who are also amongst the pilot authorities for the new Pupil Premium Post 16 Grant, to discuss best practice and challenges in the Post 16 landscape.
- Sunderland Casework Leads have set up a regional Post 16 steering group for Virtual schools which meets on a termly basis, with all 14 North East Virtual Schools involved
- Positive outcomes from the steering group include the sharing of ESOL provision for our young people who live in neighbouring authorities; closer working links to support with complex young people across borders
- Information on Northeast college and summer activities shared for young people throughout the region, good practice shared relating to transition and SEND.
- The Casework Lead also attends the National Post 16 Steering Group and has been asked to take on the role of Regional Lead for Northeast region.

Transition Support for Year 11 into Post 16 Pathways

- VS Transition Mentor role focuses on Y11 students at risk of NEET, to support their transition onto Post 16 provision and continues in the first term of Year 12.
- Transition Mentor has developed strong links with young people, schools, TfC Careers Team, secondary caseworkers, and carers to support Year 11s with preparation for transition, including support to open days and making applications.
- A high percentage of Year 11s had clear Post 16 plans in place and the Transition Mentor supported with their enrolment at colleges in Year 12
- Developed retention spreadsheet which is regularly reviewed at Post 16 one to one meetings, identifying patterns of engagement and barriers to learning.
- Introduced Education Review meetings for Year 13's who have turned 18 before the end of the academic year to meet with Personal Assistants and support with transition to Year 14
- Positive impact of transition work is demonstrated by the improvement in retention figures for Year 12s. The Year 12 pilot cohort for 2022/23 contained 60 young people

	Nov 2022	July 2023
Further Education	34	31
Training	7	13
Employment	1	3
Apprenticeship	2	2
NEET	16	11

NEET Reduction

- All students have PEPs and are supported to maintain engagement in Education, Employment and Training

	Jun-20	Jun-21	Jun-22	Jun-23
EET	50%	66%	72%	80%
NEET	50%	33%	28%	20%

- Post 16 Caseworkers offer NEET mentoring and support tailored to meet the needs of each cared for young person who is not in education, employment, or training.
- At the end of the academic year 2022/23, NEET figures were the lowest they have been since Post 16 Caseworkers came into post.
- 17% of 16/17-year-olds are NEET, with a participation rate of 73% remaining in Education or Training
- NEET mentoring involves home visits to offer information, advice and guidance, multi-agency working to support, exploring options, accompanying on visits to local providers, interview preparation and in some case creating bespoke programmes to meet the needs of the individual that cannot be met by mainstream provision.
- Casework Leads have established a multi-agency NEET Support Panel to review young people who are not in education, employment or training or complex cases at risk of becoming NEET to ensure they have wrap around support, advice, and guidance to improve retention (see below).
- Joint working between Virtual School, Next Steps, Careers/Positive Activities Co-ordinator, and College has improved significantly.
- Post 16 Casework Leads have been working from Stanfield Centre one day per week since November 2022, this has enabled more joint working with social care.
- Transition Mentor is meeting with young people in their college setting and also offers to meet at their preferred venue.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

- The Virtual School have responded to local need due to the increase in UASC post 16 students, we have a small but growing cohort of 29 young people.

- Many of our young people are living in areas outside of the North East which increases the challenges of obtaining appropriate ESOL provision.
- Every UASC young person is provided with a laptop, and referred for Flash Academy (language and learning assessment), online ESOL tuition and FE provision, and has an initial PEP within 20 days of entering our care.
- During the year 18 laptops were issued, 15 young people engaged with Flash Academy, 5 engaged with TLC live online tuition, and 2 engaged with Targeted Provision one to one tuition.
- 9 UASC young people engaged in tuition over the summer holidays.
- The VS Associate Teachers delivered in the young people's homes, in settings including Monument View, YMCAs in Sunderland and Chester le Street and Harbour View.
- Due to an increase in UASC, with a wide variety of educational experiences and prior learning, the Virtual School are in the process of exploring a new Vocational study programme to meet the needs of this group of learners.
- 3 young people have visited Springboard provision to explore this as a Vocational option and are awaiting taster sessions and a further 2 young people have offers to start a full-time study programme with ESOL support provided by the Virtual School.

Raising Aspirations for Care Experienced18 year olds

- Work is ongoing with the Next Steps Personal Advisor Team to share Higher Education opportunities and joint working to support HE aspirations through the Choices Together Programme and Regional Pilot to support care experienced students from FE to HE.
- Post 16 Caseworkers attend Northeast Raising Aspiration Partnership and the Care Experienced Student Steering Group.
- Regular meetings with NERAP and caseworkers support and refer cared for Young People to the Choices Together programme to raise aspirations and promote Higher Education.
- Virtual School & Next Steps jointly fund travel to university open days.
- Post 16 Caseworkers continue to support Y13 young people after they turn 18, when they are accessing Further Education, and hold education reviews to monitor progress and plans for progression.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Committee are asked to note the content of the report.